

# COMING TOGETHER: Tackling Unemployment Among Youth Experiencing Homelessness

*The Home Depot Canada Foundation,  
Impakt Corporation*



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# COMING TOGETHER: Tackling Unemployment Among Youth Experiencing Homelessness

In an effort to end youth homelessness in Canada, The Home Depot Canada Foundation has partnered with a range of stakeholders, including The Home Depot suppliers and associates, non-profit organizations, homelessness experts, other businesses and youth. While the solutions to youth homelessness are complex, one thing is clear: No one individual, organization or business can tackle this issue alone. We each have a key role to play.

In December 2014, The Home Depot Canada Foundation convened a group of youth, youth-serving organizations and businesses to discuss unemployment among youth experiencing homelessness. The purpose was to identify the barriers that homeless youth face in seeking employment, the role of business, and the role employment can play in ending youth homelessness.

Our goal was not to duplicate the research that has been done in this area, namely a report in 2012 by Raising the Roof. Rather, it was to provide a venue for those close to the issue to learn *with* and *from* one another.

During the Symposium – a 90-minute discussion over breakfast – youth shared their experiences and opinions. This allowed human resource professionals and hiring managers to better understand the strengths that youth can bring to a workplace and the barriers they face in doing so. It was also an opportunity for youth-serving organizations to meet businesses willing to take risks. It was, in short, a step toward building a common understanding of a complex issue.

This paper shares a few of the things we learned and outlines how we – along with our partners – will seek to reduce the barriers to employment as part of our commitment to end youth homelessness.





# UNEMPLOYMENT: Why Does It Matter?

*It's the difference between plopping down on your butt and saying, "Okay, I'm done now. I don't want to try [looking for work] anymore," and getting up every day and just trying and trying and trying. I've been doing it for 10 years and it still hasn't completely panned out, but I don't stop. It sucks, but you just keep trying. If you don't, it'll never happen.*

– JESSE, YOUTH PARTICIPANT

Jesse's commitment to finding employment is not unique. It is estimated that youth aged 16-24 make up 20% - nearly 50,000 - of the homeless population in Canada; many more are at risk of homelessness. But housing is just one part of the story. Of these 50,000 youth, many also spend a great deal of time and energy seeking employment. For them, employment represents more than income. It means attaining safety and security - a place to feel at home.

In Canada, the unemployment rate for youth is double that of the general population. However, not all youth have equal access to employment. Youth, without the stability of home or family support, can face a number of additional barriers to securing and maintaining employment.

Without employment, homeless youth may be unable to transition to independent living. But unemployment is also a known pathway into homelessness. Low wages, precarious work and job loss can put housed youth at risk of becoming homeless.

## So, what's the problem?

### What's not working?

First, it's important to know what is working. Youth who are experiencing homelessness want to work and many diligently pursue employment opportunities despite numerous barriers.

Second, there are employers who are interested in hiring youth. The attendees at our Symposium are a testament to that. While unemployment across the country remains high, some employers find themselves short of skilled and dedicated employees. There is a growing recognition that youth – who have been previously excluded from the labour pool due to various barriers, including discrimination – may be part of the solution.

**The next question is: What can youth, employers and non-profit partners learn from one another that would help them to better understand the issue and address what isn't working?**

# OUR Learning

During the Symposium and our follow-up interviews with participants we heard some common themes. These learnings, outlined below will serve as a jumping-off point for further discussions among youth, non-profit organizations, employers, educational providers and government so that together, we can take action.

1. **There are too few opportunities for youth, youth-serving organizations, employers and other stakeholders to learn from one another**
2. **Housing is more than a roof over your head**
3. **Youth face incredible pressure, but they're resilient**
4. **Youth experiencing homelessness face regular discrimination**
5. **Youth are not always encouraged to plan for or pursue career opportunities**
6. **Homeless youth need to be given the opportunity to pursue education and training**
7. **Supporting housing, health, income, food, education, training is supporting employment**
8. **Employers recognize the social and business value of hiring youth with barriers...**
9. **...But they too need support**

## 1. There are too few opportunities for youth, youth-serving organizations, employers and other stakeholders to learn from one other

In a series of follow-up interviews, we asked Symposium participants to share their biggest takeaways from the conversation. Nearly all of the participants were quick to express how important it was to hear a new perspective on the issue, particularly feedback from youth.

