

CANADIAN OBSERVATORY ON HOMELESSNESS
POLICY BRIEF

**TOWARDS AN ONTARIO
YOUTH HOMELESSNESS
STRATEGY**



COH
Canadian Observatory on Homelessness
the
homeless hub



1. Addressing youth homelessness

Last October, when the Province of Ontario released [A Place to Call Home](#), the report of the expert advisory panel on homelessness, youth homelessness was identified as one of four priority areas for the government. In this policy brief, we applaud these efforts and offer insights into how Ontario can become a leader in addressing youth homelessness by working with community partners in a strategic and effective manner. There is growing recognition that youth homelessness is distinct from adult homelessness in terms of its causes and conditions and it then follows that so must be the solutions. There is also an acknowledgement that we must do things differently; that managing the problem through emergency services is not enough if young people become mired in homelessness and find it difficult to escape. While emergency supports will always be necessary and important, we need to shift our energy and focus to preventing youth from becoming homeless in the first place, and support others to exit homelessness in a quick, safe and planned way.

Not only have attitudes shifted about the need to prioritize youth homelessness, the conditions necessary to support such a shift have begun to take hold:

- **Knowledge base** - *A growing body of research, evidence-informed practice and policy now support the proposition that we can effectively end homelessness. Innovative approaches from across the country, as well as effective interventions from around the world, demonstrate how prevention-focused approaches reduce the number of young people who become homeless, and shorten the experience of those who do!*
- **Community action** - *There are at least five communities in Ontario engaging in youth homelessness planning processes, and at least six more have expressed interest in doing so. Communities are most successful when they build on innovation that is happening locally and integrate their youth homelessness strategies into broader plans to address homelessness.*
- **Youth Engagement** - *There is a commitment by service providers, researchers, and all levels of government to meaningfully engage youth to ensure their voices are amplified and reflected in policy and programming.*
- **Provincial engagement** - *The province of Alberta is the first provincial or territorial government to release a youth homelessness strategy, and has indicated it will support Ontario in developing a strategy.*
- **Federal commitment** - *In the 2016-17 budget released by the Government of Canada, the Homelessness Partnering Strategy received an increase of almost 50% in funding, and youth homelessness was identified as a priority. In addition, the federal government has prioritized youth unemployment, affordable housing, infrastructure, the environment and Indigenous issues, all of which align with the province's priorities.*
- **A Way Home Canada** - *The emergence of A Way Home - a cross-sectoral, national coalition employing a solutions-focused approach to systemic change, program planning and implementation – provides an opportunity for the province to move quickly to support communities to engage in this work. A Way Home is dedicated to co-creating and amplifying solutions with communities and all levels of government.*

Given growing recognition of the need to do things differently, now is the perfect time for the provincial government to work with community partners to address youth homelessness in a much more strategic and effective manner.

2. Ontario: The provincial context

When the province of Ontario announced its ambitious plan to end chronic homelessness in ten years, one of the highlights was the commitment to prioritize provincial action to reduce youth homelessness.

In January 2015, Ontario established an Expert Advisory Panel on Homelessness to provide advice on how to achieve the goal of ending homelessness under the province's Poverty Reduction Strategy.

The Panel's [report](#) acknowledges that homelessness is complex, and that progressive action is required to address it. In response, Ontario is committing to a number of immediate and long-term actions, including:

- setting a target to end chronic homelessness in 10 years
- providing up to \$10 million over two years in targeted funding from the [Local Poverty Reduction Fund](#) to help prevent and end homelessness across the province
- adopting the recommended definition of homelessness, including chronic homelessness, to build common language and understanding about the problem
- planning to require enumeration at the local level to gather data about homelessness
- prioritizing provincial action to reduce homelessness in four areas: youth, Aboriginal, and chronic homelessness, as well as homelessness following transitions from provincially-funded institutions and service systems, such as jails and hospitals

Province of Ontario news release: Ontario commits to ending homelessness in ten years. October 28, 2015
<https://news.ontario.ca/mah/en/2015/10/report-of-the-expert-advisory-panel-on-homelessness.html>

Ontario's homelessness strategy – and particularly its focus on youth homelessness – aligns well with other provincial policy initiatives. The homelessness strategy fits within [Realizing our Potential](#) – the province's poverty reduction strategy – with its focus on: a) Breaking the Cycle for Children and Youth, b) Employment and Income Security, and c) A Long-Term Goal to End Homelessness in Ontario. Significantly, addressing youth homelessness cuts across all three areas of focus.

