

9.1 A PROVINCIAL RESPONSE TO LGBTQ2S YOUTH HOMELESSNESS¹

David French

Introduction

Alberta is a western province in Canada with an estimated population of 4,268,929, as of October 1, 2015. It is Canada's fourth most populous province and the most populous of Canada's three prairie provinces. Alberta's two largest municipalities, Edmonton and Calgary, make up just under half the province's total population, with a combined population of 1,999,447. The Edmonton–Calgary corridor is the most urbanized region in the province, and one of the most urbanized regions in Canada, covering approximately 400 kilometers north to south. It is also one of the fastest-growing regions in the country. Alberta has experienced success in addressing homelessness through *A Plan for Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 years* (known as the 10-Year Plan). Since the plan's inception in 2009, more than 13,458 Albertans experiencing homelessness have received housing and supports, and approximately 73% remain successfully housed, but we can do more. The 10-Year Plan states that Albertans from some specific groups, including youth experiencing homelessness, are dealing with particularly challenging issues, and require targeted responses to help them be rehoused. *Supporting Healthy and Successful Transitions to Adulthood: A Plan to Prevent and Reduce Youth Homelessness* (Youth Plan) aligns with the Housing First response, integrated service delivery and client-centered approaches from the 10-Year Plan. The Youth Plan represents the next step in the 10-Year Plan, and is a targeted response to a specific population.

Why a Plan for Youth?

Understanding the factors that lead to youth homelessness is not easy, considering the complex issues affecting that population, and the many possible pathways to homelessness. The Youth Plan was developed to address the unique needs of youth, and emphasizes

¹ Some material from this case study appeared first in the Government of Alberta's *A Plan for Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 years and Supporting Healthy and Successful Transitions to Adulthood: A Plan to Prevent and Reduce Youth Homelessness*, to which this author was a contributor. The original publications are available online (see references).

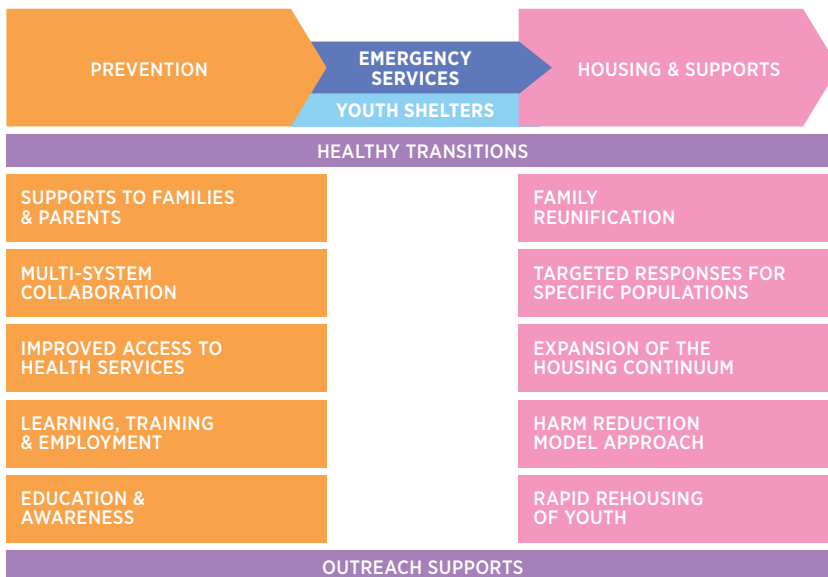
strengthening families first, as well as ensuring that youth experience healthy transitions across the system of care. Preventing youth homelessness and reunifying families when possible are the top priorities. The Youth Plan, guided by the principles of Alberta’s Social Policy Framework, was designed to align with other government programs and systems.

Before the development of the Youth Plan, the Government of Alberta’s response to youth homelessness placed much of the emphasis on the emergency response. While emergency services are important and necessary, we cannot rely on these as ‘the system’ to deal with youth homelessness. The strategies presented in the Youth Plan suggest a new way to address youth homelessness that builds on three existing components: 1) Prevention 2) Emergency services and 3) Housing and supports. However, the Youth Plan shifts the emphasis, making prevention and housing and supports greater priorities. Emergency services are still provided, with expanded supports, to facilitate this shift in Alberta’s response.

