

# Youth Reconnect



# Youth Reconnect Program Guide

An Early Intervention Approach to  
Preventing Youth Homelessness



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Lastly, this is a work in progress. In the spirit of social innovation, we will continue to make edits and refine the model presented here as we learn more about how to do early intervention in progress.

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# Early Intervention Starts Upstream

Young people who are at risk of homelessness often exhibit early “warning signs.” From a lack of engagement at school to poor hygiene to missing soccer practices regularly – these signs can indicate that a young person needs help. Failing to intervene early has consequences, including disconnection from community, school, and/or networks of support, which can ultimately lead to homelessness.

Early intervention approaches to prevention – working upstream to provide young people with supports directly within communities – therefore, is essential for reducing the flow of young people into homelessness. More than just common sense, this prevention-based approach is supported by research. The [Without a Home](#) study (Gaetz, et al., 2016), for instance, identified that 40% of young people who were homeless had their first experience of leaving home before they were 16 years old, and for these young people there are few if any supports available to help them avoid the perilous consequences of becoming homeless. For these reasons, it is imperative that there be an increased investment in policy and practices that enable more flexible, evidence-based, and youth-centered prevention strategies that are reflective of the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social needs of developing adolescents.

As an early intervention program, Youth Reconnect (YR) is part of a broader youth homelessness prevention strategy that draws from [The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness](#) and its typology of youth homelessness prevention (Gaetz et al., 2018). It is designed to ensure that young people remain connected to their family, friends, and communities, and stay engaged in school in order to maintain a positive support network that can enhance personal development and well-being. When combined with structural and systemic measures, early intervention programs, such as YR, stabilize a young person’s housing situation and prevent them from experiencing the health, safety, and mental health effects of homelessness. This goes a long way to reducing the likelihood that they will experience chronic homelessness in adulthood and prevent them from enduring a lifetime of hardship (Gaetz et al, 2018).

## Testing Approaches to Early Intervention

Since 2017, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and A Way Home Canada have been implementing and evaluating three program models that are situated across the continuum of prevention, in 10 communities and 12 sites in Ontario and Alberta. Among these is an early intervention called Youth Reconnect.

This model is based on the Australian Reconnect and the innovative Youth Reconnect program administered by RAFT Niagara. In both cases, outcomes for young people who took part in these early interventions improved in several key areas, including housing stability, enhanced family cohesion, and increased engagement with school (Mission Australia, 2016; Raft, 2014).

This document describes the key elements of the YR program model, including program elements and objectives, case examples of YR in practice, and necessary conditions for implementation. It is intended for communities who are interested in pursuing similar early intervention strategies. The key to success, regardless of the approaches taken, lies in building and nurturing community partnerships with service providers, educators, policy professionals, and young people.

- **If you are a service provider...** this guide outlines the core programmatic elements of YR based on lessons learned from practitioners and program evaluations.
- **If you are an educator...** this guide demonstrates the benefits that come from partnering with local service providers when trying to enhance outcomes for students.
- **If you are a policy professional...** this guide highlights the important community partnerships needed to design and implement early intervention programs in communities.
- **If you are a young person...** this guide reflects your feedback and suggestions for service and program improvement.

# Youth Reconnect

Youth Reconnect (YR) is a community-based early intervention program that is designed to help young people (ages 13–24) who are at risk of or in the early stages of homelessness. The goal of YR is to help young people stay connected to their family, community and school, and to strengthen connections to natural supports in order to prevent and/or reduce the risk of homelessness. It builds on the practices of Family and Natural Supports (FNS) and is guided by the principles of Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) (Gaetz, 2017) but focuses upstream on providing school-based supports that keep young people in place, so that they can move forward with their life in a safe and planned way.

## School-Based Supports

Educators are often the first adults to spot some of the early warning signs that a young person may be at-risk of homelessness. By nurturing close partnerships between Youth Reconnect programs and schools, there is a real opportunity for young people to find out where to access help and for teachers to be able to make connections and direct young people to supports in their community. Educators and YR staff can work together to address the needs of young people and achieve the mutual goals of individual and family well-being, at the same time as promoting school engagement and student success.

