hub solutions

REPORT

Developmental Evaluation of Eva's Youth Belong Program

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the young people and YOUth Belong staff for participating in this evaluation.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

BACKGROUND

Eva's YOUth Belong, developed in partnership with the City of Toronto and Raising the Roof, is an independent living program for Black youth experiencing homelessness or precarious living. The program centres the identity and intersectionality of Black youth and houses young people in community-based, shared housing, and properties across the city. YOUth Belong currently has two housing streams: (1) shared housing and (2) private rental accommodation (Bursary Program). In the shared housing stream, Eva's manages an apartment building that has capacity to house up to 15 young people. Additionally, Eva's in partnership with Raising the Roof has capacity to house 5 young people at the all-female-identifying house. Staff are available onsite at both. In the private rental accommodation stream, youth have their own private rental units in the community.

CONTEXT OF THE EVALUATION

Eva's contracted Hub Solutions, a social enterprise embedded within the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH), to conduct a developmental evaluation of the YOUth Belong program. The evaluation centred around successes and challenges with the different housing components, assessing the cultural responsiveness of programming and services, and understanding how the program is unique.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The methodology has four main components:

1. A review of academic and grey literature about Black youth homelessness with particular focus on shelter services, cultural responsiveness, and best/promising practices.

2. An online survey for young people currently enrolled in the YOUth Belong program to understand youths' experience in the program.

3. In-depth interviews with young people currently enrolled in the YOUth Belong program to further explore youths' experience in the program.

4. In-depth interviews with program staff to discuss program development.

KEY FINDINGS

Qualitative Findings: Youth Perspective

Findings from the survey and interviews with young people in the program demonstrate that the program is well-accepted by young people and generally meets their unique needs. The results are broken down into the following sections: (1) Overall Experience, (2) Location, (3) Program Accessibility, (4) Programs and Services, (5) Skills and Capacity to Navigate Systems, (6) Cultural Responsiveness, and (7) Community Referrals and Supports.

1. Overall Experience. Program youth described their overall experience as positive. Youth particularly enjoyed 24/7 access to staff support and sense of independence that YOUth Belong provided. Some youth shared that staff-youth communication could be better and that staff could conduct more intentional check-ins with youth.

2. Location. Young people who were residing at the shared apartment complex described the location as accessible and safe, for which youth shared deep appreciation.

3. Program Accessibility. Some program youth found the program to be relatively accessible in terms of registration and entry, whereas others faced challenges related to issues with accommodation, fairness and equity, and advocacy.

4. Programs and Services. While YOUth Belong provided youth with a sense of independence, staff support, stable/affordable housing, opportunities for life skills development, and adequate programming, some youth highlighted a number of problems with the program. These included lack of true independence, inconsistent supply of utilities, lack of robust programming, and inadequate support from staff.

5. Skills and Capacity to Navigate Systems. Youth indicated that staff support, education on landlord-tenant relations, and stability in terms of housing has helped them develop the necessary skills and capacity to navigate different systems (e.g., education and employment). Albeit some youth shared displeasure about staff favouritism.

6. Cultural Responsiveness. Youth participants felt that the program is culturally responsive, specifically noting that YOUth Belong offers programming and activities that are culturally appropriate. However, program youth believed that the program could incorporate more culturally relevant activities such as drum and dance, storytelling, and sports into their programming.

7. Community Referrals and Supports. Youth living in the private rental market accessed different types of supports and recreational activities in the community such as cultural education and volunteer work.

Qualitative Findings: Staff Perspective

Findings from interviews with program staff demonstrate that the program is particularly successful in meeting the needs of Black youth experiencing homelessness. The results are broken down into the following sections: (1) Staff Roles and Responsibilities, (2) Program Resources, (3) Two Housing Streams, (4) Strengths and Weaknesses of Shared Housing Model, (5) Program Strengths and Weaknesses, (6) Cultural Responsiveness, and (7) Intersecting Identities of Youth.

1. Staff Roles and Responsibilities. Frontline staff provide support (e.g., goal planning, individual check-in, case management, resource and information sharing, life skills development) to youth who live in the apartment complexes and in the private rental market. Management staff primarily support program operation in terms of program development, applying for grants, meeting funder requirements, supporting staff, etc.

2. Program Resources. Staffing, technology, intra-agency collaboration, funding, programming and services that offer opportunity for life skills development, and partnerships were highlighted as particularly important for operation of the YOUth Belong program. Some staff noted that there is a lack of professional diversity in terms of male workers and Black-identified mental health professionals. Staff also shared that there is a need for intra-agency communication and collaboration to ensure that youth (and staff) have knowledge of and access to all programs and services offered across all Eva's Initiatives.

3. Two Housing Streams. Youth in the shared housing stream and the private rental accommodation stream differed in terms of independence, relationship and rapport with staff, access to rent subsidies, access to programming and services, as well as access to and utilization of resources (i.e., education and employment support, necessities, wraparound supports).

4. Strengths and Weaknesses of Shared Housing Model. Staff emphasized that the YOUth Belong program succeeds in providing youth with a sense of belonging and independence, as well as gratitude. However, staff highlighted some challenges with shared housing such as little impact of building social connections, territorial behaviour, differences among youth, dependency on staff, and cultural differences.

5. Program Strengths and Weaknesses. Staff identified a number of program strengths that included uniqueness of the program, staff support, advocacy, supports and resources, housing support, partnerships and outreach, independence, and relationship building. On the other hand, staff noted program processes, tailored programming and supports, program expectations from youth, and role confusion and expectations as challenges of the program.

6. Cultural Responsiveness. Staff shared that YOUth Belong respects the unique ethno-racial identities of its young people through its programming and services (e.g., Rites of Passage, Black History Month, Youth-led/informed Programs), staffing (i.e., cultural competency, connection, and rapport), community referrals, partnerships, and cultural diversity practices.

7. Intersecting Identities of Youth. YOUth Belong addresses the intersecting identities of program youth through 2SLGBTQ+-affirming practices such as the use of pronouns and training for youth and staff. The program works with community organizations to develop and facilitate these trainings.

Qualitative Findings: COVID-19 Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic affected YOUth Belong in a number of ways, including lower rates of youth engagement, increased mental health challenges, stoppage of programming, and changes in visitation policies.

1. Decreased Youth Engagement. At the height of the pandemic, youth in the private rental market were not able to come on-site and staff were not able to meet youth in the community. Staff and youth found this challenging to conduct check-ins and for support.

2. Mental Health Challenges. Some youth struggled with maintaining employment during the employment due to lack of motivation, resulting in lower funds in their savings that will be used towards rent when they move out of the shared housing progam.

3. Stoppage of Programming. In-person programming were cancelled due to the pandemic. Youth who entered the program during the COVID-19 pandemic did not have access to advertised programming.

4. Changes in Visitation Policies. As per COVID-19 rules and restrictions, guests were not allowed at the residence. Youth described feeling lonely and disconnected due to this restriction.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The results from the online survey and interviews with young people and YOUth Belong staff demonstrated that the program is successful in providing housing and supports for Black youth experiencing homelessness. To improve the program, the following recommendations were developed:

Program Processes

Some youth participants expressed concerns about the intake process, particularly about the questionnaire, rules and expectations, check-in support, and more housing support for those who are living in the private rental market.

1. Revisit the intake questionnaire and make appropriate revisions, with special attention to the type of information that is collected and whether it is crucial to program admission and participation.

2. Intake processes should accommodate the youth's schedule. Since staff are on-site 24/7, they should be able to administer intake questionnaires and conduct interviews outside of regular business hours.

3. Regarding rules and expectations, staff should provide more clarification around services, mandatory activities for youth, and expectations around independent living.

4. Staff should have an in-depth one-on-one conversation with youth upon intake to identify their unique needs and goals, as well as develop a plan to address those needs and goals. Staff can then proceed with weekly/bi-weekly check-ins with youth to have some sort of progress check-in or re-evaluate the plan.

5. YOUth Belong can consider offering more follow-up support to ensure that youth who exit the shared housing stream into the private rental market remain housed.

6. There is a need for improved communication between staff and clients, especially those in the private rental market. YOUth Belong can explore ways to increase communication via call, text, e-mail.

Youth identified incompatibility with roommates as a catalyst for conflict. One way that YOUth Belong can mitigate potential conflicts between roommates is to facilitate a "roommate meet-and-greet" before assigning youth to their rooms.

Staffing

The YOUth Belong staff team is representative of the intended population and for such, has been highly praised as a catalyst for relationship and rapport building between youth and staff. Additionally, internal culturally responsive program practices such as hiring, training, and services may boost youths' engagement with services. It is important that staff receive appropriate training to support them in providing services to youth.

1. The YOUth Belong program is made up of mostly male youth. It would benefit male youth to have a male Housing Success Worker, either at full- or part-time capacity.

2. Staff should undergo regular training to equip them with some skills and tools that will help them to support the mental health needs of youth.

3. YOUth Belong could also consider hiring experts or increasing referrals to services such as Registered Social Workers or therapists to provide counselling to youth.

Program and Services

Housing for youth who are experiencing homelessness should be accompanied with supportive housing services that assist youth in making the transition from homelessness to being housed and to address issues which led to their homelessness (CCHRC, 2002). YOUth Belong is successful in housing Black youth who are experiencing or at-risk homelessness or precariously housed.

1. YOUth Belong can apply Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) principles: (1) a right to housing with no preconditions; (2) youth choice, youth voice, and self-determination; (3) positive youth development and wellness orientation; (4) individualized, client-driven supports with no time limits; and (5) social inclusion and community integration (Gaetz, Walter, & Story, 2021; Gaetz, Walter, & Borato, 2021).

2. YOUth Belong could consider implementing new program processes that track the progress of individual housing plans. This could involve developing a personalized housing plan for youth at intake such as identifying their personal strengths, setting goals, and identifying supports they would need to stabilize in their communities.

3. YOUth Belong could consider expanding its partnership strategy to include more partnerships with housing organizations or even landlords, to help house youth in the private rental market.

4. YOUth Belong should consider incorporating more hands-on activities where youth can practice and master life skills such as financial literacy, maintaining stable housing, effective grocery shopping, etc.

5. Youth and staff noted some issues with community donations that YOUth Belong such as expired food or non-culturally sensitive products.

6. YOUth Belong can take appropriate measures to ensure that food donations are not expired and are in good condition (e.g., postage around donation bin/area, discarding expired goods before youth can access donations).

    a. YOUth Belong could increase donations of culturally appropriate products through other means such as increased outreach to and partnerships with local, Black-led organizations.

    b. YOUth Belong should consider facilitating two-part workshops where the first centres around information sharing and the second on strategies and tools. This presents more opportunities for partnerships with community organizations.

7. With COVID-19 rules and restrictions slowly lifting, YOUth Belong can start-up any programming that was shut down due to the pandemic (e.g., group outings, sports), particularly activities that centre around Afro-Canadian, Afro-Caribbean, and Jamaican culture like art events, drumming, storytelling, etc. YOUth Belong should also extend these opportunities to youth living in the private rental market.

Community Collaboration

To improve housing stability for Black youth experiencing or at risk of experiencing home-lessness, it is essential to enhance cross-system collaboration and partnerships between agencies. This could include education and coordination between homeless service system and child welfare systems, youth justice systems, education systems, etc.

1. To foster information exchange, transparency, and collaboration, staff from different Eva's initiatives can form a council that meets monthly or quarterly to have conversations and provide updates about their respective initiatives.

2. One staff suggested creating an online portal that lists all programs and services available across all of Eva's Initiatives. This portal would increase awareness and transparency as well as improve referrals, which ultimately will help staff better meet the needs of the youth.

3. YOUth Belong should consider developing an outreach team. The outreach team will focus primarily on promoting YOUth Belong through social media, in-person events, and pamphlets/flyers.

4. YOUth Belong should consider creating or amplifying their online presence so to include potential self-referrals from youth who may not have access to a Case/ Social Worker.

5. YOUth Belong could benefit from more partnerships. These partnerships could translate into recreational and life skills development workshops/trainings, which could help increase youth engagement. These partnerships can be found through continued outreach efforts.

1. Background

Eva's YOUth Belong, developed in partnership with the City of Toronto and Raising the Roof, is an independent living program for Black youth experiencing homelessness or precarious living. The program centres the identity and intersectionality of Black youth and houses young people in community-based, shared housing, and properties across the city. The mandate of the YOUth Belong program is to provide Black youth experiencing homelessness or precarious living with the life skills and capacity to navigate the systems that they will connect with daily, while rooting them in their communities and multi-faceted identities.

As an organization founded by Eva Smith, who was a Black woman who immigrated to Canada from Jamaica, Eva's is uniquely placed to support the needs of Black youth. Black young people require specific programming since they experience systemic barriers when attempting to find stable housing in the city of Toronto. Further, Black youth are overrepresented in homeless shelters and transitional homes, face higher rates of housing insecurity and barriers to accessing long-term housing as a legacy of colonialism and anti-Black racisms, and experience difficulties accessing services such as healthcare, education, employment, and more.

