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CREATING A COMMUNITY STRATEGY TO END YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN EDMONTON

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INTRODUCTION

Youth homelessness is a pressing problem that impacts communities at great human and financial cost. Without adequate and individualized supports, vulnerable youth will continue to cycle through systems, emergency services and the street, increasing their likelihood of exposure to exploitation and further marginalization (Gaetz, 2011). Research suggests that effective youth strategies must respond to the specific needs of youth and the underlying causes of youth homelessness, which are distinctly unique from those that define adult homelessness and, as such, require youth-tailored responses (Gaetz, 2014; Gaetz, O'Grady, Buccieri, Karabanow & Marsolais, 2013). Further, system disconnects play a major role in contributing to youth homelessness, including barriers to successfully transitioning from youth to adult supports, challenges within the child welfare system, inadequate discharge planning from systems, challenges to accessing/receiving continuous support around mental health and addictions, the need to adopt harm reduction

principles in program/service planning and the need for relationship-based and youth-guided approaches (Felix-Mah, Adair, Abells & Hanson, 2014).

In 2014, Homeward Trust began the process of developing the *Community Strategy to End Youth Homelessness in Edmonton* (Youth Strategy). As a guiding document, it aligns with and draws upon the work of provincial, municipal and community plans, particularly the Government of Alberta's *Supporting Healthy and Successful Transitions to Adulthood: A Plan to Prevent and Reduce Youth Homelessness*, released in 2015. Edmonton's Youth Strategy aims to foster innovation and ways forward for strategic cross-systems and integrated planning with community stakeholders, especially the youth themselves. Ultimately, the intent is to achieve the goal of ensuring youth have access to safe, secure, stable housing; long-term connections to supports; improved social, physical and emotional well-being; and access to and successful outcomes in education and employment.

Edmonton’s Youth Strategy serves as a roadmap toward developing a clear Housing First-based agenda for youth. Modeled upon Gaetz’s (2014) strategic framework¹, it lays out recommendations within three broad strategic areas: enhance systems integration, prioritize prevention and sustainability and identify clear strategies for housing and support options.

FIGURE 1 *Recommendations Under Each Strategy Area*

STRATEGY ONE: Integrated System of Care	STRATEGY TWO: Prevention & Sustainability	STRATEGY THREE: Housing & Supports
1.1 Coordination of activities of youth-serving agencies and systems partners	2.1 Education on pathways into homelessness and mental health and addictions	3.1 Re-envisioning emergency services
1.2 Establish collective principles and values	2.2 Youth engagement and resiliency strategies	3.2 Increase the amount of housing options available
1.3 Establish a coordinated access and assessment strategy	2.3 Education and awareness campaigns	3.3 Availability of affordable housing
1.4 Coordinated research, data collection, information sharing and evaluation	2.4 Promotion of family reunification and supports	3.4 Housing First for youth
	2.5 Youth employment and education programming	3.5 Continuous support service and case management
	2.6 Effective supports for youth aging out of government care	3.6 Develop and maintain relationship-based approaches to supporting youth
	2.7 Zero discharge into homelessness	3.7 Maintain outreach services to connect youth with supports and housing
	2.8 Aboriginal cultural safety approaches	3.8 Appropriate/adequate services and supports for youth in high-risk situations
	2.9 Cultural competence & connections for immigrants & newcomers	3.9 Enhance services/supports for diverse subpopulations

1. Gaetz’ (2014) proposed framework, which assists communities in their efforts to strategically address youth homelessness, is built upon five core components: develop a plan, create an integrated systems response, facilitate strategic stakeholder engagement, adopt a positive youth development approach and incorporate evidence-based practices.

ABOUT HOMEWARD TRUST

Edmonton is a city with strong traditions in planning and collaboration around issues of affordable housing and homelessness, of which Homeward Trust has been an active participant in both its current form and through the work of its predecessor organizations (the Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing and the Edmonton Housing Trust Fund) which merged in 2007. Moreover, the organization was created with a unique structure that ingrains acknowledgement of the disproportionate impact of homelessness on Aboriginal peoples in the city: four of nine board members are selected through an Aboriginal nominating committee with representation from First Nations, Metis and other Aboriginal government and community stakeholders. This proportion reflects the fact that nearly 50% of the homeless population enumerated in Edmonton identifies as Aboriginal (Homeward Trust, 2013; Homeward Trust, 2014). From governance through to administration, Homeward Trust – in structure and in action – embodies a community-based mechanism for attaining the goal of ending homelessness in Edmonton.