CURRENT RESPONSE



FUTURE RESPONSE



The Youth Plan represented an opportunity to refine specific responses and align ongoing work being led through the 10-Year Plan. Ensuring healthy transitions across the system needed to be emphasized to help us achieve our goal of preventing and reducing youth homelessness as we changed our approach to how we responded to youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness. The Youth Plan builds on effective existing community-based services and introduces new evidence-based actions to address the complex issue of youth homelessness. It was the first provincial response to homelessness for a specific population in Alberta, and was guided by a vision and mission (see below).

Vision

An Alberta where all youth have a safe, supportive and nurturing home.

Mission

To reduce the number of youth experiencing homelessness in Alberta and prevent further youth from becoming homeless by ensuring that youth and their families have the services and supports they need.

The overarching goals of the Youth Plan are two-fold:

- Prevent youth from becoming homeless, using family supports and education;
- Rapidly rehouse homeless youth, using family reunification or supportive living in a client-centred approach.

The Youth Plan defines homeless youth as those Albertans who are between the ages of 13 and 24 and:

- Are without a permanent place of residence;
- Live on the street, in shelters or in places that are not intended or suitable for permanent residence;
- Are ‘couch-surfing’ or temporarily living with others for short periods of time.

During the development of the Youth Plan, research and community conversations led to significant insights about the paths into and out of homelessness for youth. These community conversations included meaningful discussions with youth experiencing homelessness, which clarified that the paths into homelessness are relatively predictable and generally include some of the following factors:

- Experience with the Child Intervention system, particularly for those placed in care;

- A history of family conflict or instability;
- One or more mental health conditions in the youth or a family member;
- Alcohol and/or substance abuse in the youth or a family member;
- Belonging to a family experiencing poverty;
- Exposure to abuse or other victimization;
- Previous episodes of temporary homelessness.

With one or more of these factors as a precursor, youth are at risk of experiencing a crisis or incident that leaves them without a permanent residence. Sometimes parents or guardians may decide they are no longer able to care for the youth, or cannot afford to pay for the youth's basic needs. Or youth may make the choice to leave, which often occurs in the case of abusive or otherwise unsafe home situations. However, it is important to note that even when homelessness begins this way, as a youth's 'choice,' the element of choice vanishes once the youth becomes entrenched in homelessness.

Alberta Data

Although seven municipal centres in Alberta conduct homeless counts bi-annually, the scope and prevalence of youth homelessness across the province has been unclear. Homeless counts represent a snapshot in time for municipalities; however, depending on the methodologies and definitions used, they may not provide accurate data for the youth population. Moreover, the data collected by Alberta's municipalities was not consistent, making it difficult to make comparisons across communities. Before 2012, youth experiencing homelessness were often not specifically counted, except when they were identified as belonging to a family experiencing homelessness. In October 2014, the first provincially coordinated and unified homeless point-in-time (PiT) counts were conducted in the province's seven major municipalities: Calgary, Edmonton, Red Deer, Grande Prairie, Fort McMurray, Lethbridge and Medicine Hat. The counts were coordinated by the community-based organizations that administer Human Services' Housing First wraparound support dollars (through the Outreach Support Services Initiative) and implement community plans in support of Alberta's 10-Year Plan. The data shows an overall reduction in homelessness from 2008 to 2014 of 15.6%, and a 3.7% decrease in homelessness compared with the counts conducted from 2012 to 2013. However, since the methodology changed for the 2014 count, and Red Deer and Medicine Hat did not conduct counts in 2008, the data on youth homelessness in the report from the 2014 count will be

used as the baseline to which future counts can be compared. A total of 6,653 individuals were counted and 20.2% (1,343) of these were youth under the age of 24.