*It was great to see that this is something that youth truly want, it's not something that others want for them. To get their perspective and feedback on what the reality of their situation is - that was a really big takeaway for me.*

– JAS, PEAK GROUP OF COMPANIES

*I still remember one youth who was travelling two hours daily to get to his job saying "it's worth it for me. I've got a great employer who is giving me a chance." Youth are eager to work. This goes against the perception or bias some people have about homeless youth.*

– JOANNE, VIRGIN MOBILE RE\*GENERATION

Participants from youth-serving organizations and youth themselves thought the opportunity to speak with employers was equally valuable.

*I was really blown away with the people that were sitting around the table with me, the amount of interest they had and the willingness to work with at-risk youth. It was a bit of an eye opener for me. It gave me a little more encouragement in terms of what we do.*

– DWIGHT, HORIZONS FOR YOUTH

*The youth, who joined me, we talked the whole way home and he was just so excited that something like this was taking place.*

– SABRINA, YOUTH WITHOUT SHELTER

## 2. Housing is more than a roof over your head

*If you're not well-rested and you don't have your bearings about you when you're [job searching] you're going to have a lot of barriers just internally... Problems with your home cause anxiety, stress, depression, nervousness and a sense of being lost.*

– JESSE, YOUTH PARTICIPANT

Above all, Symposium participants identified a lack of stable housing as one of the greatest barriers to securing and maintaining employment. At the most practical level, youth without housing don't have an address to give employers. Without an address, it is difficult to get the necessary pieces of identification to apply for work. Without an address, it is nearly impossible to open a bank account. Youth may not have access to income, food, work-appropriate clothing and transportation – all the things necessary to find and succeed in employment.

But a lack of housing is more than a practical barrier. The stability of housing provides individuals – in particular youth – with basic necessities, family support and a place to go. One youth participant urged the group not to underestimate the power of having “a place to rest your head.” But the consequences of housing instability go beyond the job search. Once a youth has secured a job, maintaining and, more importantly, thriving in that new environment becomes the next priority. Youth are left to navigate the complexities of a new workplace – perhaps their first workplace – while worrying about how and where they'll eat, shower and sleep.

## 3. Youth face incredible pressure, but they're resilient

*It is a testament to how resilient youth are, the mere fact that they get up, they move forward to do something productive. It's not easy to be thrust into a situation where you're living with two, three, four other people [in a shelter or shared housing accommodation] that you don't know, closing your eyes at night and sleeping with strangers, being told when to wake up, when to eat.*

– DWIGHT, HORIZONS FOR YOUTH

Youth who are living in shelters, staying at friends' houses, living in transitional housing or ageing out of care all share one thing in common: their living situations are temporary. In a matter of months, often days, youth can find themselves with no place to go. For a young person who is sleeping outside, the situation may be even more urgent.

Despite this pressure, youth are spending hours navigating the search for employment, housing and other supports they may need. One Symposium participant felt that it was this time pressure that was one of the greatest barriers to independent-living.

*Finding work is a full time job. You have to keep at it. But it's discouraging, you get a lot of jobs that are for two or three months, or seasonal.*

– JESSE, YOUTH PARTICIPANT

With a lack of time and a long list of priorities, youth are forced to take opportunities that aren't in their best interests, including informal work and participation in employment programs that are inappropriate, unhelpful or ill-suited to their needs.





#### 4. Youth experiencing homelessness face regular discrimination

*We service newcomers to Canada. They're conventional refugees. They do have a work permit. Their Social Insurance Number is in check, and then as soon as we apply, a lot of employers are skeptical or apprehensive based on their work permit only being valid for a year.*

– SABRINA, YOUTH WITHOUT SHELTER

Symposium participants were concerned about the level of discrimination that youth face, and they saw it as a major barrier towards seeking employment. Youth experiencing homelessness may be subject to multiple layers of discrimination. Some employers are wary of hiring youth due to their age and lack of experience. Others are concerned about hiring someone who is or has been homeless, buying into the stereotypes associated with homelessness.

Youth – already facing significant barriers based on age – can be further discriminated against based on their race, sexual orientation, gender, health or immigration status.