### Why Do Schools Matter?

*“Virtually every young person who becomes homeless was once in school. Moreover, there was likely an adult in their life – a teacher, a counselor, a coach – who knew something was wrong, but did not know what to do.”*  
(Gaetz et al., 2018, p. 77)



## **Community-Focused Service Delivery**

YR engages young people in their community, well before they need to access shelter or emergency services. In practice, this often means that YR workers go the extra mile to meet young people in community centres, coffee shops, or wherever is most comfortable. This work tends to occur outside of normal work hours to accommodate the schedule of young people and their families.

Once a referral is made, a YR worker conducts an in-person assessment, which typically includes setting actionable goals and identifying specific needs (e.g., finding a job, helping repair a relationship at home, or improving school attendance). This work is carried out with ongoing consent from the young person.

The case management services are youth-centered and designed to address personal and family challenges, while building on their strengths, talents, assets to help them achieve their goals and enhance well-being (Gaetz, 2017, p. 8). In practice, these supports can include things such as information, guidance, family mediation and support, systems navigation, access to mental health services (preferably on-site), and referrals.

It is important to note that as a form of early intervention, YR can be adapted to communities of any size and can easily be adapted to rural, small town, and urban contexts. This means accounting for the size of a community, identifying the needs of priority populations, and assessing community readiness for implementation (e.g., established partnerships with local school boards, educators, and community organizations).

## Program Elements and Objectives

The ultimate goal of YR is to prevent a young person from experiencing homelessness. This can be achieved by helping young people who are at risk of homelessness to stay in place in their communities, to stabilize and improve their housing situation, to strengthen family relationships where practicable, and improve their level of engagement with education, training, employment, and the community.

### 1 **Keep young people “in place”**

**“Keeping young people in place is about keeping them in their community. To this day I still feel out of place, an outcast, that’s bumming out of housing...It would be so nice to get that sense of home again, even if you have to rebuild your home.”**

Youth with Lived Experience

Youth Reconnect is a “place-based” intervention that is designed to enhance young peoples’ assets, self-sufficiency, and connections to meaningful adults, so that they remain attached to community and school. It is designed so that young people can access services where they are, instead of having to access supports in another community.

The disconnect, risk of homelessness, and potential for exploitation that is an outcome of leaving the community can undermine a young person’s well-being in both the short- and long-term. Youth will experience better outcomes if they are able to age in place with necessary supports and don’t leave the community because they have to.

## 2 Stabilize living situation

“A lot of kids and their families need help, they don’t get along, YR helps with that, you can sit down and have conversations, handle conflict when it comes to parents.”

Youth Reconnect  
Participant

The reasons young people may fall into homelessness are complex and diverse. A key objective of YR is to help stabilize a young person’s living situation, either by addressing issues at home that are producing the risk of homelessness, such as family conflict, or through helping young people who can no longer stay at home find housing and support options in their community. These efforts are intended to keep young people connected to school, friends, and meaningful adults in their lives – all of which are vital for positive youth development.

**Stabilizing a young person’s living situation may involve:**

- Ensuring access to safe, secure, and stable housing.
- Addressing family conflict.
- Providing the young person with emotional, physical, and income support.
- Offering mental health supports which can contribute to enhanced well-being, strengthened personal assets, resilience, and a positive sense of self, as well as address trauma.
- Addressing challenges and stresses a family may be facing.
- Ensuring young people feel supported and are self-sufficient.
- Enhancing connections with cultural supports and community.

### 3 Support young people and their families

“The family is a collective unit that needs to be supported. (It’s) not the youth that has all this bad stuff that happened to them.”

Youth with Lived Experience

Young people enter into homelessness largely as a result of challenges they experience with their parents/ caregivers or their families (Winland, 2013). In spite of this, YR operates with the underlying ethos that family (however defined by the young person) *is* important. A truly effective response must consider opportunities to reconcile relationships that have become strained overtime from past or current conflict. Young people should lead this process, choosing who and when to reconcile with individuals in their network of support.

