Friends of Ruby Evaluation:

Executive Summary and Program Update

Land Acknowledgement

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness acknowledges that the city of Toronto, Ontario is located on the traditional territories of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. The city of Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Williams Treaties signed with multiple Mississaugas and Chippewa bands (Indigenous Affairs Office, City of Toronto, 2019).

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the participants who shared their stories with us, especially the young people and program staff.

We would particularly like to thank the two Youth Ambassadors for their skills, insights, and dedication.

Background

Friends of Ruby, formerly Egale Youth OUTreach, opened its doors in 2014 in recognition of the homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, violence and harassment that can occur in schools, families, and communities. The motivation for a space like Friends of Ruby was the increasing number of suicides among 2SLGBTQI (Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, and intersex) young people occurring across Toronto.

Friends of Ruby offers individual counselling, suicide crisis services, and social supports for 2SLGBTQI young people between 16 and 29 years old. Friends of Ruby also helps with practical needs of 2SLGBTQI young people including housing, food access, system navigation, employment, and transition support.

More than 850 youth have been supported by Friends of Ruby since its doors were opened. Mental health crises and visits to hospital emergency rooms have been prevented among 470 young people. This translates into health care savings of nearly $300,000.

From 2017 to 2018, Friends of Ruby collaborated with Hub Solutions, a social enterprise of the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH), to conduct an evaluation of its services. This report outlines the process of the evaluation, the findings, and recommendations. The recommendations section includes an update on the progress Friends of Ruby has made toward each specific recommendation, to demonstrate the impact and utility of the evaluation.

Context of the Evaluation

Friends of Ruby received a grant in 2017 from the Government of Ontario's Local Poverty Reduction Fund (LPRF). As part of this grant, funding was dedicated to evaluating the program theory of Friends of Ruby and develop an outcome measurement framework for the program.

The evaluation addressed three main questions:

1. What is the program theory of Friends of Ruby?

2. Are program operations aligned to program theory?

3. What is the outcome measurement framework that best fits the needs of the program?

Evaluation Methods

In order to answer the evaluation questions, six main methods were used.
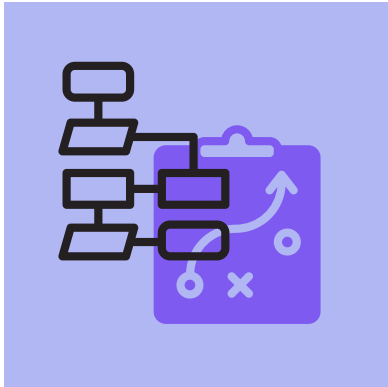
1. Creating a program logic model. This process involved a literature review, a review of program documentation, and several in-person verification processes with staff and young people.
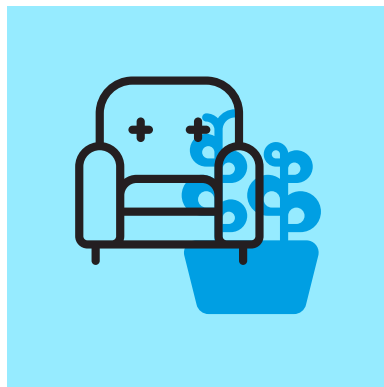
2. Seven key informant interviews with program staff.

3. Two focus groups with program staff.

4. Four focus groups with young people.

5. Surveys with young people who access counselling.

6. Surveys with young people who access the drop-in space.

Youth Ambassadors

Two Youth Ambassadors were hired to assist in the evaluation. The Youth Ambassadors were young people who had experience accessing Friends of Ruby services and had an interest in research and evaluation. Each Ambassador submitted an application and was interviewed by a staff member of Friends of Ruby and a member of the evaluation team. The Ambassadors attended advisory committee meetings, provided feedback on protocols, co-facilitated the focus groups with young people, and provided feedback on all of the evaluation products. The Ambassadors were paid for their time.

Key Findings

The following are the key themes that emerged from the key informant interviews and focus groups. First, we provide the program logic model (*see next page*).

