



# Street Youth Legal Service: A Program of Justice for Children and Youth

Toronto, Ontario

PROGRAM TYPE: Legal Support Services

Street-involved youth are defined as youth who are homeless, living in unstable housing conditions, or at risk of becoming homeless. Media accounts of homeless youth often present them as teenagers dissatisfied with the rigors and discipline of home and school and who are attracted to the freedom, excitement and independence of the downtown streets. The reality is of course much different. While some street youth leave home on their own initiative (for instance, because of unresolved conflicts with parents, trouble with the law, dropping out of school or to find work), research on street youth in Canada and elsewhere has found that the key factors that force young people to leave home include physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse, as well as ineffective parenting, family breakdown and substance abuse issues (Read et al., 1993; Smart, 1993; Janus et al., 1995; Gaetz & O'Grady, 2002).

A number of other measures point to family dysfunction and instability as significant factors. In a needs assessment of street youth in Toronto, 42.6% of young people reported having been either in foster care and/or a group home (Gaetz, 2002). Death of a parent was also a contributing factor, with 11.8% of youth reporting that one of their parents is deceased, and an additional 3.4% reporting both being deceased.

For many young people, the process of 'coming out' results in rejection by family, friends or community, making staying at home a difficult, and in some cases, a non-viable option. A body of research suggests that street youth are much more likely to be lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (20 -40%) compared to the general population (10%) (Cochran et al., 2002; Gattis, 2009; Abramovich, 2013).

Youth homelessness is a growing problem in Toronto, much like the rest of Canada. The most recent data reported by the City of Toronto suggest that approximately 5,020 young people require shelter annually (City of Toronto, 2008). This figure does not include young people outside of the shelter system, but are homeless nonetheless and 'couch-surf' with friends or relatives or live 'rough' on the streets.

## KEY MESSAGES

- ACCESS TO JUSTICE (OR REMOVAL OF BARRIERS TO ACCESSING LEGAL HELP) FOR AT-RISK AND HOMELESS YOUTH
- ENHANCING THE CAPACITY OF THE ATTENDING LAWYER AND JFCY TO MANAGE AND ADDRESS A WIDE VARIETY OF LEGAL PROBLEMS
- ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC PROBLEMS FACING THE AT-RISK AND HOMELESS POPULATION THROUGH RESEARCH, LAW AND POLICY REFORM, AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS
- PROVIDING STREET-INVOLVED YOUTH AND STAFF AT AGENCIES THAT SERVE THEM WITH INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE IN A WAY THAT OVERCOMES LEGAL BARRIERS
- COLLECTING DATA AND INDICATORS



## Homeless Youth are Victims Too

Young people who are homeless face a variety of challenges; they have been thrust into independence without adequate preparation or support, they lack resources, have little or no access to jobs, shelter and public spaces. They lack the security of person and property that a home provides - their very public lives make them much more vulnerable to assault and theft of personal property. They are often pushed into situations that force them to be more aggressive and violent in order to make money to survive, and to meet immediate needs for food and shelter. Compared to youth who have homes, street youth are much more likely to be victims of crime than perpetrators of crime. While 25% of Canadians are victims of crime in any given year, York researchers found that 81.9% of street youth have been victimized in the previous year, 79.4% of street youth reported two or more crimes, and 31.9% said that they were victims of sexual assault. Young homeless women seem to be particularly vulnerable to crime (Gaetz, 2002).

Despite these figures, the response to youth homelessness has been to criminalize young people by creating laws that prevent them from making money on the streets, rather than supporting them in resolving the issues that led them to homelessness, or that are keeping them there. For example, in Ontario, the increased visibility of youth homelessness led to calls by municipal politicians for the police to 'crack down' on street youth, and to the creation of the Safe Streets Act (2000), which made 'squeegeeing' and 'aggressive panhandling' illegal in Ontario.

In order to reduce and prevent the number of young people who are forced to survive on the streets, we need to ask: to what degree can we consider criminal and delinquent behaviours as being driven by the imperative of street youth to meet immediate survival needs and to deal with their personal safety and that of others around them? Young people on the streets lack the experience and knowledge to manage their lives effectively, let alone navigate a complex legal system. They need help with many aspects of their lives, including dealing with the legal issues that they often face as a result of their homelessness.

