



Niagara Resource Service for Youth

St Catharine's, Ontario

PROGRAM TYPE: Youth Reconnect Program

Homelessness began as an urban problem, but has since become an issue in rural communities, as well. For young people at risk of homelessness in rural areas, the resources are few and the risks that will lead them to homelessness are many. Rent in smaller towns and communities can be higher than in cities and there are usually fewer jobs. Each year, thousands of people from rural areas across the country, head to urban areas in hopes of jobs and homes, only to find full shelters, lengthy waiting lists for social housing, and more fellow jobseekers than available jobs. That is, if they make it to their destination. For many young people, being in transit is a particularly vulnerable time – they may not know what to do or where to go when they get to the city, and are at increased risk of drug use, sexual exploitation, violence and criminal involvement. Leaving one's home community also means leaving school and any positive relationships that a young person may have.

One of the few youth-serving organizations in the region, Niagara Resource Service for Youth (The RAFT) offers services to high risk and homeless youth throughout Niagara, while working collaboratively with peer agencies and support groups to foster cooperation and eliminate duplication of services.

In the Niagara region in Southwestern Ontario, it was becoming increasingly clear to service providers, including the RAFT, that young people at risk of homelessness lacked consistent support services that would prevent them from becoming homeless. In addition, there was a crisis facing the community: the closing of the shelter that serviced the area. Funding had been allocated for a new shelter, but the money was used instead to conduct a needs assessment in order to identify what was needed most in order to better serve youth. The research identified a gap in access to services for young people throughout the region.

KEY MESSAGES

- THE NEED FOR HOUSING FOR YOUTH – IN THEIR OWN COMMUNITIES
- SYSTEM INTEGRATION
- ADDRESSING ONE OF THE KEY CAUSES OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN RURAL AREAS – VULNERABILITY IN TRANSIT
- PREVENTION
- SCHOOL BUY-IN



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In 2008, the RAFT piloted a unique prevention initiative, the Youth Reconnect Program, in Fort Erie, Ontario. The driving force behind the program was the need for a transportation fund to help young people access the range of services needed, but that were not locally available. Staff felt that youth should not have to leave their home or school to access services.

Utilizing the results from the needs assessment to address these issues, the RAFT first piloted and then successfully expanded the Youth Reconnect program beyond Fort Erie to include Port Colborne, Welland, St. Catharines, and West Niagara, covering a distance of 1,852 km² and just under 500,000 residents.

Program participants are adolescents, between the ages of 16-19. Many participants are at risk of becoming homeless or are homeless (couch-surfing) and live in a rural or underserved community. Many have dropped out or are at-risk of dropping out of school. Clients often do not have stable family, peer or community supports and are unsure or have difficulty accessing community support services. The Youth Reconnect Program links young people from the Niagara region with a range of services in order to prevent homelessness, or to get them back into housing as soon as possible.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Youth Reconnect Program accepts youth referrals from schools, police officers and social welfare agencies. Once a young person is referred to the program, they will meet with program staff within 48 hours, in their home communities (often at their school), to determine what their needs are, and to develop a plan to address these issues. Typical interventions include:

Housing

The program aims to help youth remain in school whenever possible by securing living arrangements within their home community, including transitional housing. As required, youth in need of crisis housing are transported to the 17 Centre Street hostel and then helped to reintegrate into their home community. The goal is that youth remain in the shelter for less than a week.

Rent subsidy

Ten rent subsidies in the amount of \$250/month are available to young people, provided they stay in school. The subsidy can be used anywhere in the Niagara region.

Education

Staff work directly with individual schools and school boards to develop plans for youth returning to school, or create education plans to help at risk youth remain in school.

Self-sufficiency

Staff connect youth with financial support programs and stable housing to ensure youth are able to continue with their education.

Advocacy

Young people receive support to secure affordable housing and a stabilized income.

Connect to Resources

As required, youth are referred to specialized services, including mental health, addictions, and family counselling.

EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVENESS



The Youth Reconnect program collects data internally relating to each of its goals. The program works with 240 youth per year. For 2011, outcomes for youth included:

- 100% of youth referred to the Youth Reconnect Program were contacted within 48 hours of referral
- 85% of clients accessed adequate income support within the first 14 days of contact with the Youth Reconnect Program
- 76% of clients remained in school or started an education/training program
- 94% of the youth remained housed for three (3) months
- 70% of the youth remained housed for six (6) months
- 95% of youth found regular or supportive housing in emergency hostels within 21 days
- Youth reported increased levels of self-confidence and improved self-esteem (50% reported high confidence and self-esteem before the program, 88% after)
- Youth reported improved sense of belonging (12% reported feeling very connected to the community before the program, 58% after)
- Since starting the initiative, there has not only been a marked decline in The Raft's youth hostel numbers, but use of all regional hostels by youth is down a minimum of 14%.

RESOURCES & ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL



Staffing

The Youth Reconnect Program operates out of 4 sites, each with its own Youth Reconnect Worker. One additional staff member is employed as the Program Supervisor for all sites.