Ontario's strategy also references [Stepping Up](#), the province's Strategic Framework for Helping Youth Succeed, and will build on progress and important work underway in the Ministries of Education, Child and Youth Services, Employment, Justice and Municipal Affairs and Housing. In particular, work underway with Child and Youth Services to develop and implement strategies and initiatives to provide supports for young people transitioning from care (child protection) have the potential to become a key preventive strategy by reducing the flow of young people into homelessness.

An investment in preventing, reducing and ending youth homelessness will pay long term dividends for the province of Ontario. The goal of this work is to help youth avoid the devastating and long-term consequences of homelessness by providing support for young people and their families in order to reduce conflict and violence, to facilitate successful engagement in education and employment, and ultimately to support transitions to adulthood characterized by health, fulfillment and well-being. A strategy to address youth homelessness will not simply result in fewer people who experience homelessness, but rather, contribute to the longer-term reduction in poverty within the province.

3. Making the case for an Ontario strategy to end youth homelessness

On any given night there are at least 6,500 young Canadians who experience homelessness and either sleep unsheltered or access emergency shelters. Over the course of a year, the number is closer to 50,000. An even greater number are part of the hidden homeless population and temporarily stay with family or friends (couch surfing). More than a third of young people who experience homelessness in Canada are from Ontario.

The longer we let young people become mired in homelessness, the greater their exposure to the risks of sexual and economic exploitation, the more likely they are to experience trauma, declining health and addictions, and the greater the difficulty they will have in leaving the streets. Once on the streets it is not long before young people become entrenched in the street youth lifestyle. The long-term consequences are considerable, including:

- Increased risk of exploitation, violence, victimization, physical and sexual abuse.
- Greater involvement with the police and the justice system.
- Disengagement from school and difficulty obtaining employment.
- Stress, depression, anxiety disorders and suicide.
- Increased use of substances to cope.

More than a third of young people who experience homelessness in Canada are from Ontario.

While many young people are able to move forward with their lives because of their incredible strength and perseverance, this is not the case for all homeless youth who may require additional supports and services in order to end their homelessness.

Youth homelessness can be addressed in three ways. First, we need to prevent it (stop it from happening in the first place). Second, we will need an emergency or crisis response, because no matter how good our prevention is, bad things will inevitably occur. Third, we need to move young people out of homelessness in a safe and planned way and with necessary supports. Unfortunately, across Canada – and most certainly in Ontario – most of our effort and investment is in ‘managing the crisis’ through emergency services and supports (shelters and day programs). We believe that we must do better. We have to shift from *managing* the problem to preventing, reducing and ending youth homelessness.



To tackle this problem, we must begin by recognizing that youth homelessness is distinct from adult homelessness in terms of its causes and conditions, and therefore so must be the solutions. For young people, we must not be content with simply getting them off the street. We must provide solutions that help young people transition to adulthood and well-being in a safe and planned way. How we address the problem will have lifelong consequences.

With a targeted provincial strategy to address youth homelessness, we not only curtail negative consequences, but we create new opportunities for better outcomes:

- Increased housing stability for youth through rehousing (Housing First for Youth) or family reunification.
- Increased resiliency in young people and their families.
- Prevention of youth homelessness through education and enhanced family and natural supports.
- Access to education, income and employment opportunities.
- Effective models of accommodation and support that give young people options and choice in how they move forward with their lives.
- Increased high school graduation and labour market participation.
- Healthy transitions to adulthood and well-being.
- Reduced transition to adult (and chronic) homelessness.

There are few who would argue against the importance of investing in our youth, and the payoff for helping young people avoid long-term homelessness is considerable. Allowing youth homelessness to exist is not necessary, and no longer acceptable.