Homeward Trust fulfills the role of funder, coordinator and systems planner by leading initiatives and programs that fulfill the mandates of provincial², municipal³ and community plans⁴. In the role of funder, Homeward Trust administers funds on behalf of the three orders of government to support programs, projects and capital investments that are designed to help people find permanent housing and build better lives. As a coordinating organization, Homeward Trust supports local adoption of evidence-based practices, programs and services that help individuals/families find housing and supports that enable them to maintain stability. Homeward Trust manages the Housing First program, which has seen over 5,000 people housed through multiple community-based agencies since the program's inception in 2009 with funding that followed the Government of Alberta's release of *A Plan for Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 Years*. In the role of system planner, Homeward Trust brings together stakeholders to change how systems interact with each other and the people the community serves. Within this sphere, Homeward Trust has worked with community partners on multi-stakeholder system planning initiatives addressing homeless pregnant girls with sexually transmitted illnesses, housing and supporting heavy users of police services, engaging homeless people living in parkland areas, reconstructing addiction recovery pathways for homeless people, coordinating a winter warming and emergency response program, moving homeless families from emergency accommodation in hotels to homes and co-creating discharge planning protocols for release from hospital, among numerous others. This expertise in systems and community planning was a key reason why Homeward Trust has played a leadership role in taking action on youth homelessness, including the development of the Youth Strategy and formation of the Youth Systems Committee.

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2. The province of Alberta has developed effective responses to homelessness through legislation of the Social Policy Framework and Children First, through the implementation of A Plan for Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 Years, and the provincial youth plan: Supporting Healthy and Successful Transitions to Adulthood: A Plan to Prevent and Reduce Youth Homelessness.
3. At the municipal level, homelessness responses are guided by A Place to Call Home: Edmonton's 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness.
4. At the community level, responses are guided by Edmonton's Community Plan on Housing and Supports: 2011– 2015.

HOMELESSNESS IN EDMONTON

Local contextual factors that influence the realities of homelessness include the major role Edmonton plays in the provincial and national economy: according to City of Edmonton Chief Economist John Rose, Alberta accounted for 80% of new jobs in Canada between 2013 and 2014, with approximately half of them created in the Edmonton region (“Edmonton Generated 40 Per Cent,” 2014). This has resulted in high rates of in-migration given the upward trend of employment growth linked to the oil and gas sector. Overall net migration to Alberta remains higher than any other province, though Alberta has experienced a 21% decrease from 2013 (Alberta Ministry of Innovation and Advanced Education, 2014). In Edmonton, there has been a seven percent increase in population growth (approximately 60,000 in-migrants) over the past two years (City of Edmonton, 2014). Between 2013 and 2014, the vacancy rate in the province remained low, around 1.8%, with Edmonton’s vacancy rate sitting at 1.4% and an increase of six percent for average rental rates in the city over the same time period (Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2014). Although the time series is too short to make definitive conclusions, there appears to be a strong link between the change in rent and the number of homeless individuals counted in the city during Homeward Trust’s biennial homeless counts (Homeward Trust, 2014).

Edmonton’s population has a median age of 36, four years below the national average, making it the youngest of Canada’s major cities (Edmonton Community Foundation, 2014). Census data from 2011 show that 40% of the population is below the age of 30, with half of this group between the ages of 18 and 29 (Statistics Canada, 2013). This proportion mirrors findings from the October 2014 homeless count, with 20% of homeless people counted falling within the 18–30 age range (Homeward Trust, 2014). In the 2014 homeless count, 549 children and youth (under the age of 25) were without permanent stable housing (Homeward Trust, 2014). Of this number, 240 were independent youth between the ages of 13 and 24. In terms of demographics, similarly as in 2012, there remained an over representation of Aboriginal youth (55%) and a larger percentage overall of homeless male youth (57%). The homeless count survey did not include a question around LGBTQ2S identity and therefore the percentage of LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness in Edmonton remains unknown despite growing anecdotal evidence of unmet needs for this subpopulation expressed by community and system stakeholders alike.

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Data is also collected twice per year in October and April at the Homeless Connect events that provide free services to people experiencing homelessness or at risk of becoming homeless. Coordinated by Homeward Trust and hosted by the Edmonton Shaw Conference Centre, Homeless Connect has occurred every year for the past seven years. Approximately 1,500 participants who were homeless or at risk of homelessness attended each event in the past few years, receiving generally inaccessible services such as haircuts, eye check-ups and glasses, dental work, family portraits, legal assistance and others offered by community-minded businesses and organizations. Guests provide data as part of the registration process, which incorporates a survey with questions that align with those used in Edmonton's homeless count. Of the 101 youth who attended the October 2014 Homeless Connect, 64% were Aboriginal, 93% were born in Canada, 49.5% were female, 59.4% had no permanent residence and 56.7% reported being homeless more than once in their life. Among Homeless Connect youth participants who indicated that they did not have a permanent residence (n=56), they had experienced on average almost two years of homelessness and two episodes of homelessness in the past three years. The average age at which these youth became homeless was just over 17. Most of these youth used shelters; however, one in four youth couch surfed and another 14% slept rough. Over

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half were renting prior to becoming homeless; 25% lived with family or friends and 14% were in foster care or a group home. Over 60% had completed some secondary education but 55% could not find employment and were actively seeking it.