For that reason, Youth Reconnect is a youth-focused intervention that serves the whole family, meaning that family members and natural supports are also considered program participants. There may be times when case work with a family takes on a life outside of the young person. In those cases, referrals and supports will need to be made for family members and natural supports outside of the relational work that is done with the young person.

#### **Supporting young people and their families may include:**

- Supporting the young person to return or remain at home.
- Enhancing positive family relationships through mediation, counselling, and conflict resolution support.
- Providing training and support for parenting.
- Reconciling and strengthening the young person’s relationships with other family members.
- Addressing the issues and needs of parents that may underlie family conflict.
- Connecting them with cultural supports and their community.

## 4 Enhance school engagement

**“A lot of people on the verge of dropping out of schools. YR would be a helpful response for those youth...A lot of people hesitate (to reach out for support) and the more they hesitate they aren’t going to do anything. They are ashamed of the situation.”**

Youth Reconnect Participant

Enhancing school engagement and supporting student success are key goals of Youth Reconnect. Research demonstrates that young people who do not graduate from high school report lower rates of labour force participation, poorer health outcomes, and increased activity with the justice system (Hankivsky, 2008). This suggests that keeping young people connected to schools can have a profound impact on a young person’s well-being, family relations, and their risk of homelessness.

### **Supporting youth to stay connected to school may include:**

- Improving school attendance
- Enhancing feelings of inclusion, by addressing bullying, increasing social connectedness, and helping young people to engage in meaningful activities at school.
- Addressing conflict with school authorities.
- Supporting student success including high school completion.
- Improved employment and training opportunities.
- Connecting them with cultural supports and spaces at school.

# Considerations for Implementation

When implementing YR, service providers (including front line workers) should consider the following as important to guiding the work.

## Rights-based Approach

A human rights approach embraces the idea that all young people have a fundamental, legal right to be free of homelessness and to have access to adequate housing. “Youth homelessness is the denial of basic human rights and once identified as such, it must be remedied” (Gaetz et al., 2015, p. 1). Practically, this means that policies, laws, and strategies aimed at youth homelessness prevention must be grounded in human rights at all stages of development, implementation, and evaluation. As a human rights violation, youth homelessness must be remedied, and this rights-based approach can be applied through YR.

**Youth Rights, Right Now** (2016) is an excellent resource that should be consulted when developing strategies that are focused on ending youth homelessness and are rooted in international human rights law (Canada without Poverty, et al., 2016). The guide argues that all young people have a fundamental, legal right to be free of homelessness and to have access to adequate housing. The reality that youth homelessness exists in Canada, and that we allow young people to remain trapped in homelessness represents a denial of basic human rights.

**Canada is a signatory to a number of international human rights covenants and treaties that define rights relevant to homeless youth<sup>1</sup>, including the following rights:**

- Right to adequate standard of living
- Right to adequate housing
- Right to adequate food
- Right to work
- Right to health
- Right to education
- Right to personal security & privacy
- Right of equal access to justice
- Right to assembly
- Right to freedom of expression
- Right to life

(Canada Without Poverty & A Way Home Canada, 2016)

1. This includes the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC); the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD).

## Youth-centred Services With Individualized Supports

Youth Reconnect provides services that are driven by the needs of the young person and their families.

### Aspects of youth-centred services include:

- Establishing trust and treating young people with respect and dignity
- Supporting young people to identify and set goals, and help them follow through
- Referring the young person to services of their choice and accompanying them to appointments to make sure they do not feel that they are being “passed around” (e.g., making “warm referrals”)
- Assisting young people to develop creative solutions to their problems
- Advocating and modeling self-advocacy for young people in a service system environment
- Promoting ethical behaviour and anti-discriminatory practice that treats participants, family, and staff with dignity and respect

## Positive Youth Development

Adopting a positive youth development approach has important implications for practice. Assessment tools, case management, and data management supports must be strengths-based and account for risks and assets. The program model and case management supports must necessarily incorporate an understanding of the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social needs of the developing adolescent. It must build on the strengths, talents, and dreams of young people, and work towards enhancing protective factors and resilience.

