

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth Homelessness Prevention Initiative Needs Assessment

Stephen Gaetz | 2023

The purpose of the Making the Shift (MtS) needs assessment is to ascertain the degree to which the youth homelessness sector in Canada understands and supports the need for youth homelessness prevention. This includes a deep analysis of five prevention interventions we have tested and refined over the past five or so years, which are Housing First for Youth, Family and Natural Supports, Reconnect, Duty to Assist and Upstream.

→ **What We Did**

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness designed and broadly distributed a survey targeting the youth homelessness sector between March and May of this year. A strong response rate resulted in 153 useable surveys from youth homelessness service providers and participants came from across Canada. This very strong response rate gives us confidence in our results.

→ **The Youth Homelessness Sector Is Very Supportive of Prevention**

The strong support for the idea that prevention is key to ending youth homelessness has implications for the work of MtS. That almost 90% of respondents agreed with the statement, "Prevention is necessary to solve youth homelessness" was a welcome surprise, suggesting our efforts to educate on this front have been successful.

In terms of a communications strategy, going forward less effort needs to be placed on convincing youth homelessness service providers of the benefits of prevention, though a more concerted effort to reach community entities funded by Reaching Home would be of value.

→ **The Commitment Curve Identifies Interest in Prevention.**

As part of the needs assessment, we used a methodology called Commitment Curve to help us understand the readiness and needs of street youth organizations regarding preventive interventions. The Commitment Curve is a tool that assesses people's knowledge of an intervention, their interest in implementation and the different stages of commitment that a stakeholder typically follows in adopting new ways of working.

While there is no doubt strong support for prevention within the youth homelessness sector, there is a question to what extent there is broad awareness of actual preventive interventions and whether there is interest in implementation.

Over the past six years, [Making the Shift—Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab](#)¹ has played an innovative role by testing out a series of youth homelessness prevention interventions. These include:

- 1. **Housing First for Youth (HF4Y)**
- 2. **Family and Natural Supports (FNS)**
- 3. **Reconnect**
- 4. **Duty to Assist**
- 5. **Upstream**

Below is a diagram charting the different stages of commitment that can be applied to an intervention. This methodology is helpful in understanding local interest and capacity-building needs in regard to the prevention of youth homelessness and the openness of communities to explore a range of initiatives.

Figure 1. Making the Shift Commitment Curve



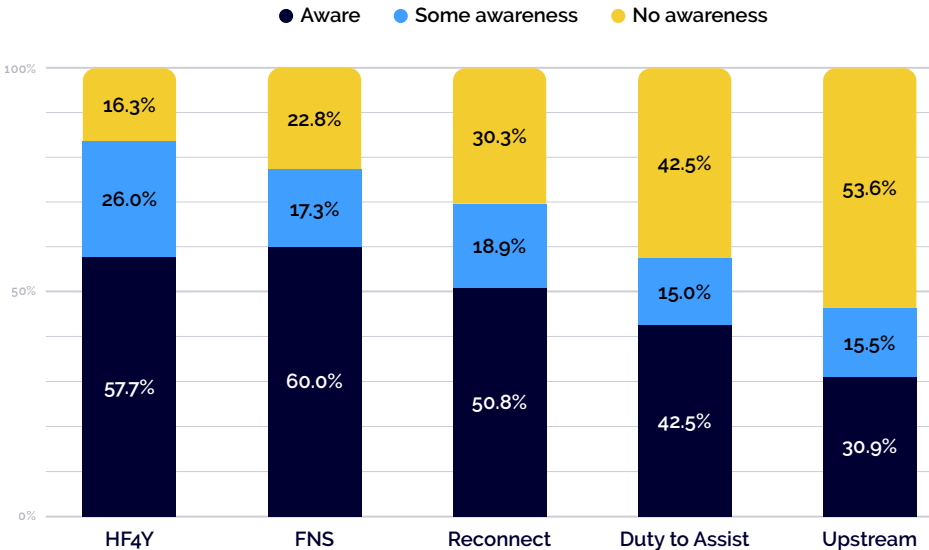
1. The Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab is co-led by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and A Way Home Canada.