YOUth Belong accepts Black-identifying youth between the ages of 16 to 24 years old who are experiencing homelessness, at risk of homelessness, or precariously housed. To benefit from this program, youth must also show commitment to making changes in their lives and working toward interdependence. This includes:

- ▶ Having secured income from employment and/or social services (e.g., Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program, Children's Aid Society)
- ▶ Having goals related to employment, career, and/or education
- ▶ Demonstrating life skills such as healthy relationships with family and friends, self-care, housekeeping, cooking, and financial literacy
- ▶ Working on developing a support system including supports from the community, family members, and friends
- ▶ Having goals in terms of next step(s) for housing

YOUth Belong currently has two housing streams: (1) shared housing and (2) private rental accommodation (Bursary Program). In the shared housing stream, Eva's manages an apartment building that has capacity to house up to 15 young people. Additionally, Eva's in partnership with Raising the Roof has capacity to house 5 young people at the all-female-identifying house. Staff are available onsite at both. In the private rental accommodation stream, youth have their own private rental units in the community.

Eva's Bursary Program provides housing supports to Black youth leaving the shelter system into successful private rental housing with housing subsidies with follow-up support services. Youth are eligible to receive up to $800 per month, which depends on the youth's monthly income and rent. To qualify for the program, young people must meet the criteria below:

1. Youth in the shared housing stream are eligible to receive the housing bursary during their 18-month stay; however, youth do not have to stay for the full 18 months. The housing bursary is reinvested directly into the program and services.

2. Youth who were previously in the shared housing stream are no longer eligible to receive the housing bursary once they've moved into private rental accommodation.

3. Youth who enter program but are living in their own private rental units are eligible to receive the housing bursary for 12 months.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF WORK

Eva's contracted Hub Solutions, a social enterprise embedded within the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH), to conduct a developmental evaluation of the YOUth Belong program. The purpose of the evaluation was to learn about successes and challenges with its different housing components, to assess the cultural responsiveness of programming and services, and to understand how the program is unique. The evaluation also explored the experiences of program staff and clients.

2. Literature Review

The Hub Solutions team conducted a rapid literature review focused on Black youth homelessness. The review includes literature about shelter services such as utilization including associated barriers and facilitators as well as cultural responsiveness. Additionally, promising and best practices for programs targeted towards Black youth at-risk of or experiencing homelessness are detailed in the review.

1. *BLACK YOUTH AND HOMELESSNESS*

Although there is a gap in race-based data collection, evidence suggests that Black youth may be overrepresented among young people who experience homelessness (Carter, 2011; Daniel & Cukier, 2014; Netto et al., 2004; O'Regan et al., 2021; Springer et al., 2013; Palmer, 2016). The 2016 National Youth Homelessness Survey reported that 28.2% of young people (ages 13-24) experiencing homelessness identified as part of a racialized community, despite only 19.1% of all Canadian youth identifying in the same way (Gaetz et al., 2016). In Toronto, the 2021 Street Needs Assessment found that 78% of young people accessing Toronto's youth shelters identified as part of a racialized community (City of Toronto, 2021).

The overrepresentation of Black youth experiencing homelessness is caused by structural and systemic factors such as poverty, lack of affordable housing, residential segregation (Carter, 2011; Kennett & Marsh, 1999; Netto, 2006; Novacek et al., 2022; Petry et al., 2021), systemic and structural racism in institutions (Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, 2018), and trauma (Crosby et al., 2018; Bender, et al., 2015). Further, many Black youth experiencing homelessness are met with more complex barriers due to intersecting identities (i.e., race, gender, sexual orientation) that marginalizes them in society (Daniel & Cukier, 2014; Hasford et al., 2018; Shelton et al., 2018; Springer et al., 2013). The experiences of homelessness among Black and other racialized young people are shaped by factors such as racism, culture, and stigma, and are further compounded by individual stressors that lead to homelessness (e.g., poverty, family conflict) (Hasford et al., 2018; Shelton et al., 2018). Moreover, inter- and intra-personal factors such as abuse, violence, intergenerational trauma, rejection, and substance use and mental health challenges, may also contribute to the experience of homelessness among Black youth (Daniel & Cukier, 2014; Hasford et al., 2018; Shelton et al., 2018; Springer et al., 2013; Springer & Roswell, 2011). Black families and individuals are represented at a greater rate than their white counterparts in the poverty population, putting them at a higher risk of experiencing homelessness (Carter, 2011).

Similarly, unemployment disproportionately impacts Black youth and their families. When experiencing homelessness, research suggests that Black individuals are less likely to be employed compared to their white counterparts (Novacek et al., 2022), making it more difficult to exit homelessness (Novacek et al., 2022) and them more vulnerable to social exclusion (Netto, 2006). Research shows that Black youth experiencing homelessness are less likely to secure employment and housing due to reasons such as age, racial discrimination, and lack of documents (Daniel & Cukier, 2014; Hasford et al., 2018).

2. SHELTER SERVICES

Because Black and other racialized youth are disproportionately likely to experience home-lessness and are overrepresented in the homeless population (Carter, 2011; Daniel & Cukier, 2014; Netto et al., 2004; O'Regan et al., 2021; Springer et al., 2013; Palmer, 2016), service provision in the homelessness sector should be examined to ensure it is not reinforcing racial disparities (O'Regan et al., 2021). This includes evaluating availability, accessibility, and efficacy of programs and services. Racialized youth can experience many stigma-related barriers (e.g., cultural attitudes toward mental illness and addiction) that deter them from seeking and using service.

Factors Impacting Service Utilization

Structural racism in institutions influences access or desire to access services and supports for racialized homeless youth (Edwards, 2020). Regarding race/ethnicity, research has consistently shown disparities in access, quality, and utilization of health and mental health services for racial/ethnic minorities (Crosby et al., 2018; Klisz-Hulbert, 2020; Marrast, Himmelstein, & Woolhandler, 2016). Black youth and their families may delay seeking mental health treatment (Klisz-Hulbert, 2020) even though they are more likely to report symptoms of mental health illness (Holden et al., 2012). This hesitance occurs due to poverty (Klisz-Hulbert, 2020), stigma (Kalambay, 2022; Klisz-Hulbert, 2020; Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2021), myths around mental health illness (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2021), improper diagnosis (Holden et al., 2012), provider bias (Kalambay, 2021), inequality of care, lack of culturally competent care (Kalambay, 2022; Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2021) and systemic disparities in the process of receiving mental health care (Kalambay, 2022; Klisz-Hulbert, 2020; Mental Health America, 2022; Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2021). For example, families fear that their children with psychiatric disorders are more likely to be referred to the juvenile justice system instead of a mental health care facility (Klisz-Hulbert, 2020) and disparities like this create distrust in the process among them (Mental Health America, 2022; Holden et al., 2012; Kalambay, 2022; Klisz-Hulbert, 2020).

In the United States, Black youth are less likely to seek mental health treatment (Klisz-Hulbert, 2020). In 2019, 9% of Black youth reported experiencing an episode of major depression, yet less than half (40%) received treatment (Klisz-Hulbert, 2020). This has detrimental consequences for Black youth including emergency psychiatric hospitalizations and noncompliance with treatment—leading to mental health issues and related challenges in adulthood (Klisz-Hulbert, 2020). Moreover, there exists racial disparities in the healthcare system that give reason for Black youth to distrust the system and those who work in it (Cauce et al., 2002; Klisz-Hulbert, 2020). For example, Black youth are less likely than white youth to be treated with beneficial psychiatric medication (Breland-Noble, 2004; Klisz-Hulbert, 2020). Black youth are also more likely than white youth to be hospitalized involuntarily (Breland-Noble, 2004; Klisz-Hulbert, 2020).

For Black youth in particular, strong family, friend, and community support systems foster positive help-seeking behaviours (McCann et al., 2016). Black youth that have these established bonds with family and friends feel more comfortable sharing information and receive more emotional support and encouragement (McCann, 2016). Likewise, strong community networks provide emotional and practical help through formal and informal services (McCann et al., 2016).

Youth experiencing homelessness, including Black youth, with prior involvement with the justice system may experience additional barriers to seeking help from services, for instance, fear of being reported to authorities and retuning to placement (Crosby et al., 2018). The justice system acted as a primary referral pathway into the mental healthcare system for Black youth in the juvenile justice system (Fante-Coleman & Jackson-Best, 2020). This referral through the justice system is also considered a barrier to future help-seeking due to negative experiences of this pathway (Fante-Coleman & Jackson-Best, 2020; My Friends Place, 2021). In particular, justice-involved youth often report negative experiences with access to services including longer wait times, bias from staff, etc. (My Friends Place, 2021). Moreover, research suggests that youth experiencing homelessness are more likely to seek help and engage in services if community service providers were deemed trustworthy and caring (Bender et al., 2007; Black et al., 2018; Crosby et al., 2018). Trust of community providers remains a critical motivating component of help-seeking behaviours among youth experiencing homelessness.

Service Utilization: General Health, Vocation, and Mental Health

The research is mixed with regard to service utilization among Black youth. One study found that Black and other racialized youth (e.g., Latinx, multiracial), compared to white youth, were more likely to use general health services, vocational, and mental health services (Crosby et al., 2018). African American or Black and Latinx youth were more than twice as likely to use general health services (Crosby et al., 2018). Minority youth were found to be 2 to 6 times as likely as white youth to use vocational services (Crosby et al., 2018).

Other studies have reported lower rates of access to services among Black youth, particularly services related to healthcare and mental health care (My Friends Place, 2021). Lower rates of access can be attributed to negative personal experiences with services as well as stigma surrounding mental health in Black communities (My Friends Place, 2021). Particularly for justice-involved Black youth, negative experiences with wait times, biases from service providers, and lack of respect often deter youth from accessing services and supports despite needing them (My Friends Place, 2021). Other factors include location of services and financial costs. A big deterrent to service utilization for Black youth is lack of cultural responsiveness in services and support programs (My Friends Place, 2021), making it difficult for youth to build rapport and trust.

3. ACCESSIBILITY AND REFERRAL: BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS

Youth have indicated that insensitive and impersonal behaviour from service providers typically brings on feelings of blame and judgement (Black et al., 2018; Chiu et al., 2018, My Friends Place, 2021)—further emphasizing feelings of neglect and mistrust of available services. Moreover, lack of support and follow-up from service providers made youth feel that they were not important– (Black et al., 2018). Youth also identified lack of inter-agency communication as a barrier to accessing services because they have to retell their stories whenever they accessed a new service (Black et al., 2018; CCRHC, 2002). Additionally, McCann and colleagues (2016) found that stigma of mental illness, lack of mental health literacy in parents and young people, perceived lack of cultural competency of services, and financial costs all contribute to accessibility of support services.

On the other hand, client-centered care as well as staff qualities (non-judgmental, understanding, knowledgeable) facilitated engagement with services (Black et al., 2018; My Friends Place, 2021). Youth felt more engaged and supported if staff displayed competency, advocacy, and supportive behaviours. Furthermore, communication and supported referrals were identified by staff as important facilitators to youth's service engagement (Black et al., 2018). Service collaboration typically results in positive outcomes for youth by increasing efficiency, increasing awareness of client issues and available services, and providing consistent response to clients (Black et al., 2018; Community Collaborative Health Research Centre [CCHRC], 2002). Moreover, other facilitators to accessibility highlighted in the literature include openness with friends and family, strong community support systems, trustworthiness and confidentiality from service providers, perceived expertise, and improved mental health literacy (McCann et al., 2016).

4. CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

There is no agreed upon definition of cultural responsiveness in Canada, however it is popularly defined as, in the context of social service provision, "the active process of seeking to accommodate the service to the client's cultural context, values and needs. The rationale for this is not only to ensure appropriate and effective service provision, but also to give practical effect to the goals of substantive equality and justice" (Armstrong, 2009 as cited in McCallum & Isaac, 2011, p. 22). There is a lack of culturally appropriate services in the homeless sector, particularly for racialized youth. The lack of culturally responsive services limits youths' access and use of services (Chiu et al., 2016; Kenneth & Marsh, 1999; My Friends Place, 2021), and may subsequently result in a vicious cycle in which Black youth experiencing homelessness are hesitant to seek care based on long-standing tensions and mistrust (Graf et al., 2022)—which further perpetuates and reinforces racial disparities in the homeless sector. In a study by Nottingham (1997; as cited in Kenneth & Marsh, 1999), an informant reported that service providers were not knowledgeable of their culture and that shelter living

conditions and services were not culturally responsive. Due to the lack of culturally appropriate services, it is not surprising that Black youth experiencing homelessness would rather turn to friends and other peers than white-run agencies for shelter (Kenneth & Marsh, 1999; My Friends Place, 2021). In a 2018 survey, 60% of Black Canadian respondents reported that they would be more willing to access and use mental health services if the mental health professional identified as Black (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2021).

It is important to note the diversity and intersectionality of young Black people and how it distinguishes their individual experiences of homelessness (Daniel & Cukier, 2014; Springer et al., 2013). Good cultural responsiveness is wholistic and assumes a two-way street, where service providers will learn about clients and clients will learn about how service providers can help and what to expect (McCallum & Isaac, 2011). Close partnerships with other service providers and community organizations also prove essential for culturally responsive programs (McCallum & Isaac, 2011). Cultural adaptations to programming and services specific to the needs of Black youth may help motivate help-seeking behaviours and engagement with services. For example, incorporating family relationships and religiosity/spirituality (McCallum & Isaac, 2011; My Friends Place, 2021; Novacek et al., 2022).

