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## **VIGNETTE:** YOUTH RECONNECT: SYSTEMS PREVENTION IN A CRISIS MODEL

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### **INTRODUCTION: YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA**

Over the past two decades, homelessness has become a serious concern in many urban centres across Canada. Throughout the 1990s, homelessness became a social crisis resulting from fewer affordable housing initiatives, problematic social assistance programs and shifting employment opportunities (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2007). It has been estimated that between 186,000 and 220,000 individuals experience homelessness every year in Canada (Gaetz, Donaldson, Richter & Gulliver, 2013). Moreover, the same report suggests that homelessness costs our economy up to \$7 billion every year. These problems are compounded by the fact that there has been a steady reduction in federal funding targeting affordable housing initiatives and other services responding to homeless populations. In particular, funding for affordable housing has dropped from \$2.7 billion (2013 dollars) two decades ago to \$2.2 billion in 2013 (Gaetz, Gulliver & Richter, 2014).

More recently, youth homelessness has become a nationwide concern. Segaert (2012) suggests that youth comprise 30% of the homeless population

accessing the shelter system. This accounts for approximately 35,000 individuals annually, or up to 6,000 homeless youth on any given night (Segaert, 2012). Unfortunately, these statistics do not describe the entire population of homeless youth because youth often enter homelessness via a different pathway than adults and because homeless youth are using different survival strategies than adults who are living on the street. For example, youths are often less visible due to the transient nature of their homelessness and because they are likely to ‘couch surf’ with friends or acquaintances rather than access shelters.

Originally, organizations attempted to respond to youth homelessness using the same strategies that were being used to address adult homelessness; however, these initiatives often proved to be ineffective (Gaetz, 2014). Youth are still developing physically, emotionally and psychologically. Many have little to no work experience or have dropped out of educational institutions. In many situations, youth homelessness arises from family conflict that forces

them to leave their homes (Gaetz, O’Grady, Buccieri, Karabanow & Marsolais, 2013). Lastly, there are separate systems in Canada that facilitate youth care in terms of welfare support, legal needs, social and emotional growth, healthcare and education (Kamloops, 2014). It would be difficult to adequately and effectively provide support for youth experiencing homelessness using traditional adult homelessness services. As a result, a reconceptualization of Canada’s response to youth homelessness – from a systems or cross-sectoral perspective – is an integral step in preventing and reducing youth homelessness in Canada. However, to date, there has been limited systems integration and coordination between social services, which has allowed youth in some communities to ‘fall through the cracks’ into homelessness. This case study will describe an innovative program in Niagara, Ontario, that focuses on integrating wraparound services and the education system to prevent youth homelessness.

## YOUTH RECONNECT AND SYSTEMS INTEGRATION

Youth Reconnect was launched as a pilot project in 2008 in Niagara, Ontario by the Niagara Resource Service for Youth called the RAFT<sup>1</sup>. The project was developed to address youth homelessness in a rural community. The project systemically brought together numerous stakeholders from across the region. These stakeholders included front line support workers, housing workers, Youth Reconnect workers, teachers, principals, school counsellors and RAFT support personnel.

Until quite recently, homelessness was considered to be an urban issue and the prevention of rural youth homelessness was largely overlooked within the social service sector. Community-led responses – where they existed – were narrowly focused on providing traditional homelessness sector services (e.g. emergency food and shelter), rather than drawing on supports from multiple social systems. Recognizing these limitations, a stakeholder committee in the Niagara region began developing a system-wide response aimed at preventing youth homelessness, rather than the provision of emergency service for youth experiencing absolute homelessness. The

stakeholder committee recognized that it would be most effective if a preventative response was integrated within existing systems that engage youth *before* they became homeless (e.g. education, healthcare, social services). Considering youth cannot become crown wards after they have turned 16, we had to consider alternative strategies that did not involve the province’s child protection services or Children’s Aid Societies (CAS). Our anecdotal evidence also suggested youth were hesitant to become involved with CAS due to the negative stigma associated with the services. As a result, Youth Reconnect partnered with several schools and school boards in Niagara to address youth homelessness.

The choice to partner with the school boards was supported by research conducted at the RAFT, which noted that the average age of youth homelessness in the region was 15–16 based on the clientele that the organization was serving. Empirical data collected by the RAFT concluded that the vast majority of youth accessing the shelter system were attending high school immediately prior to their homelessness. In many cases youth stop going to school in order access emergency

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1. Niagara Resource Service for Youth is the incorporated name of the organization popularly known as the RAFT. This change occurred when teen participants chose to rechristen the organization in 1994. At that time the youths decided Resource Association For Teens (RAFT) represented them better and the name has been in general use since then.

shelters in other cities. An internal review conducted at the RAFT prior to the development of the Youth Reconnect program suggested that 51% of youth accessing the shelter in St. Catharines had to leave the region where they were originally from, which likely resulted in a disrupted school year, or were unable to attend classes and had to drop out of high school.

