

# Guiding Youth Home

A design-based approach to preventing and ending youth homelessness

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**Right now, governments and service agencies across Canada are taking a hard look at what it will take to prevent and end homelessness. Past efforts focused on providing supports and services only when a person had “become homeless enough.” Today, there is greater recognition that more needs to be done upstream—at home and in school—to prevent homelessness from occurring in the first place.**

The cover art for this report is based on the murals created by youth participants in our homelessness prevention project.

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## About

This document is part policy provocation and part inspiration. It's intended for anyone who is interested in learning more about Duty to Assist—an innovative, rights-based approach to homelessness prevention pioneered in Wales—and wants to learn how to use design to improve the policy development process.

Part one of the document provides an overview of Duty to Assist and lessons learned from the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, along with key policy features that need to be considered when designing future services. Part two describes PluggedIn, our vision of a school-based service derived from Duty to

Assist, and highlights four moments when policy and practice intersect in unintended ways. We recommend addressing these four moments to advance and shape the philosophy, policy, and practice of Duty to Assist.

Feeling inspired? We are, too. Let's work together. After you're done reading this report, contact us to talk about how we can pilot all or some of the service elements proposed here. We're looking forward to working with people like you who are committed to ending youth homelessness.

# What will it take?

**Ending youth homelessness means creating more than shelters. It means working upstream to stop the flow of people becoming homeless in the first place.**

The shift from a reactive to a proactive approach to homelessness prevention received a big boost in 2018 with the publication of *Reaching Home*, the Government of Canada's ambitious strategy to reduce chronic homelessness by 50% over the next ten years.<sup>1</sup> The passage in June 2019 of Bill C-97, which included the National Housing Strategy Act and provided the right to housing, further signaled that progress is being made.<sup>2</sup>

When it comes to youth homelessness, however, a different approach is needed. Young people often do not have the same life skills as adults, such as negotiating a lease or holding down a stable job.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, they are grappling with the ups and downs of teenage life. And young people from marginalized communities face even greater barriers, including racism, transphobia, and sexism.<sup>4</sup> This unique set of life circumstances requires a different approach altogether.

*The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth*

*Homelessness* (2018),<sup>5</sup> published by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) and A Way Home Canada (AWHC), lays out an innovative path forward to addressing youth homelessness once and for all. Among other things, the *Roadmap* calls for the implementation of Duty to Assist, a rights-based approach to youth homelessness prevention. The concept is based on the Housing (Wales) Act 2014. As noted in the Ten Year Homelessness Plan for Wales (2009), the Act specifies, "The provision of advice is the minimum level of service offered, with Local Authorities being placed under a duty to ensure those who meet the criteria are provided with settled accommodation."<sup>6</sup> In a future where Duty to Assist is law in Canada, not only will local municipalities have a legal obligation to take reasonable steps to end or prevent youth homelessness, but young people will have legal recourse if their housing rights have been violated. This marks a fundamental shift from where we are today.

<sup>1</sup> Employment and Social Development Canada, "Backgrounder: Reaching Home," 2018, <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2018/06/backgrounder-reaching-home.html>.

<sup>2</sup> The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, "Government Introduces Right to Housing Amendments to National Housing Strategy Act," 2019, <https://caeh.ca/right-to-housing-amendments-to-nhs-act/>.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Gaetz, Bill O'Grady, Kristy Buccieri, Jeff Karabanow, and Allyson Marsolais, eds., *Youth Homelessness in Canada: Implications for Policy and Practice* (Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press, 2013), <https://www.homelesshub.ca/resource/youth-homelessness-canada-implications-policy-and-practice>.

<sup>4</sup> Kaitlin Schwan, Stephen Gaetz, David French, Melanie Redman, Jesse Thistle, and Erin Dej, *What Would It Take? Youth Across Canada Speak Out on Youth Homelessness Prevention* (Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press, 2018), [https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/COH-AWH\\_What\\_Would\\_it\\_Take.pdf](https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/COH-AWH_What_Would_it_Take.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Gaetz, Kaitlin Schwan, Melanie Redman, David French, and Erin Dej, *The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness*, ed. Amanda Buchnea (Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press, 2018), [https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/YPRfullreport\\_2.pdf](https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/YPRfullreport_2.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Welsh Assembly Government, *Ten Year Homelessness Plan for Wales*, 2009, <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-03/10-year-homelessness-plan-2009-to-2019.pdf>.

