

About

CHOICES FOR YOUTH

History

Choices for Youth is a housing support agency for youth 16-29 in the St. John's, NL metro area. It was founded in 1990 in response to "an identified need among youth, the community, and government to have an empowerment-based program available to youth for whom 'home' was not an option" (CHRN, 2013). The need for the program arose from the closure of the Mount Cashel² orphanage . While that site had to be closed, the needs of the community did not disappear.

For the first ten years of the program, Choices operated as in-care model/group home style. In 2000/2001, legislation changed in Newfoundland, which affected the agency significantly. "All of a sudden, young people had a right to choose other things, other than what we were offering them. So the organization was faced with, I guess in hindsight, a bit of a blessing, a critical moment of either folding up shop, that we've done our bit, that we're not relevant anymore or reinventing ourselves. We chose to do that by becoming an agency that works for more of an over-16 population, harm reduction, at-risk youth, homelessness. [It's] more of an outreach model supporting young people out in the community," Sheldon Pollett, Executive Director, Choices for Youth.

While the provision of supportive housing options remains a critical component of the work that Choices does, it also strives to give youth "access to a variety of services that promote healthy personal development, and a sense of belonging within an environment of respect, tolerance, peace, and equality" (Choices for Youth website).

2 The Mount Cashel orphanage, a boys' home run by the Christian Brothers of Ireland in Canada (a community of the Roman Catholic Church) was closed on June 1st 1990, following several complaints of physical and sexual abuse and numerous investigations. Following Confederation, the government placed Crown Wards (individuals in the case of the child welfare system) at Mount Cashel so not all residents were indeed orphans. The sexual abuse scandal – which affected more than 300 residents – is considered to be Canada's largest and one of the largest in the world. (http://www.heritage.nf.ca/law/wells_gov_mt_cashel_timeline.html; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Cashel_Orphanage)

Philosophy

[Choices for Youth's website](#) states: "Our organization is based on the philosophy that **everyone has a right to:**

- » Safe housing;
- » A standard of living that promotes physical, mental, emotional, psychological, and social development;
- » An environment of mutual accountability, responsibility, independence, equality, dignity, peace, and respect;
- » Protection from abuse;
- » Participation in any decision making that affects their lives."

Core Values

The core values of Choices for Youth are:

- » Act with empathy and kindness.
- » Choose to see the potential.
- » Cultivate safe, inclusive spaces, and promote diversity.
- » Work hard, with boundless ambition and strategic excellence.
- » Inspire hope, and create opportunities that empower.

According to the [Choices for Youth website](#): "Choices for Youth strives to be a model of diversity and inclusion, and our Board Members, staff, volunteers, and program participants reflect the many faces, cultures, identities, abilities, and walks of life that make up our province. We are a learning-centered organization that values the perspectives and contributions of all people, and strive to incorporate the needs and values of diverse communities into the design and implementation of inclusive programs. We respect, value, celebrate, and welcome racialized people, all sexual orientations, women and trans* people, Aboriginal and First People, people with disabilities, with mental illness, and those from all social strata".

Model

Choices for Youth began with a “simple, two-step process: help youth **find** housing, education, and employment, and then help them **maintain** it” (Choices for Youth website).

As they developed their knowledge and grew to understand more about the needs of youth, their outreach and harm reduction philosophy has led to a more complex programming model.

The Choices website states:

- » **Step 1:** Provide individuals with options to find housing, employment, training, and education.
- » **Step 2:** Provide intensive models of support on personal barriers to achieving the desired outcomes in Step 1.
- » **Step 3:** Increase youth engagement in individuals’ immediate and broader communities.
- » **Step 4:** Increase options and support for continued individual stability and independence.

Programs

Now in operation for 25 years, Choices for Youth offers a number of core programs to meet the diverse needs of the youth of St. John’s. Each program is designed to fit one or more core areas of focus: Crisis Response, Supportive Housing, Targeted Supports and/or Fostering Independence. Youth can be involved in multiple programs at the same time. Program participants may also receive individual services to meet their needs. There are approximately 80 staff in the organization and they serve the needs of about 1,000 youth per year.

The area(s) of focus for each program is listed below in the descriptions.

- » [Shelter for Young Men](#) – Crisis Response/Supportive Housing - This nine-bed facility is an emergency shelter for homeless youth between the ages of 16 and 29 who identify as male. Youth can stay for up to a month. In 2013-2014, the shelter had 229 admissions and 259 turn-aways with no availability and a 95.7% occupancy rate. The average length of stay is 21 days, 80% of users have mental health and addictions issues and there is a 69% repeat user rate.
- » [RallyHaven](#) – Crisis Response/Supportive Housing - This program provides 11 youth with long-term, supportive, communal living opportunities in four Newfoundland Labrador Housing Corporation houses in downtown St. John’s. Youth receive individualized and regular supports while in the program and there are follow-up activities after they exit. Since 2011, 41 youth have been supported. Of these, 14 (re) started an educational program, 16 found employment or began a pre-employment program and 15 maintained housing for a year+.