If we believe that **all young people, regardless of their background, deserve necessary supports and opportunities to be able to transition into adulthood and well-being, then we have to tackle youth homelessness head on.** Additionally, if we are truly concerned about addressing chronic homelessness amongst adults, we must recognize that for many of those individuals, their pathway into homelessness began when they were young. Early interventions that prevent and reduce youth homelessness may have the impact of reducing the incidence of chronic homelessness amongst adults and contribute to the province's target of ending chronic homelessness in ten years.

WHAT SHOULD A TARGETED ONTARIO INVESTMENT SUPPORT?

The province of Ontario should directly invest in community strategies that use a grass roots approach to prevent, reduce and end youth homelessness. While many communities across the province currently have some level of service provision that addresses youth homelessness, this for the most part reflects a crisis response (emergency shelters and day programs). Few communities have comprehensive plans or strategies to address youth homelessness. While the crisis response is important, this means that we are primarily 'managing' the problem, as opposed to preventing, reducing and ending youth homelessness. There is a need to shift direction if we truly want to address this problem, and this can and should be done in the context of the Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy, as well as local plans to address homelessness.

A provincial investment to address youth homelessness will help communities across the province make this shift, by providing them with the knowledge, direction and resources to achieve results. Key to this will be to provide communities with resources to adapt and implement program models designed to achieve these results. The province of Ontario should make an investment with the intent of ending youth homelessness by 2026.

A targeted provincial strategy to address youth homelessness would not only curtail the well understood negative consequences, but also create new opportunities to improve the lives of many young people.

The time is right for the province of Ontario to play a more proactive role in helping communities move from 'managing' the crisis, to preventing, reducing and ending youth homelessness. The province of Ontario should make an investment with the intent of ending youth homelessness by 2026.

A renewed investment should focus on the following:

1) COMMUNITY PLANNING

Resources should be available to help communities develop and implement plans to address youth homelessness that focus on prevention, and on helping young people exit homelessness as rapidly as possible, with the necessary supports to make a successful transition to adulthood and well-being. Such plans should set clear targets for the reduction of youth homelessness. They should also align with existing local and provincial plans, and poverty reduction strategies.

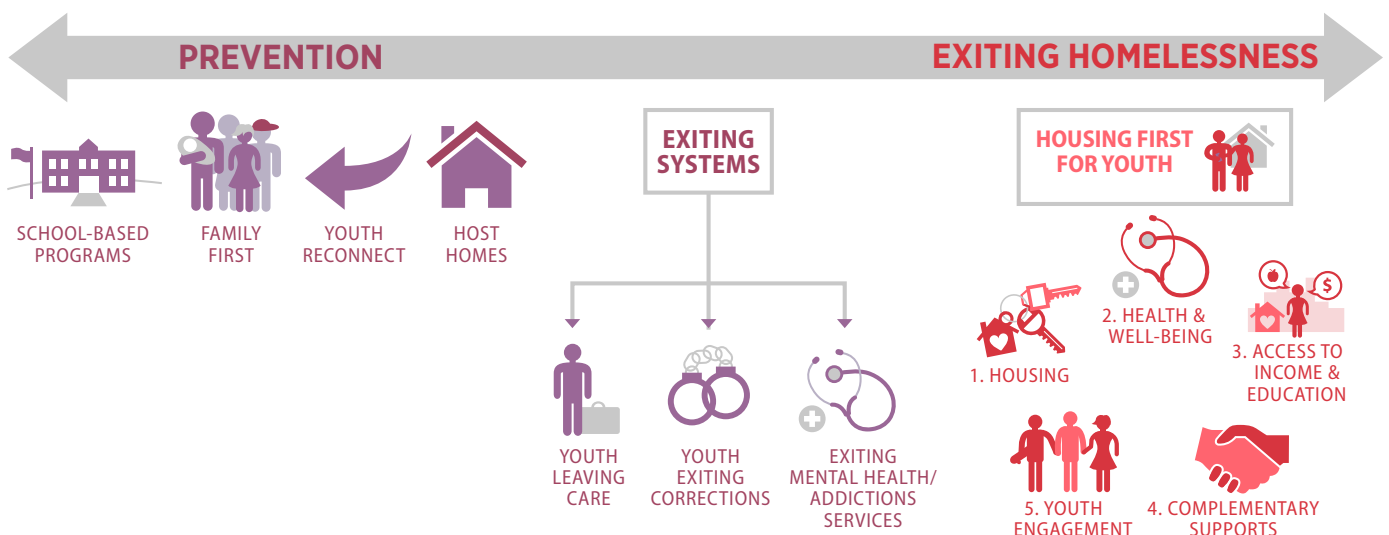
It is recommended that the province build on the work already underway and annually provide ten new communities with two years of funding to support planning and implementation. Through this investment, not only will these Ontario communities be actively addressing youth homelessness, but this capacity and knowledge base can be leveraged regionally and provincially to build broader support for action.