Youth Reconnect Worker

The Youth Reconnect Worker meets with youth and conducts intake sessions to assess needs and determine housing stability. Based on this information the Youth Reconnect Worker will link youth to resources and appropriate agencies. The Worker also serves as the liaison between the program and schools in the region.

Youth Reconnect Supervisor

The Supervisor coordinates the Youth Reconnect Program, reviews targets, and deals with higher level administration issues, including meetings with school administrators.

Cost

The total cost for each site is \$44,389 for one Youth Reconnect Worker (paid at a rate of \$14.50/hour), including administrative costs. When adding additional workers, some of the costs can be shared, but a staff component beyond 3 or 4 workers will require a supervisor and thus additional funding. The program is funded through the Niagara Region, the Homelessness Partnering Strategy and the United Way.

Partnerships

Youth Without Secure Housing

Youth Without Secure Housing is a regional roundtable of social service, government, academic, and business representatives. Its mandate is to provide a coordinated response to youth homelessness, based on the Youth Without Secure Housing Community Plan. The Raft's relationship with this organization facilitates cross-sectoral work.

The FORT, Nightlight Emergency Youth Shelter, The YWCA of Niagara, Hope House

The Youth Reconnect Program works with these shelter and housing providers across the Niagara region to ensure that young people have access to emergency and permanent housing.

District School Board of Niagara,

Niagara Catholic District School Board

The Youth Reconnect Program accesses young people who are at risk of homelessness by liaising with teachers, councillors, nurses and administration staff from the local school boards. Currently the arrangements are informal, however the organization is moving towards formal partnerships with the school boards.

Niagara Regional Housing

An independent corporation that provides affordable housing solutions for people in need, Niagara Regional Housing offers 10 rent subsidies to youth from the program. As long as they stay in school, the youth receive a \$250 subsidy, which can be used anywhere in the region.

KEY MESSAGES

THE NEED FOR HOUSING FOR YOUTH – IN THEIR OWN COMMUNITIES

Stable housing is crucial for a young person's development – it allows them to maintain supportive relationships and to stay in school. The consequences of dropping out of school are too severe, both for young people and society, yet for many youth it is their only option if they are to secure housing. One of the goals of the Youth Reconnect Program is that no young person has to leave their home community in order to be housed.

Like many other rural communities across Canada, Niagara lacks housing stock, particularly affordable accommodation for young people. The Raft successfully reached out to young people at risk of homelessness, but was unable to house them. Through partnerships with housing providers, the Youth Reconnect Program not only connects youth to housing services within their area, the rent subsidy provides further financial assistance to 10 youth. Continued support, at the youth's discretion, is also very important to long-term success.

By helping young people graduate and/or preventing their homelessness, the chances they will become chronically homeless as adults is reduced.

SYSTEM INTEGRATION

The creation of a region-wide interconnected system of services provides youth with access to a range of community resources in order to meet their needs and prevent them from becoming homeless. These cross-sectoral relationships ensure that young people can access the help they need in their home communities and that services are not duplicated within the region.

ADDRESSING ONE OF THE KEY CAUSES OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN RURAL AREAS – VULNERABILITY IN TRANSIT

A young person's journey from a town to a city can be full of risky situations that put them at further risk for negative outcomes. The Youth Reconnect Program is often able to intervene before a young person becomes homeless, by connecting them with support services to help them reconnect with family, by providing emergency shelter or by facilitating other permanent housing. If a young person does reach a crisis stage and needs alternative housing, staff take the young person to their destination, therefore eliminating the vulnerability at a crucial time.

PREVENTION

By the time someone becomes homeless, they have a number of additional needs, and preventing subsequent periods of homelessness can be more difficult. By working with young people before they become homeless, there is a better chance of preventing homelessness and other associated negative outcomes.

Through relationships with school staff and others who come into contact with youth who are in trouble, the Raft program staff can intervene and provide young people with the resources and support they need to avoid homelessness.

★ SCHOOL BUY-IN

School staff, including teachers, nurses, councillors and administrative staff, are the main source of referral to the Youth Reconnect Program. At the beginning of each semester, program staff meet with school staff and teachers to introduce the program. In order for the program to be successful, school administrators and staff need to understand the program and its potential for reducing drop-out rates for young people .

CONCLUSION

The Youth Reconnect Program is an innovative approach to solving youth homelessness in rural areas. Prior to the introduction of the program, young people would have to leave their home communities and travel to larger urban centres to find housing and/or employment, putting themselves at increased risk of negative consequences. By creating a Niagara-wide response, the Youth Reconnect Program is able to help youth remain connected to social supports and to stay in school, therefore reducing their vulnerability and preventing a first episode of homelessness.

Preventing young people from becoming homeless is one of the most powerful weapons in the fight to end homelessness. Rural communities across Canada can replicate the Youth Reconnect Program model and free more young people from a life of social exclusion.

References

Niagara Resource Service for Youth. (2012).
Youth Reconnect Program Profile.