**“(We) talk about what I want to do and we actually go and do what we talked about!” – Youth Reconnect Participant**

Positive youth development (PYD) “is an approach to working with youth that emphasizes building on youths’ strengths and providing supports and opportunities that will help them achieve goals and transition to adulthood in a productive, healthy manner” (Department of Health and Human Services, N/D). PYD is an approach to engaging young people within their communities that is productive and constructive in focus and fosters the development of positive relationships, better outcomes, and opportunities to achieve goals. As a strength-based approach, PYD focuses not just on risk and vulnerability, but also a youth’s assets.

### **A positive youth development approach:**

- Identifies the youth’s personal strengths in order to build self-esteem, personal assets, and a positive sense of self
- Works to improve the youth’s communication and problem-solving skills
- Enhances and builds natural supports, including with family
- Assists the youth in personal goal setting
- Helps the youth to access educational opportunities, and identify personal interests

## Timely and Flexible Supports

For YR to work, young people need to be aware that help and supports exist. Likewise, meaningful adults in young people’s lives – including educators and school counsellors, coaches, social workers, health care providers, and youth-serving organizations – must also know that help is there, and how to direct young people to the supports they need. YR can support such adults who identify young people they believe to be struggling with a pathway to support. Youth and their families should also be able to access YR supports on their own.

Additionally, it is advised that service providers follow up within 24–48 hours from the time a referral is made. Research shows that a response within 24 hours can prevent youth from leaving home (Australian Government, 2018, p. 21)

Once a connection is made, the young person is then met by a YR worker at a time and place of the youth’s choosing. Together they assess issues, needs, and strengths of the young person in order to identify goals and help develop a youth-led plan. As a youth-centered intervention, the services the young person receives will differ depending on individual circumstances and needs.

**As such, in delivering a timely intervention, Youth Reconnect workers will use a broad range of interventions and strategies to support a young person and their family, including:**

- Assessment
- Case management
- Goal setting
- System navigation and referral
- Advocacy
- Counselling (individual and family)
- Family mediation
- Group work
- Outreach
- Practical support
- Brokerage
- Therapies (individual and family)
- Collaboration with other services (cultural and Indigenous organizations, specialists, community stakeholders and networks<sup>2</sup>)

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2. These have been adapted from: Australian Government (2018) Reconnect Operational Guidelines, 1 July 2018 to 30 June 2021. Department of Social Services, Families and Communities Program.

Given the emphasis on positive youth development, YR work demands flexibility in terms of when and where services are delivered. For example, YR work may need to occur outside of the typical 9 to 5 work day to accommodate the schedules of young people. This may require a smaller team of YR staff to work outside normal office hours to better accommodate the needs of youth (Gaetz, et al., 2018, p. 83).

**“She (YR worker) helps with access to foodbanks and things like that and bus tickets and cab vouchers. She helps with transportation if needed, helps you get a job... a Social Insurance Number card and a resume...” - Youth Reconnect Participant**

The kind of supports young people need will vary based on the underlying issues that are producing the risk of homelessness. In some cases, the support may be short term to address a crisis. More often youth may require more intensive case management. In either case, after the living situation of the young person is stabilized, young people should stay connected to the program and have the opportunity to re-engage with supports if necessary. Designed as the “lightest touch” possible, YR workers should periodically check in with youth to ensure they are still housed and engaged in either school or work, and to ensure that the factors that put them at risk in the first place have not returned. In other words, youth exit the program of their own volition and when they are ready—there are no timelines that determine a youth’s involvement with the program.

It is recommended that YR workers carry a caseload of 15–25 young people at any given time, or 50–60 clients per worker over the course of a year. Caseloads will ebb and flow, and things may slow down during the summer months and holidays, as most referrals come from schools.