Opportunity: In collaboration with A Way Home, the province can move quickly to support communities that want to address youth homelessness. Through the efforts of A Way Home, a significant knowledge base currently exists for planning and implementation, which aligns well with other planning mechanisms to end homelessness and the provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy. A Way Home will provide communities across the province with a range of supports including a catalyst event, Collective Impact and Theory of Change implementation support, youth homelessness community planning toolkit, program model resources, a provincial Community of Practice on Youth Homelessness, as well as increased connection to government systems.

2) PROGRAM INTERVENTIONS

Central to community plans are program models that will enable communities to make the shift to an approach that focuses on prevention and helping young people exit homelessness. It should be noted that the delivery of housing and homelessness-related programs is a local responsibility in Ontario, supported in part by provincial funding streams. The proposed program interventions are based on research from Canada and elsewhere in the world (United States, United Kingdom, Australia and Scotland, in particular). Many of these program models have a strong evidence base, while others are promising practices. These models can be applied in urban, suburban, rural and remote communities. Below is an overview of effective program models:

PREVENTION-BASED PROGRAM INTERVENTIONS



a. Youth homelessness prevention.

Preventing youth homelessness means working upstream to help young people and their families before homelessness becomes a problem. There are excellent examples of interventions from Canada and elsewhere in the world. Communities will need resources and technical support to adapt and implement these program models. Key interventions include:

- *School-based prevention programs (Key Ontario example: Piloting The Upstream Project in York Region and Niagara Region, supported by Raising the Roof, A Way Home and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness)*
- *Family First strategies (Key Ontario example: Eva's Family Reconnect)*
- *Youth Reconnect - Place-based early intervention programs (Key Ontario example: RAFT in Niagara Region)*
- *Shelter diversion through Host Homes (Key Ontario example: Bridging the Gap in Halton)*
- *Better transitions from child protection (Key Ontario example: Youth-in-Transition workers - Ministry of Children and Youth Services)*
- *Discharge planning and support for young people leaving corrections (The U.S. Department of Justice is currently developing a comprehensive toolkit that can be adapted in Ontario)*

We recommend a funding stream to pilot these different models (the number of communities/ programs to be determined in discussions with different provincial ministries that will need to support this work). There is an opportunity to build a strong evidence base and leverage community experience, which will help other communities adapt these successful models.

b. Helping young people exit homelessness.

Effective strategies to help youth leave homelessness as quickly as possible should be a central feature of a provincial strategy. Such an investment would support the current federal and provincial prioritization of Housing First, in this case based on the [Housing First framework adapted for youth](#). Communities will need resources and technical support to adapt and implement these program models. Key program initiatives of the Ontario government which provide opportunities to align with key interventions to support young people to exit homelessness include:

- *Housing First for Youth (Key Ontario example: Delivering on the commitment in the Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy Update for new supportive housing targeted towards youth, including transitional housing options, such as the Foyer, which can be used to support a Housing First for Youth agenda)*
- *Employment training and support (Key Ontario example: Hire Up program)*
- *Mental health and addictions supports, including Harm Reduction (Key Ontario example: Ontario's Mental Health and Addictions Strategy)*
- *Reengagement in education (Key Ontario example: Re-engagement Initiative, Ministry of Education)*

We recommend a funding stream to pilot these different models (the number of communities/ programs to be determined in discussions with different provincial ministries that will need to support this work). There is an opportunity to build a strong evidence base and leverage community experience to, which will help support other communities to adapt these successful models.