To ensure that precarious housing does not lead to social exclusion and educational disengagement, the Stakeholder Planning Committee developed the Youth Reconnect Initiative. Youth Reconnect is a community-based prevention program that reconnects high-risk youth to their home communities. Referrals come from high schools, community partners, social service agencies and police services. The top three crises identifiers school officials referred to in order to identify at-risk youth were changes in 1) school attendance, 2) behaviour, and/or 3) grades (Geelong, 2014). Program participants are adolescents, between

the ages of 16–19. Participants are precariously housed and in imminent danger of becoming homeless. The initiative helps clients access resources and increase their self-sufficiency by assisting them to maintain school attendance, secure housing and develop a social safety net in their home community.

Once a youth has connected with Youth Reconnect, a Youth Reconnect worker becomes their primary wraparound<sup>2</sup> worker and helps to connect them with various services. Wraparound supports ensure youth are able to maintain housing, stay in school and stay in their home region where they may have friends and family. Youth Reconnect provides advocacy, life skills training, one-on-one mentoring, emergency hostel access, family reunification and community integration supports. Provided in partnership with other social service agencies and schools, this initiative focuses on helping clients to live independently and reduce high-risk behaviours while maintaining school attendance.

## SCOPE AND FOCUS OF CHAPTER

This chapter draws on administrative data collected by the RAFT from March 2013 – April 2014. Individuals are eligible to receive services through RAFT between 16–19 years of age. In order to track the efficacy of the program, participants are administered a questionnaire at intake and then at the three month, nine month and one year marks (see Appendix). A final questionnaire is administered when the youth is discharged into stable housing in the community. The questionnaire is used to gather a range of information, including demographic data, housing status, income and access to education.

In this chapter, we explore descriptive statistics summarizing the reasons for homelessness from 239 youth who had accessed the Youth Reconnect Program. A cost-savings analysis was also performed to determine the economic impact of housing youth and retaining youth in educational institutions over the past six years. All statistical analyses were analyzed in 2014 and performed using the Statistical Analysis System (SAS) software version 9.3 (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC). In what follows, we summarize our key findings using the RAFT's administrative data.

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2. Wraparound services provide comprehensive supports to help address a client's underlying causes of homelessness. These supports may include psychiatric care, medical support, housing, employment, life skills training and/or counseling services (Alberta Human Services, 2012).

## KEY FINDINGS

### Securing Housing for Youth

Youth who were accessing the Youth Reconnect program cited many reasons for becoming homeless however the majority (67%) had experienced some form of parental tension which may have included parental conflict, being kicked out and/or being pregnant. Of the remaining homeless youth, 11% experienced a change in their housing conditions (relationship breakdown or needing new housing because of issues with landlords or payment issues), six percent had been living in unsafe living conditions (not a safe home, alcohol/drug abuse by the parent or youth or experiencing physical, emotional or sexual abuse), six percent had been diagnosed with mental health disorders, and a small proportion (two percent) had been discharged from social services such as incarceration facilities or foster care.

The Youth Reconnect program focuses on securing housing for youth or maintaining housing in the same region where youth had originally accessed services. This strategy allows youth to stay in contact with their pre-existing social support networks and remain in a setting where they are comfortable. This also lessens the burden on social services because youth are more likely to also receive support from family, friends and peers rather than relying solely on institutional resources. Overall, of the youth accessing the Youth Reconnect program, 86% were able to secure accommodations in the same region where they had originally accessed services and 88% had found stabilized housing or had prevented housing breakdown with their family.

### Access to Education

Given that the majority of youth were attending high school immediately prior to their first homeless episode, school officials (e.g. teachers, principals, school nurses, etc.) are often aware of a youth's precarious housing. These officials can provide an early referral to prevention services. Forty percent of youth were referred to the Youth Reconnect program by a school official.

Access to education is a basic human right but also an important developmental resource for youth. Unfortunately, youth who drop out are three times more likely to come from low-income families; further, dropping out has been linked with two times greater unemployment and lower salaries (Pathways to Education, 2012). Moreover, 63–90% of homeless youth have reportedly not graduated from secondary school in Canada despite being the appropriate age to have earned their diploma (State of Homelessness, 2014). In response to these stark statistics, the Youth Reconnect program has ensured 70% of youth were attending an educational institution at the time of discharge.

### Economic Benefits

According to Shapcott (2007), it costs approximately \$1,932 to house a homeless individual in a shelter bed over the course of one month. All the youth who access the Youth Reconnect program were at risk of accessing an emergency shelter in the near future. Thus, based on the fact that the program secured housing for 361/463 clients, savings of \$697,452 were accrued by various government departments over the life of the project.