Based on emerging Canadian research (Raising the Roof, 2009; Abramovich, 2012) it was clear that LGBTQ2S youth are overrepresented in the homeless youth population. Therefore, the Alberta Government endeavored to conduct focused, evidence-informed research to use in developing recommendations about LGBTQ2S youth homelessness, which could serve as a direction-setting, integrated approach across the province.

Focusing on LGBTQ2S Youth

With the Youth Plan still under development and moving towards policy approval, work began to refine the targeted responses identified within it. Given the range of youth at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness, ending youth homelessness in Alberta would require targeted responses for specific subpopulations. Critical attention was given to meeting the needs of youth with mental health and/or addictions issues, youth with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), Indigenous youth, youth who were new to Alberta, and LGBTQ2S youth. These subpopulations are disproportionately represented among homeless and street-involved youth.

The actions, as identified in the Youth Plan, are as follows:

- Develop strategies and responses based on research and promising practices that reflect the unique needs of diverse youth, including Indigenous people, immigrants and the LGBTQ2S community.
- Develop a common understanding of the unique causes of homelessness, such as discrimination and inequality, for these subpopulations.
- Monitor and evaluate targeted responses for continuous improvement in serving subpopulations of youth.

Rather than adopting the common ‘one size fits all’ approach, it was seen as crucial that programs and policies in the Youth Plan that focused on the LGBTQ2S population reflect the diversity of that population’s experiences. The early emphasis on this work was to develop:

- Short-term opportunities: solutions that could be implemented immediately to streamline and prioritize service delivery for LGBTQ2S youth;

- Medium-term opportunities: solutions that required system planning and negotiations with funders and agencies to adopt;
- Long-term opportunities: solutions that required policy change or legislation reform to ensure that responses and service delivery are tailored to LGBTQ2S youth.

The effectiveness of these efforts relied upon the openness, collaboration, and partnership of communities and experts to ensure policies and programs were capturing the most important elements. Leaders within the Alberta government knew this work must be grounded in research to influence other provincial governments to prioritize the needs of LGBTQ2S youth. Dr. Alex Abramovich from Toronto, Ontario was identified as the best candidate to support this work. Dr. Abramovich had been working in LGBTQ2S youth homelessness for years, and was a recognized leader in the field, as well as being one of only a few Canadian researchers studying the issues of queer and trans youth homelessness.

Engaging the Community

Beginning in October 2014, Dr. Abramovich, the Government of Alberta and community partners worked on a report, *A Focused Response to Prevent and End LGBTQ2S Youth Homelessness* (the Report), which provided to the Government of Alberta six key recommendations developed over the course of 10 months with the support of the provincial LGBTQ2S working group. The recommendations align with and support the Youth Plan, and reflect the current needs of the youth-serving sector, including housing programs and shelters, across the province.

Informal and formal data were collected during the early engagement phases of the work, using surveys, group activities and questions. The goal was to learn more about staff training in LGBTQ2S cultural competency and anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia material; community stakeholders' level of comfort addressing homophobia and transphobia in services and programs; and community stakeholders' perspectives and understanding regarding LGBTQ2S youth homelessness. The provincial LGBTQ2S working group (the Working Group) was established in response to the data collected, to encourage interagency collaboration and partnership-building between services; support the development of policy recommendations; and implement program strategies for responding to the needs of LGBTQ2S youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness in Alberta.

The short-, medium-, and long-term opportunities identified in the Report provided an outline and agenda to begin to prioritize LGBTQ2S youth homelessness in Alberta. Before the Report was released, many efforts were already taking shape or being implemented. They included: 1) Developing an Alberta LGBTQ2S resource list providing youth and agencies with a comprehensive list of LGBTQ2S-specific services, programs, workshops and events; working group members have reported using the resource list for referrals and have uploaded the list onto agency websites; 2) Identifying local organizations (the Edmonton Pride Centre and the Calgary Sexual Health Centre) in Alberta to lead the delivery of comprehensive LGBTQ2S province-wide training; 3) Several youth-serving agencies independently securing LGBTQ2S cultural competency training from the Edmonton Pride Centre, the Calgary Sexual Health Centre, and the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies (iSMSS); 4) Developing local and out-of-province partnerships (e.g., The 519 Church Street Community Centre, Toronto, Ontario, Edmonton Pride Centre, Edmonton, Alberta and Calgary Sexual Health Centre, Calgary, Alberta), and interagency collaboration; 5) Increasing opportunities for Working Group members to learn how to meet the needs of LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness, and how to better support one another; 6) Developing internal agency LGBTQ2S working groups.