Preventing youth homelessness means working upstream to help young people and their families before homelessness becomes a problem.

c. Prevention/Rehousing Innovation Fund.

Many Canadian communities are implementing innovative models of youth homelessness prevention, and strategies to re-house and support youth. These interventions are ‘promising practices’ for which there may not yet be a strong evidence base. However, funding should nevertheless be made available to support such innovation, with additional funds to support rigorous third party evaluation that will demonstrate program model success and enable scaling up. Areas where we need innovative approaches include supports for young people leaving care and corrections, for instance. This fund could also be used to encourage place-based interventions that foster sectoral collaboration.

It should be noted that for some communities, plans will be comprehensive strategies that align with or are embedded within the broader strategy to address homelessness. For other communities – particularly small towns and rural areas - the plan may be to adapt or implement a specific prevention-based program model intended to support young people and their families. The same logic applies to the term “provincial strategy” used in this policy brief, in that a strategy may consist of a number of immediate and long-term actions, as was the case in the government’s response to the report from the Expert Advisory Panel on Homelessness.

3) INTER-MINISTERIAL INITIATIVES

Within a provincial context, youth homelessness can be seen as a ‘fusion policy’ issue involving many different ministries. That is, sustainable solutions to youth homelessness require more than just services and supports provided by the sector, and must involve housing and supports (Ministries of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Community and Social Services), Child protection and youth services (Ministry of Children and Youth Services), health, mental health and addictions supports (Ministry of Health and Long Term Care), juvenile justice and corrections (Ministry of Children and Youth Services, Community Safety and Correctional Services, Attorney General), education, training and employment (Ministries of Education, of Training, Colleges and Universities, & of Labour).

The province currently has an Inter-Ministerial Working Group on Improving Transitions Planning and Services to Reduce Homelessness with a mandate to focus on reducing the incidence of homelessness for individuals exiting provincially-funded institutions and services, with a focus on hospitals, correctional and youth justice services, child welfare, and domestic violence shelters. The province is encouraged to make the working group permanent with an expanded focus on inter-ministerial collaboration to address youth homelessness. Some key examples of scalable initiatives that can be more effective through inter-ministerial collaboration include:



a) School-Based Prevention Models

School-based early intervention programs seek to identify young people who are at risk of homelessness, dropping out of school, or other significant and negative life altering circumstances and provide the necessary supports to reduce these risks, strengthen families and keep youth in place. A strong school-based prevention approach requires a coordinated and strategic systems approach, and must adequately engage, include and mandate action from mainstream systems and departments of government, as well as the homelessness sector. Based on successful examples from Australia, Raising the Roof, A Way Home and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness are adapting such a program to the Canadian context through [The Upstream Project](#), which will be piloted in Niagara Region and York Region in the coming year.

Opportunity: In collaboration with the **Ministry of Education**, the **Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing** (the provincial lead on homelessness) should consider evaluating The Upstream Project (proof of concept) and determine how to take this program to scale across the province.



b) Family First

The goal of Family First is to break the cycle of homelessness through the provision of a very focused and client-driven intervention that supports young people at risk of, or experiencing homelessness, and their family. Case management supports are intended to help mediate conflicts, strengthen relationships and nurture natural supports to help young people move forward with their lives. As a prevention initiative, family reconnection helps young people remain ‘in place’ in their communities, where they can stay in school and connected to natural supports (including friends, family members, teachers, etc.). For young people who have experienced homelessness, it is a key housing stability strategy that prevents the recurrence of homelessness and helps them move forward with their lives in a safe and planned way. The outcome is not that the young person remains in an unsafe or undesirable household, but rather that they are able to draw on support from family members that are safe and stable.