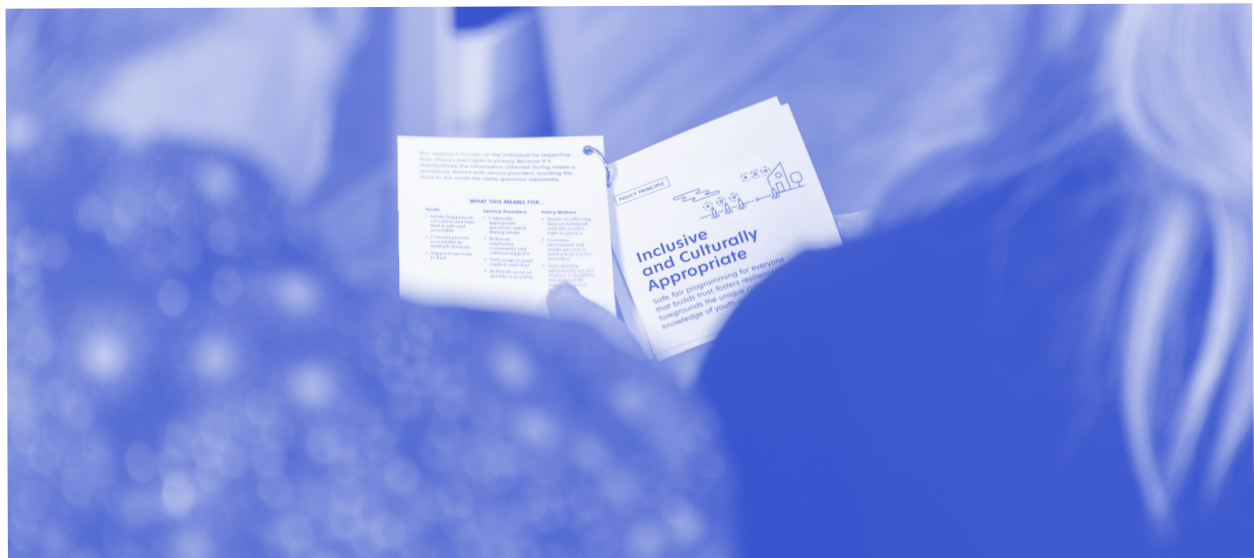


# Simulating policy in practice

What will this look like in practice? How can we anticipate unintended consequences? To answer these questions, we set out to design and simulate a school-based homelessness prevention service in Hamilton, Ontario, founded on the principles of Duty to Assist.

Throughout the design process, we spoke with a variety of stakeholders—from policy experts to frontline staff to young people with lived experience. All of them said they felt that more needs to be done in schools to stop the flow of young people from entering the homelessness system. We have proposed a service that does just that. It offers the support students want, while training school staff to spot the early warning signs that a young person may need help and giving staff actionable steps to fulfill their duty to assist.

What we have proposed will not end youth homelessness. Instead, it is a vision of what the future may hold: when services are more integrated, school-based supports are in place, and school staff are trained and feel confident taking action when they sense a student is in need. It's a future where school is more than a place to learn—it is the heart and soul of the community.



Part 1

# Duty to Assist and simulating policy in practice

# Disrupting the status quo

Young people aged 13–24 report that social service organizations and governments are waiting too long to provide the critical support they need to avoid becoming homeless.<sup>7</sup> And for those under the age of 16, the situation is even more challenging. In response, COH and AWHC have advanced a “made in Canada” Duty to Assist strategy that requires all levels of government to cooperate in the design and delivery of timely youth-centred housing supports and services to prevent and end youth homelessness.

## ***Duty to Assist***

**A statutory obligation, or a legal duty, requiring that local authorities make reasonable efforts to end a person’s homelessness or stabilize their housing.<sup>8</sup>**

Duty to Assist starts with policy designed to protect young peoples’ right to housing. Just as importantly, it is a set of proposed policies, services, and practices that are intended to change the way homelessness services are designed, administered, and measured. For instance, under Duty to Assist, professionals who work closely with young people, such as teachers, librarians, and coaches, will be obligated under law to refer a young person to relevant services to prevent or end their homelessness. To be clear, this does not mean simply suggesting resources; it requires an understanding of the referral process and, with the young person’s consent, guiding them to an appropriate service or support in their community.

When Duty to Assist is successfully implemented, young people under the age of 25 will be provided with information, advice, and housing-focused supports to avoid an experience of homelessness or to make that experience as brief as possible.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Gaetz, David French, and Melanie Redman, “Youth continue to be outnumbered! Our response to the Federal Government’s National Point-in-Time Count,” 2019, <https://www.homelesshub.ca/blog/youth-continue-be-outnumbered-our-response-federal-government’s-national-point-time-count>.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Gaetz, Kaitlin Schwan, Melanie Redman, David French, and Erin Dej, *The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness*, ed. Amanda Buchnea (Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press, 2018), [https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/YPRfullreport\\_2.pdf](https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/YPRfullreport_2.pdf).

# Now

## How things currently are...

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Services that prioritize emergency response and crisis

Gap in support for young people aged 13–16

Over-representation in the homeless population of young people from LBGTQ2S, Indigenous, and racialized communities

Disjointed and uncoordinated intake, assessment, and referral

Redundant and siloed data collection and management across organizations and systems

Invasive and intensive process for accessing high-quality and secure housing

# Next

## How Duty to Assist changes things...

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Proactive, upstream services focused on prevention

Timely support for young people aged 13–24 at risk of or currently experiencing homelessness

Culturally appropriate and identity-specific supports that celebrate identity and reconnect young people to their communities

Service integration that supports seamless handoffs between organizations and across systems

Standardized data collection to consistently assess service quality and measure outcomes

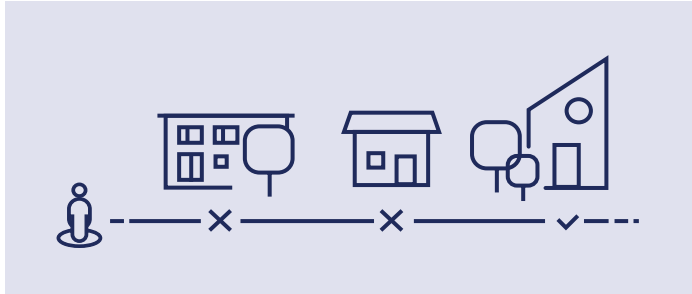
Rights-based process for accessing housing, with the option of legal recourse if that right is not upheld

# Six guiding principles and policy features

**We propose six guiding principles and policy features distilled from the *Roadmap* and from our experience simulating Duty to Assist in Hamilton.**

## 1/ Respectful of choice

Give young people freedom to choose which programs and services to take part in, even if this means they refuse support altogether.