Recommendations

The recommendations provided in the Report foster a standardized model of care for government and all youth-serving agencies, which is necessary in creating accepting, affirming and supportive environments for youth. The core recommendations of the Working Group to the Government of Alberta included:

1. Support the delivery of LGBTQ2S-specific housing options (develop new housing options and/or refine existing housing options), including:
 - Emergency shelter beds available to LGBTQ2S youth;
 - Transitional housing programs;
 - Supportive housing programs (Housing First) that are choice-focused and place-based (e.g., Host Homes).
2. Support the delivery of population-based programs for LGBTQ2S youth that foster an intersectional approach (develop new programs and/or add to programs provided by existing services), including:
 - Drop-in programs that offer arts, social, cultural and recreational activities;

- Mentoring programs;
 - LGBTQ2S health clinic hours;
 - Skill-building and employment support;
 - Population- and/or cultural-specific programming to provide cultural connectedness and access to cultural traditions and practices, including newcomer/immigrant LGBTQ2S youth, LGBTQ2S youth of colour and two-spirit Indigenous youth.
3. Create provincial housing and shelter standards that focus on working with and meeting the needs of LGBTQ2S young people by providing:
- A standardized intake process (see Appendix C in the Report for questions regarding gender and sexual identity);
 - Respect and acceptance by service providers for each client’s self-defined gender identity and gender expression, including chosen name and pronoun;
 - A gender-inclusive washroom policy that ensures all services are equipped with single-stall, gender-inclusive washrooms (this may be in addition to gendered washrooms in some service locations) and providing the tools, such as signage, required to convert washrooms;
 - Guidelines for mandatory and ongoing training, during the first three months after hiring, for all front-line staff, management and volunteers in youth-serving organizations across the province, as well as for foster parents and families fostering LGBTQ2S youth;
 - The continuation of the existing provincial LGBTQ2S Working Group;
 - Appropriate and diverse resources, including pamphlets, fliers, wall posters, and information on coming out, LGBTQ2S health, safe sex and local LGBTQ2S services and events, to be available at all shelters, housing programs and youth-serving organizations, with a recommendation that staff be made aware of available LGBTQ2S-specific programs, so they can refer youth to appropriate services as needed;
 - A separate standard regarding access to services for transgender, two-spirit, and gender non-conforming individuals, stating that all shelters/housing programs and youth-serving organizations must accommodate all transgender, two-spirit, and gender non-conforming residents/clients according to their self-identified gender. Services should also be equipped with the appropriate resources and knowledge to refer youth to transition-related treatment (e.g., hormone therapy, legal name change, counselling), and funding and support should be made available for transition-related needs;
 - A formal grievance/complaints process that will be implemented by all shelters and housing programs to allow clients/residents to lodge formal, anonymous complaints.

Clients must be informed of the procedure during intake, and the grievance/complaints process must be posted in a conspicuous area of the service location.