In April 2014, Edmonton's youth sector and agencies implementing the Homeward Trust-funded Winter Emergency Response Program began raising concerns that homeless youth who are high risk and have complex

needs are encountering serious gaps at the systems level and misconceptions at the community level and, in the end, are accessing programs and services not equipped to address their specific needs and conditions. The most immediate concerns were the barriers to accessing mental health and addictions supports, lack of information sharing between systems and homeless serving agencies, insufficient safe spaces for youth to

access services to assist with basic needs and lack of appropriate housing options for youth. It was clear that while great work was being done across the youth serving sector, there was still a need for enhanced coordination and integration amongst providers. Given Homeward Trust's role as systems planner, the organization began engaging Edmonton's youth homelessness sector and systems stakeholders to exchange information, identify gaps and recommend areas to focus resources and planning to address the immediate and long-term needs of homeless youth.

DEVELOPING THE STRATEGY: LITERATURE REVIEW

Given the urgency to ensure that the most vulnerable youth can access services and be guided along clear pathways to permanent housing and support options, Homeward Trust began by exploring how other communities were approaching youth homelessness. A literature review was conducted focusing on the UK, Australia, United States and Canada. Initial explorations focused on understanding the causal factors and conditions of youth homelessness. Drawing upon the extensive literature on youth homelessness, Homeward Trust explored national, regional and international recommendations that best reflected Edmonton's local contexts. For the purpose of supporting strategy development, thematic analysis of the literature centred on three priority areas: integrated systems of care, prevention and sustainability, and housing and supports.

An integrated system of care is defined as a local system that addresses the needs of individuals through the coordination and connection of programs, services and resources from planning through to delivery (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2014). Importantly, an integrated system of care requires youth to be active participants in the planning, delivery and evaluation of programs and services specific to their needs (North Carolina Families Inc., 2006). Homelessness prevention approaches draw from the public health model of prevention, which is generally understood within three categories: primary, secondary and tertiary prevention (Culhane, Metraux & Byrne, 2010). Gaetz (2014) defines each as follows:

1. Primary prevention includes community-wide interventions that focus on working upstream by looking at the factors that increase the risk for homelessness;
2. Secondary prevention identifies conditions at early stages for those at risk of becoming or newly homeless; and
3. Tertiary prevention refers to ensuring homeless individuals are moved into housing with wraparound supports.

Successful prevention approaches require an integrated and coordinated system amongst youth serving agencies, government and organizations both internal and external to the homeless-serving sector (Gaetz, 2014). The literature is clear on the need for housing solutions to include a range of options across a continuum that matches the diversity of youth needs with suitable and affordable options (Gaetz et al., 2013). Regardless of the model, youth need the flexibility to move across the continuum of housing options according to their needs and as they transition to adulthood (Gaetz, 2013). Successful housing also necessitates available and appropriate supports that focus on the development of life skills, meaningful engagement, access to education and employment, and strengthening social relations (Gaetz, 2013).

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DEVELOPING THE STRATEGY: STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

While Homeward Trust took the lead in drawing up a rudimentary framework for the Youth Strategy that brought together research on youth homelessness as a conceptual starting point, it was ultimately community discussions that framed the development and priorities of the Youth Strategy. The process was an intentionally inclusionary endeavour and facilitative of cross-systems planning. Participants at each stage of consultation were strategically selected to ensure a diversity of perspectives and to foster relationship building and networking, not only between Homeward Trust and stakeholders but also amongst stakeholders themselves. The first consultation stage, a scoping session, focused on frontline engagement to help understand how services are planned and delivered on the ground and the challenges faced by frontline providers. The second stage, the strategy planning session, focused on a wider range of public, private, community and systems stakeholders. Invited participants came from both frontline and leadership positions to ensure system planning knowledge could interact with expertise from on-the-ground operations and direct delivery. The third stage, the youth consultation, was explicitly for youth to share their perspectives on having experienced services and programs first hand and living the daily realities of homelessness. Essential to consulting youth was the establishment of safe spaces for discussion, which was achieved by having the youth define the parameters and boundaries. Also necessary was the provision of incentives, which was pursued as a matter of principle: it was less about an incentive than it was about showing youth that their time and perspectives were valuable.

Initial Scoping Session

While a literature review provided an initial starting point and strong theoretical basis for strategy development, it was imperative to engage Edmonton's youth-serving sector and systems partners to define local contexts, identify gaps and barriers, and prioritize key areas to focus resources and cross-systems planning. Invitations were sent to homeless-serving agencies, youth-serving community agencies and stakeholders from diverse systems including primary health and mental health and addictions systems, corrections and justice, public and catholic schools, police, libraries, employment centres, income support programs and Aboriginal organizations/agencies, among others. The findings from the literature review – and emerging framework for the Youth Strategy – were presented to approximately 30 participants, including both community and government stakeholders. The three-hour meeting was held at the University of Alberta in late August 2014 and aimed to share knowledge, engage in discussions around community-level resourcing and cross-systems planning, and identify clear priorities and approaches to further develop the Youth Strategy. Following a brief presentation by Homeward Trust staff on research and strategic responses from other jurisdictions, the floor was opened for plenary discussions on two questions:

- What are the barriers/gaps at the systems level that are limiting youths' access to appropriate resources and services?
- What does integrated cross-systems planning and coordination of community level resources look like for Edmonton?