Program Mandate

Program staff and young people agreed that Friends of Ruby is a place for 2SLGBTQI young people between the ages of 16 to 29 who are experiencing homelessness or precarious housing and require some form of support, such as mental health counselling or general services (i.e., access to housing, employment, education).

Profile of Young People who Access Friends of Ruby

Staff shared several trends they were seeing among young people who access Friends of Ruby. These included:

- **AGE.** Many of the young people who accessed Friends of Ruby were in their mid- to late-twenties. This is an important finding, as many services for young people often have an age limit of 24.

- **INCOME.** Most young people were accessing some form of social assistance (i.e., OW, ODSP).

- **SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT.** Some young people reported involvement in the child welfare sector.

- **MIGRATION.** Some young people have migrated to the Greater Toronto Area from areas across Canada.

- **SERVICE USE.** Most young people were looking for mental health services.

Goals

VISION: A Toronto where 2SLGBTQI young people are housed, can access services and experience a sense of belonging.

MISSION: Offer crisis intervention, a sense of community, counselling and support related to housing, health, wellbeing and overall sustainability. A safer space for 2SLGBTQI young people.

Target Populations

2SLGBTQI communities age 29 and under.

Program Eligibility

2SLGBTQI young people up to age 29 with lived experience of street involvement, homelessness, precarious housing and/or mental health challenges.

Inputs

FUNDING
Personnel and supplies

STAFF
– Director of Transitional Housing
– EYO program manager
– Mental health counsellors
– Case managers
– Drop-in staff

TRAINING
– Anti-Oppression/ Anti-Racism
– Crisis intervention
– DBT

SPACE
Friends of Ruby

HOURS OF OPERATION
Mon-Thurs 10-8; Fri 10-6

Activities

SCREENING & ELIGIBILITY
1. 2SLGBTQI young people complete intake forms or sign in upon entry
2. Service Coordinator screens young people to determine eligibility

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS
1. Young people access same day crisis counselling and/or support
2. Young people receive supports onsite including case management and referrals for additional (external) services

HOUSING SUPPORTS
1. Young people receive supports in finding suitable emergency and long-term housing

DROP-IN
1. Young people accessing a safe space
2. Provides food, computers, entertainment (i.e., tv, movies)
3. Access to a comfortable, resting space.
4. Access to creative and supportive groups
5. Access to community, social support, and peer relationships

AFTERCARE
1. Short-term follow-up supports
2. Referral pathways to appropriate services

OTHER
1. Access to TTC tokens (with limits)

Outputs

INTAKE
# of 2SLGBTQI young people referred to EYO
# of 2SLGBTQI young people screened
# of 2SLGBTQI young completing intake assessments

REFERRALS
# of external referrals to 2SLGBTQI services
# of external referrals to general services

MENTAL HEALTH
# of 2SLGBTQI young people accessing mental health counselling
# of 2SLGBTQI young people on waitlist

HOUSING
# of 2SLGBTQI young people accessing housing supports from staff
# of 2SLGBTQI young people referred to emergency shelters

DROP-IN
# of 2SLGBTQI young people accessing the drop-in
# of meals served
# of 2SLGBTQI young people accessing programming

OTHER
# of TTC tokens distributed

Short-Term Outcomes

– Greater access to basic support services

– Greater self-awareness of mental health and substance use among 2SLGBTQI young people

– Greater interpersonal skills and conflict management among 2SLGBTQI young people

– Enhancing the connection of 2SLGBTQI young people to the community

Long-Term Outcomes

– Greater stability in housing among 2SLGBTQI young people

– Greater mental health outcomes of 2SLGBTQI young people

– Greater sense of belonging among 2SLGBTQI young people

– Increased connection with community (relational and physical neighbourhood) among 2SLGBTQI young people

External Influences

Homophobia, biphobia, & transphobia; racism (anti-Black, anti-Indigenous); employment rates, rental costs

Service Offerings

Service offerings at Friends of Ruby were largely framed in two different ways: 1) Mental health counselling, and 2) Drop-in supports.

MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELLING. Young people shared overwhelmingly positive feedback on the counselling services at Friends of Ruby. Young people felt a positive connection with their counsellors and appreciated that the counselling was specifically for 2SLGBTQI individuals.