5.PROMISING AND BEST PRACTICES

There are little documented promising and best practices for culturally sensitive service delivery, particularly for Black youth experiencing homelessness. However, research suggests that good practice should involve a pro-active and wholistic approach, communication with racialized minority communities (Guerreo et al., 2018), culturally sensitive service delivery (Calvillo et al., 2009; McCallum & Isaac, 2011), and culturally relevant partnerships with community organizations (CCHRC, 2002; Netto et al., 2004). Below are a few promising/best practices that are documented in the literature.

Integration of Services

In order to improve housing stability for Black youth experiencing homelessness, it is important to enhance cross-system collaboration and partnerships between agencies. For example, enhancing education and coordination between the child welfare system and the homeless service system; and strengthening the working relationship among law enforcement, criminal justice, and the homeless service system; would improve coordinated access to services for youth. Furthermore, to ensure culturally appropriate service reception, relevant service providers should receive opportunities to expand their capacities in cultural competency, institutional racism, and the needs of diverse homeless populations, especially Black 2SLGBTQ+ individuals (Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, 2018).

Supportive Housing Services

Housing for youth who are experiencing homelessness should be accompanied with supportive housing services that assist youth in making the transition from homelessness to being housed and to address issues which led to their homelessness (CCHRC, 2002). These services may include housing support from transitional housing to independent living, supports for health and well-being, access to income and education, and enhancing life skills. The Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) principle suggests employing a "positive youth development" orientation that would identify their personal strength, would help to improve their life skills in communication and problem solving, assist them in setting personal goals, and integrate community support (Gaetz et al., 2021). Moreover, the "positive youth development" approach involves social inclusion and community integration (Gaetz et al., 2021). This integration includes housing models that do not stigmatize or isolate youth; opportunities for social, cultural, and spiritual engagement, particularly for Indigenous, racialized, 2SLGBTQ+, newcomer youth, and other communities; opportunities for engagement in meaningful activities through education, employment, vocational, spiritual, cultural, and recreational activities; and connections to relevant professional supports (Gaetz et al., 2021). Housing options should reflect the everchanging needs (dependent on stage of development, life skills, income) of young people, and supports must be tailored to their unique circumstances (Gaetz et al., 2021).

Organizational Practices and Training

Internal culturally responsive program practices such as hiring, training, and services may boost youths' engagement with services (Calvillo et al., 2009; Guerreo et al., 2018). Cultural respect can also be promoted through development and implementation of teaching strategies with emphasis on understanding and sensitivity—these trainings are applicable to both staff and youth in the shelters (Black et al., 2018; CCHRC, 2002; Guerreo et al., 2018). Additionally, youth service workers and agencies should have a well-developed network of community resources that they can readily connect with for referrals and guidance (Black et al., 2018; CCHRC, 2002). This may also foster inter-agency collaboration and thus, coordinated service delivery and support for youth.

Rites of Passage

A Rites of Passage program is a form of an Afrocentric intervention rooted in a tradition common to many African cultures, during which elders and the community assist adolescents in their transition to adulthood (Hasford et al., 2018). The Rites of Passage program typically incorporates traditional practices, education rituals, and arts (e.g., drum and dance) that draw upon principles of African culture (Hasford et al., 2018). These programs are aimed at educating and providing people of African descent with alternative spheres of reality that emphasize healthy living, community responsibility, and eldership respect. Throughout the program, youth will gain a sense of self that re-centres the African identity through the

exploration of history, tradition, values, and cultural precepts (Hasford et al., 2018). There is little research on the impact of Rites of Passage programs with youth experiencing homelessness, however there is evidence that these programs can have positive impacts on youth who are involved with the justice and child welfare systems (Hasford et al., 2018).

2SLGBTQ+ Youth

The literature highlights core components to consider when working with 2SLGBTQ+ youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness. For instance, creating 2SLGBTQ+-affirming and culturally competent policies and standards; adopting a standardized intake process that is 2SLGBTQ+-inclusive (e.g., sexual identity, gender identity, pronouns, preferred name); and increasing access to services for transgender and gender-expansive youth. Black and other racialized 2SLGBTQ+ youth disproportionately experience bullying and violence, discrimination, homelessness, poor physical and mental health outcomes, and lack of interpersonal and community support (Benn, 2017; YouthREX, 2017). The needs of Black 2SLGBTQ+ youth are unique and are seldom being met by existing programs and services. By leveraging what already exists (i.e., knowledge, resources, services, programming), organizations with similar values and goals should connect and share information and resources (Benn, 2017). Organizations can also adapt their program model to existing frameworks specific for Black and other racialized 2SLGBTQ+ youth. For example, the Black Queer Youth (BQY) is a safe space for Black, multiracial, African and Caribbean youth who identify as 2SLGBTQ+. The framework is informed by a number of theories and ideas, especially intersectionality, which explores the interdependence between multiple identity categories (e.g., race, ethnicity, sexuality) and social inequities and exclusion (e.g., racism and homophobia) (Benn, 2017). Incorporating this as part of service provision or programming may help in addressing the unique needs of Black 2SLGBTQ+ youth.

3. Methodology

A mixed-methods approach, including qualitative and quantitative research methodologies were used. Prior to data collection, Hub Solutions received ethical approval from York University's Research Ethics Board and secured written consent of all participants. The methods, including data collection tools and analysis strategies, are described below.

1. YOUTH SURVEY

Hub Solutions developed an online survey using the web-based survey platform Qualtrics. The survey included closed- and open-ended questions that focused on youths' experience in the program, including what they liked most about YOUth Belong, what they would change about the program, cultural responsiveness, and how the program is supporting them to reach their goals. The survey was piloted with a small group of young people and these young people did not have feedback on the structure of the survey. YOUth Belong staff shared the link to the online survey via email with youth in the shared housing program, as well as those who are living independently (in the private rental market). The survey was active from March to May 2022. Respondents received a $15 gift card and also had a chance to win one of three $50 gift cards for their time. A total of 12 youth participated in the survey. Quantitative data was descriptively analysed using Microsoft Excel. Qualitative data was analysed and later incorporated into the youth interview analysis.

2. YOUTH INTERVIEWS

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with youth residing at the apartment complex and with youth living in the private rental market who had exited from the shared housing stream. The qualitative interviews provided an opportunity to expand upon the topics in the survey and to gain more insight into program strengths and weaknesses relating to accessibility and cultural responsiveness of programs and services offered at YOUth Belong.

Program staff provided contact details for youth in the shared housing program and for youth living in the community. Hub Solutions staff recruited youth via e-mail and telephone. All in-depth interviews were conducted via Zoom Video Conferencing between March to April 2022. Participants received a $30 gift card for their time. A total of six youths were interviewed. All interviews were recorded via Zoom and transcribed using Otter.ai, an online transcription service. The data was analysed using a thematic approach. The evaluation team read and coded each transcript line-by-line, with codes using the participant's own language (in vivo coding) as much as possible. From this process, themes were developed. The coding process was largely guided by the evaluation questions that were asked, ensuring a pragmatic approach to the analysis.

3. STAFF INTERVIEWS

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with frontline and senior management staff at YOUth Belong. The qualitative interviews focused on program development and context, program resources, housing types, infusion of Black youth lived experiences, program strengths and challenges, and youth outcomes.

Hub Solutions interviewed staff via Zoom between March to April 2022. A total of six interviews were conducted. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai. The same thematic approach to qualitative data analysis used for the youth interview analysis were employed for the staff analysis.

4. Findings

A summary and interpretation of findings from the (1) Youth Survey, (2) Youth Interviews, and (3) Staff Interviews are detailed in this section.

1. QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS: YOUTH SURVEY

None of the survey respondents had been in the program for up to the 18-month time limit for program participation. Among the 12 youth who participated, the average length of stay was 8.5 months, with a range of 5 to 12 months (Table 1). The majority (83.3%) of survey respondents were referred to YOUth Belong by a Case Worker or Support Worker. One (8.3%) youth was referred through family or friend, and one (8.3%) through Eva's Phoenix (Table 2). None of the youth were self-referred (via online/website).

→ **Interpretation.** YOUth Belong could consider creating or amplifying their online presence to include potential self-referrals from youth who may not have access to a Case/Social Worker. Social media may be particularly useful in this regard given the widespread of the various platforms by youth.

Table 1. Length of Stay in Months

	N=12
Mean	8.5
Median	9.0
Minimum	5.0
Maximum	12.0

Table 2. Referral to YOUth Belong

	N=12
Referral from Caseworker/Support Worker	10 (83.3%)
Online/Website	0 (0.0%)
Family/Friend	1 (8.3%)
Other	1 (8.3%)

Half (50.0%) of respondents were in a shelter prior to YOUth Belong, 16.7% were in transitional housing, 16.7% were couch-surfing, 8.3% were living in their own apartment, and 8.3% declined to answer (Table 3).

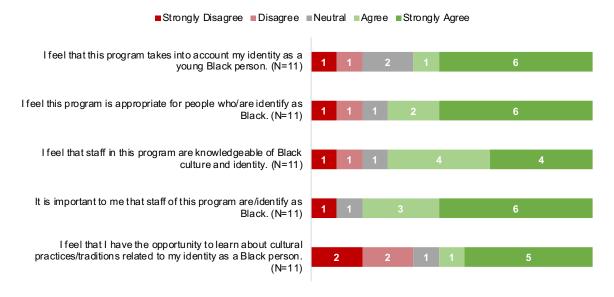→ **Interpretation.** According to the data, youth typically move from shelter to shelter— YOUth Belong can consider offering more follow-up support to ensure that youth who exit the shared housing stream into the private rental market remain housed.

Table 3. Type of Housing Before YOUth Belong

	N=12
Own Apartment	1 (8.3%)
Shared Apartment (e.g., two-bedroom with roommate)	0 (0.0%)
Transitional Housing	2 (16.7%)
Shelter	6 (50.0%)
Rooming House	0 (0.0%)
Living with Family or Friends	0 (0.0%)
Living with Significant Other	0 (0.0%)
Other	2 (16.7%)
Decline to Answer	1 (8.3%)

Youth were also asked about the cultural responsiveness of the program, that is, whether they felt that YOUth Belong adequately infuses the lived and living experiences of Black youth into programming and services offered (Figure 1). Out of 11 responses, over half (63.6%) of youth felt that the program considers their identity as a young Black person, while 18.2% did not feel that it does. Almost three-quarters (72.7%) of respondents felt that the program is appropriate for people who identify as Black compared to 18.2% who did not feel the same. Moreover, 72.7% felt that the staff in the program are knowledgeable of Black culture and identity, while 18.2% disagreed. Similarly, the majority (81.8%) of youth respondents indicated that it is important that staff of the program are/identify as Black, whereas 18.2% did not find it to be important. While more than half of respondents (54.5%) felt that they had the opportunity to learn about cultural practices/traditions related to their identity as a Black person, 36.4% did not feel they had the same opportunity to learn.

Figure 1. Cultural Responsiveness of YOUth Belong

2. QUALITATIVE FINDINGS: PROGRAM YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

A total of six youth were asked about their experience with YOUth Belong so far, particularly about program strengths and weaknesses relating to access, accessibility and cultural responsiveness of programs and services offered at Eva's YOUth Belong, as well as access to community supports and involvement in recreational activities. The results are broken down into the following sections: (1) Overall Experience, (2) Location, (3) Program Accessibility, (4) Programs and Services, (5) Cultural Responsiveness, and (6) Community Referrals and Supports.

Overall Experience

Youth described their overall experience at YOUth Belong as positive, specifically noting 24/7 access to Staff Support and Resources and Sense of Independence as contributing factors.

▶ *Staff Support and Access to Resources.*

Overall, youth found staff to be helpful, resourceful, and supportive. Youth in shared housing indicated that having staff around all the time provided them with a sense of safety and immediate support whenever necessary, thereby helping to meet their needs.

> *"They help you out with everything, the different programs, they help, and you can find a job. Call them like you get your smart serve and stuff like that." – Youth (Shared Housing)*

Youth in the shared housing program particularly enjoyed their weekly check-ins with staff, as well as staff's approach at resolving conflicts. Other youth noted that despite their 24/7 presence onsite, program staff are not overbearing or intrusive. In this sense, the program promotes independence among the youth because it gives them a chance to troubleshoot on their own before approaching staff for help.