Although free assistance on legal matters is available through a handful of organizations, including Legal Aid Ontario, Pro Bono Law Ontario and the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, no organization is specifically serving street-involved youth. For example, the Provincial Child Advocate works specifically with the 43% of young homeless people who are involved with Children's Aid; however that leaves another 57% of young people who require access to services. Legal Aid Ontario only covers certain offences, and people charged with low-level criminal offences cannot receive court representation.

## Supporting Homeless Youth

Justice for Children and Youth (JFCY) is a Legal Aid Ontario clinic and the operating arm of the Canadian Foundation for Children, Youth and the Law. The clinic provides legal representation to Ontario youth aged 17 and under in the areas of child welfare, income maintenance, criminal, family, constitutional, human rights, education, and health law. Although JFCY works with young people burdened with legal problems, there were no services that addressed the unique needs of young people living on the streets. In 2000, JFCY started 'Street Youth Legal Services' by providing legal advice to youth at drop-ins throughout the downtown core of Toronto. To enhance the service, JFCY commissioned a needs assessment with homeless youth, asking what legal areas they would want assistance with. The researchers found that youth on the streets face a number of legal and justice issues related to housing, employment, family law and immigration. This broad range of legal and justice issues looms large in the lives of homeless youth who, as inexperienced and alienated youth with little money, are often unable to properly advocate

for their rights. The researchers identified a number of challenges that prevent young people from getting the help they need, including complex barriers, a lack of financial resources, social isolation and mistrust. The needs assessment formed the basis for the development of a new JFCY program for young people who were street-involved or homeless and who needed help with a variety of legal issues in order to avoid or get out of homelessness.

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SYLS provides legal advice, representation, referrals, and education to street-involved youth, aged 16 to 24, via workshops and individual consultations. The project delivers legal information and services directly to young street-involved people in drop-in centres and shelters - where youth congregate to access other

services, such as health care, food, employment assistance and counseling. Additionally, SYLS provides advocacy on behalf of the street-involved youth population, and engages in community development, research and policy and law reform activities in order to influence systemic change.

## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

SYLS is a four-part program that incorporates individual advice and representation, education, community development, and addresses systemic change, in the following formats:

### Individual Advocacy

The SYLS lawyer provides legal advice, referrals, or on-going representation to at least 350 street-involved youth each year at weekly drop-in sessions located at partner agencies.

### Education

The SYLS lawyer conducts approximately one educational workshop per week at a shelter or other agency serving homeless youth. As well as working with youth themselves, SYLS provides training workshops and materials to agency staff at shelters, drop-in centres and other street youth serving agencies. The SYLS lawyer also hosts an annual 'Street Law Smarts' Training Day for homeless youth serving agency staff. The training day covers legal information relevant to homeless youth including lecture and problem-based learning tools. The training program is accompanied by a resource binder and each attendee obtains a 'street youth advocate' certificate. Annually, approximately 50 youth workers attend the workshop. This year, a think tank forum focusing on systemic issues for homeless youth was also held to highlight research, litigation, and project based advocacy projects aimed to reduce homelessness.

### Community Development

SYLS is currently active in community development projects linked to addressing systems change, including participation in community advocacy groups, hosting feedback forums on on-going research, and contributing to projects led by youth and community members. Examples include assisting a group of previously street-involved youth with legal advice on how to incorporate their group 'Fresh Collective' as a not-for-profit, and acting as the lawyer in the 'Affidavit Project', exploring the experiences of youth when interacting with the police.

### Addressing Systems Change

SYLS engages in activities that focus on prevention of homelessness by addressing systemic problems that contribute to youth homelessness. For instance, in the past, they challenged the *Safe Streets Act*, which criminalizes begging and creates barriers for getting off the street. The clinic frequently advocates for young people who cannot live at home but who may be ineligible for intervention by the children's aid society.

## SYLS addresses the needs of street-involved youth who may have experienced one or more of the following situations:

- They may have left home suddenly, without their possessions, including identification, and are unable to retrieve essential documents and materials.
- They may need legal advice on getting and remaining housed, for example the duties and responsibilities of being a tenant in relation to a potential eviction.
- They may need help obtaining money to support themselves, for example legal assistance to overcome student loan or welfare denials; legal assistance to obtain child support from a parent, or spousal/child support from a previous partner.
- They may need legal assistance to get out of or stay out of jail.
- They may need help accessing medical assistance or counselling to address mental health problems.
- They may need legal advice and options to overcome past harms (such as historic childhood abuse or more recent assaults, including sexual and domestic assaults).
- They may be struggling with family law issues stemming from their involvement in the child welfare system, either as children, or as young parents.
- A growing number of homeless youth in the 'shelter system' are refugees and immigrants who must deal with resulting settlement issues and problems.