A young person shared:

> A lot of counsellors [at other agencies] I'd talk to, it's just seemed like they had ulterior motives, or I didn't really connect with them fully. And when I came across [Friends of Ruby] I had a connection with the staff almost instantly and I felt very at home and kind of with my kind here. And it's the only counselling that I've actually ever had that was kind of successful because that connection was there.

DROP-IN SUPPORTS. Young people often used the drop-in space to access basic needs (e.g., food, transit tokens), socialize with other 2SLGBTQI young people, and find refuge from the stress in their lives.

A young person shared that the drop-in is:

> ...good for support when you're really depressed and stuff. It's a good place to chill. A place to get away from the stress at home or just stress in general. It's a place where you can get away from all of that stuff. It's a place where you can feel not overwhelmed.

Other service offerings included arts-based programming, housing supports, and providing a safer space. Although there was a general sense of Friends of Ruby being a safer space, young people did say that there needs to be more education and training for young people on what is a safe and safer space.

Sense of Community

Young people and program staff all discussed the sense of community within Friends of Ruby. The sense of community was described as young people socializing together, even outside of the space. Friends of Ruby's mandate as a space exclusive for 2SLGBTQI young people contributed to this sense of community, as there were few options available in Toronto that were specific to 2SLGBTQI young people.

Supporting Young Black, Indigenous and People of Colour

Program staff noted that Friends of Ruby could enhance specific supports with Black, Indigenous, and young People of Colour (BIPOC). There was limited representation of BIPOC staff at Friends of Ruby, which served as a barrier for young BIPOC to access Friends of Ruby. For example, it was thought that this lack of staff representation at that time made young BIPOC feel uncomfortable to access the drop-in space.

Friends of Ruby was aware of these gaps in services and is actively addressing them. For example, the organization has increased the number of BIPOC front-line staff and partnerships are being sought with BIPOC agencies in Toronto. An update on other actions Friends of Ruby has taken or is working towards is included in the recommendations section.

Policies and Procedures

Young people and staff members discussed the importance of clear policies and procedures. In particular, policies regarding the safety of young people and staff were deemed as important as was consistency in the enforcement of these policies.

Community Partnerships

Program staff members generally felt that Friends of Ruby had good partnerships with several agencies within the broader Toronto community; however, it was thought that these partnerships could be enhanced through stronger outreach efforts, particularly with other services located in proximity to Friends of Ruby and with agencies working with young BIPOC.

Strengths of Friends of Ruby

The strengths of Friends of Ruby, as identified by young people and staff, included:

- Providing a space exclusively for 2SLGBTQI young people.

- Providing a space for older 2SLGBTQI young people (i.e., ages 25 to 29).

- Access to counselling specific for 2SLGBTQI young people.

- Access to supports in the drop-in and the programming that was offered.

- The sense of community developed in the space.

- The staff dedication to 2SLGBTQI young people.

Challenges at Friends of Ruby

The challenges encountered by Friends of Ruby, as identified by young people and staff, were:

- A small physical space to operate in.

- Trying to meet the unique needs of each young person.

- Meeting the demand for counselling services.

- Providing consistent programming in the drop-in space.

- Recognizing the complexity in operating in safe vs. safer spaces.

Recommendations

Young people and program staff provided several recommendations to enhance or improve services at Friends of Ruby. These centred on the physical space of Friends of Ruby, staff, programming, and partnerships and promotion.

The recommendations focus on steps that Friends of Ruby can take to sustain and improve program operations. These recommendations are grounded in the best practices found in the literature review and the data attained from young people, program staff, and key informants.

It should be noted that Friends of Ruby has already taken several steps to address many of these recommendations. These steps are highlighted below under the specific recommendation that they relate to.

Physical Space

1. **Sustain and grow the space and operations.** Friends of Ruby is providing a vital service to 2SLGBTQI young people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness in Toronto. As the demand for service increases, it will be important for Friends of Ruby to operate in a physical space that can handle an increased number of young people. With the growth of the space, Friends of Ruby should consider the following:

- Having greater physical distance between the counselling offices and the drop-in space so as to limit the impact of the noise/activity that can occur in the drop-in.