Youth believed that program staff are especially helpful with finding and sharing resources pertaining to employment, education, housing, health and mental health care, etc. For example, one youth in the shared housing program noted that staff were always keeping an eye out for and sharing suitable job postings with them. However, although youth living independently in the private rental market shared similar sentiments about their overall positive experience in the program, they faced some challenges in terms of accessing and receiving supports from staff. Youth expressed their displeasure over inadequate communication and inaccessibility to staff:

> *"In the beginning, the support was probably accessible. Towards the middle, I had a random change—the person that was previously handling the caseload basically just said "today's my last day" at 2pm on a Friday, so there was no time for anybody to reply and then I was stagnant without a support for about a couple months." – Youth (Private Rental Market)*

→ **Interpretation.** Based upon these results, there is a need for enhanced communication between staff and clients in the private rental market. YOUth Belong can explore ways to increase communication via phone, text, or e-mail. This could include creating a group chat with youth in the private rental market, allocating specific times during the day that staff will be able to dedicate to youth (e.g., 10:00 AM to 12:00 PM daily), and implementing a shared calendar that youth and staff can use to schedule and facilitate check-ins.

▶ *Independence.*

Youth in the shared housing program and in the private rental market have access to their own rooms and shared spaces. Participants believed that the programs encourage youth to be independent, which involves advocating for their unique needs and any resources or supports they might need to satisfy those needs. For example, one youth in the shared housing program learned to be persistent with her needs/requests, in this case a desk for school. Through her experience was positive, she shared that although youth are expected to be independent in the program, some youth may find it challenging to advocate for themselves, therefore leaving some needs unsatisfied.

> *"Not everybody is raised that way, to understand how to advocate for themselves or where to go for resources." – Youth (Shared Housing)*

→ **Interpretation.** There is a need for staff to sometimes be more intentional about inquiring about clients' needs. This can be done during client intake and check-ins with youth. YOUth Belong can consider creating separate forms that are specific to meeting client's needs, formulating questions that will help staff better understand what the youth needs and how to help them meet those needs. Two forms can be incorporated: (1) youth intake and (2) youth check-in form.

Location

YOUth Belong has two different apartment complexes for the shared housing program: one with a capacity of up to 15 people, and the other with a capacity of 5 female-identifying people. Findings below reflect the perspectives of youth who reside at the 15 person capacity location.

▶ **Accessible/Convenient.** This location was described by youth as accessible and convenient. There is a grocery store, mall, laundromat, bank, and TTC station within walking distance, making the location ideal for youth. One youth who often commutes downtown for school shared the convenience of living near a TTC subway station.

▶ **Safety.** Despite the convenience of the the location, there are some concerns about safety. One youth expressed that there are some people "with mental health issues or homeless people that could potentially scare you" who hang out in the vicinity. In lieu of that, there is sometimes higher police presence in the neighbourhood that one youth acknowledged as cultivating some sense of safety. Additionally, the apartment complex has cameras installed inside and around the building. Coupled with 24/7 access to staff, youth feel safe at this location.

"That was a big deal to just sleep at night knowing that you're kind of safe." – Youth (Shared Housing)

Program Accessibility

While some youth found that YOUth Belong was relatively accessible in terms of sign-up and entry, others faced challenges related to issues with accommodation, fairness and equity, and advocacy.

▶ *Ease of Accessibility.*

All six interview participants found the sign-up process easy, specifically praising staff for their support throughout the process. Five out of six youth that were interviewed were referred to YOUth Belong through their Case Worker/Social Worker. One was transferred from Eva's Phoenix, a transitional housing facility for youth that prioritizes stabilizing housing for youth who are precariously housed and/or experiencing homelessness.

Intake Process. While youth expressed positive experiences with program sign-up, some youth found that the intake form/questionnaire could be re-vamped. Certain questions in the intake form might trigger negative reactions or feelings of discomfort. For example, asking youth to provide a weight or asking if they are Black. Moreover, one youth living independently in the private rental market requested more flexibility in terms of conducting the intake process outside of business hours because not all youth are available or on-site during regular business hours.

→ **Interpretation.** YOUth Belong should revisit the intake form and make appropriate revisions, with special attention to the type of information that is collected and whether it is crucial to program admission and participation. This process can be done in consultation with young people. Additionally, because staff are available 24/7, intake interviews/processes should accommodate the youth's availability.

▶ *Staff Support.*

Youth found that staff were generally helpful during the sign-up and move-in processes (e.g., carrying bags, checking in, showing them around, offering support, etc.). One youth expressed gratitude towards staff for moving his belongings to his room while he was sleeping. Some youth also expressed satisfaction about the way they were received at intake, and the manner in which staff articulated program requirements and expectations, answered any questions from youth, and supported youth during these processes. However, some young people asked for greater clarity around the rules and expectations of the program. For example, one young person said:

"So, when I first came they just told me about independency, they weren't really telling me about what resources I had and then out of nowhere like I just found out that I had to attend the meeting every - it's like a resident meeting and it's

mandatory, but they didn't tell me I would have to do it. and when I found out I signed the form like now I have no choice. Like I feel like I wasn't informed about every single thing here." – Youth (Shared Housing)

→ **Interpretation.** It would serve youth and staff to provide more clarification around services, mandatory activities for youth (e.g., Rites of Passage, Resident meetings), expectations around independent living, etc. This ensures that youth are aware of these services and therefore, encourages them to access and utilize them.

▶ *Barriers/Challenges Related to Program Accessibility.*

Most youth did not experience any challenges with signing up for and moving into the program. One youth shared that it was their first time in a shelter/transitional home and expressed that the process was "pretty decent." However, some youth faced some challenges in terms of accommodation, fairness and equity, and advocacy.

Accommodation. Some young people complained about the willingness/reluctance of some staff to provide assistance at times. For example, one youth in the shared housing program was extremely displeased with the unaccommodating nature of staff and the program in response to their needs.

→ **Interpretation.** While it is understandable that staff cannot fulfill all requests, if they are unable to accommodate a request, it is important that staff provide adequate explanation and justification to youth. Staff can consider offering alternatives that can similarly meet the youths request/need.

Fairness and Equity. Some young people also shared that staff can sometimes operate on a favouritism basis where they are more willing to accompany or assist specific youth with their requests (e.g., driving them to the grocery store).

Advocacy. Additionally, YOUth Belong encourages youth to be independent, which often requires youth to advocate for themselves. This self-advocacy can be overwhelming for some youth who have not had to do so prior. One youth shared that "learning to advocate for [themself] was a very difficult thing" and that being persistent was key.

Programs and Services

In addition to independence and staff support, youth liked that YOUth Belong provided housing including rent bursaries, opportunities for life skills development, and adequate programming.

▶ *Housing.*

Most of the youth felt grateful to have a roof over their head and a safe place to call their own, even if it is only for 18 months. Residents in the shared housing program have access to a furnished room and shared common areas (e.g., kitchen). Moreover, youth appreciated the cleanliness and safety of the apartment complex compared to other shelters or housing they resided at.

Further, youth living independently in the private rental market found that the housing bursaries are helpful for rent. Youth who started the YOUth Belong program while living independently in the private rental market are eligible to receive a housing bursary of up to $800 every month for one year. These bursaries are used towards rent, which oftentimes means that youth can put more of their monthly income towards savings for other necessities (e.g., education, hygiene, transit, etc.). Most importantly, it alleviates stresses that youth feel when it comes to rent payments.

▶ *Life Skills Development.*

Many youths praised the program for its many opportunities to develop life skills such as budgeting, cooking, cleaning, conflict resolution, etc. Most notably, youth appreciated staff for teaching and sharing conflict resolution strategies and tools. Staff taught youth to active and empathic listening, accountability and responsibility, teamwork, as well as problem solving. Youth felt that they are better equipped to avoid future conflicts and to handle any that arise. For example, one youth in the shared housing program who expressed frustration about their roommate's cleanliness, now has a "chores list" that he shares with said roommate to manage accountability and tidiness of the shared room. These life skills (e.g., learning how to share a space with other people) are preparing youth in the shared housing program for independent living, and more generally, their futures.

There are a few other programs that provide youth with the opportunity to develop life skills. For example, the Grocery Shopping Program teaches youth about budgeting, nutrition, cooking, and more generally, independence and self-reliance. Youth also pick up life skills such as cleaning, cooking, and laundry through activities at the program. Namely, the maintenance program enables youth to spearhead all chores as it relates to maintaining the cleanliness of the building. One particular life skill that most participants highlighted as helpful for independent living and stabilizing in their communities was financial literacy. YOUth Belong runs a Savings Program where youth are required to contribute a portion of their monthly paycheck towards savings. The program teaches youth how to budget and ensures that youth will have enough funds for rent when they transition out of the shared housing program and into the private rental market.

Youth would like to receive more practical support in terms of life skills development such as training/workshops about financial literacy, maintaining stable housing, effective grocery shopping, etc. One youth sought external resources/services that they felt was better equipped to help with developing those life skills. YOUth Belong should consider incorporating more hands-on activities where youth can practice and master those skills.

▶ *Programming.*

Youth enjoy utilizing the different services that are offered. One example is the groceries program, where youth have access to President Choice (PC) gift cards to use towards groceries. Staff will also accompany youth to the grocery store to advise on best nutritional practices. Another example is the food bank; YOUth Belong gets food donations from local grocery

shops. One issue that youth have identified with the food bank/donations is that there are expired items, which poses a health risk.

→ **Interpretation.** YOUth Belong should take appropriate measures to ensure that food donations are not expired and are in good condition. This could include postage around the donation bin/area that discourages expired foods, and even having staff or dedicated youth go through the food bank to discard expired donations. This would create a volunteer opportunity for youth.

▶ *Socialization.*

The program affords residents the opportunities to bond through shared activities like cooking, maintenance chores, Rites of Passage offered by WoodGreen Community Services, and Resident meetings. This largely contributes to the positive experiences that youth have had through their participation in the program. Nonetheless, youth share that they seldom deeply engage with each other at the apartment complex. Youth expressed that they have their own lives outside of the shard home and would consider other residents in the shared housing program as acquaintances rather than friends. Some youth did share that it is nice to interact with someone who is close in age and has similar experiences. Youth can bond with other residents over shared life experiences, and while this bonding is still possible with staff, it is not to the same degree of that between youth.

> *"Like everything is kind of like a 'hi' or 'bye' type of thing. It's not like yeah, we don't get real bonded like that. The most we will converse is when we go to like their mandatory Rites of Passage program." – Youth (Shared Housing)*

▶ *Barriers/Challenges Related to Programs and Services.*

Youth highlighted a number of problems that they experienced in the program. These included a Lack of True Independence, Inconsistent Supply of Utilities such as running water, Lack of Robust Programming, and Inadequate Support from Staff.

Lack of True Independence. For instance, the program encourages youth to be independent, yet they are mandated to attend activities such as resident meetings and Rites of Passage programming. Youth expressed that this expectation makes them feel like they do not have autonomy. Some youth felt that resident meetings are unnecessary as messages can be relayed via group chats or signage around the building.

Inconsistent Supply of Utilities. Young people share that there are periods of time where there will be no running hot water in the building. Youth expressed frustration with the inconsistent supply of hot water—especially in the winter months—and long wait times for maintenance to fix the issue. Moreover, youth expressed frustration with slow and inadequate Wi-Fi, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when everything transitioned online—reliable Wi-Fi was noted as a challenge during this time.

> *"We can't wait 5 days for someone to fix the warm water. It should be done immediately, you know?" – Youth (Shared Housing)*

Lack of Robust Programming. Youth have access to a Rites of Passage program that teaches youth about Black history and empowerment. All interview participants praised the cultural education that the Rites of Passage program provides. However, one youth found that it lacked opportunity for skills development, specifically tools and strategies that could help them as Black youth to navigate different systems and institutions while in the program and after exit.

Inadequate Support from Staff. One youth living in the private rental market faced some difficulties with accessing support from staff. He shared that staff were unresponsive to his needs and on one occasion, did not hear back from staff until two weeks after initial contact.

> *"There was one day that we were actually supposed to meet, she was supposed to give me something related to Christmas and she didn't responded to the middle of January." – Youth (Private Rental Market)*

Skills and Capacity to Navigate Systems

Programs and services at YOUth Belong have equipped program youth with skills and capacity to navigate different systems (e.g., education, employment, income assistance) and to stabilize in their communities. Youth described the following as helpful for developing the necessary skills and capacity: Staff Support, Education on Landlord-Tenant Relations, and Stability.

▶ *Staff Support.*

Staff assist youth with a variety of things such as education and employment support, referrals to health care services, and communication. When a youth needs academic support, staff will assist as best as they can. This could involve helping youth with homework and/or referring youth to external sources for support. Similarly, staff also seek and provide lots of resources for employment based on youth's interests. For example, one youth who has an interest in arts shared that staff send a lot of relevant job postings. Additionally, there is a shared group chat among youth in the shared housing program at the apartment where staff will regularly alert youth about things like fresh deliveries at the food bank, grocery shop runs, events, etc.

> *"If you need a job, they give you resources like in Ontario, like a lot of different resources. They even will send you jobs via text, they'll just text you the job availabilities they find and think that you would be good at." – Youth (Shared Housing)*

However, not all youth shared the same sentiment about staff support. Some youth also believe that staff should be more accommodating of youths' needs. In addition to basic needs like shelter, young people felt that staff should acknowledge and consider other needs related to education and employment. Moreover, one youth in the shared housing program mentioned that she received little to no support from staff or the program in terms of signing up for financial aid (e.g., Ontario Student Assistance Program, scholarship), and described

that it was a "self-learning process". Although Eva's offers psychotherapy services, youth are not aware of them and/or do not know how to access those services. As a result, one youth found herself having to find those resources elsewhere.