*“As you can imagine, clients require the most intensive supports up front, but in most cases can be moved to a lower level of service within a couple of weeks. The majority of youth in a YR worker’s caseload are medium acuity in terms of the complexity of their needs, and often become low acuity with supports. We average about 3 months of service between intake and discharge.”*

Mike Lethby, Executive Director, RAFT

## Cultural and Contextual Competency

The design and development of a Youth Reconnect program should reflect the identities and experiences of the youth and families in the surrounding community in order to be accessible, inclusive, and competent in the supports that are being delivered. The intersecting identities and diversity among groups, such as newcomer youth, Black youth, LGBTQ2S+, young parents, youth with disabilities, and youth in rural or remote communities, have unique experiences and needs that should inform the operations of a YR program.

**“...getting someone from (the same) background, they build a bond, they understand each other. It could actually be a lot more comforting...it’s pretty inspiring.” - Youth Reconnect Participant**

Ideally, cultural or context-based YR services should be developed to support the unique groups of youth from varying cultures, identities, and contexts. The value of services that are designed for specific groups of youth is that they are experts in the areas of providing YR from a cultural or contextual lens, which may include having agency leadership and staff that reflects the youth’s identity and providing culturally based supports that may be lacking from a mainstream service provider. The provision of cultural or context-based services may also meet the needs of youth who are uncomfortable or unwilling to access mainstream services, which may be due to feelings of mistrust, feeling uncomfortable, or from their trauma histories. A goal of all YR programs should be to be inclusive to all groups of youth, such as hiring staff that reflects the culture and backgrounds of youth in the surrounding community, providing Culturally Competent training for staff, and creating or designing a space that reflects the surrounding community (e.g., displaying artwork and literature).

Culturally competent services identify and remove any barriers that prevent young people and families from accessing and participating in Youth Reconnect. These barriers can include any aspect of culture or context that is unfamiliar or unwelcome to the recipient of services.

**In removing as many barriers as possible, Youth Reconnect services should:**

- Ensure that language translation is available (where possible)
- Have an anti-oppressive, intersectional approach that believes personal experiences are inextricably linked to and determined by social, cultural, political, and economic relationships and systems
- Be mindful that young people and families may have different expectations surrounding family roles and responsibilities based on their cultural norms
- Cultivate and foster inclusive and welcoming space

## Working With Indigenous Youth (First Nations, Metis, Inuit)

Indigenous youth are at higher risk of experiencing homelessness. Therefore, YR programs designed for Indigenous youth must consider the impacts of colonization, cultural genocide, racial discrimination, and intergenerational trauma that are experienced by Indigenous youth (Thistle, 2017). As stated in the [Definition of Indigenous Homelessness in Canada](#), “Indigenous homelessness has been incorrectly understood by settlers as being without a structure of habitation or being roofless (Somerville, 1992), when Indigenous homelessness is also about being without All My Relations. Being without a physical structure is only a symptom of the root causes of Indigenous homelessness, which are being without healthy social, cultural, spiritual, emotional, and physical relationships” (Christensen, 2013; Thistle, 2017, p. 16). This definition indicates that YR supports need to be tailored and responsive to these root issues in order to prevent and sustain Indigenous youth from experiencing homelessness.

**“...focusing on the cultural and spiritual, access to Elders, ceremony...it’s important for healing and trauma.” - Youth with Lived Experience**

While there are currently limitations in knowledge on how to create a YR program model for Indigenous youth, we believe that where possible the program design must incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing and practices, and ideally be led and staffed by Indigenous organizations, partners, and communities so that the supports provided are culturally reflective, respectful, and embedded in Indigenous knowledge and worldviews (Thistle, 2017). For example, based on the promising practices from programs that have been adapted for Indigenous youth, such as the Endaayaang Housing First for Indigenous Youth project, a YR program for Indigenous youth must involve Elders and/or Knowledge Keepers as guides in the development and implementation of a program model. In promising practices there must also be integration of and ongoing opportunities for youth to connect to their culture, community, family, and kin and to (re)build their identity that is reflective of their nation. Indigenous young people should be a part of the consultation and provide feedback on the program design. All individuals—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—should participate in cultural awareness, safety, and allyship training to deepen their understanding of the community and nation they are supporting, and these discussions should be ongoing. Overall, the approach to an Indigenous YR program must reflect the Nation and the needs identified by elders, youth, families, and community (A Way Home Canada et al., 2018).