### Policy features

- Accessing support comes with as few strings attached as possible.
- Young people are given opportunities to take control of the process.
- Ongoing consent is sought from young people throughout the formal assessment, referral, and intake process.
- Young people can access ongoing support to foster and maintain relationships with service providers.
- Young people can refuse support and help at any time, but professionals have an ongoing obligation to reach out.

## 2/ Measurable and accountable

Establish clear mandates, oversight, and standardized methods for measuring and evaluating service quality and outcomes.

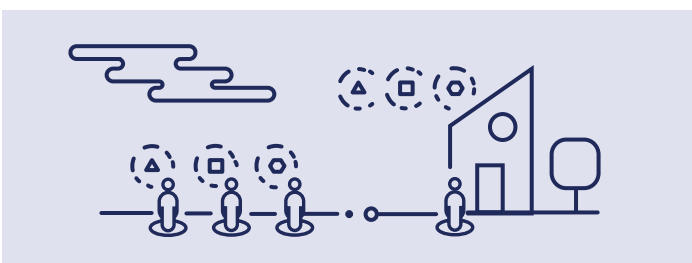


### Policy features

- Assure young people that organizations will be held accountable for service delivery.
- Young people are actively involved in the design, delivery, and improvement of service supports and programming.
- Roles and responsibilities of service organizations are made explicit and organizational mandates are clearly outlined.
- Standardized metrics are used to measure service quality and outcomes.
- External oversight of coordinated entry systems is provided by community entities to monitor data quality and integrity.

## 3/ Inclusive and culturally appropriate

Develop safe, fair, and inclusive programming for everyone that builds trust, fosters resiliency, and emphasizes the unique cultural practices and knowledge of young people and their communities.



### Policy features

- The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action inform all decisions with respect to Indigenous policy development and service design.
- Young people have opportunities to re-engage with cultural practices that may have been lost through intergenerational trauma caused by colonialism.
- Young people's identities are celebrated.
- Support is based on the principles of anti-oppression.



#### 4/ Seamless and timely

Create an efficient and standardized process to assess youth needs and refer them to services that address their specific emotional, physical, cultural, and social needs.

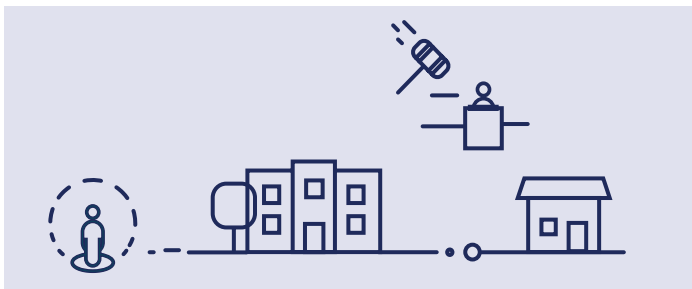


#### Policy features

- Young people can access culturally appropriate support and advice 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- A standardized, strengths-based, and youth-friendly process is used for formal assessment and intake.
- Integrated mandatory data entry and sharing agreements are in place at the community level to protect young people from the burden of repeating intensive intakes.
- Timing and location of in-person meetings is determined based on young people's preferences.
- Referrals are made as quickly as possible.
- Services and systems collect the smallest amount of data possible, and young people are notified each time their personal information is collected or shared.

#### 5/ Rights-based

Equip government actors and service providers to fulfil their legal duty to find safe, stable housing for youth who are, or are at risk of becoming, homeless.

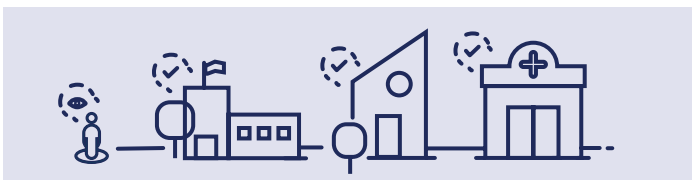


#### Policy features

- Young people have the legal right to housing-focused supports.
- Government actors and service providers have a statutory responsibility to provide young people with the advice and support they need to secure stable housing.
- Meaningful adults (e.g., teachers, coaches, nurses) who have an obligation to help may require support, which may include assistance in determining the severity of a young person's risk of homelessness.
- Adults are made aware of how to access services to support young people in need.

#### 6/ Easy to find

Ensure supports are easy to find so that young people are aware and able to access services as needed.



#### Policy features

- Adults working with young people are made aware of the resources that are available and how to access them before a need arises.
- Young people can easily identify where to go for culturally appropriate advice, support, and guidance.
- All young people have equal access to supports and services.

# Lessons learned from Wales

**The successful implementation of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 offers some important lessons for Canada. Dr. Peter Mackie, a researcher at Cardiff University and a key figure in the rollout of the Act, says that three areas in particular are worth considering.<sup>9</sup>**

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<sup>9</sup> These lessons are based on an interview with Dr. Peter Mackie conducted by Chad Story and the Designership research team on May 30, 2019, and a presentation Dr. Mackie gave on June 19, 2019, at the Hamilton Education Centre, Hamilton, Ontario, titled "Homelessness prevention in Wales: The 'Duty to Assist.'"

## **1/ Participatory processes may improve implementation and compliance**

The process used to craft and implement the Act took several years. Dr. Mackie says the length of the process helped to build buy-in for the changes that needed to take place across the social services sector in Wales. Taking a participatory approach, he says, gave political actors, frontline service providers, and those most directly affected by the legislation opportunities to give feedback and shape the implementation process.