For example, Symposium participants identified the problematic allocation of a Social Insurance Number (SIN). Temporary workers, who are legally entitled to work in Canada, are issued SINs beginning with a 9. Employers are then required to verify the immigration status of these applicants. Some employers are resistant to enduring what they see as an “administrative burden” in hiring those workers; others are concerned about employee turnover. This means youth with SINs beginning with a 9 face an added layer of discrimination.

While most companies have explicit policies against discrimination, these policies do not always translate into practice, particularly for those in charge of hiring. Employers committed to hiring youth with barriers must ensure that everyone in the company, at all levels, are adhering to anti-discriminatory policies and fairly evaluating youth.



## 5. Youth are not always encouraged to plan for or pursue career opportunities

*Understand your strengths, but also work on your weaknesses. You need to know what you're good at, and what type of jobs you need to look into. Learn about your strengths and things that you can continue working to improve. Set goals.*

– KYLA, YOUTH ADVISOR TO THE HOME DEPOT CANADA FOUNDATION

Kyla's advice to youth who are seeking employment parallels advice that a good mentor, parent or teacher might give to a young person. It's a message that focuses on self-reflection, self-improvement and long-term planning. And it's a message that many youth hear. Unfortunately, a number of youth who are experiencing homelessness do not have trusting mentors and they are not always given the opportunity to set their own goals; instead, they are required to take the jobs that are available, regardless of their suitability.

Symposium participants expressed concern that jobs available to youth aren't conducive to long-term employment or a career. While many of these jobs may address a short-term need for income, they don't promise job security, economic stability or career progression.

Participants felt that a lack of housing should not preclude youth from pursuing meaningful employment; youth should be supported to identify and pursue their career goals and aspirations.

*We look at not just getting youth into a job right away, but ask what they're working towards. Our program is employment-based but we are looking at other things that might help youth to get employment that's a good fit and maybe better for them in the long-term.*

– DWIGHT, HORIZONS FOR YOUTH

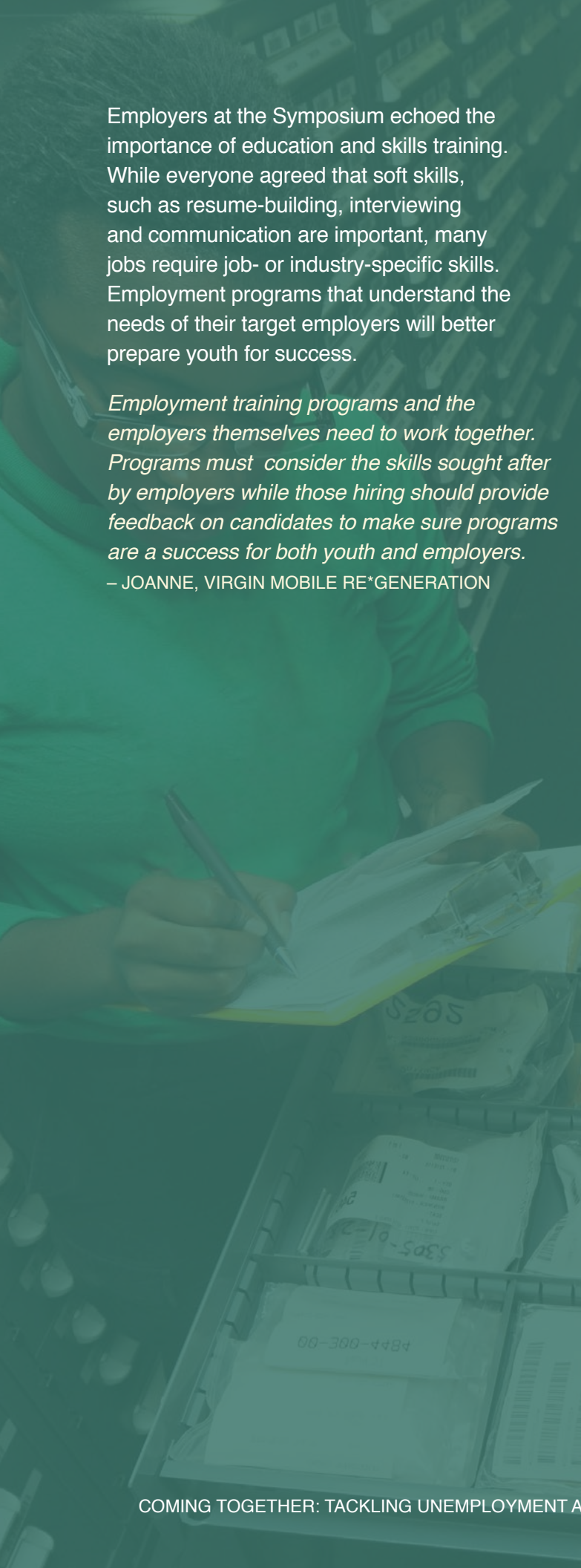
## 6. Homeless youth need to be given the opportunity to pursue education and training