- Establish quiet spaces for young people who access the drop-in.

- Have dedicated space for staff, such as a break room or lunchroom, and dedicated office space.

UPDATE: This recommendation was already in progress at the time of the evaluation and Friends of Ruby has now moved to a larger space. The new Friends of Ruby space is close in proximity to the previous location and comes with an additional 5,000+ square footage. The new space also meets all of the other aspects of this recommendation, including: a separate space for counselling and drop-in spaces, a quiet area for young people, and a dedicated kitchen and lunchroom for staff.

The new location also comes with other extra program rooms and office spaces. At the previous space one room was used for staff meetings, programming, and board meetings. The new space has separate areas for all these activities and extra spaces for young people to use for different programming, quiet places, or access to computers.

After moving to the new and larger location, Friends of Ruby received the 'Inspiring Community Organization of the Year' Award for 2019.

Program Staff

2. **Continue to hire staff members representing the diversity of 2SLGBTQI young people**. Efforts should be made to hire BIPOC and transfeminine individuals, as there was limited representation at the time of the evaluation. In hiring BIPOC staff members, it will be important to include measures to ensure that they feel supported on the job.

UPDATE: At the time of this evaluation, management was in the process of working toward hiring staff members from diverse identities. Currently, there is much greater representation of BIPOC staff members and all front-line staff identifies as 2SLGBTQI. The organization continues to make an effort to prioritize diverse hiring.

Other efforts have been implemented to ensure both BIPOC staff and young people are supported in the space. This includes a new drop-in time that is specific to young BIPOC and operated by BIPOC staff. Friends of Ruby also applied for and received funds dedicated to developing a Two-Spirit focused program with Indigenous Peoples in 2020-2021. Finally, a new program focused on newcomers and refugees is under development.

3. **Increase the capacity of counselling services in order to allow for more young people to be able to access counselling services.** The demand for counselling services at Friends of Ruby is high. In order to meet this demand, it will be imperative for Friends of Ruby to hire more counsellors, with an emphasis on BIPOC, Two-Spirit, and transfeminine individuals.

UPDATE: Friends of Ruby has been able to enhance their counselling services with the move to the new space, as there are now five additional office spaces available for counselling services. At the time of this update, Friends of Ruby was employing 5 counsellors of whom 3 self-identify as BIPOC, and one as non-binary.

4. **Expand on the hiring of peer support workers.** In our review of the recommendations with the program advisory committee (Friends of Ruby stakeholders, Youth Ambassadors, and Hub Solutions team), a Youth Ambassador shared that there was still a need for more peer support workers with lived experience of homelessness at Friends of Ruby. Peer support is a key feature of youth-centered programming, such as the Housing First for Youth framework.

UPDATE: Friends of Ruby is addressing this recommendation by hiring a staff member who is dedicating their time to increasing peer support workers. Friends of Ruby is also increasing opportunities for volunteers to participate in the space.

5. **Increase research and evaluation activities.** The appetite for research and evaluation extended from young people to program staff to senior management. In order to formalize research and evaluation activities, a research and evaluation position should be created at Friends of Ruby. This position could exclusively be dedicated to research and evaluation or split between service provision and research and evaluation (i.e., .75 FTE research and evaluation and .25 FTE service provision).

UPDATE: In working to address this recommendation, Friends of Ruby is hiring a Program and Evaluation Lead who focuses on research and evaluation activities. Evaluation activities will continue to be a part of ongoing program improvements.

Programming

6. **Continue and increase opportunities for young people to engage in community advocacy events.** Young people expressed an interest in political engagement and advocacy opportunities for 2SLGBTQI rights. This could take the form of workshops at Friends of Ruby, attending community events (i.e., Pride Toronto), and political engagement at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels. Friends of Ruby should continue to collaborate with other community agencies and connect young people to political and advocacy events.

UPDATE: Friends of Ruby continue to ensure that there are opportunities for 2SLGBTQI advocacy with young people, which includes connecting young people to community advocacy groups. Friends of Ruby also continues to hold community events, such as hosting a post Pride party. In 2020, Friends of Ruby launched Canada's first ever national Chosen Family Day (February 22). The Day is named for the family that the 2SLGBTQI community choose and recognizes and celebrates the valued relationships between friends and allies in the 2SLGBTQI community.