## Workshops

SYLS delivers regular workshops on a variety of topics including (but not limited to):

### How to get legal help

- What you can do to get legal advice
- How to preserve evidence

### Leaving home

- Do you have the right to enter your parents' home after they have kicked you out?
- Do you have a right to your possessions?
- Who can apply for child support?

### Police

- When can the police conduct a stop and search; what can they ask a youth; what are a youth's rights?
- How are the police different from security guards and special constables?

### Criminal

- What happens when a young person is charged or ticketed?
- What can youth do if there is a warrant out for their arrest?
- Details of provincial offenses like squeegeeing, panhandling, and trespassing.

### Records

- How can young people get youth records, criminal records, and police records?
- How can records affect young people and what can they do about it?

### Housing

- What are the rules of the shelters?
- What can be done if your landlord won't fix your place, takes your belongings, or kicks you out

### Employment

- The rules about vacation and overtime, how much you should be paid, your rights if fired, or refused pay.

### Assistance

- Eligibility for Ontario Works and ODSP.

### Family

- Custody and support rights and responsibilities with your parents, your child, your partner, and the CAS.

### Immigration

- The law on immigration to Canada from other countries.
- People's rights in immigration situations.

# EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVENESS



JFCY measures outcomes by maintaining a database of all legal advice, referral and brief service intakes, with detailed notes of the legal issue and outcome of each intake. Through feedback on individual cases and successful resolutions to multi-layered legal problems, JFCY charts the success of the SYLS program.

In 2011-2012 SYLS served 413 youth. In addition, SYLS delivered 62 workshops to 876 people. The three key outcomes that are facilitated by the work of SYLS and that relate to reducing the risk factors for homelessness are: resolving criminal justice issues, obtaining and retaining housing, and facilitating an income.

## Resolving Criminal Justice Issues

An example of SYLS resolving a legal issue is a resolution of involvement in the criminal justice system, the end result being that the young person stays out of jail.

- **34** young people resolved a criminal justice issue including:
  - o **9** young people had charges withdrawn before the trial date
  - o **7** young people were diverted to mental health services
  - o **5** young people were diverted elsewhere (e.g. prevention program, drug awareness program, voluntary service)
  - o **8** young people plead guilty and were granted a discharge
  - o **5** young people had charges withdrawn on the trial date, (as a result of completing specified programming)

## Obtaining and Retaining Housing

Young people are supported in obtaining or retaining housing through legal advice on housing rights, such as unlawful evictions, the duties and responsibilities of a tenant and landlord, or a referral to a legal clinic to represent on an eviction.

- **23** young people maintained housing rather than being evicted as a result of direct negotiation by the SYLS lawyer.

## Facilitating an Income

Street-involved youth are provided with legal assistance to overcome student loans or welfare denials; to obtain child support from a parent, or spousal/child support from a previous partner.

- **6** youth received help to access student welfare or other financial assistance after a loss of financial support as a result of a citizenship/sponsorship breakdown
- **5** youth received help to access and obtain child support or spousal support
- **7** youth had debts resolved
- **5** youth got help accessing student loans
- **14** youth got help accessing compensation
- **3** youth were helped to negotiate with a landlord for compensation
- **4** youth were helped with wills/estates



## User Perspective

### Examples of Outcomes for Youth who Have Accessed SYLS

A SYLS lawyer represented a young woman who had outstanding debts from panhandling tickets. In the last year, the young woman lived under bridges and begged for money on roadways. She received several panhandling and trespassing tickets, but did not have the money to pay the fines, nor know how she would fight the tickets, so did not respond and was left with hundreds of dollars of debt to the city.

Recently housed, she received a collection agency bill for close to \$1,000. With her feet barely under her, and currently completing a work program through social assistance, she did not know how to pay the debt. She was very worried the debt would drive her back to homelessness.

The SYLS lawyer helped the young woman appeal the set fine sentence that had been imposed, and reduce the fines to a total of \$80.

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The SYLS lawyer helped a young woman make a complaint to the police outlining harassment she has suffered at the hands of her parents. The young woman's parents were chronically telephoning the shelter she was living at; and the staff were suffering verbal aggression from the parents when the young woman indicated she did not want further contact with her parents. The young woman was very nervous to speak with the police as she had negative interactions with them in the past. The SYLS lawyer was able to support the young woman through the complaint process, give her legal advice on statements to the police, and outline her additional legal options. The police warned the parents that if they were to continue with the telephone calls, they would be charged. To date, the warning was successful and the parents have stopped harassing their daughter and the shelter staff.