*School is probably one of the most important things. Some jobs, you need post-secondary, some you need high school, and some you need trade school. If youth haven't finished high school, I don't think going into the workplace is necessarily a good idea.*

– KYLA, YOUTH ADVISOR TO THE HOME DEPOT CANADA FOUNDATION

Symposium participants considered the overall lack of education among youth who are experiencing homelessness to be a barrier to improving employment outcomes. Youth who are or have been homeless have varying levels of education; however, many youth are forced to leave school because of their chaotic situations or in order to pursue quick employment to meet their basic needs.

Participants felt that education and employment need to go hand-in-hand. Youth who are in urgent, time-limited situations may require quick and accessible employment. However, it's critical that youth are supported in their efforts to pursue education and training that positions them for jobs that are secure, in demand and, importantly of interest to them; jobs that match their skills and goals. Improving the educational foundation of youth will make them more competitive applicants and improve their employability, beyond the support of a single employment program.



Employers at the Symposium echoed the importance of education and skills training. While everyone agreed that soft skills, such as resume-building, interviewing and communication are important, many jobs require job- or industry-specific skills. Employment programs that understand the needs of their target employers will better prepare youth for success.

*Employment training programs and the employers themselves need to work together. Programs must consider the skills sought after by employers while those hiring should provide feedback on candidates to make sure programs are a success for both youth and employers.*

– JOANNE, VIRGIN MOBILE RE\*GENERATION

## **7. Supporting housing, health, income, food, education and training is supporting employment**

*We've really got to work to heal and help vulnerable youth move forward before we can actually tackle employment. To say that employment is the goal – it may be one of the end goals, but we've got to make sure that we've got things in place before that.*

– DWIGHT, HORIZONS FOR YOUTH

Symposium participants felt strongly that employment supports for youth without stable housing must go beyond the supports that are traditionally available for unemployed individuals. Access to housing, income, food, identification, physical and mental health resources and education should be included alongside skills training, job searching and resume-building.

Most importantly, employment supports should be tailored to the needs of the individual. For some youth, broader supports – such as housing and education – may be of greater value than specific employment skills. Symposium participants expressed frustration at having to sit through multiple resume-building workshops or interview classes that ultimately didn't lead to employment.

Other Symposium participants were sympathetic, but explained that funding is one of the greatest barriers to providing holistic and tailored support. Employment programs – even for youth experiencing homelessness – are often funded to provide very traditional, narrow forms of employment support. Many programs are simply underfunded.

## 8. Employers recognize the social and business value of hiring youth with barriers

*Yes, it's the right thing to do. But youth, number one, they bring energy of a different level to organizations. I think any organization that hires people from diverse backgrounds, make for a strong company overall. Different experiences weave a pretty tight fabric.*

– LONI, THE HOME DEPOT CANADA

*For employers, hiring youth gives them access to an underutilized labour pool. It's an opportunity to invest back in the community and to feel like you made an impact.*

– CINDY, PEAK GROUP OF COMPANIES

The businesses and employers in attendance at the Symposium indicated that it is possible to engage the private sector in hiring youth who have experienced homelessness. Other initiatives and programs indicate similar potential.

Virgin Mobile RE\*Generation has partnered with community groups across Canada that deliver demand-driven job skills training programs for at-risk and homeless youth, with the goal to help 450 youth get jobs by 2017 and be a catalyst for change. They have also partnered with Civic Action and Social Capital Partners to raise awareness about how we can all help break down the barriers to employment faced by youth who are homeless or at-risk.

During the Symposium, employers were able to share their enthusiasm and their learning.