7. **Centre the voices of young people in the development of programming and policies.** It is imperative that young people are heavily involved in the process of developing programming and policies at Friends of Ruby. Young people expressed interest in developing and co-facilitating workshops and wanted input on the development of new policies at Friends of Ruby. Friends of Ruby should look to programming suggestions reported in this evaluation as well as the needs assessment that was conducted in the spring of 2018 by The Public Good Initiative. Going forward, Friends of Ruby should solicit verbal (i.e., focus groups, brainstorming sessions) and written (i.e., surveys) input from young people. Programming by, for, and with young BIPOC should be prioritized.

UPDATE: Friends of Ruby continue to work on ensuring that young people's voices are heard and that their opinions and preferences are infused into new and existing programming. Since the evaluation, Friends of Ruby has developed and implemented a Youth Committee to support and facilitate youth engagement with the organization. Currently, Friends of Ruby operates regular arts programming and recreational programming. As previously mentioned, Friends of Ruby has also created a weekly drop-in space exclusively for young people who identify as BIPOC.

8. **Further develop housing supports.** Friends of Ruby should increase its capacity to assist young people who acquire housing assistance. Currently, Friends of Ruby staff are linking young people who need housing to emergency shelters or determining if young people can stay with a trusted friend or family member. As there are no 2SLGBTQI-specific shelters in Toronto and only one transitional housing program for 2SLGBTQI young people, access to safer accommodations is challenging. To strengthen their housing services, Friends of Ruby should consider adopting a Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) approach to their work.
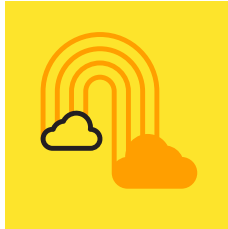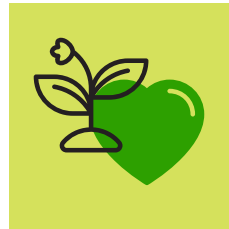
HF4Y is based on five core principles:
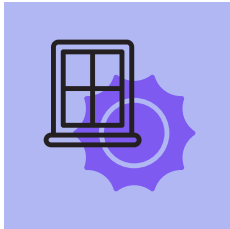
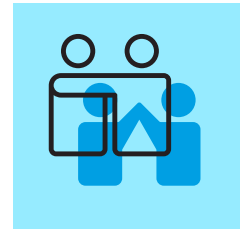**1.** A right to housing with no preconditions.

2. Youth choice, youth voice and self-determination.

3. Positive youth development and wellness orientation.

4. Individualized, client-driven supports with no time limits.

5. Social inclusion and community integration.

Housing First programs for queer and trans youth are currently operated by RainCity Housing in Vancouver (Munro, Reynolds, & Townsend, 2017). The program describes its work as using:

> **Housing First, radical harm reduction, culture and belonging as imperative to wellness, creating reciprocal relationships of respect, dignity and autonomy, and centring [their] work in [their] collective ethics, which are decolonizing and committed to not replicating the very oppressions that caused youth to be homeless (Munro, Reynolds, & Townsend, 2017, p. 135).**

With the impending opening of the Friends of Ruby Home, the opportunity to apply a HF4Y framework is timely.

UPDATE: Friends of Ruby continue to orient their service delivery using principles of the HF4Y model. This includes providing services that recognize youth voice and choice, delivering client-centered supports, promoting social inclusion and community integration, and enhancing professional development for staff and leadership on trauma-informed care and harm reduction. It is also preparing to open its housing alternative dedicated to 2SLGBTQI youth. The program recognizes that further work will be needed to fully align with a HF4Y model, including additional professional development opportunities for program staff.