In the report that follows, we provide a detailed analysis of the Commitment Curve results for all five interventions.

→ **Level of Awareness of Prevention Interventions**

For the most part, the survey respondents demonstrated some level of awareness of the prevention interventions in question. The highest levels of awareness were for Housing First for Youth, Family and Natural Supports and Reconnect.

Figure 2. Percentage of respondents who were aware of the Making the Shift youth homelessness prevention interventions



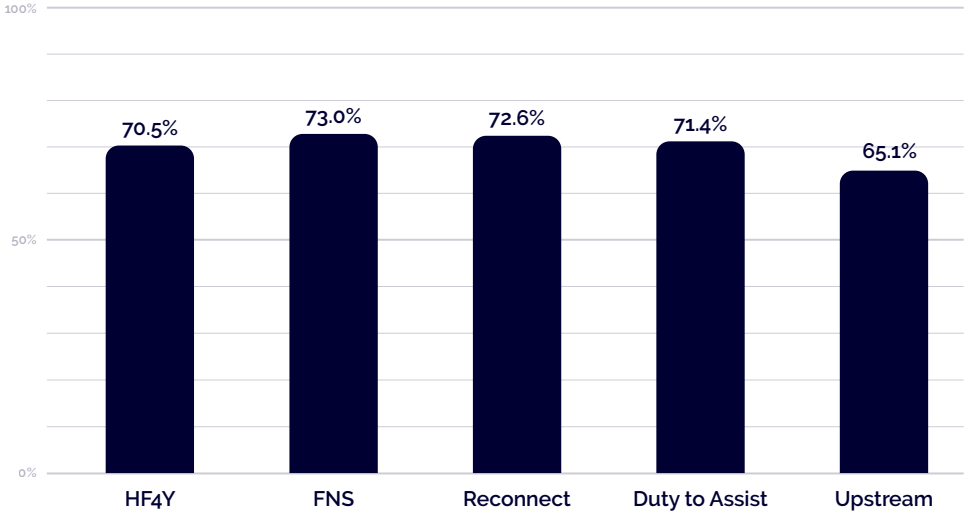
The survey did indicate that there is room for growth. The dark blue portion of the figure above identifies the percentage of respondents who were not aware of the preventive intervention in question or were aware of it but did not know much about it.² The lowest levels of understanding were for Duty to Assist and Upstream. All of this has implications for the communications strategy of Making the Shift going forward. While between 53% and 61% of respondents demonstrate awareness for HF4Y, FNS and Reconnect, there is still considerable room for growth in knowledge and interest for all three interventions, and this should be the communications priority in the short and intermediate term. A more concerted effort to raise awareness of Upstream and Duty to Assist will be an intermediate and long-term goal that will be based on enhanced development and understanding of these interventions. Overall, a more effective and targeted communications strategy will need to be designed and implemented for MtS by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) and A Way Home Canada (AWHC).

2. Note that the data indicating awareness includes positive responses to the question, "Organization has a clear understanding of the intervention but is not interest in implementing it".

The good news is that there is strong support among service providers for more information about specific preventive interventions (Figure 2 below). This includes not only those organizations that know little or nothing about such interventions, but also those organizations that currently have some degree of knowledge of the interventions. Depending on the intervention, between 65% and 73% of respondents indicated they would like to find out more about the interventions.

Organizations are very likely to support these preventive interventions once they have a clear understanding of them.

Figure 3. Percentage of organizations that would like to learn more about the interventions



We should also note the very high level of interest expressed in finding out more about adapting HF4Y to meet the needs of Indigenous youth, and in particular how to design and support an Indigenous-led approach for HF4Y. This finding is important for MtS's communications strategy, and also has implications for training and technical assistance.