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The SYLS lawyer regularly gives legal advice on being a victim or witness in a criminal trial, and options for making a criminal injuries compensation board application. The SYLS lawyer represented a 16 year old woman named Chanel who was assaulted by her mother and was now the victim/witness in her mother's criminal case. After the assault, Chanel stayed with a neighbour. A family friend then agreed that Chanel may live with her. The SYLS lawyer provided Chanel with legal advice on being a victim/witness, on making an application for criminal injuries compensation, and advocated for Chanel to secure financial independence from her mother. Chanel was sponsored by her mother to come to Canada and has only been in the country for six months. The SYLS lawyer informed Chanel about sponsorship breakdown, and advocated on her behalf to Ontario Works and Citizenship Immigration Canada. The SYLS lawyer also helped Chanel get her personal belongings back from her mother, including her identification cards, and informed her school that Chanel no longer requires a guardian and wishes her school records be kept private and confidential from her mother. The SYLS lawyer also gave legal advice on her immigration status, further financial rights and responsibilities through welfare, and referred her to social and psychological supports for the trauma she is enduring.

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A 17 year old youth in southern Ontario was kicked out of her father's house after she told him she was gay. She was having difficulty securing housing, financial support, and continuing her schooling. The SYLS lawyer gave her legal advice on her options and coordinated with the legal clinic in her region to help her apply for welfare, access child support, register in a new school (she had moved to live with her girlfriend's grandparents), and provide her with legal support to get her belongings back from her father. She wrote:

"Hey Joanna, so sorry for not contacting you sooner, I've been really really busy this last month! Things have finally started rolling and my girlfriend's grandma is letting me stay in the whole basement of her house. I've been busy moving things around to help make the space work. I'm also receiving welfare now :D so I'm able to pay my girlfriend's grandma rent and I also get like \$260 for myself! I've also registered for school and just finished my first day! :D I really like it and everything seems to be working out, finally. I'm still keen on getting things from my dad's house but I think a worker at the legal clinic in London is going to take care of that. We've met once and I have another meeting with her tomorrow. So I'll see what she can do for me, if nothing is successful though, I'd still really appreciate if you'd still help me out with contacting my dad and stuff –to get my i.d. cards and belongings back. Thanks for all you've done, you referred me to the right people and I was able to receive financial assistance within two weeks :D I'm gonna keep better touch with you so you know what's up! Talk to you soon Joanna :)"

## How data is used to inform practice

The legal issues that homeless youth seek help with directly influence SYLS program development. Depending on who comes in the door and the legal issues they face, services are developed to fit the needs of the young people accessing the service. Intake statistics based on area of law are compiled and reviewed bi-annually. Workshop topics are developed based on identified needs and priorities. For example, a high rate of intakes about police assaults led to educational workshops and community development projects on the topic. Gaps are also identified when SYLS experiences a lack of legal options available to a youth, such as for 16 and 17 year olds who are abused by parents but unable to seek protection from the Children's Aid Society. The legal options for youth to establish personal and financial security in this situation are narrow. Noting gaps and failures within current systems while advocating for youth ultimately influences the development of systems change activities aimed to overcome such failures.

## RESOURCES & ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL

### Staffing

#### Lawyer

The lawyer works with community-based youth agencies and provides summary advice and representation (6 hrs/week + 1hr travel time), educational sessions on legal issues for youth and youth workers (4-7 hours/week + 1 hr travel time), community development (7 hrs/week), engages in intake processes, prepares documents for legal cases, including court time (15 hrs/week), and develops educational resources and other administrative matters, including project expansion and fundraising (2-3 hrs/week).

SYLS also relies on staff from JFCY, including a shared administrative assistant, office manager, and students.

#### Office Manager

The Office Manager is responsible for human resources and finances and works with SYLS approximately 2-3 hours/week.

#### Administrative Assistant

The Administrative Assistant is responsible for answering the telephone, preparing documents, assisting with organization of training workshops, data entry and intakes, communications and mailing, and other administrative functions (approximately one day per week).

#### Students

Students work with the lawyer depending on need and availability of students.