Opportunity: In collaboration with the **Ministry of Children and Youth Services** and the **Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing**, the province can support municipalities to ensure that all young people who experience homelessness, regardless of where they are in the province, have access to these supports. In addition, there needs to be more proactive supports for families when a young person is at risk of homelessness.



c) Youth Leaving Care

Research consistently points to the high percentage of homeless youth who have had some involvement with child protection services, including foster care, group home placements or youth custodial centres. While a seemingly intractable problem, there are many jurisdictions that have come up with effective program models and interventions that reduce the risk of homelessness for young people transitioning from care. This often involves much more than simply reforming child protection laws or extending the age of care. Rather, effective strategies involve partnerships between government, child protection services, and community-based service providers who have solid experience and expertise in working with at risk youth.

Opportunity: Working in collaboration with the **Ministry of Children and Youth Services**, the **Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing** (the provincial lead on homelessness) should further develop and implement strategies to support young people transitioning from provincial care. While such work is complex and fraught with many challenges, it is worth noting that the MCYS has already begun implementing a comprehensive strategy to address the needs of young people leaving care. The province should expand programs for high risk youth leaving care who are vulnerable to becoming homeless. It is also recommended that interventions such as the Youth-in-Transition workers program – which provides case management support for young people who have become homeless since leaving care – be further scaled and enhanced.



d) Youth Exiting Corrections

Without proper transitional supports, young people leaving corrections are not only at risk of homelessness, but there is an increased likelihood of reoffending. An effective model of discharge planning and support provides young people with solid case management while in custody, with an aftercare plan upon release, and balances the need for housing with the support required to transition to independent living. It also means helping youth address

issues that may have led to or been caused by their incarceration (including mental illness, substance use, trauma history, lack of education and employment skills). This work would build on existing support models and programs for youth while incorporating aspects of interventions that support post-discharge needs, including the [Foyer Model](#), [Housing First for Youth](#), [Transitional Housing](#), Family Reconnect, Employment Programs etc. Rooted in a philosophy of Housing First for Youth, programs that supports effective exits for youth leaving corrections will not only serve to reduce youth homelessness, but will become an effective crime prevention and public safety.

Opportunity: Working in collaboration with the **Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services**, the **Attorney General**, the **Ministry of Children and Youth Services** and the **Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing** should pilot and implement innovative programs to support young people leaving corrections (either the juvenile or adult systems), and then take such programming to scale. There are also potential opportunities to partner with the John Howard Society of Toronto Reintegration Centre and the Federal Government’s Ministry of Justice (and in particular its Youth Crime Prevention initiative).



e) Employment Training and Support

Youth unemployment is a challenge in Ontario but one that presents particular barriers for young people trying to leave the streets. For young people who experience homelessness and are considered ‘employment ready’, there is [Hire Up](#), a national hiring portal that connects employers with youth-serving organizations to create meaningful employment opportunities for youth with lived experience of homelessness. For those who are more deeply entrenched on the streets, there is [Train for Trades](#) (modelled by Choices for Youth, St. John’s Newfoundland) a unique training program that focuses on energy retrofits. Using a wrap around supports model (including accommodation, life skills, mentoring, job coaching, mental health and addictions supports) young people are given a solid foundation to pursue training and education. Working in collaboration with a training college, trade unions and local businesses, Train for Trades teaches young people to retrofit houses, resulting in reduced energy usage and energy poverty. Young people leave the program with marketable skills, greater housing stability, confidence and a chance to contribute to their community. The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness has created [a comprehensive toolkit based on Train for Trades](#) that enables communities to adapt the model.

Opportunity: Working in collaboration with the **Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities; Ministry of Education** and the **Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change**, the **Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing** should invest in training and support for young people who are homeless, integrating this into a [Housing First for Youth](#) strategy. Train for Trades is an evidence-based initiative that is immediately scalable, and can be a classic ‘win, win, win’ proposition for the province and communities in Ontario; it deals with youth homelessness, skills development, and energy poverty, which affects the elderly and other low-income people. Given recent announcements by the province (investment in energy retrofits) as well as the federal government (enhanced infrastructure investments), going to scale with Train for Trades and combining it with Housing First for Youth presents an opportunity to make a major impact on youth homelessness.



f) Mental Health and Addictions Strategy

Addressing the needs of young people with mental health and addictions issues continues to be a major challenge for those working in the homelessness sector. Young people who are homeless are more likely than housed youth to exhibit not only serious mental health conditions, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, but also very high levels of depression, anxiety (obsessive/compulsive and phobic), hostility, paranoia and suicidal ideation due to the reality of life on the streets. One consequence of these challenges is that many young people resort to the use of substances to cope. Mental health issues are then both a contributor to youth homelessness, but also a barrier to transitioning from the streets.