## Partnerships and Collaboration

The success of Youth Reconnect requires a focused approach to partnership and collaboration. For instance, YR programs will have multiple entry points and may take referrals from a broad range of people and core services including parents, concerned neighbours, schools, child welfare, community organizations, the youth justice system, police, medical and mental health services, youth employment and training organizations, etc.

**“Finding connections in the community that are meaningful. Community partners are connected to like employers...programs, those may count as mentors that are important to keeping youth stable.” - Youth with Lived Experience**

Moreover, the case management approach of YR works best when embedded within a “systems of care”, where links are made to necessary services and supports based on the needs of the youth and family. For instance, YR staff will likely need to make referrals to health and mental health services for additional assessment, treatment, and supports. For both systems of referrals and case management to work effectively, then, YR workers will need to network and spend time building and developing good working relationships with such institutions and service providers.

Perhaps the most important partnership for YR is with local schools, as this is where young people spend most of their waking hours, where they have relationships with friends and potentially meaningful adults in their lives such as teachers, coaches and counsellors – adults who may recognize that something is wrong. Unfortunately, most educators are not trained, nor do they necessarily have capacity to support young people in such difficult circumstances. Cultivating close relationships with local schools and their staff is thus central to the success of Youth Reconnect, but this takes time, commitment, and resources. This work needs to occur at several levels, including building relationships with guidance counsellors, principals, school board officials, and teachers.

**“(Homelessness) affects school, their education and ability to learn. (School is) hindered by their problems...be there to advocate through school and home, show them stability, (and) to have someone to rely on who is always going to be there.” - Youth Reconnect Participant**

**A successful Youth Reconnect program starts with strong community relationships, which can be built and sustained by:**

- Building a local community of practice that is designed to support YR-related case management activities, share best practices, and coordinate referral activities. The interagency Family and Natural Supports Champions table coordinated by Covenant House Toronto, is an example of the type of collaborative body that could be useful when implementing YR in communities.
- Forging deep collaborations with identity-focused organizations to ensure young people can access culturally specific supports that keep them connected to community and enables self-expression and affirmative identity development, contributing to a positive sense of self.
- Engaging school administration to help them understand Youth Reconnect, its value to the school, and how this work supports the school's goals of educational engagement, student success, and well-being.
- Sharing information with students and staff through assemblies and a communications strategy. YR workers can use this opportunity to educate on homelessness and help people work through and identify risks (both students and teachers) and inform them of available supports if ever they are in crisis. Because YR workers are able to impart information about the rigours of youth homelessness, they can operate as an “early warning system” in that young people and their families may come to self-identify and seek support.
- Cultivating relations with school staff. The presence of YR workers in schools will also provide teachers with key points of contact when they suspect something is wrong. A good strategy is for the YR worker to identify a “school champion” – a key contact within the school (a counsellor, a teacher) who will become a go-to person to help build relationships and direct referrals.

# Youth Reconnect in Practice

Local adaption of the YR program model can take on a variety of forms and should be adapted according to the needs and context of local communities.

To be clear, there is no one-size-fits all version of YR. In fact, there are a number of examples of how YR has been adapted to address the unique needs of communities in Canada and Australia. These adaptations range in scope and scale, with some interventions functioning as an outreach model, with others offering YR as a service directly within schools. As a more general program model, YR is guided by the core principles of Housing First for Youth. Core principles are important because they provide a guide for planning and delivering a strategy, and can also become a standard against which program fidelity is measured — essential for future scaling and/or adaptation. As the case examples below illustrate, YR can take on a variety of forms; however, the goal remains the same: to provide young people at risk of or who have recently experienced homelessness, the supports and services they need to remain connected to family, community, and education.

*“Youth Reconnect provides advocacy, life skills training, one-on-one mentoring, emergency hostel access, family reunification, and community integration. Provided in partnership with other social service agencies, the initiative focuses on helping clients to live independently and reduce high-risk behaviours while maintaining school attendance”*

*(Pettes, 2014, p.1).*

# Reconnect (Australia)

The Reconnect program was launched in 1998 by the Australian government, in response to increasing rates of youth homelessness. The goal of Reconnect is to prevent homelessness by intervening early with families and young people to stabilise and improve their housing situation and improve their level of engagement with family, work, education, training, and their local community (Australian Government, 2009, p. 4).