The lesson here is to start early, consult often, and be open to receiving feedback. Including frontline staff and those most affected by Duty to Assist in the policy development process will increase the chances that the legislation will have the support of stakeholders closest to the problem.

## **2/ New skills are required at the front lines**

Despite broad consultation prior to implementation, turnover of frontline staff increased immediately after the proposed legislation became law. Dr. Mackie attributes this in part to the new demands placed on the front lines. Rather than acting as gatekeepers focused on completing administrative duties, frontline staff worked with clients to proactively find housing accommodations, which includes options available on the private rental market. These new skills are akin to those a real estate agent might possess, and, in some instances, local authorities have started hiring people with backgrounds in this area.

In Canada, job retraining and reskilling should be done in partnership with frontline staff to determine what skills will be needed in the future to satisfy the demands that may result from the passage of Duty to Assist legislation. Change is hard, and, inevitably, some people will choose to leave the profession. This should not be seen as a failure. Steps should be taken to support those individuals who transition to the new work.

## **3/ The commissioning of services needs to be rethought**

In Wales, housing managers are currently responsible for commissioning programs to housing associations and third parties. The introduction of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 identified some gaps in the existing process. Dr. Mackie points to examples of organizations in Wales that are commissioning youth-specific support but don't have the necessary expertise in this area.

Using a co-design approach here in Canada may prove useful when commissioning housing-related services to ensure all parties involved in the process have clarity about the desired outcomes and goals of Duty to Assist.

# Putting policy into practice

Implementing policy is notoriously tricky. What at first seems clear on paper and in words can easily be misinterpreted when translated into a service. We have learned firsthand that connecting policy and service delivery is essential for spotting unintended consequences and helping strengthen policy intent.

We spent 14 weeks in Hamilton, Ontario, researching, prototyping, co-designing, and testing key elements of a service built on the foundation of Duty to Assist. We had two aims. First, we sought to identify unintended

consequences associated with the implementation of Duty to Assist in order to strengthen the policy. Second, we sought to create a service concept to pilot in a school in Hamilton. We used a human-centred design process that incorporated art-based research methods grounded in an anti-oppressive framework.

Here we provide an overview of the four-phase design process used, lessons learned in each phase, and highlights of the proposed service.

# How might we use design methods to test components of the Welsh Duty to Assist model in Hamilton, Ontario, with young people who have experienced homelessness, in order to deliver a more effective and implementable policy?

- 1/ How do young people identify, navigate, and access the supports they need when they are trying to avoid experiencing homelessness?
- 2/ What opportunities exist in the City of Hamilton to shift toward a proactive model to support young people at risk of becoming homeless?
- 3/ How can services be improved and/or reorganized to equip communities for the passage of Duty to Assist?

# 1/ Understand



We conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with lived experts (young people who have experienced homelessness) (n=8), natural supports (n=3), service providers (n=6), program managers (n=3), and policymakers (n=2). We asked young people to make art that represented what “home” means to them and what would need to change for them to feel like they’re at home. This process revealed four common contexts in which Duty to Assist will need to be interpreted and the specific core needs of young people that need to be addressed in order for it to be successful.

## What we learned

### “Home” is a lifelong pursuit

More than a physical space, home is a state of mind. Being home means feeling safe, comfortable, welcome, accepted, and loved. Home is not a final destination, but a lifelong journey of personal growth, filled with opportunities to thrive and connections to community.

### Four common contexts intersect

Young people talked about four contexts in particular that shaped their relationships to community, family, identity, and home: When they are housed, at school, staying at a shelter, and living on the streets. We heard loud and clear that getting it right in schools means helping youth speak out sooner and find a

community to connect with and giving them the tools they need to tackle real-life problems. We entered the prototyping phase with schools in mind.

### “Miracle workers” hold it all together

We got a glimpse into the characteristics of service providers who go the extra mile—“miracle workers.” These providers go to young people in places where they gather instead of waiting for them to ask for help. Tenacious and gritty, they are like detectives collecting evidence about the youth experience. They are negotiators and problem-solvers. They view rules as guidelines and know when and how to bend them to make sure young people get the supports they need.



## 2/ Co-create

With research insights in hand, we convened 23 professionals from across the homelessness sector in Hamilton to co-create future services based on the principles of Duty to Assist. The session focused on schools, as this was the one context that research participants overwhelmingly identified as the best place to prevent youth homelessness.

The workshop featured three activities. First, participants worked together to generate service ideas to address the needs of students, based on their knowledge of Duty to Assist. Next, they collaboratively designed service concepts by creating, sketching, storyboarding, and writing out their ideas to share with other participants. Last, they completed an activity to support implementation by identifying social infrastructures already in place.

### What we learned

#### **Focusing on upstream prevention is difficult**

Because people's mental models are focused on downstream interventions, on the streets and in shelters, it can sometimes be difficult to envision a future scenario upstream. The key is to revisit the principles of Duty to Assist often. If you find that they just don't make sense in the context you are designing for, chances are you're focusing your efforts too far downstream.

#### **Leveraging the social infrastructure already in place is important**

The City of Hamilton is doing innovative work when it comes to homelessness prevention. Service providers encouraged us to build upon their work and, wherever possible, foster new partnerships rather than reinvent the wheel.

## 3/ Prototype

We prototyped service concepts from phase two and tested them at two design jams in Hamilton with lived experts and service providers. Participants were asked to provide candid feedback. We quickly sketched out ideas in response. This iterative loop—sketching and receiving real-time feedback—allowed us to quickly test out new ideas with participants.