### Funding and Resources

SYLS currently operates with a grant from the Law Foundation of Ontario, which covers part of the lawyer's salary. The Foundation for Children, Youth and the Law provides the remainder of the funding. JFCY, the operating arm of the Foundation for Children Youth and the Law, receives funding from Legal Aid Ontario for lawyers doing children's law. Legal Aid Ontario provides no funding to the SYLS lawyer, so that external fundraising and grant applications are required. When SYLS has not received funding in the past, savings from the Foundation have been used to pay the lawyer's salary in order to provide bare bones legal services.

Additionally, JFCY raises funds for SYLS through an annual fundraising event.

If more funds are made available in the coming year, the SYLS program would like to conduct a second Street Needs Assessment. JFCY would like to use the updated Needs Assessment to assess SYLS activities and the needs and priorities of homeless youth, with special focus on questions related to reducing barriers to safety and security in housing and finances.

Increased funding would also better meet the needs of the hundreds of young people who require SYLS services. The ideal structure for a prosperous service would include a team of at least three lawyers, at least three social workers, and at least three paralegals. The teams could be broken down into legal education, legal advocacy/law reform, and frontline services.

## Partnerships and Collaboration

### Private bar lawyers

Lawyers in a variety of legal areas, including criminal defense and family and immigration law, make a commitment to provide street-involved youth referred by SYLS with free legal consultations, or legal representation as a retained lawyer, when appropriate. These lawyers are sensitive to the vulnerabilities of street-involved clients, and agree to provide services matching youth's special needs. For example, lawyers may be more willing to meet a youth at a shelter or drop-in facility, rather than have the youth visit the law office for an appointment.

### Partners in research studies and community development projects

Research and community development partners work with the SYLS program to actualize research and community development projects including law and policy reform that relate to empowering street-involved youth, reducing the amount of time that young people are homeless, and preventing youth from becoming homeless. Academic research partners include York University and the University of Guelph. Community partners include Raising the Roof and St. Stephen's Community House.

### Interaction with Other Systems

To do poverty law work, it is important to help clients, but also to address other systemic issues. As a drop-in lawyer providing legal services at a number of agencies, the SYLS lawyer actively makes use of referrals to housing, mental health, education and personal supports they feel may assist the client in their transition out of homelessness.

### Community Partners

#### **Weekly drop-in agencies**

Agencies that partner with SYLS for weekly drop-ins provide office space at their facility so the SYLS lawyer may have confidential space to provide legal advice or information to youth and a telephone to provide brief services. The SYLS lawyer may also refer clients to health professionals and program staff. Management staff also partner on advocacy projects affecting street-involved youth. Partner agencies currently include Yonge Street Mission's Evergreen Centre for Street Youth, Queen West Community Health Centre, the YMCA of Greater Toronto, and Native Child and Family Services Wood Street Drop-in.

#### **Youth shelters in the GTA**

Youth shelters are aware of the SYLS program, and as their programming permits, work with the lawyer to create workshops on issues relating to homeless youth in a variety of shelters at different times. For example, the SYLS lawyer attends *Youth Without Shelter* approximately every two months and provides a legal education workshop and individual consultations with the residents. The SYLS program additionally provides shelter residents and agency staff with individual legal advice, larger scale educational events, and community development projects.

#### **Homeless youth drop-in and employment programs**

In addition to the weekly drop-in locations, the SYLS lawyer attends a variety of youth drop-in and employment programs, collaborating in workshop programming on issues relating to street-involved youth. The SYLS program additionally gives participants and agency staff an opportunity to receive legal advice, and invites them to participate in larger scale educational events and community development projects. Drop in and employment programs currently include Yonge Street Mission's Evergreen Centre's Connecting Youth to Work Program, St. Christopher House Toronto Youth Jobs Corp Program and Supporting Our Youth Monday Night Drop-in.



# KEY MESSAGES

## ACCESS TO JUSTICE (OR REMOVAL OF BARRIERS TO ACCESSING LEGAL HELP) FOR AT-RISK AND HOMELESS YOUTH

Instead of simply responding as representatives to youth in legal crises, the SYLS program educates on legal rights and responsibilities, working to enhance laws and policies that prevent homelessness or support youth transitions out of homelessness. By addressing the legal and justice issues of street youth (through individual advocacy and information), SYLS helps remove legal barriers that keep young people homeless, unemployed and unable to move to other centres where housing and employment may be more available. SYLS achieves this by:

- a) Providing regular and consistent drop-in lawyering services in locations frequented by youth (drop-in programs, parks, shelters);
- b) Providing legal education and proactive lawyering (explaining what legal problems the youth may have beyond that of a criminal problem, e.g.: family; debt) to at-risk and homeless youth;
- c) Providing immediate, no-delay service, advice and referrals.