For most, it was important to reiterate that youth – despite their housing situation – have a range of skills, experience and strengths that they bring to the job. Participants felt that employers have a responsibility to understand the barriers that a youth may face but ultimately to treat them as they would any other employee. The human resource experts in the room pointed out that this isn't novel in the business world.

*Give them the respect that they need – as you would any other candidate but understand what they may face and how you can help in the transition. Any good employer – if this is a viable candidate – will work with employees to accommodate all sorts of barriers.*

– LONI, THE HOME DEPOT CANADA

Youth, despite the frustrations around employment, held very similar views to those of employers. In a follow-up interview Jesse – a youth participant at the Symposium – spoke candidly and practically:

*Empathy is important. Your business has to make money, it has to be progressive and it has to be profitable. You've got to have empathy but at the same time, you've got to hire someone [who can do the job].*

– JESSE, YOUTH PARTICIPANT



## 9. ...But they too need support

*[The youth-serving agency we're partnering with] was very clear that once the youth's placement is done, they're not dropping the youth or us like a hot potato. That gave me a lot of confidence. It was a safety net for us and the youth; we're not in it alone.*

– CINDY, PEAK GROUP OF COMPANIES

Symposium participants stressed the importance of strong partnerships between youth-serving agencies, employers and youth. Youth-serving organizations must play a role in working with employers to better understand the issue of youth homelessness. Organizations can work with employers to break the stigma around homelessness but they also must be forthright about the potential risks of hiring youth who face barriers. It is through open dialogue and information that employers can best support youth in their job or placement.

While everyone agreed about the importance of strong and supportive partnerships between youth-serving organizations and employers, the lack of funding for employment programs is an unquestionable barrier. Staff in employment programs must support youth in their search for employment, help them to address other barriers such as housing, income, food and then spend a great deal of time recruiting willing employers. Despite a lack of resources, some youth-serving agencies are able to provide support to youth and their employer once a youth has been hired; though it can be difficult for employers to identify partners in their community that can do so.

# THE HOME DEPOT CANADA FOUNDATION'S Next Steps

In October 2013, The Home Depot Canada Foundation made a three-year, \$10-million pledge to help put an end to youth homelessness. Our commitment is built on the growing understanding of the important relationship between housing and supportive services in helping vulnerable and homeless youth make healthy transitions to adulthood. That is why we partner with organizations across the country that provide both housing and other supports (i.e. physical and mental health, family reconnection, education, training and/or employment programs) to the youth they serve.

As we heard from participants at our Symposium, employment is a key facet of these additional supports. For some youth, employment and access to education and training means an end to homelessness. For other youth, employment means *preventing* homelessness.

For The Home Depot Canada Foundation, the opportunity to speak to youth, youth-serving agencies and like-minded employers was a powerful first-step towards better understanding the role of employment in ending youth homelessness.

Above all, our Symposium confirmed the importance of shared learning. The kind of learning that can only occur when you bring together a group of committed individuals - with various experiences, viewpoints and ideas - to discuss an issue that is meaningful to them - in this case, youth unemployment.