9. **Engage young people in research and evaluation activities.** This work needs to be adequately compensated. As part of this work, review the program logic model and outcome measurement framework at yearly intervals. The inclusion of the Youth Ambassadors in this evaluation was essential. The Youth Ambassadors verified the findings that emerged from this evaluation and were able to acquire a level of authenticity from the focus group participants that our evaluation team would not have been able to. When developing new research and evaluation activities at Friends of Ruby, young people should be engaged in the process and adequately compensated. The new Youth Advisory Committee developed at Friends of Ruby could fill this role. One activity the Committee could engage in is a yearly review of the program logic model and the outcome measurement framework. In future evaluation work with third parties, Friends of Ruby should ensure that the third parties incorporate youth voice within their research and evaluation plans as part of their contractual obligations.

UPDATE: Friends of Ruby continue to develop their research and evaluation capacity, including the hiring of a Program and Evaluation Lead. As part of developing their research and evaluation capacity, Friends of Ruby will strive to engage young people in all upcoming and ongoing research and evaluation activities.

Partnerships and Program Promotion

10. **Partner with agencies that work with young BIPOC to meaningfully engage with young BIPOC at Friends of Ruby.** Related to the second recommendation, Friends of Ruby should continue to partner with agencies that work with young BIPOC. These partnerships will help Friends of Ruby develop programming and policies that are attuned to the needs of young BIPOC that access Friends of Ruby.

UPDATE: Friends of Ruby is continuously working on developing partnerships in the community, particularly agencies that work with young BIPOC such as BlackCAP.

11. **Strengthen and sustain partnerships in the community.** Friends of Ruby should continue to strengthen and sustain partnerships within the community. In particular, Friends of Ruby should look to partner with agencies that are in the same neighbourhood. These partnerships will expose young people who access Friends of Ruby to other services that are available to them.

UPDATE: Since the move to their new location, Friends of Ruby has engaged with other community-based agencies in the area. Outreach efforts are also being developed to continue the important work of obtaining, strengthening, and sustaining partnerships in the community.

12.

Represent 2SLGBTQI young people in the broader system of homelessness services and work toward broader system change. In our review of the recommendations with the program advisory committee, the Youth Ambassador shared that Friends of Ruby should represent 2SLGBTQI young people in the broader system of homelessness services and work toward broader system change to create a more inclusive system. One of the Youth Ambassadors shared that the youth homelessness sector still does not properly meet the needs of 2SLGBTQI young people, particularly transgender and gender non-binary individuals. Staff at Friends of Ruby should use their voice in broader public meetings to advocate for system change through inclusive policies and programs. This could include sharing the inclusive policies that Friends of Ruby currently operates under and opening dialogues on how the system can better support 2SLGBTQI young people. Friends of Ruby should also consider inviting young people to meetings with community stakeholders (i.e., City of Toronto Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, Youth Shelter Interagency Network).

UPDATE: Friends of Ruby sit at various tables and engage with multiple networks in the community, such as the Canadian Alliance on Suicide Prevention and the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness. Opportunities for community engagement will increase with the opening of the Friends of Ruby Home, and the hiring of a Community Engagement Coordinator.

Conclusion

This report highlights the main evaluation findings and how Friends of Ruby has worked to address the recommendations resulting from the findings. Friends of Ruby has gone through substantial changes since the evaluation took place. This includes moving to a new location and becoming an independent charity with a new brand and mission to support the progressive well-being of 2SLGBTQI youth through social service and housing. These changes provided an opportunity for Friends of Ruby to address several of the evaluation's recommendations. For example, Friends of Ruby has been able to increase mental health supports for 2SLGBTQI young people and continue to foster a sense of community within its drop-in space. Of particular note, Friends of Ruby has enhanced its supports to BIPOC young people and staff, and is currently starting a comprehensive Anti-Racist & Anti-Oppressive work. Friends of Ruby should continue to reflect on its practices and program offerings by obtaining regular feedback from young people and staff.

References

Munro, A., Reynolds, V., & Townsend, M. (2017). Youth Wisdom, Harm Reduction & Housing First: RainCity Housing's Queer & Trans Youth Housing Project. In A. Abramovich & J. Shelton (Eds.), *Where Am I Going to Go? Intersectional Approaches to Ending LGBTQ2S Youth Homelessness in Canada & the U.S.* (pp. 135-154). Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.