These discussions were facilitated by Homeward Trust staff with the purpose of maintaining continuous and inclusive dialogue and facilitating information sharing amongst participants. For a discussion that could have easily been mired in problem orientation and pointing fingers, the feedback was surprisingly focused, solution oriented, honest and collaborative. Most importantly, it signaled a palpable energy and early momentum for tackling the complex issues around youth homelessness at both the systems and community level. In essence, the community badly needed to see change and was ready to make it happen.

Following the scoping session, Homeward Trust-funded youth agencies and Child and Family Services were engaged to tease out more detailed information on areas

to prioritize resources and elicit recommendations on housing options for youth. Informal meetings were held separately with each agency to allow for candid conversations on challenges and barriers around service delivery and to solicit ideas for overcoming these disconnects. These conversations were held with both frontline staff and managers to fill in the knowledge gaps from the scoping session. While not intended as an exercise in validating the Youth Strategy framework, information gathered supported adoption of its core components. Aligning with the scoping session, dialogue with agencies highlighted the importance of meeting immediate and long-term needs of youth, centring on facilitating access to housing and supports.

Strategy Planning Session

To build upon the momentum and collaborative spirit around ending youth homelessness, a second larger planning session was held at the end of September 2014 to discuss a proposed framework for Edmonton's Youth Strategy focused on the primary themes generated from the literature review: (1) enhancing coordination and service integration, (2) improving appropriate connections to housing and supports and (3) prioritizing prevention efforts. Drawing upon community recommendations from the scoping session and subsequent agency interviews, Homeward Trust engaged a broader range of stakeholders within mainstream services and outside of the housing and homelessness sector. Youth-serving agencies were also encouraged to recommend and invite youth to the planning session. Approximately 70 participants representing a wide swath of perspectives attended the session held at Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society. To facilitate an interactive engagement process, a "Fishbowl Process"⁵ was used, consisting of a panel of youth-serving agency leaders and key system stakeholders, guided by a member of Homeward Trust's leadership team in discussion around barriers/gaps and priorities/recommendations. Following the panel session, audience members were given the opportunity to respond and share observations on the dialogue, bringing the broader expertise of the community into the discussion.

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Information collected from the strategy planning session was again organized into the three thematic groupings identified within the literature review (integrated system of care, prevention and sustainability, and housing and supports). Across all categories,

5. The Fishbowl Process used in the Strategy Planning Session involves a small group of participants seated in a circle, with a larger group of observers seated around them. The small group is led through a facilitated discussion for a time, while the larger group observes. When the time runs out, the large group has a turn to speak, while the small group observes. In this manner, this method facilitates dialogue when discussing topics within large groups.

recommendations from the participants highlighted the need for acknowledging and strengthening existing collaborative relationships between community and systems partners. With respect to integrated systems of care, recommendations called for streamlining system navigation and enhancing coordinated access for youth. Recommendations highlighted that a system of care necessitates inclusive approaches that are youth centred and strengths/relationship based, including harm reduction and trauma-informed practice. Regarding housing, recommendations indicated the need to develop clear pathways and transitions along the continuum of housing options for youth, including access to long-term and appropriate services and supports based upon the needs and risk level of the youth. Feedback also highlighted key barriers, including the lack of appropriate housing or interim accommodation options, system breakdowns and inadequate mental health and addictions supports. Prevention and sustainability recommendations indicated the need to enhance understanding around Aboriginal perspectives and historical contexts and the adoption of cultural safety and competency practices more generally. There was also a focus on increasing awareness around the pathways and complexities of youth homelessness and its linkage to identity and social relationships, with special attention required for challenges faced by LGBTQ, newcomer, gang-involved and sexually exploited youth.

Youth Consultation

In January 2015, a consultation was held with homeless and at-risk youth to draw on their lived experiences of homelessness and to identify barriers and gaps within Edmonton's housing and support services. Youth serving agencies were once again engaged to identify and recruit youth who were experiencing homelessness or at risk of becoming homeless to attend the consultation. In recognition of their expertise and participation, \$25 prepaid Visa cards were provided as honoraria. Approximately 20 homeless or at-risk youth attended the consultation, which was held at Edmonton's downtown public library for accessibility and inclusion. Safe space boundaries were established by the participating youth. To activate discussions, a short presentation was provided outlining key concepts and ideas on how to address the needs of homeless youth. Following the presentation, the larger group was divided into smaller tables to discuss the following questions:

- What has stopped you from getting housing, healthcare, legal aid, school and jobs?
- What has helped you get housing, healthcare, legal aid, school and jobs?
- In a perfect world, what do we need to end youth homelessness?