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—Matthew, age 21, Tier 1 Participant, Train for Trades

- » [The Lilly](#) – Supportive Housing/Targeted Response - The first affordable housing facility for male and female youth experiencing homelessness in St. John's, The Lilly opened in 2010. It houses 14 youth, ages 16-24, in 1- and 2-bedroom units and is staffed 24/7. It is modeled after Eva's Phoenix in Toronto and the renovations were done by the youth in the Train for Trades program. Since 2010, 80 youth have resided at The Lilly, of which 80% availed of The Lilly as long-term housing and 95% were employed or enrolled in education/employment programs while living at The Lilly.



'The Lilly' is a transitional housing project built as the pilot initiative for Train for Trades.

“The Lilly is transitional housing. There are two floors, there’s a kitchen to each floor and a living area to each floor, but everybody gets their own room and room key to get in to the rooms...It’s a really cool feeling that the guys from prior or the person prior built my living space.”

—Matthew, age 21, Train for Trades Tier 1 participant and resident of The Lilly

- » [Outreach and Youth Engagement](#) – Crisis Response/Targeted Supports/Fostering Independence - This initiative serves as the gateway into Choices for Youth for most youth. It includes a drop-in at the Youth Services Centre, a meal program and the staff team provides programming to support the diverse needs of youth, including housing, employment, education, life skills, lifestyle choices and mental health and addictions supports. This acts as a central hub that enables Choices staff to connect youth to the programs that are right for them. In 2013-14, there were 20,948 requests for service, and they provided food or access to food over 8,000 times. There were 700 distinct individuals served and the forecast for 2014-2015 is 1,200.

There are three main programs within the Outreach and Youth Engagement program area:

- › [Jumpstart](#) – This 12-week pre-employment program operates three times per year and supports youth to learn basic employability skills, including property maintenance, home repairs, carpentry, gardening, cooking and food safety. Staff and two youth mentors, who are past participants of the program, support the youth. In 2013-14, 29 youth completed the program. 16 youth were connected to further education, 23 gained employment and 28 were assisted to find or maintain housing.
- › [Momma Moments](#) – This program supports young pregnant and parenting women to improve their healthy living skills and effectively care for their children. Groups run weekly in St. John's and Conception Bay South. In 2013-14 the program served 39 young mothers and 52 children. 100% reported healthier eating habits, 15% secured safe and affordable housing and 88% received access to public health and counselling services. Building from this program, Choices is developing a Young Parents Supportive Housing and Resource Centre. This project will combine support services and housing for young, single-parent families, and is designed to help single parents improve their parenting success and keep their children in their care.
- › [Youth in Transitions](#) – This provincial pilot program is offered through the Department of Child, Youth and Family Services and in the metro area in partnership with Choices for Youth. It's a life skills based program providing individualized support staff (from the Outreach and Youth Engagement Team) to help youth develop skills such as budgeting, meal planning, laundry and transportation. Since October 2013, 55 young people have taken part in the program. Of these, 27 have secured stable housing and 22 have completed and exited the program.
- » [Moving Forward](#) – Targeted Supports - This project provides intensive support for youth aged 16-24 who struggle with complex mental health issues. In partnership with Eastern Health and Stella's Circle, Moving Forward assists youth who exhibit high-risk behaviours through one-on-one and supportive groups. In 2013-14 there were 17 youth participants and 75% of participants found stable housing.
- » [Train for Trades](#) – Fostering Independence - This program forms the core of this toolkit and is discussed in more detail throughout. Essentially, the program provides employment and skills training in a supportive environment for at-risk youth while they learn construction skills and retrofit houses/facilities belonging to Newfoundland Labrador Housing Corporation, private citizens, or community partners. In 2013-14, the program enrolled 20 youth across three tiers. Eleven of the youth completed a GED and 70% of graduates are now employed or in post-secondary school.
- » [Youth Leadership Council \(YLC\)](#) – Fostering Independence – When youth homelessness is not a part of our everyday lives, the gap between perception and reality of the issue can be enormous. The YLC helps close this gap, and connects funders, the community and other support systems to real information and lived experience. It is an intentional process of involving youth in the decision-making process and program design. Youth also deliver workshops on self-injury and hope to expand to other topics. In 2013-14, the Council grew from 4-12 members and it held 14 self-injury workshops.

In the delivery of all these programs and across all four areas of focus (Crisis Responses, Supportive Housing, Targeted Supports, Fostering Independence), Choices for Youth strives to empower at-risk youth by helping them secure stable housing, employment and education. These are held as the three Key Life Factors at Choices for Youth and are fundamental to helping at-risk youth transition into healthy adults.