→ **Interpretation.** To better support youth, it would be helpful if staff had an in-depth one-on-one conversation with youth upon intake to identify their unique needs and goals and outline how staff can assist youth in addressing those needs and achieving those goals. However, this may be intimidating for some young people as they enter the program. For these youth, the assessment of their needs can occur overtime. Moreover, one youth living in the private rental market mentioned that they did not receive any supports but noted that they would have liked to have these supports, especially when they moved out of the shared housing program. For youth living in the private rental market, there should be more follow-up care/support. Check-ins should follow a regular and consistent schedule that is tailored to the youths' availability. This will help youth and staff to track progress and identify any new goals and supports.

▶ *Education on Landlord-Tenant Relations.*

Youth highlighted a number of program experiences that contributed to their skills and capacity development. One example included education around landlord-tenant relations. Because YOUth Belong staff act as both landlord and service provider, youth have the chance to learn about landlord-tenant relations, specifically what is allowed versus what is not, how to navigate conversations/interactions, and how to maintain positive relations. This education piece and experience prepares youth for independent living in the private rental market where they will have to face these processes.

▶ *Stability.*

Youth shared that YOUth Belong provides them with a sense of stability in terms of having a place to call home. The stability alleviates stresses from being without a home which creates more time for youth to concentrate on or pursue educational and/or employment goals. Consequently, youth may experience improved health and mental health outcomes. At the same time, youth are nervous about exiting the program, particularly about maintaining housing in the community.

→ **Interpretation.** It would be beneficial for youth if YOUth Belong could provide more support in terms of finding, securing, and maintaining housing. This could involve more partnerships between YOUth Belong and housing organizations, or even landlords, to help house youth in the private rental market.

> *"In terms of like my grades, they have been much better and much higher and more stable in terms of maintaining my job. I show up on time. I'm not going from one place to another place. I'm not moody or I don't take that negativity that I have within me. So yeah, it changed a lot in regard to that and had allowed me to you know, now think about not just "Oh, where do I stay or how do I do this?'" – Youth (Shared Housing)*

Cultural Responsiveness

Interview participants were asked about the cultural responsiveness of the program and services, particularly whether they felt that YOUth Belong values diversity, understands cultural differences, and offers supports and services that meet the unique needs of Black youth. Overall, participants felt that the program is culturally responsive, specifically noting that YOUth Belong offers programming and activities that are culturally appropriate. However, participants believed that more could still be done in this regard. They noted that YOUth Belong could incorporate more culturally relevant activities such as drum and dance, storytelling, and sports into their programming.

▶ *Cultural Education.*

YOUth Belong educates youth on Afro-centric culture, history, and its impact through the Rites of Passage program. The program helps youth connect to and learn more about their cultural roots, to which youth have identified as being important to know and understand. At the time of data collection, the Rites of Passage program was only available to youth in the shared housing program. One youth living in the private rental market shared: "Within Eva's, there needs to be a lesson of culture, some type of like, cultural awareness piece for those who do not know where they come from." YOUth Belong should consider opening the Rites of Passage program to all youth; those in the private rental market should be invited to participate in the program onsite.

Although the Rites of Passage program provides youth with a wealth of knowledge about Afro-centric culture, youth have highlighted some challenges such as low engagement and practicality. In addition to the virtual nature of the program, it is very information-heavy, meaning that while informative, it lacks the "so what" piece. Youth expressed that they do not know what to do with the information or how to translate that knowledge into working strategies or tools that they can use in their everyday life. One youth suggested hosting workshops that are focused on developing those practical skills, strategies, and tools.

> *"I feel like the cultural responsiveness like yeah, it's black oriented, but is it addressing the people like our skill, like the skills we need to be successful at life."*
> *– Youth (Shared Housing)*

→ **Interpretation.** YOUth Belong should consider facilitating two-part workshops where the first centres around information sharing and the second on strategies and tools. This is another area of opportunity for potential partnerships.

▶ *Cultural Activities/Events.*

YOUth Belong strives to create and host culturally relevant activities for the youth in the shared housing program. For example, staff celebrated Black History Month by preparing various cultural dishes for youth. Some youth shared that they enjoyed learning how to prepare cultural dishes with staff and other residents. Moreover, staff will try to prepare a cultural meal (e.g., African food, Mexican food) for youth once a week, which youth appreciate.

▶ *Safe/Inclusive Environment.*

The program promotes diversity by fostering safe and inclusive environments for youth to practice their ways of culture. For example, cooking and eating unique cultural dishes and practicing faith. One youth who is of Muslim faith shared that staff are respectful of his religion and practice and are willing to accommodate where necessary.

> *"It's very hard to be like a black person out there. So this place has made it very easy for us to just be ourselves and practice whatever we want and whatever is like our identity you know, our culture." – Youth (Shared Housing)*

▶ *Recreational Activities.*

Some youth participated in recreational activities before the COVID-19 pandemic started. One youth in the shared housing program remembered attending "Yoga for Girls", an activity where Black women gathered to practice yoga, relaxation, and meditation while sharing their experiences with each other. Another youth mentioned movie nights at the residence. One youth living in the private rental market participated in recreational sports such as volleyball on a weekly basis at a local recreation centre prior to the pandemic. The youth expressed that it helped him stay physically active and busy.

→ **Interpretation.** As COVID-19 rules and restrictions slowly lift, it would be beneficial for youth to attend and engage in recreational activities. YOUth Belong can start-up any programming that was shut down due to the pandemic (e.g., group outings, sports), particularly activities that centre around Afro-Canadian, Afro-Caribbean, and Jamaican culture like art events, drumming, storytelling, etc. YOUth Belong should also extend these opportunities/programming to youth living in the private rental market.

▶ *Infusion of Lived Experiences of Black Youth.*

Youth who participated in the interview felt that the services at YOUth Belong are adequate in terms of infusing the lived experiences of Black youth. The program considers the unique struggles and needs of Black youth at-risk of and/or experiencing homelessness, and thus has the supports and services in place to help those youth. For example, youth identified that having Black staff is good for building rapport because there is cultural understanding. Moreover, youth shared that the workshops are culturally appropriate in terms of being facilitated by someone who identifies as Black. However, youth emphasized that it would be nice to see and hear more from representatives from Black-led community organizations. For example, youth suggested inviting a Black entrepreneur to come in and share their story about how they got started with their business, their visions, and goals. Youth can connect as a higher level with someone that they can resonate with; therefore, YOUth Belong should consider this for future programming.

> *"I knew that it was a newer program, but the biggest issue that I faced was that like there was no 'embracing culture' qualities to it—this is what I would encourage to be implemented in Eva's." – Youth (Shared Housing)*

Community Referrals and Supports

Youth living in the private rental market were asked about the types of supports and recreational activities they access in the community.

▶ *Cultural Education.*

One youth mentioned accessing services at "The Village" in Peel region, a safe and inclusive space for youth of African and Caribbean descent to come together once a month and connect with staff members who are sensitive to their social location. The youth received cultural education around Black culture, responsibilities of being Black, self-care, etc. Because youth living in the private rental market do not have access to the Rites of Passage program offered through YOUth Belong, they have to find that education from somewhere else in the community.

▶ *Volunteer.*

Additionally, the same youth shared that volunteering as a mentor to youth at "The Village" also helped him keep busy. As a mentor, he supported other youth during their transition out of transitional housing. The youth shared that in addition to keeping him occupied, volunteering at "The Village" fuels his passion for finding supports and resources for Black youth who are experiencing homelessness.

3. QUALITATIVE FINDINGS: PROGRAM STAFF PERSPECTIVE

A total of five staff (three frontline, two management) were asked to share their perspectives on the program, including program development and contextual factors, available and required resources, housing types, cultural responsiveness, program strengths and challenges, as well as program outcomes. The results are broken down into the following sections: (1) Staff Roles and Responsibilities, (2) Program Resources, (3) Two Housing Streams, (4) Strengths and Weaknesses of Shared Housing Model, (5) Program Strengths and Weaknesses, (6) Cultural Responsiveness, and (7) Intersecting Identities of Youth.

Staff Roles and Responsibilities

Frontline staff provide extensive support to youth who live on-site and in the private rental market. Support includes goal planning, one-on-one check-in, case management, resource sharing (for health care, mental health, employment, etc.), and life skills development. Ultimately, frontline staff support youth in program to achieve their goals, which could include housing, employment, health, etc.

Management staff (Senior Site Manager, Program Manager) provide support in terms of program operations. This includes program development, grant applications, team case management, meeting funder requirements, providing support for staff, and ensuring that youth are being served.

Program Resources

Staff highlighted the following as important for program operation: *Staffing, Technology, Intra-agency Collaboration, Funding, Programming and Services that offer opportunity for life skills development, and Partnerships.*

▶ *Staffing.*

Frontline staff praised the representativeness of the YOUth Belong team. Both frontline and management staff reflect the intended youth population, which creates an environment where youth feel comfortable connecting with staff. However, staff indicated that there has been major staff turnover, contributing to a lack of consistency within the program. This also makes it difficult for youth to engage and build continued rapport with staff. Additionally, all three Housing Success Workers (HSW) are women. The YOUth Belong program is majority male; it would benefit male youth to hire a male HSW, either at full- or part-time capacity.

Another issue that staff identified was a lack of professional diversity. Staff are seeing more mental health needs and admit that they are not certified to support youth in those aspects. It is important that staff receive appropriate training that will support them in providing services to youth. Staff felt that they should undergo regular training to equip themselves withskills and tools on how to meet the mental health needs of youth. For example, de-escalation training and mental health first aid. Additionally, staff felt that youth would benefit from onsite mental health counselling/support.

Eva's offers a Family Reconnect program, where they provide external support of family connection services for youth. Staff have referred youth to the program in the past, but youth feel hesitant to engage meaningfully because they feel that counsellors cannot relate with them. Counsellors in the Family Reconnect program are predominantly white, making it difficult for Black youth to confide in them. This stems from deep seeded historical and new traumas, issues of trust and understanding, as well as power dynamics/imbalances.

> *"Some of the feedback I've gotten is them telling me, you know, they can't relate to me. How do they know the struggles that I've experienced and what I'm going through, when they are not Black and they don't understand certain things that I go through personally as a black youth[?]" – Frontline Staff*

→ **Interpretation.** It is important to include Black and other racialized professional experts in the services and supports provided through Eva's to ensure cultural representativeness. YOUth Belong could consider hiring experts such as Registered Social Workers or therapists to provide counselling to youth. It is important that the certified experts identify as Black so that youth feel comfortable confiding in and sharing with them.

Similarly, there is merit in bringing on one or two staff that are dedicated to managing youth living in the private rental market. This would reduce the caseload for the HSWs that are currently responsible for both youth groups, which staff have expressed as being overwhelming at times. Most importantly, youth in the private rental market will have full access to the community worker(s) and receive continuous support—something that youth in the private rental market have identified as challenging.

> *"It's very overwhelming and a lot of the time to community with get left out because we're focused on what's in front of us." – Frontline Staff*

▶ *Technology.*

Youth in the shared housing program require access to technology for employment, education, online counselling, etc. Staff indicated that some youth cannot afford their own technological equipment and that YOUth Belong should offer these tools to youth so that they can engage in programming and services. YOUth Belong can invest in portable tablets and/or laptops and an on-site desktop computer.

▶ *Lack of Intra-Agency Collaboration.*

Staff feel that they are not aware of the various services and supports that are available through other Eva's Initiatives, attributing it to the lack of intra-agency communication and collaboration. Staff indicated a need for more transparency across the organization in terms of the types of services that are offered so that staff can better assist youth. For instance, one staff mentioned that oftentimes youth are referred to resources in the community rather than at Eva's because they were not aware that Eva's offered that resource. Staff suggested networking with other employees from different Eva's Initiatives for some sort of information exchange to foster transparency and awareness. Another staff recommended creating a portal that lists all programs and services available across all of Eva's Initiatives—a directory of services. This portal would increase awareness and transparency as well as improve referrals, which ultimately will help staff better meet the needs of the youth.

> *"It would be great if there was more transparency between like the different supports and sites within Eva's. There are lot of supports that I think that Eva's has that we're able to use as opposed to outsourcing resources. But it's just a lack of information. Like sometimes I might have a youth that might need support with employment or like they want to do some sort of training. And I'm able to do research and find that information for them through another employment program. But then it's like Eva's had that same program. I just wasn't aware of it." – Frontline Staff*

▶ *Funding.*

Frontline staff fetl that funding should be generously allocated towards maintenance of the building as youth have raised many concerns such as flickering lights and no hot water. The building is old and in need of work to ensure that the youth residing in it are safe and comfortable. Frontline staff would also like to be advised of funding allocation/breakdown. Frontline staff would like more funding to be put towards creating and offering culturally responsive workshops and trainings. For example, learning how to prepare cultural dishes. Materials for such activities would require purchasing cultural ingredients like oxtail and goat, both of which are expensive. Staff find themselves paying for these items out of their own pockets. Management staff noted that Eva's Phoenix [another housing program offered by Eva's] has a Life Skills Program Facilitator, expressing that the youth would benefit from having one dedicated to YOUth Belong.