→ Commitment Curve—Zone of Interest

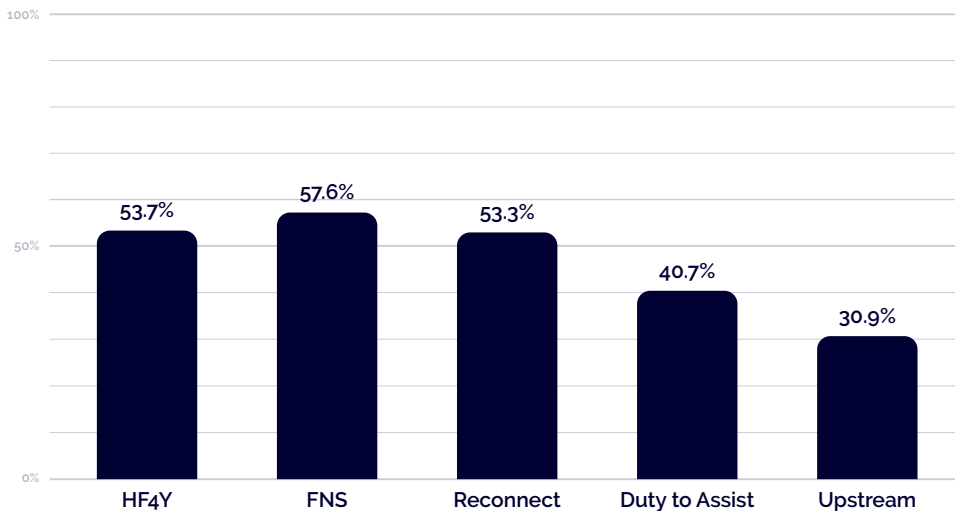
When using the commitment curve to facilitate transformation, we can determine the degree to which an organization or community has knowledge of an intervention and an interest in implementing it someday.

Key steps on the way up the curve include:

- Identifying that a particular intervention will help the respondent's organization achieve its goals.
- Stating their interest in implementing a particular intervention, although they currently lack capacity.
- Actively planning to implement but need more support.
- Currently running a pilot of the intervention.
- Implementing the intervention as one of their core programs.

Organizations for which one or more of the above are true are in what is known as the “Zone of Interest,” meaning that, with the right capacity building and support, their intention is to implement one or more of the five preventive interventions.

Figure 4. Zone of Interest - Percentage of respondents inclined to implement the intervention



A high percentage of respondents —62.7%—were in the Zone of Interest for at least one of the five identified preventive interventions. Figure 4 breaks down those in the Zone of Interest by intervention type. The interventions that show the most interest and readiness include Housing First for Youth, Family and Natural Supports and Reconnect, though there is a significant level of interest across all five interventions.

Across all of the interventions, the MtS communications and marketing strategy will need to raise levels of awareness and build interest among participants in exploring the implementation of such interventions in the future.

As part of our training and technical assistance (TTA) strategy, we will reach out to all of the respondents who are in the Zone of Interest to further gauge their needs and interest in TTA across the different interventions.

→ **Service Providers Identify a Great Need for Organizational Capacity Building and Support**

Early in this executive summary, we indicated that 90% of respondents felt that a focus on prevention is necessary to end youth homelessness. At the same time, research participants also identified a lack of capacity as the reason they do not engage in more youth homelessness prevention. Only a quarter of respondents believed their organization had the resources, knowledge and capacity to invest in training and technical assistance. They voiced their belief that the shift to prevention will not happen without support. They indicated the following needs:

→ **Need for more information.**

Over 65% indicated they needed more information and training on the five interventions we are promoting,

→ **Need for communities do more.**

A very high percentage of respondents (91.3%) identified that their community needs to do more in the area of youth homelessness prevention.

→ **Need for dedicated funding.**

Over 80% indicated there needs to be dedicated funds to support preventive interventions.