## ENHANCING THE CAPACITY OF THE ATTENDING LAWYER AND JFCY TO MANAGE AND ADDRESS A WIDE VARIETY OF LEGAL PROBLEMS

By acting as a one-stop shop for street-involved youth with a range of legal issues, the SYLS program empowers youth to address their layered legal problems and facilitates effective and lasting resolutions. The SYLS lawyer plays an important role in crafting solutions to the criminal problems that in turn often include solutions to other problems that many street youth face. Because the SYLS program is a project of Justice for Children and Youth, it benefits from the clinic's expertise in education and family law, housing for poor young people, and mental health supports.

## ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC PROBLEMS FACING THE AT-RISK AND HOMELESS POPULATION THROUGH RESEARCH, LAW AND POLICY REFORM, AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

SYLS exists in spite of a system that favours criminalization over support. In addition to preventing and ending homelessness while providing legal assistance to individual clients, SYLS has a broader goal of preventing and reducing youth homelessness at a systems level. SYLS fulfills this goal by engaging in community development, research, and advocacy on behalf of the street-involved youth population. The research they have been engaged in has been used to inform the program, but more significantly to address systems change. This includes advocating for changes in laws or policies that contribute to youth homelessness. For example, JFCY has advocated for the revision of law enforcement records retention policies to ensure fairness to youth and alignment with the *Youth Criminal Justice Act*, especially considering youth who face barriers to employment and education.

## PROVIDING STREET-INVOLVED YOUTH AND STAFF AT AGENCIES THAT SERVE THEM WITH INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE IN A WAY THAT OVERCOMES LEGAL BARRIERS

It is important to provide legal education to both street involved youth, staff members at youth serving agencies, as well as other advocates, including legal aid lawyers, in order to assist them with problem solving and advocacy on different issues facing the population. Educating young people about the value of the law will empower them to assert their legal rights. SYLS' regular workshops provide education on all of the issues that street youth struggle with, as well as practical information about what to do to resolve the problem. In addition, SYLS delivers training sessions including a one-day think tank event related to legal issues for street involved youth.

## COLLECTING DATA AND INDICATORS

SYLS has been collecting data on a variety of outcomes, focusing on the nature of the legal issues that young people presented with, however they initially lacked focus on the tangible outcomes that occurred as a result of contact with SYLS. For example, they reported that 42% of the youth they worked with had a criminal justice issue. What was not pulled from the data however, was that of those youth, 34 (30%) had a legal issue resolved with the help of SYLS. If the issue had not been resolved and had resulted in a criminal record, that would have likely been a barrier to securing housing and employment. Of those young people, 17 were able to access other social services in order to address needs that prevent them from securing housing and employment.

Income is another factor that contributes to homelessness, and in 2011-12 SYLS helped 44 young people access some sort of income including student loans, employment, compensation, and social assistance initiatives. In other words, without the service, 44 young people would have had even less money, which would have put them at further risk of a variety of housing and/or legal problems.

By identifying the key outcomes of a service, as they relate to the evidence-based risk factors for homelessness, SYLS now has a stronger message about the potential impact the service has on ending homelessness.

# CONCLUSION

When youth are forced to live on the streets, they face a range of legal, justice and personal issues that can further impede their development. They are more likely to be victims of crime, and at the same time, are often subject to extra negative attention by police because they are young and homeless. They experience difficulty securing benefits and rights. That is, the vast majority of street youth are in need of legal supports. Unfortunately, there are very few legal supports available. In order to end homelessness, we need to do everything we can to help youth get off the streets, including supporting them with the challenges they face.

To the best of our knowledge, the SYLS program is unique in Canada. There is real potential for this program to be adapted and replicated in other communities. Many, if not all, aspects of the SYLS initiative could be replicated in other Canadian communities, modified to their local needs and the legal aid scheme in the province.

The program was discussed as a model at the American Bar Association's annual conference in August 2011. A four-part program like SYLS, incorporating education, advocacy for systemic change, community development, and individual advice and representation could be integrated into already existing legal aid structures, such as Ontario Legal Aid Clinics, or law school clinics throughout the country. Alternatively, a program like SYLS could be created out of a partnership between private bar lawyers and community agencies, with a lead lawyer or advocate coordinating services.

The outcomes of this preventive work should extend well beyond the program, and can potentially have an impact in many communities across Canada.

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