Program funding is limited, which brings about its own challenges. Management staff highlighted that having staff onsite 24/7 required additional costs that put the program at a deficit in terms of allocated funding for staffing—further highlighting the need for more funding.

▶ *Programming and Services.*

The program prepares youth for independent living by providing opportunities for life skills development through programming and services. Currently, youth can learn about financial literacy and nutrition through the Savings, Grocery Shopping program, PC Gift Card program, and the food bank. Frontline staff have attempted to introduce new programming but found it challenging to accommodate all youth because they are at different levels of independence and readiness to engage. For example, one staff mentioned that some youth are more advanced in terms of financial literacy while some struggle with saving and budgeting.

▶ *Partnerships.*

Staff identified partnerships with community groups and organizations as important for program operation. YOUth Belong can partner with the community to facilitate programming/workshops for youth to help them navigate real-world systems. For example, inviting a community organization that specializes in sexual health topics to teach youth about safe sex practices.

→ **Interpretation.** Currently, WoodGreen Community Services runs the Rites of Passage program every week. YOUth Belong can curate more community partnerships and broaden their program offerings, while simultaneously introducing youth to more community resources.

▶ *Outreach.*

Staff noted that there are many Black-led organizations in the community that support Black youth. They thought that YOUth Belong should consider creating an outreach team to find community partners, build those connections, and strengthen them overtime. Outreach will help put YOUth Belong on the map and community organizations can refer youth to

the program, and vice versa. The outreach and promotion of YOUth Belong needs to be on a higher scale for the program to reach its full potential. Staff thought that it should be promoted at the same level as other Eva's Initiatives programs to sustain the program long-term, and should extend to youth shelter systems, schools, child welfare systems, as well as the youth justice system.

> *"I just feel like [YOUth Belong] is kind of blending into like all these other small black programs that don't have longevity." – Frontline Staff*

> *"We know there are a lot of youth out there that can benefit from our services, just do they know about our services? So just strategizing ways to get our program out there, I think would be an effective thing for us. And I do think the outreach team would be very, very helpful with that." – Frontline Staff*

Two Housing Streams

Staff noted that youth in the shared housing stream and the private rental accommodation stream differed in the following ways: Independence, Relationships and Rapport, Rent Subsidies, Access to Programming and Services, Access to and Utilization of Resources.

▶ *Independence.*

Youth in the shared housing program have greater and immediate access to support from staff, and as such are more dependent on staff. These youth have 18 months to find housing and save enough money for first and last month's rent. Staff shared that focusing on what is next is often not the immediate priority of youth in the shared housing program and are often reliant on program workers to help them with stabilizing. Staff noted that they typically require a bit more support in terms of making sure most of their needs are met.

In contrast, youth living in the private rental market are more independent. Staff found that they are focused on making sure they have enough money for rent and occupied with work and sometimes school. Sometimes youth in the private rental market will require some assistance with rent, which YOUth Belong provides if they are eligible (i.e., bursaries). Staff noted that youth in the private rental market have attained a higher level of independence and described them as "go-getters" and "self-sufficient", and YOUth Belong therefore aims to get youth in shared housing to same level of independence.

▶ *Relationship and Rapport.*

There is more opportunity for youth in the shared housing program to build a trusting and strong relationship with staff because staff are on-site 24/7. On the other hand, it can be challenging for youth living in the private rental market to build those same relationships with staff. Most times, the youth will check-in with or reach out to staff via text or phone call if or when they need help. Staff shared that although most youth in the private rental market are independent and seldom require help, some of them do need more support. There are

some youth who prefer to meet staff in-person but have not been able to due to COVID-19 rules and restrictions, which leaves youth feeling frustrated with the little or lack of support they receive from staff.

▶ *Rent Subsidies.*

Youth in the shared housing program receive up to $800 subsidies/bursaries monthly but not in cash. This fund goes into providing them with accommodation and services. Youth in the shared housing program have access to this bursary for 18 months. In comparison, youth living in the private rental market are also eligible for monthly rent subsidies of up to $800 for one year only if they bypassed the shared housing component of YOUth Belong program. Through partnerships with landlords, these youth can choose to pay the difference in rent after Eva's pays the rent subsidy to the landlord for the first year and then cover the full market rent to the landlord if they decide to stay in the same unit.

▶ *Access to Programming and Services.*

Youth in the shared housing program have full access to the programs and services offered at YOUth Belong such as Rites of Passage, cooking with staff, and movie nights. Youth in the private rental market do not have access. For example, Rites of Passage is offered to youth in the shared housing program but not to youth in the private rental market. This is due to scheduling difficulties and COVID-19; nevertheless, staff thought that youth in the private rental market would benefit from having the access to the same programs and services as youth in the shared housing program. With pandemic rules and restrictions slowly lifting, YOUth Belong could consider extending the Rites of Passage invite to youth living in the private rental market.

▶ *Access to and Utilization of Resources.*

There are several services available to youth in the shared housing program but not to those in the private rental market. At the apartment complex, youth have access to staff 24/7 and to life skills development programs such as cooking, maintenance chores, assisted grocery shopping, and more. Aside from one-time workshops that youth in the private rental market are invited to, staff believe that more should be offered to those youth. Staff were under the assumption that these youth are independent and "have their life together", which could attribute to the lower levels of engagement with this group. Staff highlighted a number of supports and/or resources that are the same for or differ between the two youth groups: *Education and Employment, Necessities*, and *Wraparound Supports.*

Education and Employment. Eva's has an employment training program called Youth Succeeding in Employment Program (YSEP), where youth receive on-the-job training for 15 to 17 weeks. This program is offered to youth in the shared housing program and in the private rental market. Staff refer youth to applicable resources when requested.

Necessities. Both youth groups also have access to necessities such as food through PC gift cards and the food bank and to clothing. Though this is offered to both groups, youth living in the private rental market rarely use these services because they already have access to food and clothing.

Wraparound Supports. For both youth groups, YOUth Belong encourages youth to reach out if they need guidance, support, or resources. For example, if a youth living in the private rental market is looking for resources for education, staff will find a suitable program and make the referral. One difference is that youth in the shared housing program have 24-hour access to staff support while youth in the private rental market have to make an appointment with staff.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Shared Housing Model

Staff identified the following as successes of the shared housing program: *Sense of Belonging, Independence*, and *Gratitude*.

▶ *Sense of Belonging.*

As YOUth Belong is a program specifically for Black youth, staff shared that those in the program do not feel like the minority group. Staff explained that this creates a strong sense of belonging for youth and decreases the chances that youth feel lonely while in the apartment complex. Moreover, youth in shared housing do not communicate with each other often, but when they do, they realize that they share a lot of similarities in terms of situation, experience, and culture. This communication and resonation promote an environment where youth can be their authentic self. Additionally, it fosters an environment where youth can comfortably have certain conversations with each other and with staff. Management staff shared that all youth come from similar experiences of being precariously housed so there are no feelings of being "better than anybody else"—matter of fact, youth resonate with each other in terms of working towards a similar goal, which is finding stable housing.

> *"So regardless of how somebody looks or how they talk, we're all in the same boat and that boat is basically we're here, we try and kind of get our stuff together for the time being here and then once we get to a place where we're in a better place to serve one another, then we move on." – Management Staff*

▶ *Independence.*

Staff noted that youth outh are continuously learning how to live independently. Youth are gaining life and interpersonal skills such as conflict resolution, sharing spaces, and being respectful of others. As a result, staff felt that youth are better equipped to manage disagreements with roommates and other residents. Moreover, youth learn how to live in shared spaces respectfully (i.e., shared chores and responsibilities) as well as how to maintain that space. Youth can also manage their finances through budgeting and savings.

▶ *Gratitude.*

One staff shared that youth have a sense of gratitude in that they have a place they can call their own.

> *"A lot of these youth were precariously housed prior to - come here from being couch surfing, may have been in the shelter system, so to have a place where they finally could sit down and call it their own even if it's for 18 months, I think is very good and they have a sense of gratitude for the most part." – Management Staff*

On the other hand, staff highlighted a number of challenges with shared housing such as *Little Impact on Building Social Connections, Territorial Behaviour, Differences Among Youth, Dependency of Staff,* and *Cultural Differences.*

▶ *Little Impact on Building Social Connections.*

Even though YOUth Belong is a program for Black youth only, staff noted that youth still look at each other as strangers. Staff share that youth are hesitant to interact and build those relationships with other youth in the program, and attribute this to youths' prior experiences of being in the shelter system.

▶ *Territorial Behaviour.*

Staff found that youth are more defensive and territorial due to prior experiences of being in the shelter system. For example, when a youth is in conflict with other residents, they will involve a worker rather than resolving the conflict with the resident. The lack of communication between residents creates an "awkward vibe" in the shared house, as described by staff.

▶ *Differences Among Youth.*

Staff indicated different levels of independence and lifestyles among youth in the program. Some youth are in school and working while others are not; staff emphasized that when you put the two together, issues arise when it comes to hygiene, cleaning, noise, etc. YOUth Belong could consider implementing a "roommate meet-and-greet" prior to move-in so that youth can get to know each other and test out compatibility.

▶ *Dependency on Staff.*

Despite learning to live independently, youth in the shared housing program still experience challenges and will resort to staff to mediate or resolve those challenges. Staff support youth when they are in conflict or disagreement with other residents or roommates by discussing the issue and proposing possible solutions. Additionally, youth with a shelter background sometimes misconstrue what the program is because they are used to staff doing things for them, so when they are told to do it themselves (i.e., be independent), they find it difficult.

> *"If they do need the support, then obviously we'll support them, but again, it's about that whole teaching them of independence and doing things by themselves." – Management Staff*

▶ *Cultural Differences.*

Sometimes there is a cultural clash where youth will have different living and eating styles. Youth are also come from different walks of life. Staff found that some youth do not understand these differences and are therefore finding it hard to comprehend each other's methods of doing things.

Overall Program Strengths and Weaknesses

▶ *Program Strengths*

Staff highlighted a number of strengths of the program, including successes of acting as both service provider and landlord: *Uniqueness of the Program, Staff Support, Advocacy, Supports and Resources, Housing Support, Partnerships and Outreach, Independence,* and *Relationship Building.*

Uniqueness of YOUth Belong. When asked what makes YOUth Belong a unique program, staff emphasized that in addition to providing supports and services to Black youth in Toronto, YOUth Belong actually provides housing for youth at both locations. The program was also praised for its cultural responsiveness in terms of meeting the unique needs of Black youth at-risk of or experiencing homelessness. The program extends to all Afro-centric cultures, not just Black Canadians.

Moreover, the program is staffed with workers who identify as Black which contributes to the uniqueness of YOUth Belong. Staff are very hands-on and knowledgeable about Black culture. The team works well together to help youth succeed in the program by bringing unique perspectives when providing support to youth. Management and frontline staff are reflective of the population that YOUth Belong services, which helps to address barriers and issues that Black youth face because there is common understanding and perhaps experience that contributes to building strong relationships with youth as well as to the development of the program.

> *"So YOUth belong is unique in its presence, because it addresses all these issues and barriers that come up and we can do it in a way that's very open and very transparent, very to the point. We don't need to tiptoe around anything we can call things exactly as they are and there's no feeling of the elephant in the room. we're just able to talk openly about what some of the challenges and the barriers are out there in the world that racism does exist and prejudiced people out there and being able to talk about that." – Management Staff*

Staff Support. The staff team was noted as one of many program strengths, particularly for its representation, well-roundedness, and "ready-to-help" attitudes. Staff do their best to advocate for the youth in terms of maintenance issues, housing, resources, etc.

Advocacy. Youth in the shared housing program can approach staff directly about any maintenance/building issues. As service providers, staff shared that they are able to advocate for youth in shared housing in terms of building maintenance by pushing through orders to fix the water or lights, for example. As service providers, staff understand the urgency and importance of building maintenance compared to the maintenance person, as the maintenance person does not have the same rapport with youth and therefore does not hear the frustrations from youth. Though staff can take down complaints from youth, staff cannot necessarily fix the issues immediately. Staff explained that they have to remind youth that they are not technically the landlord and that issues relating to the upkeep of the building have to be passed on to the landlord.

Supports and Resources. Unique supports offered at YOUth Belong were also identified as one of the main strengths of the program. For example, the Grocery Shopping program that provides youth with PC gift cards and educated shopping was highlighted as an important part of the program. Additionally, the dual role of service provider and landlord is described by staff as being beneficial for providing services to and checking in with youth. Because the office is in the apartment complex, youth have 24-hour immediate access to staff, and vice versa. Staff have also noted that being in such close proximity promotes open communication and rapport building between staff and youth. The housing bursaries that youth can use towards rent were also identified as a major strength.