Youth feedback mirrored many recommendations provided by the community consultations. Considerable priority was given to the need for an integrated system response and streamlined process and pathways to services, explicitly in relation to health, justice and education. Youth felt that there needed to be prioritization of collaboration within the sector, expressly around information sharing and service continuity. Other areas of importance centred on enhancing education and awareness around the pathways into youth homelessness, with a focus on family breakdown, trauma, mental health and addictions and, more broadly, on the daily challenges

that homeless youth encounter. In relation to housing, recommendations called for increased housing options for youth, particularly congregate supportive housing and scattered site housing with supports for daily living and skills development. Recommendations reinforced the need for a more coordinated and accessible continuum of housing and support options for youth.

Central to all youth feedback was the need to involve youth in program and service planning. In reference to their vision of 'a perfect world,' recommendations included a lower cost for housing, increased supports, more transitional housing, stronger community engagement and enhanced partnerships across the sector.

ESTABLISHING THE YOUTH SYSTEMS COMMITTEE

Participant feedback across all consultations, including youth, asserted the need for structured relationships and networks to enable streamlined access and navigation of services and coordination of cross-systems and community planning. Central to this idea was the call for the formation of a committee that would work to share and mobilize information, pool resources and maximize inter- and cross-agency collaboration to implement the Youth Strategy. In January 2015, Homeward Trust created the Youth Systems Committee with this purpose in mind. The committee serves in an advisory capacity to Homeward Trust, helping to identify and address systems challenges and opportunities for Edmonton's youth sector, and overseeing the refinement, implementation and monitoring of the Youth Strategy. The involved stakeholders include representatives from both the municipal and provincial governments; mainstream systems including Alberta Health Services, Child and Family Services and financial support programs; the Edmonton Police Service; public and separate school boards; funding bodies; the Edmonton Public Library; youth shelters; youth-serving agencies who are actively involved in addressing youth homelessness; and other community- and government-based providers. Many of these members had been previously involved in the consultation process that helped to develop the Youth Strategy and thus were eager to participate in a committee focused on realizing its goals.

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The committee operates under a mandate of improving cross-systems integration and coordination to ensure homeless and at-risk youth have access to appropriate public and community-based supports and services to prevent and end homelessness. In order to achieve this, a clear work plan has been created that aligns with the Youth Strategy, incorporating feedback and input from all committee members and setting out priority areas of focus and actions to be taken. The work plan includes success measures, a delineated timeframe and lead agents for each activity. In creating the work plan, the committee desired a focus on action-oriented outcomes, framed within the values and principles from the Youth Strategy and grounded within the urgency of solving youth homelessness. Within each strategy area, specific implementation activities are identified that have been prioritized into a measured timeframe of six months, one year and two year markers that will allow for continual and cumulative progress.

FROM STRATEGY TO IMPLEMENTATION

With the completion of the development of the Youth Strategy and the creation of the Youth Systems Committee to oversee implementation of its recommendations, focus turned towards determining next steps in operationalizing implementation efforts. On June 10, 2015, Homeward Trust hosted the Youth Services & Access Design Forum, a daylong event aimed at facilitating greater coordination, collaboration and cooperation among multiple agencies and government systems each providing youth-oriented services, in order to ensure youth can access the supports and services they need. Over 50 individuals attended the forum, representing membership from 30 government and agency partners, many of whom sit on the Youth Systems Committee. Homeward Trust staff worked closely with City of Edmonton stakeholders to co-organize and plan the event. During the youth consultation process for the development of the strategy, youth expressed that being able to participate in the planning and decision making process demonstrated that their voices were being included and valued. Given this perspective, there was considerable regret on the part of Homeward Trust and its partners that, despite beginning the process in the spirit of creating a youth-centred system, the youth themselves were not formally included until

development of the strategy was in its final stages. As such, it was decided that moving the Youth Strategy from paper into action must start with meaningful engagement of youth with lived experience.

Planning for the forum centred on incorporating a youth-led neighbourhood tour of Edmonton's inner city and Old Strathcona areas. These tours aimed to help ground the subsequent design work within the experiences and points of view of youth themselves. Afternoon sessions delved into community asset mapping to identify what resources are available in each neighbourhood, where they are concentrated and where there are gaps. Following the asset identification exercise, the participants engaged in a detailed group design discussion, focusing on future visioning of what an ideal youth system could look like and what changes, including additional, reallocated or integrated resources, would be needed to realize such a youth system. Although all the youth guides who participated in the neighbourhood tours were invited to participate in the full day, only one was able to stay and participate in the afternoon sessions. The forum ended with a final debriefing and reflection completed through a Socratic Circle method discussion that was captured by a graphic artist in a visual diagram.