**In 2015, as part of our broader commitment to end youth homelessness, The Home Depot Canada Foundation will:**

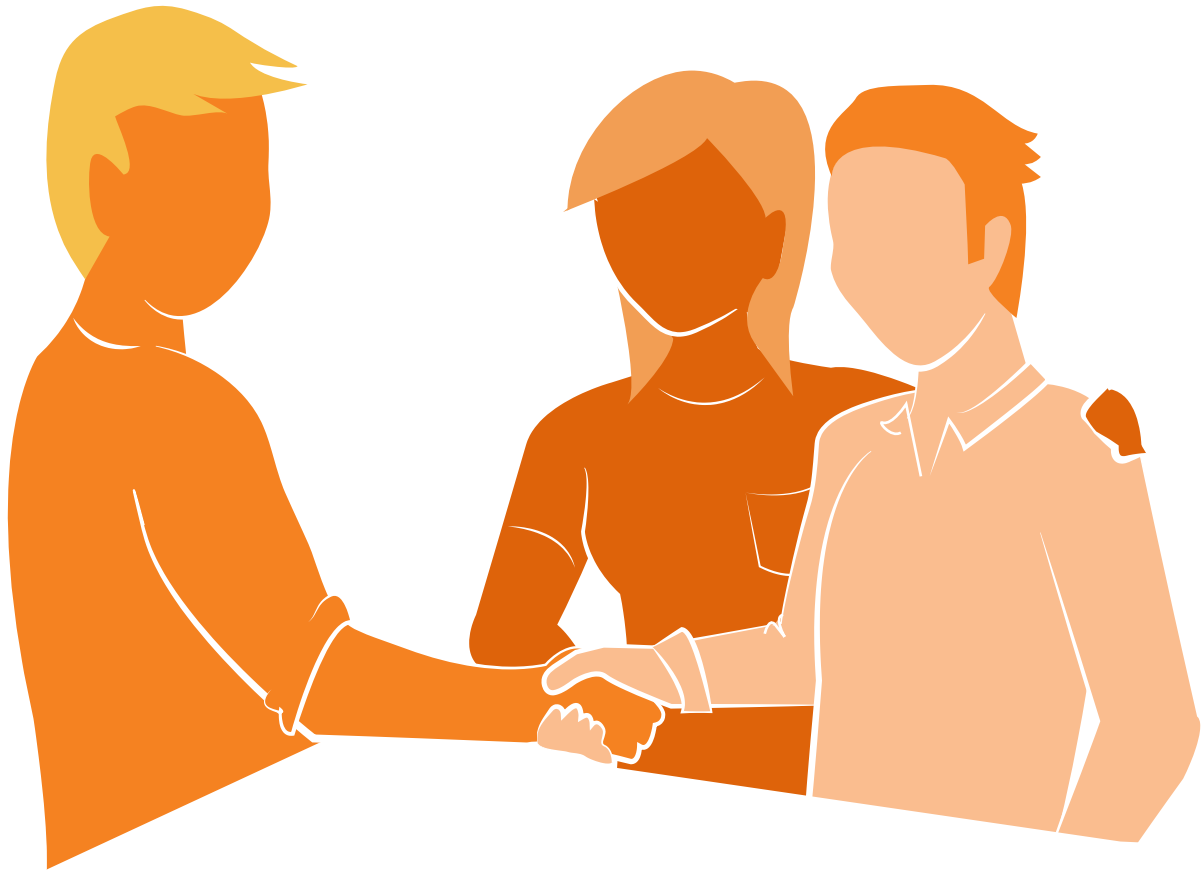
- » **Continue the conversation**
- » **Support our partners to help youth succeed**
- » **Provide jobs for youth**
- » **Connect employers and youth-serving agencies**



## CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

We will work with our advisors including our Issues Advisory Council, Youth Advisory Committee, Supplier Advisory Committee as well as The Home Depot associates and businesses that have an interest in this area to address the barriers and seek approaches to improving employment options for homeless youth.





## SUPPORT OUR PARTNERS TO HELP YOUTH SUCCEED

We will support our current partners to provide the youth they serve with the supports they need to succeed, including employment-focused support and also housing, health, education, training and other needs.



## PROVIDE JOBS FOR YOUTH

In partnership with The Home Depot Canada, we will develop a hiring plan to provide job and career opportunities in our stores for youth experiencing homelessness.



## CONNECT EMPLOYERS & YOUTH-SERVING AGENCIES

We know that improving employment outcomes among homeless youth requires strong partnerships between employers and youth-serving agencies. We will launch a job portal that will connect youth-serving agencies, their job ready youth clients and businesses seeking candidates for job vacancies within their organizations. Tool kits containing best practices, checklists, etc. will be provided to all parties to inform ongoing open dialogue and to ensure the partnership remains mutually beneficial.



# SYMPOSIUM Participants

The Home Depot Canada Foundation thanks those who attended our Symposium and shared their thoughts and experiences. Click on the logos below to learn how some of the participants are improving employment outcomes for youth experiencing homelessness.



*Since 2009, The Home Depot Canada Foundation has invested more than \$13-million to help improve homes and communities across Canada because we believe that good neighbours make great neighbourhoods.*

*The Home Depot Canada Foundation is committed to supporting initiatives that help put an end to youth homelessness in Canada.*

Learn more at: [www.homedepot.ca/foundation](http://www.homedepot.ca/foundation)

The logo for 'impakt' is displayed in a white box. The word 'impakt' is in a lowercase, sans-serif font, with the 'k' in red and the other letters in black.