Reconnect is an excellent example of an early intervention strategy embedded in an integrated community system of care, working across institutional jurisdictions including social services, education, and health to provide young people who become homeless or are at risk of homelessness with supports to stay at home or find alternative supported living arrangements.

**“A focus on responding quickly when a young person or family is referred; a ‘toolbox’ of approaches that include counselling, mediation, and practical support; and collaboration with other service providers.**

**As well as providing assistance to individual young people and their families, Reconnect services also provide group programs, undertake community development projects and work with other agencies to increase the broader service system’s capacity to intervene early in youth homelessness.”**

**(Australian Government, 2003, p. 7).**

## The Raft – Youth Reconnect (Canada)

The RAFT is a youth-serving agency in Southern Ontario's Niagara region that provides programs, services, and resources for youth at-risk of or experiencing homelessness. In partnership with local schools, the RAFT developed an early intervention program model similar to the Australian Reconnect program after recognizing that more and more youth were accessing shelter and a better response was possible. This community-led innovation was designed as an outreach program to provide support to young people and their families in small towns and rural areas surrounding St. Catharines. The RAFT program targets young people between the ages of 16 and 19. Teachers, coaches, and counsellors identify young people they believe to be struggling and offer them the opportunity to meet with a YR worker.

### Typical program interventions include:

- Helping youth remain in schools whenever possible by securing living arrangements.
- Working directly with individual schools and school boards to develop plans for youth returning to school after dropping out or creating education plans to help at-risk youth remain in school.
- Connecting youth with financial support programs and stable housing to ensure youth are able to continue with their education.
- Securing affordable housing and a stabilized income by reducing access barriers and providing advocacy when needed.
- Linking youth to specialized services (e.g., mental health, addictions, family counselling) as required.
- Directly assisting youth to develop a social safety net to support them in the future and to help them as they move forward from the program.
- An evaluation of the RAFT's Youth Reconnect conducted in 2014 demonstrated positive outcomes for youth, including housing stability and connection to school, and that the program model is cost-effective (RAFT, 2014).

# Making the Shift (Canada)

In 2017, the Making the Shift Demonstration Lab partnered with Good Shepherd Centre to plan, deliver, and evaluate a Youth Reconnect demonstration project in Hamilton, Ontario.

## The work of this project is to:

- Clearly define the Youth Reconnect program model with clear objectives and outcomes,
- Deliver services through a multi-year demonstration project, and
- Conduct research and evaluation in order to:
  - **Connect research to practice to lead to continuous improvement**
  - **Determine program and individual level outcomes.**
- Produce better outcomes for youth and their families.

The Youth Reconnect program model is based on the findings of the Making the Shift Demonstration Lab, consultations with the RAFT and Australian Reconnect providers, and a literature review of youth homelessness early intervention and prevention programs.

**“The Youth Reconnect Program has provided Good Shepherd Youth Services the opportunity to be a driving force in a shift from a crisis response to youth homelessness towards a focus on prevention and community and family reunification. Making the Shift has encouraged this by allowing interventions to take place at a younger age - as early as 13 - in creative ways (working with youth and families in whichever way works for them) and encouraging community-based interventions.”**

**- Loretta Hill-Finamore, Good Shepherd, Hamilton, ON**

# Conclusion

There is a growing desire to learn more about the prevention of homelessness in Canada, especially now as the federal government has signaled its focus on reducing the flow of people into chronic homelessness through the Reaching Home Strategy.

YR is an emerging example of how to integrate early intervention practices as part of a system of care that can be delivered in any community, regardless of size or location.

In [\*Without a Home: the National Youth Homelessness\*](#) study (Gaetz, et al., 2016), we learned that we are intervening too late in our efforts to disrupt a young person's experience of homelessness.

This report highlighted that 40% of youth in the study experienced their first episode of homelessness before the age of 16 years, yet often homelessness organizations provide services starting at the age of 16 or 18 years (Gaetz, et al, 2016, p. 38).