Youth-guided Neighbourhood Tour

The intent of the youth-guided neighbourhood tour was based on approaches like Jane's Walk, in which interested people are directly exposed to places and people to help them understand broader contexts and meaning. As youth homelessness is most visible in two areas of the city (Old Strathcona, immediately south of the North Saskatchewan River, and downtown, immediately north of the river), it was important that forum participants witness the realities at street-level in those areas. Homeward Trust committed to engaging homeless youth to shape the tours with their perspectives and lived experience. Given Homeward Trust's recent foray into systems planning for youth homelessness, partnering agencies were solicited to advise on youth engagement approaches and assist with recruitment of youth. Early steps focused on meeting with youth-serving agencies to determine if such an approach

was practically feasible and ethically sound. From these meetings emerged a blueprint for meaningful engagement and a tactical way forward for incubating this youth-led activity. While there were some initial reservations, there was also buy-in, as youth-led tours were a novel experience; they were also viewed as a catalyst for youth empowerment and a unique opportunity for youth to be at the forefront of service planning. To support participating youth, meetings were held four consecutive Friday afternoons over the course of one month to develop the walking routes, personal narratives and ideas of how to address systemic issues and barriers. These meetings also focused on building trust and establishing relationships between Homeward Trust and the youth, and amongst the youth themselves. To reduce barriers to participation, Homeward Trust provided dinner at each meeting and gave each youth transit tickets to get to and from the meetings. Additionally, their time commitment, practical expertise and willingness to engage forum participants were recognized by providing a \$125 prepaid Visa card for those who participated in the tour. While the initial meeting brought together 13 youth from diverse backgrounds, many were uncomfortable with the idea of speaking in front of large groups of stakeholders. In the end, five youth participated: three youth led the downtown inner city walk and two youth led the Old Strathcona walk, sharing their stories and lived realities of youth homelessness. The experience was a powerful one for all who participated, elevating the abstract understanding of system disconnects to the gritty reality of life on Edmonton's streets for vulnerable and neglected youth.