Opportunity: Engage the **Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care** to work collaboratively with the **Ministry of Children and Youth Services** and the **Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing** to contribute to Ontario’s Mental Health and Addictions Strategy in a way that supports young people at risk of, or who have experienced homelessness between the ages of 13 and 24. This means outreach-based approaches to improve access to care and support, ensuring all service providers are able to provide trauma-informed care, that there are adequate treatment beds available for young people experiencing homelessness, and that no young person leaving inpatient care transitions to homelessness. In addition, communities across the province should be provided with training and supports to implement harm reduction strategies and practices, a necessary precondition for supporting the implementation of Housing First for Youth.

4) TARGETED SUPPORT FOR KEY YOUTH SUB-POPULATIONS

a) Indigenous Youth

It should be noted that Indigenous youth, who are overrepresented in the youth homelessness population, face additional challenges because of the legacy of colonialism and racism in Canada. While a consideration of the needs of Indigenous youth should run through all planning and program activities, it is important to support the development of Indigenous-led interventions. A funding stream that provides support for Indigenous-focused and -led programs to prevent, reduce and end youth homelessness should be made available, and all communities engaging in broader strategies should be expected to address the needs of this population in their planning. This initiative could compliment the government’s commitment to developing an Indigenous Housing Strategy.

While a consideration of the needs of Indigenous youth should run through all planning and program activities that address youth homelessness, it is important to support the development of Indigenous-led interventions.

b) LGBTQ2S Youth

Youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered or transsexual (LGBTQ2S) make up 25-40% of the youth homeless population, compared to only 5-10% of the general population. Homophobia and transphobia produce the conditions whereby many young people are not able to stay in their homes, schools or communities. It is essential that public policy and service providers ensure that the response to homelessness – through prevention, emergency services or housing options – does not contribute further to the stigmatization and marginalization of LGBTQ2S youth, and that there are targeted responses that meet their unique needs.

5) ENGAGEMENT WITH OTHER LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT

There is an unprecedented opportunity for different levels of government to work collaboratively to make real progress on ending homelessness in Canada. The current Federal government has indicated that it is prioritizing youth issues, addressing affordable housing and homelessness, employment and environmental change, and is taking up the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indigenous rights. All of these areas of focus represent opportunities for Ontario to align its work with the Government of Canada.

In addition, the opportunities for inter-provincial and territorial collaboration should be explored. Working with provinces that are making headway on youth homelessness (Alberta) or are interested in moving in this direction (Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, for instance), Ontario can not only gain strategic insights into how to make progress, but also make a significant contribution to the development of a broader pan-Canadian effort to prevent and end youth homelessness. The province should encourage, support and play a leadership role in the development and implementation of a federal/provincial/territorial youth homelessness planning table (as recommended in our [Policy Brief: Federal Investment in Youth Homelessness](#) (2016)).

6) KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION

For youth homelessness planning, as well as many of the program interventions above, there is an emerging, and in some cases established, knowledge base to support a more robust development of program model frameworks and technical support to enable community adaptation and implementation. In addition, the existence of the HPS-funded Community Workspace on Homelessness for the sector, will provide a platform for the development of a provincial community of practice.

The province of Ontario has strongly indicated that it supports the use of research, data and evaluation in its plans to address homelessness. The province is home to many of Canada's leading research institutions, as well as the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness at York University, and as such has a strong knowledge base to draw on to support its efforts.

We know a lot about key interventions that can support a strategy to prevent and end youth homelessness. However, in order to take such programs to scale, the province should invest in knowledge mobilization. Going to scale includes "scaling up" – aligning the support of higher levels of government with the program initiatives; "scaling down" – supporting communities and providing necessary knowledge, tools and resources to foster the conceptual shift and implementation, and "scaling out" – enabling a broader range of communities to adapt and implement interventions with a high degree of fidelity to the suggested program models. The province should continue its knowledge mobilization activities already underway, such as the Local Poverty Reduction Fund, the Innovation, Evidence and Capacity Building Fund and the support of the Youth Homelessness Community Planning Toolkit and consider further knowledge mobilization activities in the areas of: a) program evaluation (to support proof of concept), b) program model toolkits, and c) technical support.