The annual cost of dropping out of high school is approximately \$19,104 every year (Havinsky, 2008). The Youth Reconnect program assisted at least 247 youth to return to an educational setting, which equated to a savings of \$4,718,688 over the entirety of the program.

## DISCUSSION: MAKING THE SWITCH FROM PRIMARILY EMERGENCY TO PREVENTION FOCUS

In the Niagara region of Ontario, a number of citizens became concerned by the increasing number of youth who were sleeping rough on our streets. This growing awareness of a youth homelessness crisis in the region led to the creation of the RAFT, which offered drop-in programs and ultimately a hostel. Providing a hostel service was a natural progression in service delivery, as it reflected concurrent response methods being used to manage adult homeless populations and was the best strategy to secure the limited funding available at that time. Starting in 2002, the RAFT began offering four emergency hostel beds and by 2007 had expanded to offer 24 emergency hostel beds. By 2008, the RAFT took its first major steps towards a prevention-focused response, with the creation of Youth Reconnect.

This experience isn't exceptional, but few youth homeless agencies have made the transition from managing crises to preventing youth homelessness. A few factors critical to advancing the adoption of a prevention mandate include:

- Shifting expertise from a reactionary response to a preventative one;
- Ending reliance on models to support adults experiencing homelessness;
- Developing compelling evidence for prevention; and
- Repurposing infrastructure to support prevention.

To some degree working in homeless services will require some form of a reactive response. When a homeless youth shows up on your doorstep, questions of prevention are nonsensical. Emergency responses are well developed and can be quite effective during emergencies. The fact that so much has been invested in these emergency systems, however, creates a barrier to preventative thinking. Intellectual space needs to be created in order to allow for true reflection. This is not an easy proposition in the middle of continual crisis. Effort will be required to investigate and develop local expertise in prevention.

Youth homeless crisis thinking has also emulated current emergency adult homelessness strategies. This creates the awkward adoption of core assumptions about adult homelessness, notably that homelessness is urban, male, exacerbated by mental health and/or addiction issues and due to poverty. These core assumptions when applied to the youth population are nearly if not all completely misaligned. Youth homelessness is as likely to begin in rural/suburban areas as urban, genders are equally represented, mental health/addictions issues often involve their parent(s) and all socio-economic backgrounds are represented. Developing a youth-specific understanding of homelessness is an important opportunity for the introduction and implementation of preventative services. Youth resilience and comparably shorter street exposure make prevention programs realistic alternatives with greater opportunities for success.

Difficulty developing compelling evidence for prevention is largely due to a lack of research regarding youth homelessness in general. The majority of available research focuses on the adult homeless population and crisis intervention due to the lack of a locus for homelessness prevention for adults. This situation is beginning to change where older models and best practices are being challenged; however, the

understanding and models have yet to reach a critical mass, which will eventually lead to prevention being the generally accepted model of service delivery. Collecting and documenting data by youth servicing agencies is critical to the development of research focused on understanding youth homelessness. Understanding the divergence points between youth homelessness and adult homelessness will allow for better prevention responses and potentially reduce the number of homeless youth.

Finally, even assuming that prevention does become generally accepted as a service delivery model, the current infrastructure is crisis focused. Further, it is poorly placed to address youth homelessness given its largely urban location. Unless there is a shift to provide substantially more funding, any large-scale shifts with the current funding support would jeopardize the entire youth homeless system and would likely be insufficient to bridge the gap between transitioning a crisis-focus system to a prevention-focused response. Developing a prevention response will require strategic

planning and collaboration within the youth sector. Importantly, communicating this strategic shift with partners and funders will aid in the transition as prevention work begins to lower the total number of individuals accessing emergency services. Schools and school boards will play a key role in aiding this transition because they are connected with the majority of youth who may experience housing crisis and the physical schools are present in the majority of communities both urban and rural.

The opportunity for youth servicing agencies is present. Youth serving agencies are maturing and realize that a youth-specific service is fundamental to their work. The success of programs like Youth Reconnect show that investments in strategic planning and change management will be critical to making this transition as smooth as possible as will a willingness to engage with new partners across sectors. This willingness to integrate will require cooperating with existing systems, like education, and repurposing them to address the needs of youth experiencing homelessness.

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Michael is the Executive Director of the RAFT, a not-for profit agency in the Niagara region working with at-risk youth and their families. He is an innovative leader working to create a systemic approach to addressing youth issues and youth homelessness; primarily by transforming a reactive institutional crisis model to a preventative community model.

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Tyler's work focuses primarily on assessing the effectiveness and responsiveness of homeless initiatives across Canada. His research has also evaluated programs targeting injection drug users, sex trade workers, and populations affected by mental disorders.