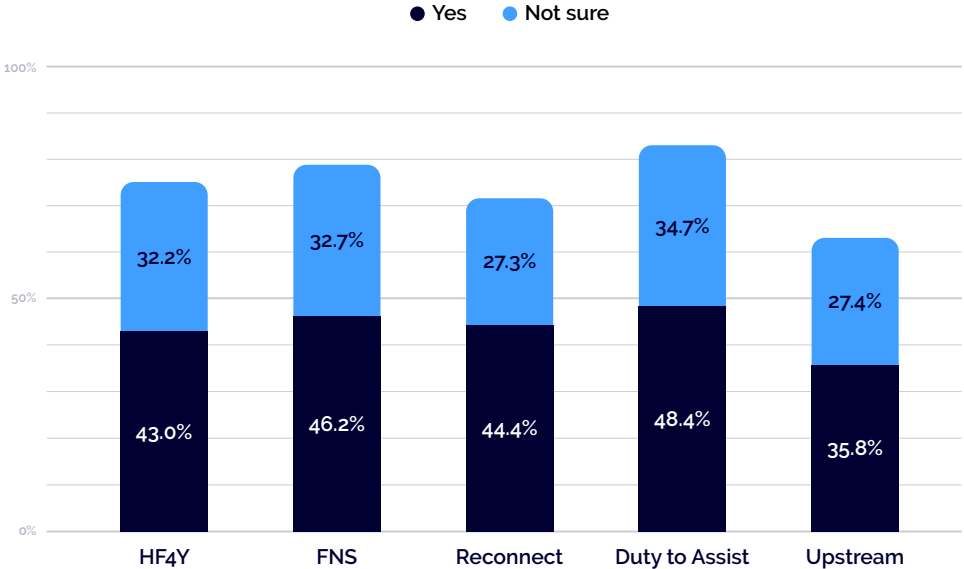
→ **Need for quality training and technical assistance.**

Three quarters of respondents identified that having access to quality training and technical assistance would be necessary for the successful implementation of preventive interventions.

The fact that many organizations want training and technical assistance but do not know where to access it is a significant insight from this report. Making the Shift (COH and AWHC) have the ability to deliver quality TTA regarding all of these preventive interventions. That this is not widely known reinforces our view that a more comprehensive and targeted communications and marketing strategy needs to be established.

Innovation and transformation cannot occur without the right organizational capacity. Figure 5 highlights the intersection of organizational desire and commitment to the five interventions detailed in this report. It also represents the acknowledgement of the necessity of building organizational capacity to deliver on implementation.

Figure 5. Percentage of organizations interested in implementing the interventions but needing support to do that.



In total 55.8% (73 unique organizations) expressed interest in implementing at least one of the five preventive interventions while also identifying they needed support. Depending on the intervention, between 35.8% and 46.2% of service providers expressed this view.

Having identified a need for support, many organizations need capacity building that does not simply focus on providing more information but also on training and technical assistance. A clear challenge is that many organizations do not know where to go for support.

→ Potential for Growth

It is interesting to note that a sizable number of service providers answered “not sure” when asked if they were interested in implementing the interventions but needed support. While this indicates they currently are not ready to commit, with the right information, engagement and support, it is possible that many could eventually change their opinion and support implementation and obtaining TTA.

→ Conclusions

This section details the key takeaways from the needs assessment.

- **Prevention is broadly recognized within the sector** as being necessary for ending youth homelessness.
- **Many organizations have a good understanding of what prevention entails** and know about the prevention interventions in this report. Nevertheless, across the board, service providers suggested that they need more information on prevention.
- However, information alone will not get us where we need to be. Perhaps the strongest message to come from this needs assessment is the paramount **need for enhanced organizational capacity building**. Moving towards prevention is an exercise in transformation that can be challenging. **Service providers identified that in order to implement preventive interventions, they needed training and technical support**, but many do not know where to access this. Providers also identified **the need for targeted funding to support youth homelessness prevention**.
- Finally, service providers felt that **they needed much more support to get their communities on board with homelessness prevention**. This corresponds with what we have learned from the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness regarding the fact that many community entities do not prioritize youth homelessness or, in particular, prevention.
- None of this will just happen organically. **Higher orders of government need to support the work of capacity building and make investments in effective preventive interventions**.

For more details, refer to [the full report](#).