4. Develop integrated provincial training solutions for expanded staff training for all aspects of LGBTQ2S cultural competency, by:
 - Expanding LGBTQ2S youth homelessness training in Alberta for all youth serving-organizations by supporting partnerships between the Calgary Sexual Health Centre and the Edmonton Pride Centre, as well as other local or out-of-province organizations (e.g., The 519 Church Street Community Centre, Toronto, Ontario), and by borrowing key principles from best-practice guidelines and successful training models;
 - Promoting the delivery of immediate training to organizations and communities, such as rural and remote communities, that lack specialized LGBTQ2S resources and have requested support to meet the needs of LGBTQ2S youth;
 - Ensuring that LGBTQ2S cultural competency training includes, but is not limited to, the areas described below (depending on the population served):
 - *Language/terminology*: Help staff develop more understanding and clarity regarding LGBTQ2S language and terminology, and navigate discussions with comfort and ease.
 - *Homophobia and transphobia*: Increase understanding and awareness of the causes of homophobia and transphobia and the importance of intervention, as well as the needs and experiences of LGBTQ2S homeless youth and the barriers they have faced. Training will help participants identify and intervene when homophobic and transphobic incidents occur, as well as learn how to create safe, secure, and affirming spaces for LGBTQ2S youth.
 - *Transgender awareness*: Help staff understand how to support transgender youth, provide a private space for staff to ask questions regarding working with transgender youth, help organizations create a transgender inclusion policy and develop trans-inclusive and trans-affirming services, become more knowledgeable and develop strategies to reduce barriers for trans service-users.
 - *Two-spirit/Indigenous*: Increase understanding and awareness of two-spirit identity, Indigenous cultures and traditions, and of Indigenous people who identify as LGBTQ2S. Training will help service providers create culturally sensitive programs and spaces, and help reduce stigma and discrimination towards LGBTQ2S-identified Indigenous youth.
 - *Systems Navigation*: Ensure that staff members are aware of all local LGBTQ2S resources and programs available for client referrals and education.

5. Develop a prevention plan that emphasizes strategies for early intervention, raising awareness, and programming for children, youth and families, including:
 - Preventing LGBTQ2S youth from becoming homeless, preventing LGBTQ2S youth from becoming adults experiencing chronic homelessness, supporting family first/ family reconnection (when there is a supportive family member), and encouraging schools with a Gay–Straight Alliance (GSA) to explore the role of the GSA in supporting LGBTQ2S students;
 - Working collaboratively in a multi-system approach to promote awareness and provide families, teachers, support workers, health care professionals and communities with resources and outreach information, and sharing programs, so that when young people come out as LGBTQ2S, they are provided with the support they need;
 - Placing more emphasis on prevention to help shift the current response to LGBTQ2S youth homelessness from an emergency approach to a longer-term approach, thus aligning with Alberta’s Youth Plan.

6. Develop the capacity for research that frames new approaches and solutions to LGBTQ2S Youth Homelessness, through:
 - Investigating LGBTQ2S youth homelessness in rural Alberta;
 - Evaluating new and emerging LGBTQ2S programs across the province, which will allow for future LGBTQ2S housing services to operate from an evidence-based model;
 - Reassessing LGBTQ2S-specific questions on measurement procedures and point-in-time counts;
 - Ensuring that volunteers conducting counts and surveys receive sensitivity training before asking questions of youth about their gender and sexual identity, and ask every respondent about gender identity, not only those respondents that volunteers perceive as transgender or gender-nonconforming;
 - Integrating LGBTQ2S youth with lived experience and LGBTQ2S organizations into the design and execution of counts, which will improve outreach, especially to those youth who are not accessing services;
 - More accurately measuring LGBTQ2S youth homelessness in Alberta, which may help us better understand how LGBTQ2S youth move through programs and systems, and which interventions are working;
 - Focusing research on prevention strategies to identify those that are successful and should be used.

Early Results

The Report was formally released by the Minister of Human Services, the Honourable Irfan Sabir, in March 2016. The release of the Report allowed its findings to be shared across government departments and through various stakeholder channels. The Working Group remains operational, and its membership continues to grow, along with its responsibilities to support implementation.

Recommendations currently being implemented are:

Recommendation #1 – Support the delivery of LGBTQ2S-specific housing options:

In February 2015, the Calgary Homeless Foundation issued a request for proposals for programs addressing youth homelessness. The Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary was one of the applicants approved for funding. Their Aura Program, which is the first dedicated LGBTQ2S housing program in Alberta, launched in June 2015. With additional funding from Human Services, both the Calgary Homeless Foundation and Homeward Trust Edmonton are working to develop targeted LGBTQ2S-specific housing options for implementation in 2016–2017.