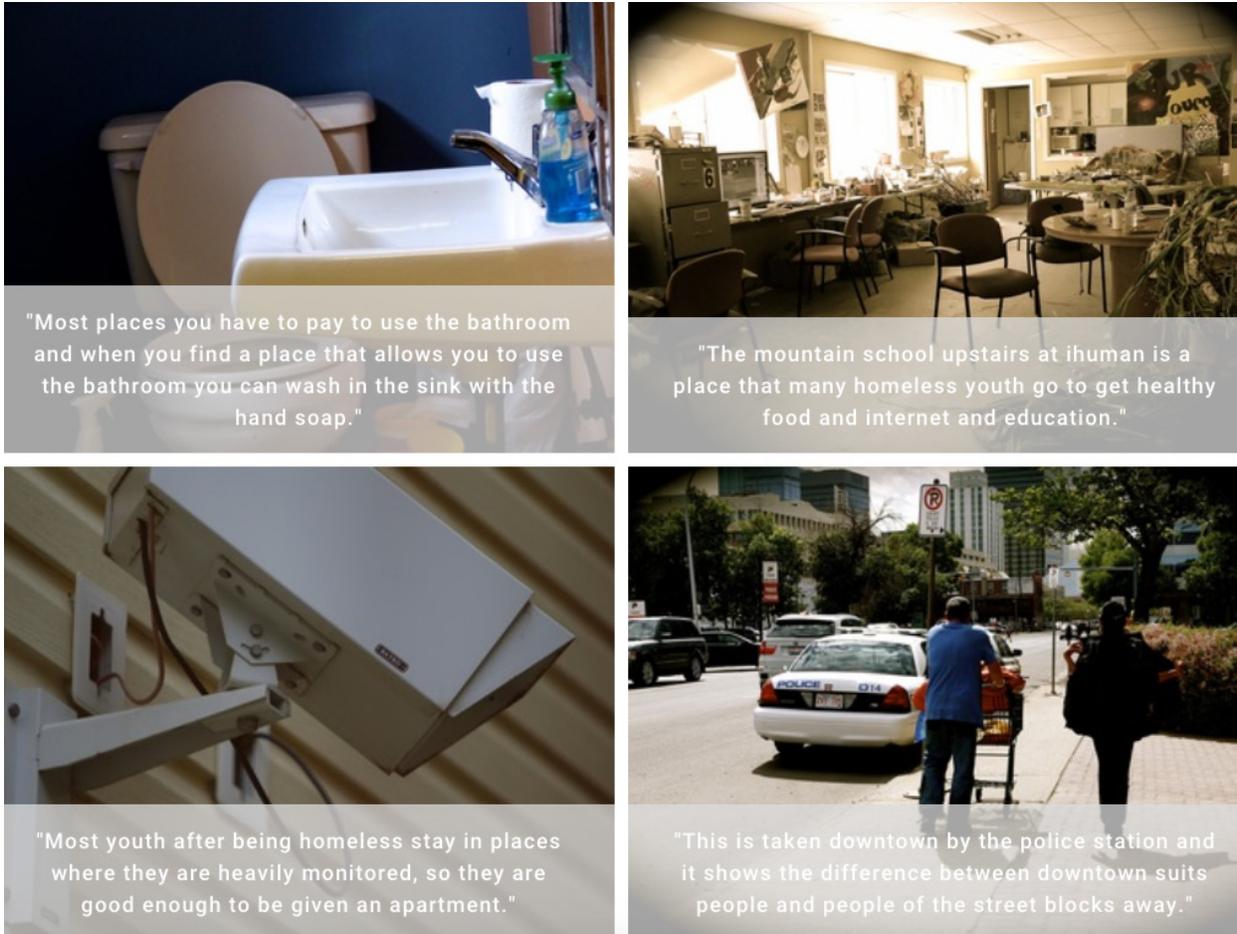
Photovoice

Early in the planning stages of the forum, it became apparent that while the youth-guided tour was a space to express and empower youth, not all youth would be in a position to share their experiences in such a format. To be inclusive of those youth who wanted to participate and share their stories through another medium, Homeward Trust offered the opportunity to share their viewpoints through Photovoice. Photovoice combines photography with community development and social action. Participating youth were asked to represent their perspectives by photographing scenes that highlight barriers and issues that homeless youth face. The purpose of this project was to use photography as a medium of expression to understand youth perspectives and experiences around issues of homelessness, capturing the realities of street life in Edmonton. This project engaged youth to think about their communities and raise issues that are important to them. To help youth frame their story, we asked youth four questions. For each question, the youth took one photo and provided a written response.

1. What places or things have meaning to you and that you think are important to youth around issues of youth homelessness?
2. What are places you feel safe and don't feel safe?
3. What are places and things that you would like to see changed?
4. What does a 'home' mean to you?

Recruiting youth for this project relied solely on partnering agencies, who were contacted via email and in person by Homeward Trust. Community agencies supported participating youth by assisting with transportation to any places youth wanted to document as part of the project, as well as encouraging and helping youth with their written responses. Each youth who participated in the Photovoice project was provided with two transit tickets and a \$50 prepaid Visa card for their time and openness in sharing their perspectives and ideas. In total, six youth participated.

FIGURE 2 *Screenshot of Photovoice Contributions posted on yegyouthstrategy.ca*



Community Asset Mapping

In the Community Asset Mapping activity in the afternoon of the forum, the two youth-guided tour groups were divided into smaller groups and given a large printout map of either the downtown/inner city or Old Strathcona/Southside, as well as some translucent Mylar paper upon which they were asked to draw out the resources and assets available in each area. Participants were asked to reflect upon the morning's youth-guided tour and to draw from the knowledge and experience of those in each group to complete their maps. Participants were given markers, coloured dots and a legend of service types they were asked to identify on the map. The aim of this activity was for each participant to gain a

better understanding of the current youth system, how and where services are dispersed throughout the city and the challenges and gaps in services that currently exist for homeless youth.

At the end of the session, each small group was able to review the maps of the other groups in their larger breakout, allowing for participants to compare and contrast how others had mapped resources in the same neighbourhood. Through having a clearer understanding of how the current system appears, the participants were then in the right frame of mind to engage in future visioning to determine how an ideal youth-serving system would look.

FIGURE 3 *Youth Design Forum Participants Engage in Community Asset Mapping*



Youth Services and Access Design Discussion

The group design discussions offered stakeholders the opportunity to share their feedback and perspectives on how best to support high-risk and homeless youth in the Old Strathcona/Southside and downtown/inner city areas to access the supports and services they need. The aim for these collaborative discussions was to produce a framework for neighbourhood-specific service and access models, utilizing existing linkages and community supports. Based upon their existing knowledge and the information and experience from the day's activities, participants were asked to envision what the ideal youth system could look like and to engage in 'blue sky' future visioning of how that ideal state could be achieved. Participants were asked to give ideas and suggestions for specific resources, actions or assets that could/should be added, redistributed or reconfigured in order to achieve the goal of a

coordinated, integrated and collaborative youth system. Following ample discussion time, the two breakout groups presented back to each other an overview of their discussion and the ideas and suggestions put forth for each neighbourhood. A joint summary discussion, focusing on an overview of suggested ideas, enabled the distillation of several common themes within and between both the downtown/inner city and Old Strathcona/Southside areas. The forum ended with a Socratic Circle method discussion⁶, in which participants reflected on the implications of the day for themselves and their organizations and what they felt were the key takeaways from the day. The group's reflections were illustrated by a graphic artist as people spoke, capturing the highlights of the day in a stunning visual representation.

6. The Socratic Circle method is a participant-centred approach to inquiry and discussion between individuals. The method was adapted to incorporate a facilitated discussion in which participants divide into an inner and an outer circle. Each circle of participants is given the opportunity to speak to the issue, then provide highlights of what they heard or ask clarifying questions of each other's conversations.