A key feature of the intervention is that it is community-based, meaning the program can be tailored to the unique needs and strengths of a community. This may include, for instance, communities that have a high number of Indigenous youth or are situated in a rural or remote area.

One of the first steps of initiating a YR program will involve engaging with community stakeholders, such as service providers, educators, policy professionals, community members, system planners, and youth and families. The initial consultations will need to consider what an adaptation of YR could look like, where there might already be opportunities to expand, enhance, or revise existing services to be adapted to YR, and how the program could be aligned within a broader system of care.

**Youth Reconnect is an effective way to help young people avoid homelessness, achieve positive personal development, and set them on a path to enhanced wellbeing.**

# Let's get started

Schools are important places for social development: where friendships are made, relationships are forged, and life lessons are taught. Early interventions that focus on keeping young people connected to schools and their community, therefore, must be considered when developing a comprehensive homelessness prevention strategy.

If your community or organization is considering implementing an early intervention program like Youth Reconnect, here are steps you can take right now to get started:

- 1.** Contact your local school board and set up a meeting to discuss opportunities to support student success. Follow up by sending this document and suggest opportunities to engage other educators in your community.
- 2.** Host a meeting with local youth-serving agencies to discuss your community's current early intervention efforts and to assess the need for a program like YR. Use the conversation starters tip sheet at the end of this document to guide the discussion.
- 3.** Host a local townhall (in person or online) to find what your community needs and how a program like Youth Reconnect might be useful. Ask local youth leaders to present what they believe would be beneficial for young people in their community. Be sure to report back what you hear from community members to [info@awayhome.ca](mailto:info@awayhome.ca). This information will be useful when it comes time to refine the YR program model.
- 4.** Contact A Way Home Canada or the [Canadian Observatory on Homelessness](#) for information about how you can set up a YR program, including help with planning and strategy, technical assistance, and training.

Youth Reconnect is uniquely designed to support young people (under the age of 16) and their families while keeping them in place – at home, in their community, and connected to the people and social institutions that can set them on a path to personal development. The resources and supports offered through YR are intended to strengthen and build relationships with natural supports in order to avoid a situation in which family tensions result in homelessness. Providing support early can mediate these challenging situations and ultimately prevent young people from experiencing chronic homelessness as adults.

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# Youth Reconnect Conversation Starters

Use these questions to spark a conversation in your community or organization about designing and delivering Youth Reconnect.

## Questions to Consider

1. Who are the community stakeholders that would need to be involved in delivering Youth Reconnect in your community (e.g., service providers, schools, cultural groups, Indigenous agencies, business owners, local political representatives, funders, and youth and families, among others)?



Create a stakeholder map to identify groups and individuals that need to be part of the planning conversation. Check out the Systems Planning Collective's [Stakeholder Mapping Template](#), which can help you get started.

2. How can we build and nurture relationships with local school officials (e.g., teachers, principals, guidance counsellors, schoolboard trustees, and parent teacher committees)? If you have existing relationships, who do you know who can be a Youth Reconnect champion?



Before you approach anyone, it is important to first identify what you will be asking them to do (e.g., be part of a committee or make an introduction, etc.)

3. In what ways are you familiar with positive youth development and youth-centred service delivery? Do you or your staff require training to enhance your knowledge before engaging with youth?



Create an internal survey to assess your organization's commitment to youth-centredness. The Government of Nova Scotia, for instance, published [a set of guidelines](#) for organizations looking to be more youth-centred. It includes questions that you can use to assess your organization's approach to youth-centredness.

4. How can you fund a Youth Reconnect program in your organization or community?



Consider convening a local funders table to discuss opportunities to run a one- or two-year Youth Reconnect pilot in your community.

5. What existing programs within your organization or community could be adapted to incorporate the principles of YR?



Service blueprinting is a useful tool for pinpointing opportunities to adapt your service delivering approach. Check out [this video](#) from Nielsen Norman Group about how to do service blueprinting in five easy steps.

## Youth Reconnect