Recommendation #3 – Create provincial housing/shelter standards that focus on working with and meeting the needs of LGBTQ2S young people:

Development of recommendations related to LGBTQ2S Housing and Shelter Guidelines is being led by the Working Group and is to be completed in the near future. Current housing and shelter programs for youth do not have a comprehensive reference guide for how to implement programming for at-risk LGBTQ2S people. The recommended guidelines will seek to increase awareness of promising practices in supporting LGBTQ2S people, and identify specific measures that must be taken to ensure inclusive housing and shelter spaces for LGBTQ2S people are available. The recommended guidelines will also identify options for an integrated application of best practices, and provide options for guideline compliance, as well as an enhancement to current accreditation, licensing and approval of housing and shelter programs.

Recommendation #4 – *Develop integrated provincial training solutions for expanded staff training in all aspects of LGBTQ2S cultural competency:*

The Calgary Sexual Health Centre was granted funds to lead this work. The training is being developed in collaboration with the Pride Centre of Edmonton and the Working Group, with the goal of providing information to staff on how to support LGBTQ2S youth to achieve housing and housing stability.

Recommendation #6 – *Develop the capacity for research that identifies new approaches and solutions to LGBTQ2S Youth Homelessness:*

- A review of the gender-specific questions on the Human Services Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) Youth Shelter Data Collection System is underway to ensure that questions align with best practices as identified in the Report. The review and required changes will be completed by March 31, 2017.
- A Youth Needs/Risk Assessment has been developed in collaboration with government and community partners. The assessment includes specific questions about the gender and sexuality of a youth. The assessment is intended to provide a holistic understanding of the needs of and risks facing a young person, in order to effectively match them to appropriate supports.

Recommendation #2 – *Population-based programs for LGBTQ2S youth that foster an intersectional approach* and **Recommendation #5** – *Develop a prevention plan that emphasizes strategies on early intervention, awareness raising, and programs for children, youth, families,* have not been prioritized for implementation by the LGBTQ2S Youth Homelessness Working Group at this time.

Acknowledgements

The leadership demonstrated by Dr. Alex Abramovich and Alberta's youth serving community in developing and submitting this report to government should not go unnoticed. A careful blend of advocacy, evidence and risk-taking was needed to ensure the Government of Alberta accepted the recommendations and acted to implement them.

References

- Abramovich, A. (2012). *No Safe Place to Go — LGBTQ Youth Homelessness in Canada: Reviewing the Literature*. Canadian Journal of Family and Youth, 4(1), 29-51. Retrieved from: <https://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/cjfy/article/view/16579/13220>
- Abramovich, A. (2015). *A focused response to prevent and end LGBTQ2S youth homelessness*. Report prepared for Government of Alberta. Retrieved from: <http://www.humanservices.alberta.ca/documents/abramovich-report.pdf>
- Government of Alberta, Human Services. (2009). *A Plan for Alberta: Ending Homelessness in 10 years*. Retrieved from http://www.humanservices.alberta.ca/documents/PlanForAB_Secretariat_final.pdf
- Government of Alberta, Human Services. (2015). *Supporting Healthy and Successful Transitions to Adulthood: A Plan to Prevent and Reduce Youth Homelessness*. Retrieved from: <http://www.humanservices.alberta.ca/documents/plan-to-prevent-and-reduce-youth-homelessness.pdf>
- Raising the Roof. (2009). *Youth Homelessness in Canada: The Road to Solutions*. Retrieved from: <http://www.raisingtheroof.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/road2sols-FINAL.pdf>

About the Author

David French

Manager of Community Partnership Initiatives,
Alberta Human Services
david.french@gov.ab.ca

David has a passion for developing programs and policy that meet the needs of vulnerable youth. David led the development of Alberta's Youth Plan and now supports its implementation across ten Alberta communities and is tasked with leading key strategic policy areas, embedded within the Youth Plan, across Government.