FROM IMPLEMENTATION TO INITIAL ACTIONS

Homeward Trust continues to work with the Youth Systems Committee and related stakeholders to mobilize funding and reposition resources to move the community closer to a system design that can end youth homelessness. Moreover, youth who participated in consultation activities have been engaged to form a Youth Advisory Committee to ensure the work remains grounded in their lived experience.

A commitment to providing individualized youth-centred supports requires integrated systems that adopt strategies for information sharing to support the continuity of services and transition planning. As such, a key priority activity for the Youth Systems Committee is to have clarification on provincial legislation and policies so that all stakeholders in the system of care are engaged in reasonable information sharing to better serve youth. This activity will be crucial to accomplishing all further activities related to facilitating coordinated access, intake, service delivery and evaluation. Information sharing will also set the stage for activities within the two year timeframe, such as the use of common assessment protocols and tools and the use of a common data system for monitoring the entire system of care for continuous and responsive quality improvement.

Both within the community consultation events that went into the development of the youth strategy and the discussions to come out of the Youth Forum, a top priority is to develop strategies for high-risk and homeless youth to have easy, coordinated access to co-located and integrated mainstream services needed to prevent and exit homelessness. The objective in creating these 'integrated hubs' lies within the new capacities and efficiencies created from drawing on

the untapped collective repository of strengths when multiple agencies are brought together. Integrated hubs can help harmonize multiple mandates and improve information exchange, eliminate competition and ultimately bring agencies closer together (Belanger, 2014). They also can facilitate greater coordination, collaboration and integration among multiple agencies and government systems providing youth-oriented services. Although this is one promising strategy, recommendations that emerged from the Youth Forum also call for ensuring a balance between centralized and decentralized service access and delivery. Incorporating

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greater integration of system services, such as income support, health and Child and Family Services programs and supports, within community-based service providers across the city would help to ensure that youth can access the services they need wherever they choose to seek assistance.

Additional mobile outreach services were also suggested, to ensure youth are being engaged and reconnected to mainstream services as soon as possible, as well as to target those youth who have become entrenched in the homeless 'street culture.' Social media was suggested as an initial access point for youth and a key engagement tool. Above all else, there was consensus on developing pathways for newly homeless or at-risk youth to be diverted from the shelter system as quickly as possible into alternative forms of interim accommodation and to immediately begin the process of securing appropriate supportive or supported housing options.

CONCLUSION

The Youth Strategy is not the final step, but rather the first giant leap (of faith) towards achieving the goal of ending youth homelessness. The specifics of the strategy will be continuously refined, evolving over time in order to meet the changing needs of youth and adapt to shifting policy environments and service contexts. Effectively, strategies to end homelessness require sustainable, long-term approaches that are supported by integrated systems and community-level resourcing that prioritizes prevention and housing and supports (Belanger, 2014; Bond, 2010; Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2011; CHRA, 2012; CAEH, 2012; CHRN, 2012; CCF, 2010; Culhane, Metraux & Byrne, 2010; Gaetz, 2014, 2011; Gaetz, O'Grady, Buccieri, Karabanow, & Marsolais, 2013; Greenber & Rosenheck, 2010; Hambrick & Rog, 2000; Junek & Thompson, 1999; NAEH, 2013; Quilgars, Fitzpatrick, & Pleace, 2011; Raising the Roof, 2009). Edmonton's homeless-serving sector has historically capitalized on and strengthened the efforts of individual community agents through collaborative partnerships in an ongoing drive to better address the needs of the most vulnerable people in our community, as evidenced by the successes in applying Housing First to house thousands of formerly homeless people over the last six years. In developing the Youth Strategy, Homeward Trust, alongside its community and systems partners, engaged in a series of activities that incited intensive learning about the contexts, disconnects and opportunities for collaborative and coordinated planning and delivery for homeless youth. Throughout the process, the Youth Strategy morphed and evolved, reflecting the experience and expertise within the community, including the youth themselves. While still in the early stages of this work, it is clear that continuing progress will not be defined or limited by constrained ways of thinking or siloed approaches to problem solving. It is no overstatement to say that being able to achieve often repeated but seldom enacted concepts like 'meaningful engagement' and 'collaborative planning' is a laudable accomplishment. Through developing the Youth Strategy and setting the course for its implementation, Homeward Trust and its partners have demonstrated the potential and capacity of Edmonton to engage in collective action aimed at realizing integrated service delivery within the youth homelessness system. Thus, Edmonton has a solid foundation in place on which to build deeper and more complex strategic efforts to make progress towards ending youth homelessness.

In developing the Youth Strategy, Homeward Trust, alongside its community and systems partners, engaged in a series of activities that incited intensive learning about the contexts, disconnects and opportunities for collaborative and coordinated planning and delivery for homeless youth.

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