### What we learned

#### **Making policies “real” exposes unintended consequences**

Something magical happens when you show a prototype that looks like the real thing. It’s no longer just an abstract idea but a physical thing that people can interact with and comment on. Simulating elements of our service concept allowed us to quickly identify gaps in our knowledge and spot unintended consequences of the policy. For instance, it was only when we simulated the service concept that we began to appreciate

how Duty to Assist will likely conflict with Duty to Report—which requires people working in certain professions to report neglect or abuse to child protective services for young people under the age of 18.

#### **Keeping the process open and nimble is vital**

Designing in the social service space requires flexibility and a willingness to change direction to accommodate the needs of participants.

Part 2

# PluggedIn and policy implications

# PluggedIn

**PluggedIn is a four-pronged service concept designed to support the successful implementation of Duty to Assist in schools through a combination of advice, support, and training offered online and in person.**

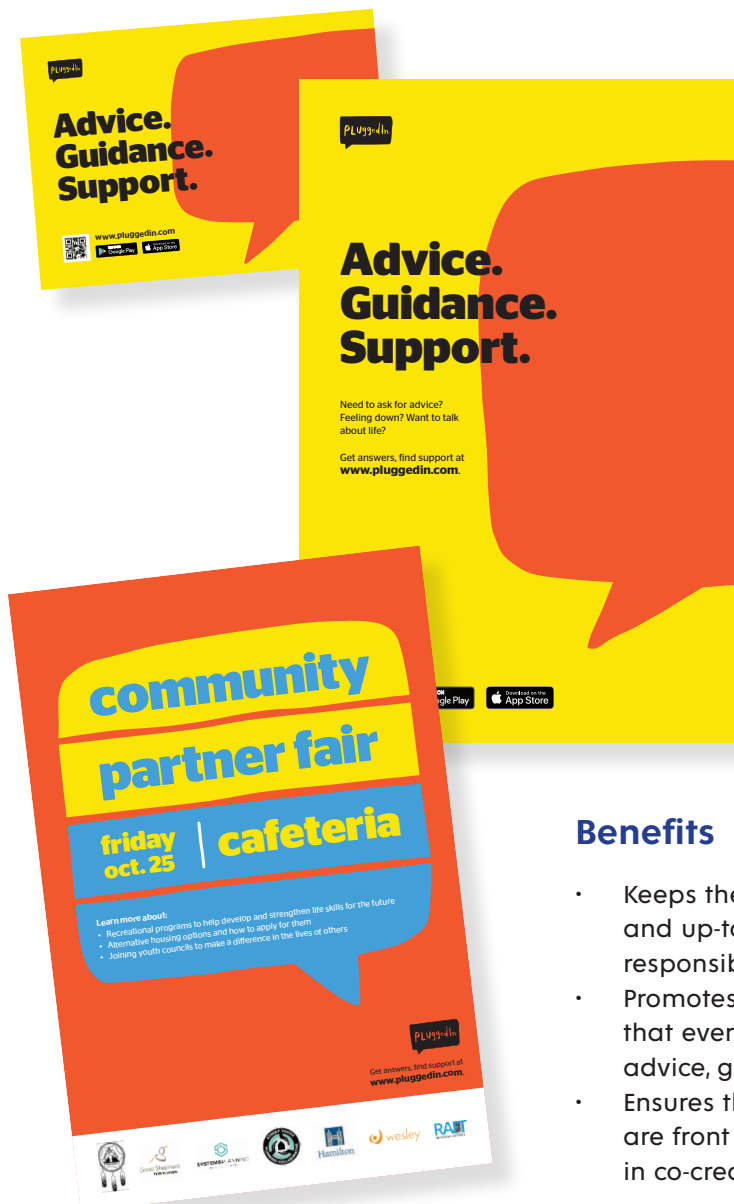
## Benefits

- Administered by community partners with strong reputations representing diverse communities and identities
- Protects the privacy of young people by collecting only data that is absolutely necessary and only when they provide consent
- Facilitates seamless handoff between schools and community partners
- Gives school staff and volunteers a clear understanding of their role under Duty to Assist
- Provides staff, volunteers, and students with a clear referral pathway
- Can be scaled up or down for a pilot, depending on the available resources and timing
- Focuses on the strengths of young people, and celebrates their unique identities

# 1/ Youth-centred school awareness

## A school-wide awareness campaign co-created by students, school staff, and community organizations to promote awareness about Duty to Assist and PluggedIn

This awareness campaign will help everyone understand their rights, responsibilities, and obligations under Duty to Assist. Campaign messaging includes details about Common Ground, the in-school community drop-in centre, and prompts users to download the digital assistant for advice and support.



### Benefits

- Keeps the school community informed and up-to-date about their rights and responsibilities under Duty to Assist
- Promotes awareness of PluggedIn so that everyone knows where to go for advice, guidance, and support
- Ensures that the voices of young people are front and centre by involving them in co-creating the campaign messaging

## 2/ AI-driven support

**A digital assistant for school staff and volunteers to help identify students who may need immediate access to housing-related supports and services, along with a list of actionable next steps that ensure they fulfill their legal obligation under Duty to Assist**

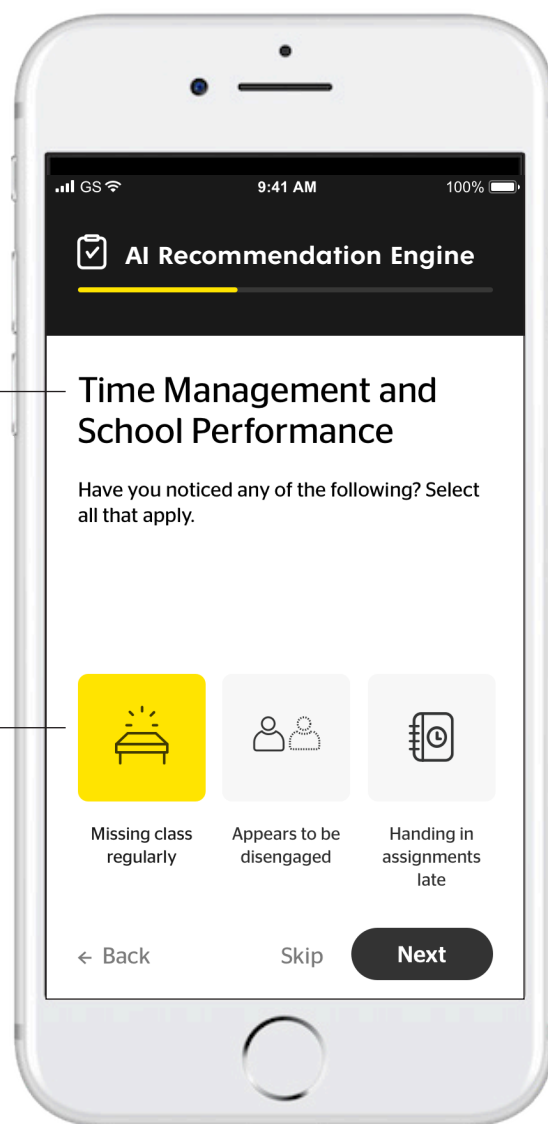
In addition to resources, staff have access to suggested conversation starters to make reaching out to students easier.

A friendly, text-based interface offers a platform for advice, with the option to email community support workers from participating community organizations. The digital assistant suggests youth-friendly, culturally appropriate health and social services available in the region for members of the school community.

### Benefits

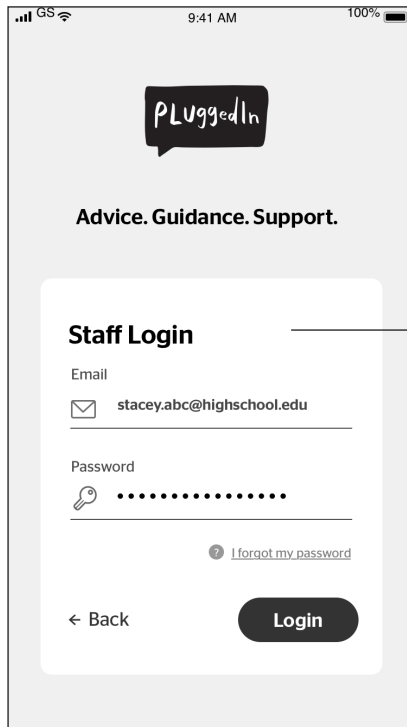
- Identifies young people who may need housing-related supports and suggests community services before it's too late
  - Advises school staff and volunteers on their obligations to act under Duty to Assist
  - Provides guidance to support young people with housing-related needs
  - Supports school staff and volunteers to start a dialogue with young people
  - Features partnerships with Indigenous community organizations, avoiding harmful pan-Indigenous approaches to service delivery
- Needs-based categories
- Simple observational items

### AI recommendation engine



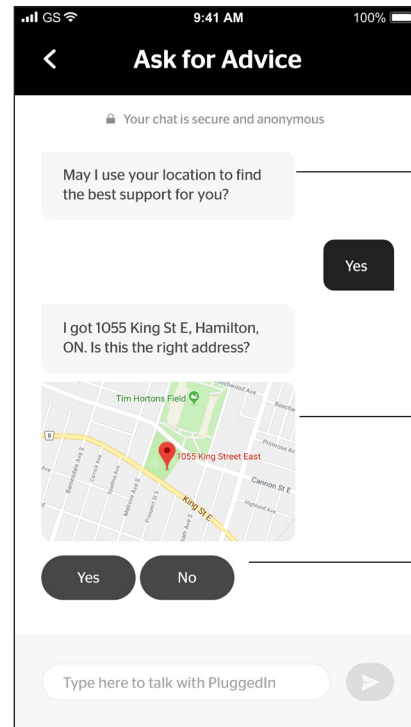


## Dedicated staff login



Distinct login for school staff

## Advice chatbot

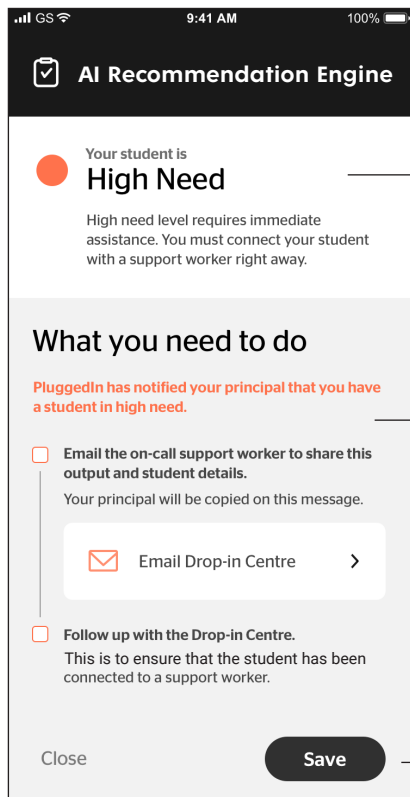


AI-generated suggestions in an easy-to-use text-based interface

Location-based recommendations

Asks for consent when accessing personal information

## Actionable next steps



Easily identify the need level of students

Actionable next steps, including how to connect a student to the support they need

Teachers can save individual records

## 3/ Common Ground drop-in centre

**Dedicated support workers from participating community organizations share office hours at a designated space in the school. Indigenous students are connected directly with an Indigenous-focused program.**

Students can make an appointment or drop by the centre during designated hours to get advice or seek a referral. They can also choose to meet with a community support worker at a time and location that is most convenient.

The community support worker is the single point of contact for staff and students and will oversee the formal assessment and coordinated intake process using a standardized, youth-focused assessment tool, such as the Youth Assessment and Prioritization (YAP) Tool.<sup>10</sup> Information from this assessment will be used to determine the best pathway of service to meet the student's needs.

### Benefits

- Integrates a team of dedicated support workers into the school community
- Offers flexible meeting options for students
- Takes the burden of case management off of teachers so they can focus on their role as mentors
- Tests a youth-friendly approach to coordinated access

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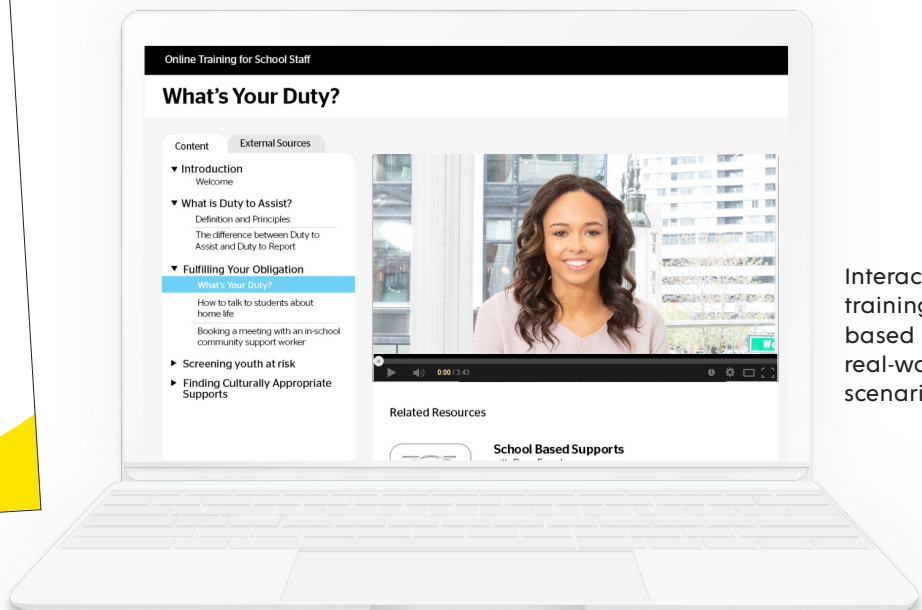
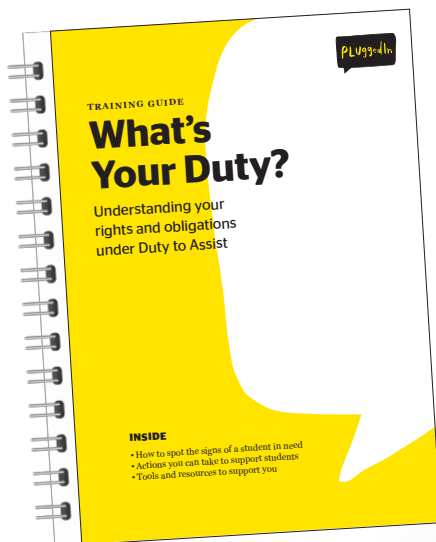
<sup>10</sup> The Youth Assessment and Prioritization Tool, <https://yaptool.com/>.

# 4/ Duty to Assist real-world training

A combination of in-person and online training and professional development will ensure school staff know how to identify students who may need housing-related supports, as well as the steps they should take to support students to fulfill their obligations under Duty to Assist.

## Benefits

- Provides clarity for all school staff and volunteers about their obligations under Duty to Assist
- Instills confidence in staff and volunteers that they have the resources they need to support students who are at risk of being homeless
- Facilitates standardized pathways to support students in need of housing-related supports
- Helps teachers build empathy for students through real-world scenarios



Interactive training based on real-world scenarios

# Policy implications

By simulating a service grounded in the principles of Duty to Assist, we were able to uncover policy components that may result in unintended consequences that have the potential to negatively affect young people. Three specific tensions emerged, each warranting consideration.

## 1/ Indigenous youth may be singled out

Our simulation revealed that the rollout of Duty to Assist will likely result in a heightened state of awareness in which teachers are more vigilant about watching out for the early warning signs that a young person may be at risk of becoming homeless.

In general, this is exactly what the policy is intended to do. However, this heightened awareness may have the unintended consequence of teachers reporting more Indigenous students to child protective services. This is in part because what constitutes “early warning signs” relies on subjective observations that can be biased by deeply held assumptions and prejudices (conscious and unconscious) about Indigenous peoples. More simply, what one teacher identifies as a sign of neglect may be seen by another as typical teenage behaviour. We heard from representatives at community organizations that Indigenous young people are regularly discriminated against in schools simply for the clothes they wear or the way they talk.

If not adequately addressed, Duty to Assist could result in overreporting of young people who are presumed to be at risk of homelessness, even though they may not be, simply due to biased observations. This is particularly worrisome because Indigenous young people are already disproportionately overrepresented within the child welfare system in Canada, constituting over half of the children in care nationwide.<sup>11</sup>

### Our recommendation

Policy and legislation for the enforcement of Duty to Assist should be co-developed with Indigenous communities through comprehensive engagement. Policy refinements should foster self-determination among Indigenous people and communities.

### What do you think?

**How might we refine the existing Duty to Assist policy to better acknowledge the unique needs of Indigenous young people and better account for the legacy of colonialism and the historical marginalization of Indigenous youth?**

<sup>11</sup> Naomi Nichols, “Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness in Canada: Who Is Responsible?” 2017, <https://www.homelesshub.ca/blog/child-welfare-and-youth-homelessness-canada-who-responsible>.

## 2/ It is unclear where Duty to Report ends and Duty to Assist starts

Duty to Assist is intended to protect and support young people, with an age mandate targeting those aged 13–24. In bringing Duty to Assist to life through our simulated service, it became apparent that the intention to protect young people may have unintended consequences. In particular, the positioning of the policy as a “duty” is reminiscent of the Duty to Report, in which the mandate is similarly intended to promote the safety and wellbeing of Canadian youth. In fact, the lines are blurred to such an extent that service providers faced with needs-based scenarios were challenged to differentiate between their two duties.

The question remains: Will school staff always feel that they have a Duty to Report if the student is known to be below the age of 16, particularly if homelessness is interpreted as a form of neglect warranting immediate intervention? Delineating between these two duties will help clear up this confusion and ensure that school staff feel confident in their rights and responsibilities under Duty to Assist.

### Our recommendation

The policy should explicitly state the distinctions between the Duty to Assist and the Duty to Report. To further minimize the potential for overlap of these duties, resources for adults should clearly delineate the expectations and causes for concern within Duty to Assist so that, whenever possible, it is an obligation distinct from the child protection system.

### What do you think?

How might we more clearly distinguish between competing and complementary professional duties without over-burdening professionals who already have a lot on their plates?

## 3/ The policy should be strengths-based, not fear-based

Our early iterations of the service concept placed emphasis on the legal rights and obligations of Duty to Assist, drawing attention to mechanisms for accountability and recourse. In the design jams we hosted with young people and service providers, these early concepts were interpreted as punitive. Duty to Assist had the potential to represent unwelcome volumes of work to service providers and to reinforce the stigma and burdens associated with homelessness.

Words such as “screening” and “risk” were perceived as potentially harmful to young people because of the negative cultural meanings that have become associated with the terms. For instance, one participant imagined a future scenario in which a young person might confront a teacher whom they suspect is using the digital assistant associated with PluggedIn to “screen them”: “You’re screening me right now, aren’t you?” Exchanges like this could become a common occurrence within schools if Duty to Assist is not perceived as strengths-based.

### Our recommendation

Consistent with Indigenous ways of knowing and being, Duty to Assist should be positioned as a strengths-based obligation. This will signal to young people that the policy is intended to lift them up, celebrate their identities, and connect them to their communities. It must be made explicit that Duty to Assist is not intended to punish, report, or ridicule young people. By recognizing their unique gifts, we can guide young people to a place they call home so that they thrive in circumstances that may not always be stacked in their favour.

### What do you think?

How might we position Duty to Assist as a strengths-based obligation intended to lift up and support young people, not punish or report them?

# What's next?

**This project and the insights laid out in this report represent one of many steps needed to address youth homelessness in Canada.**

**Design has a valuable role to play in this work going forward. Prototyping, in particular, is useful for testing key elements of policy to identify opportunities to improve outcomes and address unintended consequences.**

**We offer PluggedIn as a vision for the future. In taking the time to read this report you have signaled your interest in making this a reality —a hopeful sign that change is possible.**





# Thank you

Each year, the Toronto-based service design consultancy Bridgeable partners with an organization to tackle a challenge with real social impact through its service design internship, the Designership. The 2019 Designership was dedicated to reducing and preventing youth homelessness. Bridgeable's Chad Story led the Designership team, which included Amy Deckert (Design Researcher), Fahim Shahriar (Service Designer), Tara Tsang (Service Designer), and Mirusha Yogaraja (Project Journalist).

None of this work would have been possible without the hard work and generous guidance of the staff at Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) and A Way Home Canada (AWHC).

A special thank you is due to Erika Morton, our fearless "boots on the ground." Dr. Peter Mackie, who is at the forefront of the Duty to Assist movement, provided invaluable advice and insight throughout. We are appreciative of the creativity, time, and talent of Clarissa Bambao, John Cleland, Lucia Cleland, Dan Cuison, Chris Ferguson, Sochi Fried, Molly Klebanoff, Joanne Klimaszewski, Benjamin Spiller, Kate Steinmann, Cameron Stephen, and Sinead Wickham.

Countless frontline staff, policy experts, program managers, and social workers—working upstream in schools and downstream on the streets in Hamilton—provided important, candid feedback and advice along the way. We are grateful for the support and mentorship of the Hamilton Regional Indian Centre (HRIC) and, in particular, Sheryl Green, a key ally in this work. The Street Youth Planning Collaborative in Hamilton graciously provided leadership, knowledge, and space in support of this project.

Most importantly, we are indebted to the young people who trusted us with their stories, made art with us, and held us accountable every step of the way. We have heard your calls for change. We hope this is a first step, however limited, toward the future you desire.