*Founded in 2001, Impakt is a Toronto-based B Corp that creates opportunities for corporations to benefit from being socially responsible and builds partnerships between corporations and non-profits to achieve positive social change.*

Learn more at: [www.impaktcorp.com](http://www.impaktcorp.com)

\*We heard many, sometimes opposing viewpoints at the Symposium. This position paper reflects The Home Depot Canada Foundation's position on this issue. Participant logos do not imply an endorsement of the content of the paper.

1. [http://www.raisingtheroof.org/RaisingTheRoof/media/RaisingTheRoofMedia/Documents/RtR\\_PS\\_FullReport\\_EN\\_web\\_01-13.pdf](http://www.raisingtheroof.org/RaisingTheRoof/media/RaisingTheRoofMedia/Documents/RtR_PS_FullReport_EN_web_01-13.pdf)
2. <http://www.homelesshub.ca/about-homelessness/legal-justice-issues/discrimination>



*360°kids has been helping families, children and youth in our communities for over 25 years. Our primary focus is providing aid and support to at-risk and homeless youth. It is estimated that on any given day there are over 300 homeless youth in York Region. Family breakdown, addiction issues and abuse are just some of the reasons these youth become homeless but regardless of the circumstances, they are just kids and they don't deserve to suffer the way they do. 360°kids operates a variety of programs to give these kids the support they need to reach a state of safety and stability. We inspire them to rebuild their lives and we help them to overcome the obstacles they face. It is a complete 360° approach to assisting these kids and it has been successful in helping thousands of youth become healthy, stable adults who contribute to our communities.*

Learn more at: [www.360kids.ca](http://www.360kids.ca)



*Raising the Roof's Youthworks initiative aims to help solve youth homelessness. We've developed several resources, including an Employment Toolkit for both agencies and employers to provide employment opportunities for homeless or at-risk youth. Our annual Toque Campaign also supports community partner agencies across the country providing much-needed services to youth experiencing homelessness.*

Learn more at: [www.raisingtheroof.org](http://www.raisingtheroof.org)



*First Work member agencies deliver life and employment skills training as well as job search and placement supports to vulnerable youth with barriers in Ontario communities.*

Learn more at: [www.firstwork.org](http://www.firstwork.org)



**eva's initiatives**  
Creating opportunities for homeless youth

*Eva's provides safe shelter, training, counselling, and a wide range of innovative programs and services to help homeless and at-risk youth reach their potential to lead productive, self-sufficient and healthy lives. With cutting-edge services, and distinctive programming, Eva's offers a continuum of service not available anywhere else in Canada. Locally, Eva's operates three unique shelters that accommodate 114 youth - aged 16-24 - each night. Nationally, Eva's works to build innovative and long term solutions to end youth homelessness.*

Learn more at: [www.evasinitiatives.com](http://www.evasinitiatives.com)



*Virgin Mobile RE\*Generation empowers a generation to help its own. It gives Members and other Canadians a chance to help at-risk and homeless youth develop skills to get and keep jobs.*

Learn more at: [www.virginmobile.ca/regen](http://www.virginmobile.ca/regen)



*Youth Without Shelter (YWS) is the singular emergency residence and referral agency in Etobicoke serving homeless youth, ages 16 to 24 (with 30 emergency residential beds; and 20 transitional Stay in School Program beds). Life circumstances have not been kind to the youth in our programs. They are victims of abuse, abandonment or have no family at all. YWS not only offers a safe, warm bed for youth but has evolved to provide a full circle of care to over 1,000 youth each year: counseling, effective skills program, employment guidance, placement in affordable housing, and support for continued education.*

Learn more at: [www.yws.on.ca](http://www.yws.on.ca)





*Horizons for Youth is a 35-bed emergency youth shelter dedicated to helping homeless and at-risk youth between the ages of 16-24 years old.*

Learn more at: [www.horizons4youth.org](http://www.horizons4youth.org)



*The Peak Group of Companies is one of Canada's fastest-growing home improvement products and installation companies. We are also a proud and long-standing partner of Home Depot Canada. Our partnership extends to the work of the Foundation, and its commitment to support an end to youth homelessness.*

Learn more at: [www.peakinstallations.com](http://www.peakinstallations.com)