> *"I also think the support that we offer because not a lot of places like like, for example, our shelters would do something to do like the grocery program or just certain hands-on things that we do here. They wouldn't get those things if they were anywhere else. So I think that's why I find in youth belong that are beneficial."*
> *– Frontline Staff*

Housing Structure. Another strength of the program is that it offers an adequate amount of space for youth, and more importantly, a private room for youth to call their own. Youth also have access to shared common areas such as the kitchen and living room. YOUth Belong notes positive housing outcomes for youth after exiting the shared housing stream.

After 18 months in the shared housing stream, youth transition into the private rental market where they are able to maintain secure and stable housing. Staff expressed that there is a need for housing for youth, especially for Black youth who experience systemic barriers such as racial discrimination and bias that make it difficult to secure permanent housing. The YOUth Belong program helps youth overcome these barriers, and in the process, builds youths' self-esteem and confidence. Staff highlighted that YOUth Belong is not the only program that is specifically for Black youth, but it is the only program that provides housing for Black youth only.

Tenant Rights. Additionally, as landlord, staff have the chance to educate youth about landlord-tenant relations and law. This better prepares youth to self-advocate when looking for housing or entering leases in the future.

"For some youth they're going to be exiting the program soon. So they are able to like when they're looking for a place, they know more now than they did before. So when they're reading, you know, apartment descriptions and some of the things that the landlord is requesting, or seeing our rules they know okay, like these, this is against the laws between tenants and landlords." – Frontline Staff

Partnerships and Outreach. YOUth Belong has existing partnerships with some grassroot organizations (e.g., Peace Builders, Jamaican Canadian Association). Through partnerships, YOUth Belong hosts a female and male youth mentorship program, where youth have the opportunity to learn self-advocacy skills.

"And now here we are, with staff and other partners that we've got to know where we can let a young person know 'hey, it's gonna be all right. We've got support here working with you and if we can't, if it's bigger than us, then we reach out to what about partners who may be able or best equipped to deal with it better than us.'" – Management Staff

Despite the number of partnerships that YOUth Belong has with community agencies, people still do not know that the program exists. Staff shared that there needs to be more outreach and promotion of YOUth Belong across the city so that when a youth who could benefit from the program presents at a community organization, the agency can refer the youth to YOUth Belong. Moreover, staff noted that YOUth Belong is not easily accessible on the Eva's website compared to other houses/initiatives. Staff believe that the program could have a further reach in the community but expressed that there is not enough effort put into promoting the program.

"Not everybody's aware of youth belong, what we do here at Eva's, so I think that's a bit of a challenge." – Management Staff

Independence. Youth can independently in the shared housing program and private rental market. Youth have a lot of privacy in the shared housing program—access to their own room and their own key. Staff described that it gives them a strong sense of independence to be able to do their own grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, etc.

On their own part, program staff noted that they had begun to notice positive changes and improvement related to independence among youth, which they attributed to the program. They shared that youth were paying rent, phone bills, and credit bills, working to earn a decent living, and doing home chores. They also noted some positive differences in the way that youth are managing the day-to-day demands of life with little to no support from staff. When they require assistance, they can connect with staff and problem-solve together.

"Aside from the follow up support they might get once monthly or as frequent depending on what their level of support is …, it allows them to really build those core skills." – Management Staff

Relationship Building. Moreover, youth can build connections when living in the shared housing program. For example, when preparing meals in the shared kitchen, youth can socialize with other residents. You will also sometimes share food with other youth and staff.

▶ *Program Challenges*

On the contrary, staff also identified a couple challenges of the program, particularly: *Program Processes, Tailored Programming and Supports, Program Expectations from Youth, and Role Confusion and Expectations.*

Lack of Consistency and Transparency Among Staff. Staff expressed that inconsistency related to expectations, conflicts between management staff, roles and responsibilities, can make it difficult for them to request further support and resources to carry out their job effectively. Moreover, staff highlighted a lack of transparency in terms of support for frontline staff from senior management staff. Specifically, frontline staff would appreciate progress updates for any requests that they send to senior management. Open communication between frontline and senior management staff would offer more transparency in terms of program operation and expectations among all staff.

> *"Let us know why it's taking so long. Like you don't need a full thing but at least let us know. So we're not here in the loop. So that's the other thing transparency for sure." – Frontline Staff*

Program Processes and Expectations. Staff are noticing that youth who do not meet all of the program requirements (e.g., employment, income, Black-identified, etc.) are accepted into the program. Staff admitted that they struggle to encourage these youth to fulfill program expectations (e.g., attending mandatory services, participating in Savings Program) and it can sometimes lead to conflict. Staff think that the intake process should be tailored to meet the unique needs of Black youth. For example, asking specifically about their needs and goals to see if it aligns with program entry requirements. Staff believe that incorporating this important step in the intake process will mitigate the risk of these conflicts.

Additionally, one senior management staff shared that buy-in from youth is another challenge. Youth can get complacent in the program because they do not realize that shared housing program is not their final stop. Youth sometimes forget that they still have to find and secure housing in the community within 18 months.

→ **Interpretation.** YOUth Belong could consider implementing new program processes that track the progress of individual housing plans—are youth making progress, if not, what supports/resources do they require from staff to get to the next step?

Tailored Programming and Supports. Youth and staff alike have highlighted the need for more tailored supports such as mental health counselling, more housing support, and employment workshops.

Mental Health Counselling. There is a high demand for mental health counselling/services. While staff try to help youth navigate their unique mental health challenges, staff are not certified to make diagnoses or recommend treatment options. Staff are trained in de-escalation techniques, but it is sometimes not enough. Youth would benefit from having an onsite mental health clinician/professional who identifies as Black, who can have these conversations with youth. Youth shared with staff that they were depressed, lonely, bored, etc. and staff struggle to support youth who present with severe mental health challenges (e.g., depression, severe anxiety or mood swings, suicidal thoughts, etc.). For most youth, staff will tell them to come downstairs and hang out in the office or main space, but overtime "youth get too comfortable", and "boundaries have to be drawn" again. In some cases, staff cannot offer the support that youth need.

More Housing Support. Staff identified the need for more housing support through partnerships to help youth transition into independent living in the community. Specifically, more partnerships and collaborations with housing providers across the city (i.e., landlords, apartment buildings) would be helpful so that staff know where to direct youth when seeking housing. Housing partnerships and collaborations will also help remove barriers that youth may face when applying for housing. For example, whether youth's employment is satisfactory. With partnerships in place, YOUth Belong can assure landlords that youth are required to maintain employment while living in the private rental market and that they will have the financial means to provide rent, with or without assistance from YOUth Belong. This may reduce instances where youth applications are rejected by external landlords that deem their employment as unsatisfactory.

> *"So there's just a few things there that I think that we should be handling as well just to make sure that we have a good success rate. It doesn't make sense helping them for 18 months for them to end up right back where they were because of something they knew that we could have done better." – Frontline Staff*

Employment Workshops. According to staff, youth requested job searching and training programs. Currently, YOUth Belong offers some training programs that some youths have taken advantage of.

→ **Interpretation.** Notwithstanding, YOUth Belong could look into introducing new innovative and rigorous employment supports to offer to youth. This can also be done with support from partnerships or collaborations with employment programs in the community.

▶ *Program Expectations.*

Staff shared that when youth are frustrated with unresolved maintenance issues, they feel that they do not need to actively participate in mandatory programming. For example, if there is no hot water, some youth take it as they do not need to contribute to the Savings Program until the issue is resolved. Moreover, there is a lack of understanding on the youths' part around what staff are capable of when acting as landlord. Staff described that youth

complain about the building and that there is an expectation from youth that staff will fix those issues immediately. When staff remind youth that maintenance workers have to be contacted, youth typically become frustrated, angry, and impatient with staff. Moreover, some youth feel frustrated with staff when it comes times to conduct monthly 5-minute inspections of the rooms. Some youth have previous trauma that can be instigated during arguments related to landlord/tenancy issues, so staff noted that there is a fine line between acting as service provider and landlord.

> *"So that's one of the biggest challenges, the fact that we are, as I said, the middle person—well, we're the buffer but we get it from, if you understand, both sides." – Management Staff*

▶ *Role Confusion and Expectations.*

There is a lot of conflict between acting as a service provider and a landlord in terms of managing expectations of each role when providing services to youth. For example, when youth approach staff about maintenance issues, staff respond on behalf of the landlord to make sure those issues are noted and resolved while simultaneously supporting youth to manage their frustration about those same maintenance issues.

> *"That's also tricky too, because as a landlord, there's also legal things you have to follow so it's just remembering what happened to where at what time and how to deal with the situation effectively. Knowing when to be a landlord and knowing when to be a social worker because those two things can clash." – Frontline Staff*

Cultural Responsiveness

YOUth Belong is a program that incorporates Afro-centric practices. The program addresses issues that affect the Black community. The program also advocates and addresses the unique needs of Black youth at-risk of or experiencing homelessness or are precariously housed. Those needs being: housing, health and mental health, education, and employment. YOUth Belong respects the unique ethno-racial identities of its young people through its Programming and Services, Staffing, Partnerships, and Cultural Diversity practices.

▶ *Programming and Services.*

Staff noted that YOUth Belong provides some programming and services that are responsive to the diverse ethno-racial identities of program youth. For example, there are a lot of art pieces by Black artists or art that symbolizes Black culture around the apartment complexes. Moreover, staff specifically mentioned the Rites of Passage program, Black History Month, and Youth-led or -infused programs.

Rites of Passage. The Rites of Passage program focuses on educating youth about African heritage by providing tools to help youth navigate challenges they may face in the future. The program supports youth to understand their identity: who they are as an individual, as

part of a community, and as part of a system. There is, however, limited engagement with this program as it is virtual. Staff shared that youth will typically join on their devices and leave it on in the background while they are occupied with other things. Also noted by youth, the program, albeit very informative, lacks actionable resources/tools that could benefit youth.

Black History Month. Staff prepared some culturally relevant activities for youth to celebrate Black History Month. For example, preparing cultural dishes, watching Black-focused movies, and educating youth about Black history and impact.

Youth-led/informed Programs. Management staff identified having youth-informed and/or youth-led mentorship programs as beneficial for meeting youths' needs. For example, recruiting third-part representatives who can act as a role model and advocate for youth to provide programming and to create programming with the youth. Staff emphasized the importance of involving youth in program development so that it is specifically tailored for youth. Currently, YOUth Belong runs an in-house peer-led maintenance pre-employment program where one youth is responsible for any maintenance around the building (e.g., cleaning) for the month. One management staff expressed interest in reconvening a Youth Advisory Council that involves multiple Black communities and agencies and Black youth. The council would provide guidance and feedback on program processes as well as service provisions.

▶ ***Staffing.***

YOUth Belong staff are from different cultures and backgrounds, which creates a more comfortable environment for youth to share with and seek support from staff. There is a sense of relatability that youth do not feel with non-Black staff or professionals, as highlighted by both youth and staff.

> *"I think the fact that they're able to come and they've said it, they tell us like you know we're really happy with you guys. We're comfortable with the team and we like that you guys are like from the same ethnicity as us and it makes us feel comfortable." – Frontline Staff*

Rapport Building. The diverse identities of staff has helped to build rapport with youth, as they feel that they can relate and therefore, are more open to sharing and reaching out for help. When staff and youth relate on things like interest, music, stories, etc., it fosters good relationship building. On the contrary, it is difficult for youth to have the same conversations with the same authenticity with relief staff who do not identify as Black. Moreover, staff find that providing supports and services to youth is "smoother" because they can build strong rapport with youth through cultural understanding. Additionally, team dynamics has helped promote rapport building between youth and staff. The self-expression and acceptance allow youth to be comfortable "speaking their own truth" and to ask for support when needed.

Cultural Competency. Additionally, staff and youth can bond over cultural food and cooking together. Because staff were already familiar with these dishes and activities, it was not challenging to host workshops with the youth. Staff were also able to effectively assist youth with braiding hair, finding the right hair products, and quick tips here and there.

Cultural Connection Among Staff. Because all staff identify as Black, it was easier to bounce ideas off each other because of mutual understanding and awareness of what was being discussed. Most often, staff were able to come up with an answer or solution quickly.

> *"There are just some things that you just relate to just have to be it to know, you know? It is no words really, it's just kind of like internal cultural connection." – Frontline Staff*

▶ *Community Referrals.*

Staff will make referrals to the community whenever requested by youth. There is an abundance of resources available in the community for Black youth, however it can be challenging for them to know where and how to access those resources. Staff will assist youth through referrals to programs and resources that are Black-focused or Black-led so that youth feel comfortable accessing and utilizing those services and are able to build the same rapport.

> *"I think in general for anybody like there are there are so many resources. It's just how do you access them? Where are they? If you don't know how to navigate around that and how to how to find them then you're kind of stuck, right?" – Frontline Staff*

▶ *Partnerships.*

Partnerships are crucial to the program. While Eva's might have expertise in housing, there are other organizations in the community that are more knowledgeable in other areas such as the justice system, employment and education, healthcare, and mental health, etc. For example, Across Boundaries is an organization that provides mental health services for racialized communities. Those organizations are better equipped to support youth in those facets, which is why creating those partnerships with Black-led organizations is so important.

→ **Interpretation.** YOUth Belong program could benefit from more partnerships. These partnerships could translate into recreational and life skills development workshops/ trainings, which could help increase youth engagement. With new partnerships, the program could tailor partner-led workshops and activities to youth interests.

Cultural Diversity. Staff are aware of the cultural diversity at YOUth Belong; youth come from all parts of the African diaspora and are of different faiths. Staff are mindful of that when planning events that involve food, ensuring that there are options for everyone. One challenge that staff noted was that a lot of the donations that YOUth Belong receives from the community are not culturally appropriate (e.g., general shampoo). For example, some of the hair products are not used by youth because they need hair products specific for Black hair.

Intersecting Identities of Youth

YOUth Belong addresses the intersecting identities of program youth through *2SLGBTQ+-affirming Practices* such as the use of pronouns and training for youth and staff. The program works with community organizations to develop and facilitate these trainings.

▶ *2SLGBTQ+-affirming Practices.*

The program follows 2SLGBTQ+-affirming practices such as being respectful of young people's pronouns and providing education. For example, at intake, youth are asked to provide preferred name(s) and pronouns. Moreover, staff educate youth about different identities and intersectionality to raise awareness and understanding among youth about everyone's "unique walk of life". At the all-female-identifying house, youth who are part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community are given priority by the program to ensure safe individual spaces. Management staff shared that anti-oppression workshops are mandatory for youth to learn more about anti-racism, oppression, intersectionality, and to develop strategies and tools on how to navigate the real world.

▶ *Partnerships.*

YOUth Belong continues to build partnerships with community organizations like the 519 and Black Cap so that those agencies can provide information and training to youth. This also exposes youth to all kinds of supports and services in the community, creating a network of support for when they transition into independent living in the private rental market.

Despite the use of 2SLGBTQ+-affirming practices, staff noted that the program could do more to address the intersecting identities of young people. For example, hosting workshops and trainings about the different identities. This would help the program work towards creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment where youth are encouraged to keep an open mind and to be themselves. Moreover, funding was identified as a challenge in terms of hosting events for Pride Month, Black History Month, Sexual Health, etc.

4. QUALITATIVE FINDINGS: COVID-19 IMPACT

The COVID-19 pandemic affected YOUth Belong in a number of ways, including lower rates of youth engagement, increased mental health challenges, stoppage of programming, and changes in visitation policies. Findings below highlight youth and staff experiences with the program amidst the pandemic.

Decreased Youth Engagement

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, staff were not able to engage with youth in the private rental market due to public health measures. Youth living in the private rental market were not able to come on-site and staff were not able to meet youth in the community. Many youth are not vaccinated, making it challenging for staff to meet with them. Prior to

COVID-19, staff would try to meet or check-in with youth once a month, but that has been challenging amidst the pandemic. With restrictions lifting, staff are investigating ways to increase engage with youth living in the private rental market.

Mental Health Challenges

Amidst the pandemic, some youth have struggled with finding and maintaining consistent work. A requirement of the program is that youth must be working and contributing to the Savings Program. However, some youth have not been able to find work or were unmotivated to seek employment, and thus have no money saved for rent once they reach the end of their 18 month stay.

→ **Interpretation.** YOUth Belong can consider implementing more tailored/one-on-one supports to help youth be more consistent with employment and income so that they can exit the program successfully and live independently in the community.

"So that's one really concerning thing right now, and we're trying to actually figure out how do we adjust that effectively, because that's not the point of YOUth belong, it's not a revolving door." – Frontline Staff

Stoppage of Programming

Most of the in-person programming ceased as soon as the pandemic hit. As a result, youth who entered the program during the pandemic were not able to participate in the activities that were advertised as part of the program. Only the Rites of Passage program continued through the pandemic. One youth emphasized that YOUth Belong should start in-person programming now that rules and restrictions are easing up and stated that residents would attend and participate.

Changes in Visitation Policies

Due to COVID-19 rules and restrictions, guests were not allowed at the residence. Youth expressed their discontent because the program is supposed to be independent living and so they should be able to have guests over. Some youth also shared that they get lonely and feel disconnected when they can't bring their friends and family to the residence.

"But the rest of them people that don't really know each other, [it] can get a little bit lonely I think but like I'm speaking for myself." – Youth (Shared Housing)

Although youth are not covered under the Residential Tenancy Act (RTA) as a tenant of the shared housing program, staff believe that they should receive the same privileges as they would under the RTA. Particularly because YOUth Belong is advertised as an independent living program, youth should be allowed to have guests over. Management staff shared that they reviewed the guest policies and plan to implement new policies to allow guests by the end of April 2022.

5. Recommendations

Based on the experiences and perspectives of program youth and staff, Hub Solutions curated 23 recommendations that fall within the following categories: (1) Program Processes, (2) Staffing, (3) Program and Services, and (4) Community Collaboration.

1. PROGRAM PROCESSES

Some youth participants expressed concerns about the intake process, particularly about the questionnaire, rules and expectations, check-in support, and more housing support for those who are living in the private rental market. To address these concerns, YOUth Belong should consider the following:

1. Revisit the intake questionnaire and make appropriate revisions, with special attention to the type of information that is collected and whether it is crucial to program admission and participation. For example, is it important to know a program youth's weight? If yes, how should staff approach this conversation?

2. Intake processes should accommodate the youth's schedule. Since staff are on-site 24/7, they should be able to administer intake questionnaires and conduct interviews outside of regular business hours.

3. Regarding rules and expectations, staff should provide more clarification around services, mandatory activities for youth, and expectations around independent living. Staff should emphasize during intake that certain programming is mandatory for all youth, like Rites of Passage and Resident Meetings. Staff can consider creating a standard pamphlet/one-pager to share with incoming youth about rules and expectations of the program.

4. There is a need for staff to be more intentional about inquiring about clients' needs. Staff should have an in-depth one-on-one conversation with youth upon intake to identify their unique needs and goals, as well as develop a plan to address those needs and goals. Staff can then proceed with weekly/bi-weekly check-ins with youth to have some sort of progress check-in or re-evaluate the plan. YOUth Belong can consider creating separate forms (i.e., "client needs assessment"), formulating questions that will help staff better understand what the youth needs and how to help them meet those needs. Two forms can be incorporated: (1) youth intake and (2) youth check-in form.

5. YOUth Belong can consider offering more follow-up support to ensure that youth who exit the shared housing stream into the private rental market remain housed. This could involve bi-weekly telephone or monthly in-person check-ins to evaluate how the youth is doing and assess if they require more support including employment, education, housing, income, etc.

6. There is a need for improved communication between staff and clients, especially those in the private rental market. YOUth Belong can explore ways to increase

communication via call, text, e-mail. This could include creating a group chat with youth in the private rental market, allocating specific times during the day that staff will be able to dedicate to youth (e.g., 10:00 AM to 12:00 PM daily), and implementing a shared calendar that youth and staff can use to schedule and facilitate check-ins.

7. Youth identified incompatibility with roommates as a catalyst for conflict. One way that YOUth Belong can mitigate potential conflicts between roommates is to facilitate a "roommate meet-and-greet" before assigning youth to their rooms.

2. STAFFING

1. The YOUth Belong staff team is representative of the intended population and for such, has been highly praised as a catalyst for relationship and rapport building between youth and staff. As the program continues to expand, YOUth Belong should continue to recruit people who identify as Black. That being said, the program should also consider the following expansions to the staff team:

2. The YOUth Belong program is made up of mostly male youth. It would benefit male youth to have a male Housing Success Worker, either at full- or part-time capacity. This would allow male youth to share what they otherwise would not be comfortable sharing with a female HSW.

3. Internal culturally responsive program practices such as hiring, training, and services may boost youths' engagement with services. It is important that staff receive appropriate training to support them in providing services to youth. While it is noted that staff and youth undergo anti-oppression training, YOUth Belong can consider offering other sorts of training for staff to help them in their roles. For example, many staff shared that they feel ill-equipped to assist youth with mental health struggles.

4. Staff should undergo regular training to equip them with some skills and tools that will help them to support the mental health needs of youth. For example, de-escalation training and mental health first aid.

5. YOUth Belong could also consider hiring experts, or increasing referrals to services such as Registered Social Workers or therapists to provide counselling to youth. It is important that the certified experts identify as Black so that youth feel comfortable confiding in and sharing with them. These experts can be hired on a part-time/casual basis due to funding restrictions.

3. PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Housing for youth who are experiencing homelessness should be accompanied with **supportive housing services** that assist youth in making the transition from homelessness to being housed and to address issues which led to their homelessness (CCHRC, 2002). These services may include housing support from transitional housing to independent living, supports for health and well-being, access to income and education, and enhancing life skills.

YOUth Belong is successful in housing Black youth who are experiencing or at-risk homelessness or precariously housed. To improve on supports, Hub Solutions recommends the following:

1. YOUth Belong can apply Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) principles: (1) a right to housing with no preconditions; (2) youth choice, youth voice, and self-determination; (3) positive youth development and wellness orientation; (4) individualized, client-driven supports with no time limits; and (5) social inclusion and community integration (Gaetz, Walter, & Story, 2021; Gaetz, Walter, & Borato, 2021). These principles are captured in the recommendations below.

2. YOUth Belong could consider implementing new program processes that track the progress of individual housing plans—are youth making progress, if not, what supports/resources do they require from staff to get to the next step? This could involve developing a personalized housing plan for youth at intake such as identifying their personal strengths, setting goals, and identifying supports they would need to stabilize in their communities.

3. YOUth Belong could consider expanding its partnership strategy to include more partnerships with housing organizations or even landlords, to help house youth in the private rental market. This partnership strategy would reduce the barriers that Black youth face when securing housing.

4. Youth would like to receive more practical support in terms of life skills development such as training/workshops about financial literacy, maintaining stable housing, effective grocery shopping, etc. One youth sought external resources/services that they felt was better equipped to help with developing those life skills. YOUth Belong should consider incorporating more hands-on activities where youth can practice and master those skills.

5. The program receives a lot of donations from community organizations such as food and hygiene products. Youth and staff noted some issues with these donations that YOUth Belong such as expired food or non-culturally sensitive products. YOUth Belong can consider the following to address these concerns:

    a. YOUth Belong can take appropriate measures to ensure that food donations are not expired and are in good condition. This could include postage around the donation bin/area that discourages expired foods, or even having staff go through the food bank to discard expired donations.

    b. Staff noted was that a lot of the donations that YOUth Belong receives from the community are not culturally appropriate (e.g., general shampoo). For example, some of the hair products are not used by youth because they need hair products specific for Black hair. YOUth Belong could increase donation of culturally appropriate products through other means such as increased outreach to and partnerships with local, Black-led organizations.

→ **Rites of Passage** is a form of an Afro-centric intervention rooted in a tradition common to many African cultures. The Rites of Passage program incorporates traditional practices, education rituals, and arts to educate and provide Black people with a sense of self that recentres the African identity. YOUth Belong should continue to offer the Rites of Passage program in partnership with WoodGreen Community Services as it is received well by youth. However, the Rites of Passage program lacks practicality as noted by youth and staff. The Rites of Passage program should consider how to equip youth to be successful and stable in the community as a Black youth. Hub Solutions recommends:

6. YOUth Belong should consider facilitating two-part workshops where the first centres around information sharing and the second on strategies and tools. This presents more opportunities for partnerships with community organizations.

7. With COVID-19 rules and restrictions slowly lifting, YOUth Belong can start-up any programming that was shut down due to the pandemic (e.g., group outings, sports), particularly activities that centre around Afro-Canadian, Afro-Caribbean, and Jamaican culture like art events, drumming, storytelling, etc. YOUth Belong should also extend these opportunities to youth living in the private rental market.

4.COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

To improve housing stability for Black youth experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness, it is essential to enhance cross-system collaboration and partnerships between agencies. This could include education and coordination between homeless service system and child welfare systems, youth justice systems, education systems, etc. Hub Solutions recommends that YOUth Belong focus on expanding their partnership strategy, improve inter-agency collaboration, and increase outreach efforts in order to put YOUth Belong on the map so that it can reach its full potential.

1. To foster information exchange, transparency, and collaboration, staff from different Eva's initiatives can form a council that meets monthly or quarterly to have conversations and provide updates about their respective initiatives.

2. One staff suggested creating an online portal that lists all programs and services available across all of Eva's Initiatives. This portal would increase awareness and transparency as well as improve referrals, which ultimately will help staff better meet the needs of the youth.

3. In order to sustain the program long-term, YOUth Belong should consider developing an outreach team. The outreach team will focus primarily on promoting YOUth Belong through social media, in-person events, and pamphlets/flyers. The outreach team should also engage the youth shelter system, education system, child welfare system, as well as the youth justice system.

4. YOUth Belong should consider creating or amplifying their online presence so to include potential self-referrals from youth who may not have access to a Case/ Social Worker. This would include creating a webpage about the program that is easily accessible through the Eva's general website.

5. YOUth Belong could benefit from more partnerships. These partnerships could translate into recreational and life skills development workshops/trainings, which could help increase youth engagement. These partnerships can be found through continued outreach efforts. Partnerships could also mean a greater network of community support for youth after they transition into independent living in the private rental market.

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