Leadership, direction and investment on the issue of youth homelessness by the provincial government can yield significant policy and practice changes across the province. This will create the context for greater alignment of policy and funding, sharing of practices and creating a broad provincial strategy.

Done well, a strategy to prevent, reduce and end youth homelessness will impact on the broader homelessness problem, and help the province achieve its goal of ending chronic homelessness in ten years. An investment that prioritizes the prevention and reduction of youth homelessness will also reduce the likelihood that young people who are homeless become the chronically homeless adults of the future. By supporting healthy transitions into adulthood, participation in education and community engagement, we are investing in health and well-being, enhanced employability, and reduced risk that young people will rely on benefits and supports as they age. This longer-term return on investment is potentially quite considerable and will improve the lives of young people across the country, and strengthen Ontario families and communities.

Done well, a strategy to prevent, reduce and end youth homelessness will impact on the broader homelessness problem, and help the Federal government achieve its goal of reducing homelessness in the province of Ontario.

REINVESTMENT IN ADDRESSING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

In a policy brief for the Government of Canadaⁱⁱ, we proposed an annual investment of \$16.5M to address youth homelessness through the Homelessness Partnering Strategy. The scope of a targeted provincial program to support community strategies to prevent, reduce and end youth homelessness has been outlined above. Funds will need to be used to support community strategic planning and program implementation. Overall project planning and coordination are also an important associated cost consideration. The scope of the overall provincial investment is not detailed in this brief, as it will have to be costed by associated ministries who will participate in the provincial homelessness strategy.

NOTES

- ⁱ Gaetz, Stephen (2014) [*Coming of Age: Reimagining our Response to Youth Homelessness in Canada*](#). Toronto: Homeless Hub Research Paper Series #11
- Gaetz, Stephen (2014) [*A Safe and Decent Place to Live: Towards a Housing First Framework for Youth*](#). Toronto: The Homeless Hub Press.
- ⁱⁱ Gaetz, Stephen & Melanie Redman (2016) [*"Federal Investment in Youth Homelessness: Comparing Canada and the United States. A Proposal for Reinvestment."*](#) Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Policy Brief #1

How to cite this document:

Gaetz, Stephen & Redman, Melanie. (2016). *Towards an Ontario Youth Homelessness Strategy*. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Policy Brief. Toronto: The Homeless Hub Press.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

**STEPHEN GAETZ,**

DIRECTOR OF THE CANADIAN OBSERVATORY ON HOMELESSNESS

736.2100 EXT. 20050

SGAETZ@EDU.YORKU.CA

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) is a non-profit, non-partisan research institute that is committed to conducting and mobilizing research so as to contribute to real and sustainable solutions to homelessness. We work together as a group of researchers, service providers, policy and decision makers, people with lived experience of homelessness, as well as graduate and undergraduate students from across Canada with a passion for social justice issues and a desire to solve homelessness in our communities. The COH undertakes an ambitious program of research that includes local, provincial and national monitoring activities, as well as original research that not only contributes to the scholarship on homelessness, but enhances the impact of research on solutions to homelessness by establishing an evidence base and knowledge mobilization strategy.

**MELANIE REDMAN,**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF A WAY HOME

MREDMAN@AWAYHOME.CA

A Way Home is a coalition of national organizations dedicated to preventing, reducing and ending youth homelessness in Canada. Ending youth homelessness means doing things differently. A Way Home promotes effective strategies that shift the focus away from an emergency response to one of prevention. We also advocate for moving youth who do become homeless into supportive housing as rapidly as possible, in a safe and planned way. This can only be done through effective community planning, service integration, and the alignment of strategies and resources for maximum impact at the national, provincial, territorial, and community levels. Founding members include Raising the Roof, Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, Canadian Housing & Renewal Association, Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, and the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness.