MAKING
THE SHIFT
youth homelessness
demonstration lab

**SUPPORTING YOUTH
AT RISK OF HOMELESSNESS:**
AN EVALUATION OF HAMILTON'S
YOUTH RECONNECT PROGRAM

2020   Rachel Caplan ·
John Ecker · Jennifer
Akerman · Meryl Borato

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A WAY HOME
VERS UN CHEZ-SOI
CANADA

Land Acknowledgement

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness acknowledges that the city of Hamilton, Ontario is located on the traditional territories of the Erie, Neutral, Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee, and Mississaugas. The land is covered by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, which was an agreement between the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabek to share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. It is further acknowledged that this land is covered by the Between the Lakes Purchase, 1792, between the Crown and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation (Urban Indigenous Strategy, City of Hamilton, 2019).

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Executive Summary

This report presents the results from the evaluation of the implementation and early development of the Good Shepherd Centre's Youth Reconnect (YR) program in Hamilton, Ontario. The YR program is part of the Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Demonstration Project (MtS DEMS) – a three-year project funded by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC). MtS DEMS is focused on testing three prevention-based program models in 10 communities and 12 organizations in Alberta and Ontario in order to improve outcomes for young people at risk of or currently experiencing homelessness in Canada, and their families. The evaluation took place in 2019 and therefore does not reflect the context of delivering services during a pandemic.

WHAT IS YOUTH RECONNECT?

Youth Reconnect 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 Youth Reconnect is to help young people stay connected to their family, school, and community, and to strengthen connections to "natural supports" in order to prevent and/or reduce the risk of homelessness. It builds on the practices of the Family and Natural Supports (FNS) framework (Borato, Gaetz, & McMillan, 2020) and is guided by principles of the Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) program model (Gaetz, 2017), but focuses upstream on providing school/community-based supports that keep young people in place, so that they can move forward with their lives in a safe and planned way. It is largely based on the Australian Reconnect model (Australian Government, 2013) and was initially implemented in 2008 in a Canadian context through the RAFT in the Niagara Region of Ontario (Niagara Resource Service for Youth, 2012).

CONTEXT OF THE EVALUATION

The three key objectives of this qualitative formative evaluation were to:

—1—

Understand the Hamilton Youth Reconnect program and determine the most important components of the program.

—2—

Understand the process of program implementation (i.e., facilitators and challenges) and the processes of program development (i.e., adaptations and innovations).

—3—

Identify program strengths and next steps for the purpose of program improvement.

Evaluation Methodology

There were four main components of our methodology, which included: 1) A review of program documentation; 2) Interviews with six young people; 3) Interviews with three Youth Reconnect workers; and 4) One focus group with nine program/organizational-level leadership staff. We intended to interview family members of young people who enrolled in the Youth Reconnect program, but we were unable to successfully recruit family members. Interviews with seven key informants from community-based organizations that collaborated with Hamilton's Youth Reconnect program were interviewed as well. Findings and recommendations from the community key informant interviews will be reported in a companion report to be released subsequently.

This project received ethical approval from York University's Office of Research Ethics.

Key Findings

Key program components and activities of the Youth Reconnect program identified by young people, Youth Reconnect workers, and program/organizational staff were: i) Early intervention; ii) Youth-centred support; iii) Flexibility and accessibility of program supports; iv) Access to mental health services; v) Connection and support outside of family; vi) Family mediation, and education and advocacy with parents; vii) Reconnection with family; viii) Community integration; and ix) Organizational support.

What worked/is working well? Youth indicated that the following elements are working well: i) Shelter diversion (early intervention) and flexibility of support; ii) Access to mental health supports. However, one youth, who was recently enrolled in the program, was unable to report on program elements that were working well.

Youth Reconnect workers thought that the following elements were working well: i) Shelter diversion (early intervention); ii) Flexibility of the program; iii) Homelessness and shelter education; iv) Transportation; and v) Intersectoral collaboration.

Themes from the program-organizational staff responses included: i) Planning; ii) Family mediation; iii) Flexibility; iv) Youth and family engagement; v) Visibility within the community; and vi) MtS DEMS support.

When asked what modifications were made to fit the context of Hamilton, the themes from the Youth Reconnect workers were: i) Housing support; ii) Shelter education; iii) Staff schedules; and iv) Program eligibility. The themes from the program-organizational staff were: i) Clinical support for parents; and ii) Outreach.

When asked of the *challenges* *they experienced in the program, the themes from youth were:* *i)* *Lack of housing;* *ii)* *Resource limitations;* *iii)* *Limitation in access to Youth Reconnect worker due to external factors;* *and* *iv)* *Transitioning out of the program*.

The themes from the Youth Reconnect workers related to challenges were: *i)* *Housing for youth;* *ii)* *Lack of designated meeting spaces;* *iii)* *Discharge;* *iv)* *Resource limitations;* *v)* *Outreach;* *and* *vi)* *Shelter education*.

The themes from the program-organizational staff responses were: *i)* *Lack of residential programs* *and* *ii)* *Administrative paperwork*.

Young people were asked what they would *change* *about the program. The themes from their responses were:* *i)* *Increasing the exposure of the program;* *and* *ii)* *Improved training across the system*.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from young people, Youth Reconnect staff, and program/organizational staff, the following recommendations were developed. They are grouped based on areas through which the program can sustain and enhance their strengths, and those that will require further development.

SUSTAIN & ENHANCE

- The program should continue to work with young people under the age of 16.

- The program should continue to offer flexible, accessible, and adaptable supports.

- The program should continue to work with young people and their families, with the consent of young people.

- The program should continue to provide access to mental health supports for young people and their families.

- The program should continue to have a flexible mandate that respects the unique needs and rights of young people.

- Enhance the partnership with the local school boards and increase outreach into schools.

- Enhance partnerships with child welfare agencies.

- The program should continue to advocate for young people, particularly around housing and income support.

- The program should continue to expand their staffing coverage.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

- Develop informational materials for parents on the impact of the emergency shelter system on young people.

- Refer young people requiring independent housing to youth housing programs.

- The YR program should ensure that it is providing services that are aligned with the YR model.

- Advocate for the City of Hamilton to provide reduced transit passes to young people.

- Have measures in place to ensure that young people do not fall through the cracks by reviewing the eligibility/exclusion criteria.

- Ensure that there are at least two lines of communication with young people.

- The program should develop its aftercare support. Aftercare support will help a young person's transition from the program.

- The program should track where young people are being diverted and conduct a follow-up with young people once they are discharged from the program.

- Develop a partnership with a community-based organization to create office space for staff and a private space for young people and workers.

- The program should hire more staff and develop a standard for caseload ratios.

SECTION 1: Introduction To Hamilton's Youth Reconnect Program

This report presents the results from an evaluation of the implementation and early development of the Good Shepherd Centre's (GSC) Youth Reconnect (YR) program in Hamilton, Ontario. The YR program is part of the *Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Demonstration Project* (MtS DEMS) - a 3-year demonstration project testing programs intended to support young people at-risk of, or currently experiencing, homelessness in Canada. The purpose of this report is to present a qualitative description of the early stages of development and implementation of the program from the perspectives of different stakeholder groups. The evaluation took place in 2019 and therefore does not reflect the context of delivering services during a pandemic.

BACKGROUND OF MAKING THE SHIFT YOUTH HOMELESSNESS DEMONSTRATION LAB

In 2017, A Way Home Canada (AWHC) and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) created the Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab (now officially called the *Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Demonstration Lab*) to develop demonstration projects based on emerging interventions for youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

The City of Hamilton was selected to set up a YR demonstration project because the community was well positioned to facilitate youth homelessness prevention through the Street Youth Planning Collaborative (SYPC). The SYPC is composed of directors/senior management and frontline workers from youth-serving agencies and youth with lived experiences of homelessness in Hamilton. The group convenes regularly to assess the continuum of services that are available to vulnerable youth in Hamilton (i.e., young people experiencing chronic housing instability to those at imminent risk of homelessness), and works together to fill gaps in that continuum.

When AWHC and the COH approached the SYPC about starting a YR demonstration project in Hamilton, the SYPC responded positively. The collective believed that YR would fill an important gap in their youth homelessness service continuum, as it would target youth at risk of housing loss and needing support to prevent an episode of homelessness. The GSC proposal for a YR program was successful and in January 2018 they began accepting participants.

SITE DESCRIPTION

Hamilton has a population of 536,917 (Statistics Canada, 2016). The city has experienced a 3.7% population growth from 2011 to 2016. Based on the 2016 Census, there were approximately 68,845 young people aged 15 to 24 residing in Hamilton.

Among individuals in Hamilton with incomes of less than $20,000 per year, approximately 16,400 spend more than 50% of their incomes on rent (City of Hamilton, 2019). The vacancy rate in Hamilton in 2019 was 4.1% and the average market rent for a one-bedroom apartment in 2019 was $1,021. This average market rent figure primarily focuses on rental apartments and rental townhouses. Expanding the scope to condominium apartments, the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Hamilton in April 2020 was $1,429 (Rentals.ca, 2020)[1].

Since 2015, an average of 2,850 unique individuals annually access one of Hamilton's emergency shelters (City of Hamilton, 2019). Shelter occupancy has remained high, except for a decrease in the youth sector. In the 2018 Point-in-Time (PiT) count, 13% of surveyed individuals were between the ages of 16 to 24. Also of note, in the 2016 Point-in-Time Count, approximately 28% of individuals and families experiencing homelessness identified as Indigenous (Hope, Mayo, Montana McCormack, & Rollings, 2017).

ABOUT GSC'S YR PROGRAM

GSC's YR program is a community-based early intervention program that provides youth who are at-risk of or experiencing homelessness immediate access to support that will stabilize their housing and assists them in creating and strengthening connections with their families, education systems, and communities. Depending on the young person's choices, these supports can include mental health services, family mediation, housing, and other community-based services.

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1 The data used in this analysis is based on monthly listings from Rentals.ca. "The data is much different than the more familiar numbers collected and published by Canada Mortgage Housing Corporation (CMHC).

Rentals.ca data includes basement apartments, rental apartments, condominium apartments, townhouses, semi-detached houses, and single-detached houses, where CMHC's primary rental data only includes rental apartments and rental townhouses. CMHC collects some data on the secondary market, but it is reported separately.

The CMHC rental rates are based on the entire universe of purpose-built rental units in Canada (the stock), while Rentals.ca data is primarily based on the asking rents of vacated units only (the flow) — this is a smaller sample size, but more representative of the actual market rent a prospective tenant encounters. The Rentals.ca data set typically produces much higher rental rates in comparison to CMHC, as vacated units are not subject to rent control."

PROGRAM ELIGIBILITY

Youth ages 13-19 and who are at-risk of homelessness or have a history of housing instability are eligible for the program. Young people currently residing in an emergency shelter are not eligible, as the program is intended to be an upstream prevention intervention. Youth must live within the catchment area of the city of Hamilton. There is no waitlist for services and no set time limit on program length.

STAFFING

YR workers refer to, access, and coordinate community-based services to support young people in creating support networks. YR case management provision involves facilitating and advocating for access to community housing services and crisis counselling, as well as inter-agency coordination. Additionally, with consent and by the request of young people, YR workers engage with the young person's family members to assist with strengthening and repairing their relationships.

PREFERRED QUALIFICATIONS INCLUDE

– Primary case management and community development skills acquired through a post-secondary education in social services such as Child and Youth Worker, with a demonstrated commitment to the mission values of availability, responsibility, adaptability, quality, and dignity.

– Must have some experience working with youth.

– Knowledge of and/or experience working with children under the Child and Family Services Act Guidelines.

– Having a minimum of two years' experience related to the engagement of high-risk youth with a focus on building capacity.

– Understanding of and being comfortable working from a client-centred approach.

– Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) certification or willingness to be certified is a requirement.

– Must have a valid G driver's license.

SECTION 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

For the purpose of this review, we employ the Canadian Definition of Youth Homelessness, which defines youth homelessness as "the situation and experience of young people between the ages of 13 and 24 who are living independently of parents and caregivers, but do not have the means or ability to acquire a stable, safe or consistent residence" (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2016, p.1).

A rapid literature review was conducted to identify and evaluate the evidence for youth homelessness prevention and early intervention programming. Rapid reviews are a form of knowledge synthesis that follow the systematic review process, but components of the process are simplified or omitted to produce information in a timely manner (Khangura et al., 2012). This rapid review included both scholarly research and grey literature published between 1995 and 2019.

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION IN CANADA

Young people, aged 13 to 24, represent 20% of Canadians experiencing homelessness on any given night (Gaetz et al., 2016). Historically, communities and governments in Canada have relied on emergency services and crisis responses to support youth who are homeless (Gaetz et al., 2018). While emergency supports are necessary, they do not effectively prevent, reduce, or end youths' experiences of homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2018). There is a substantial body of evidence supporting the need to shift to proactive and preventative, rather than reactive responses to youth homelessness (Robertson & Toro, 1998; Sanabria, 2006, Coco & Courtney, L.J, 1998), yet evidence for the effectiveness of youth homelessness prevention in Canada is much-needed.

The [Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness](#) (Gaetz et al., 2018) presents a typology of youth homelessness prevention in Canada organized into six categories:
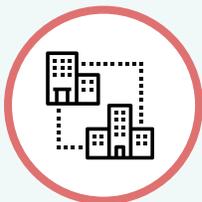
1. STRUCTURAL PREVENTION: Legislation, policy, and investment to address risks of homelessness and increase social equality. Examples include legislating housing as a human right, adhering to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action (2015), poverty reduction strategies, and income support.

2. SYSTEMS PREVENTION: Breaking barriers and enhancing access to services and supports. This includes transition supports for those leaving public institutions, such as correctional facilities, hospitals, and child protection systems.

3. EARLY INTERVENTION: Strategies designed to act early and address the risk of homelessness, as well as provide crisis intervention to those who have recently experienced homelessness. Examples include effective outreach, coordinated intake and assessment, client-centred case management, and shelter diversion.

4. EVICTION PREVENTION: A type of early intervention, programs designed to keep young people stably housed and help them avoid eviction. Examples include landlord/tenant mediation, rental assistance, emergency financial assistance, and legal advice and representation.

5. HOUSING STABILIZATION: Supporting people who have experienced homelessness to find and maintain housing. This includes Housing First and supports to enhance health and well-being, education and employment, and social inclusion.

6. DUTY TO ASSIST: Combines a statutory responsibility to help young people at-risk of homelessness, with an obligation to ensure that adults in the lives of young people are able to provide support to help young people avoid homelessness or direct them to the appropriate services.

YR can be considered an early intervention strategy. The next section of this report highlights some of the key research on early intervention strategies for youth experiencing homelessness.
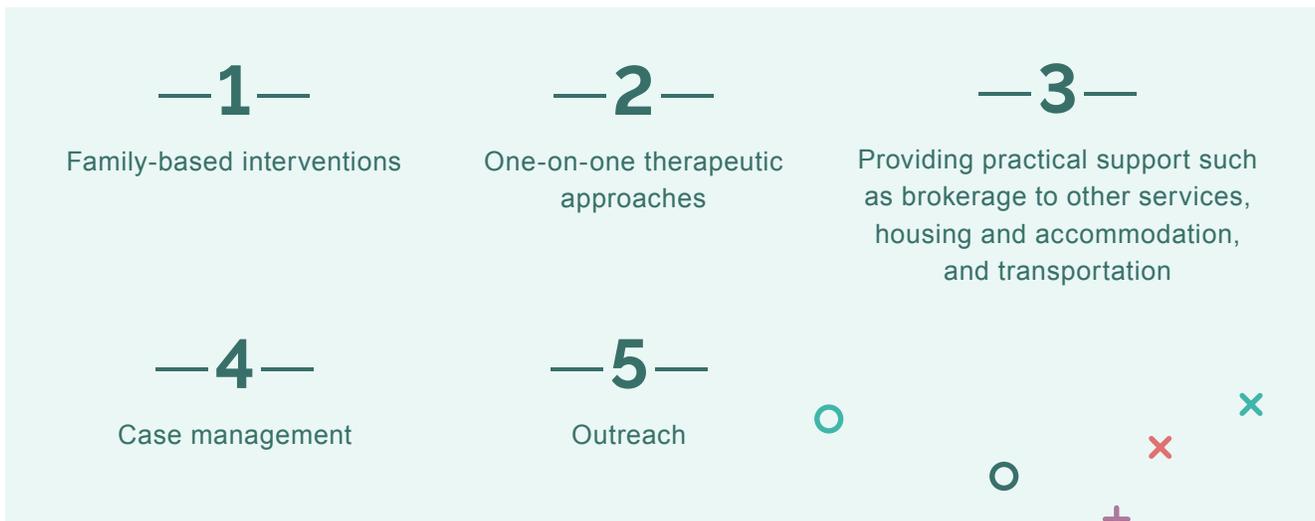
EARLY INTERVENTION IN YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Early intervention approaches seek to identify and address the challenges that young people and their families face before they experience homelessness, and with that reducing entries into homelessness altogether. Early intervention programs seek to strengthen the protective factors that mitigate risk of homelessness and stabilize housing for young people through increasing school engagement, nurturing family and "natural" supports, improving health and wellness, and enhancing conflict resolution skills (Gaetz et al., 2014). Below, two examples of YR programs are discussed.

The Reconnect Program

The Reconnect Program was launched in 1999 by the Australian government, in response to increasing rates of youth homelessness. The Reconnect Program is a community-based early intervention and prevention program for young people aged 12 to 18 (or to 21 years in the case of newcomers) who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness, and their families (Australian Government, 2013; Chamberlain & Mackenzie, 1998; Crane & Brannock, 1996; National Youth Commission, 2008). The Reconnect Program is based out of schools and aims to prevent homelessness by providing support and services through a network of community-based, early intervention services (Australian Government, 2013). The program promotes family reconciliation through mediation and improving family communication (Australian Government, 2013).

The key elements of the Reconnect model
(Barker, Humphrise, McArthur, & Thomson, n.d.):

—1—
Family-based interventions

—2—
One-on-one therapeutic approaches

—3—
Providing practical support such as brokerage to other services, housing and accommodation, and transportation

—4—
Case management

—5—
Outreach

These supports are offered with a focus on building relationships, rapport, and trust with young people and their families. The Reconnect program uses client-centred, flexible, holistic, strengths-based and solution focused supports (Barker et al., n.d.)

According to the Australian Government (2013), the Reconnect Program aims to:

—1—

Link schools and young people to community-based services that can support youth and their families

—2—

Improve awareness of youth homelessness amongst school staff, teachers, and administrators, include knowledge of available local services

—3—

Providing practical support such as brokerage to other services, housing and accommodation, and transportation

—4—

Improve young people's engagement with education, employment, training, and community

The Reconnect Program operates over 100 programs in communities across Australia, with some specializing in supporting high-risk sub-populations such as Indigenous youth, LGBTQ youth, and newcomer and refugee youth. Evaluations of the Reconnect Program have demonstrated positive impact and outcomes (Evans & Shaver, 2001; Australian Government, 2013; Australian Government, 2016). A comprehensive review by the Australian government in 2003 indicated positive outcomes in relation to housing stability for youth, young people, and parents' ability to manage family conflict, engagement in education and employment, and community engagement.

YR in the Canadian Context

YR began as a pilot project in 2008 in the Town of Fort Erie, Ontario, Canada. The project was scaled up to cover much of the Niagara region in 2009 (Niagara Resource Service for Youth, 2012). The YR Initiative is a community-based prevention program that reconnects youth to their home community. While YR was adapted from the Reconnect Program in many ways, it was not a government-led initiative. Rather, YR is a community-led project that developed out of a need to address youth homelessness in rural areas. The program is a partnership between schools in Niagara Region and the RAFT emergency shelter in St. Catharines.

The RAFT YR program targets young people between the ages of 16 to 19. RAFT's YR program "helps clients' access resources and increases their self-sufficiency, by assisting adolescents to maintain school attendance, secure housing and develop a social safety net in their home community" (Niagara Resource Service for Youth, 2012, p.4). Teachers, coaches, and counsellors identify youth at risk of homelessness, and refer them to a YR worker. Youth are also able to access the program through self- or family referral, or referral by service providers, such as healthcare providers, community workers, and employers.

YR is a client-centred intervention. In the context of the RAFT's YR program this means that the young person and YR worker meet at the youth's place of choosing and together they assess the youth's needs and develop a community-based plan of action that draws on local support, enhances protective factors, and allows the youth to stay in school. The YR program is a "place-based support," with the goal of increasing assets and self-sufficiency to allow the youth to remain in their home community.

> *"By creating a localized support network and keeping youth within their home communities, the youth reconnect initiative is able to help youth remain connected to their communities, with the support they need, instead of forcing youth to relocate to a larger urban area, where they are more susceptible to engaging in high risk behaviours" (Niagara Resource Service for Youth, 2012, p. 2).*

A review of the RAFT's YR program was conducted in 2012. According to the review, the number of youth who reported living in regular housing increased from 35% at intake to 80% at discharge. However, the evaluation followed these promising results by emphasizing that "there should be a concerted effort to improve collaborations within existing support systems such as educational services and identify at-risk youth before they enter a life of homelessness" (Niagara Resource Service for Youth, 2012, p.12).

Based on the RAFT's Youth Reconnect program, AWHC and the COH, through MtS DEMS, wanted to evaluate YR as a demonstration project, where the program model could be further developed and adapted.

SECTION 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

An ecological systems approach is needed to understand homelessness more generally (Shinn, 1992; Toro, Trickett, Wall, & Salem, 1991), and specifically to evaluate and implement intervention programming for young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness (Bronstein, 1996). This evaluation was designed through an ecological systems lens. The methods used through data collection and data analysis reflect this lens. Stemming from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory of child/human development, Kelly (1979, 2006) and Trickett et al. (1985) expanded the theory to better understand how resources are utilized and how local systems work within communities. More specifically, Kelly (1979, 2006) and Trickett et al.'s (1985) ecological systems theory focuses on how community-based interventions utilize local resources and ecological processes within these local systems. Based on their ecological systems theory, Hawe (2017) outlined four central principles that can be used to understand how community-based interventions work ecologically:
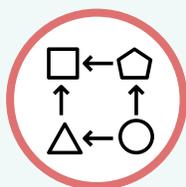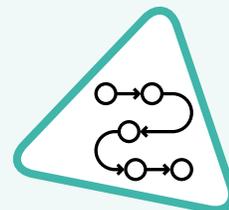
1. Cycling of resources:
The ways in which resources flow throughout a community. "Resources might include ways of thinking, professional expertise, leadership, existing programs, churches, networks, groups, festivals, existing meeting places, and opportunities for interaction" (Hawe, 2017, p.91).

2. Interdependence:
The interconnections within a community. "There will be direct and indirect relationships so that one can see how having an impact in one part of the community might have effects and ramifications elsewhere…" (Hawe, 2017, p.91).

3. Adaptation:
The need to tailor interventions to the community. "The process of maximizing fit between intervention and community" and "patterns of organization at a higher level that enhance the function of the setting" (Hawe, 2017, p.91).

4. Succession:
The ways in which ideologies, resources, and practices within a community change over time. With respect to community-based interventions, "succession refers to the history of previous innovations and how the timing of the intervention affects its uptake, shape, and interpretation. It encompasses how the intervention matures and develops as it interacts with its context over time" (Hawe, 2017, p.91).

SECTION 4: EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

KEY OBJECTIVES

There were three key objectives of this qualitative formative evaluation:

—1—

Understand the Hamilton Youth Reconnect program and determine the most important components of the program.

—2—

Understand the process of program implementation (i.e., facilitators and challenges) and the processes of program development (i.e., adaptations and innovations).

—3—

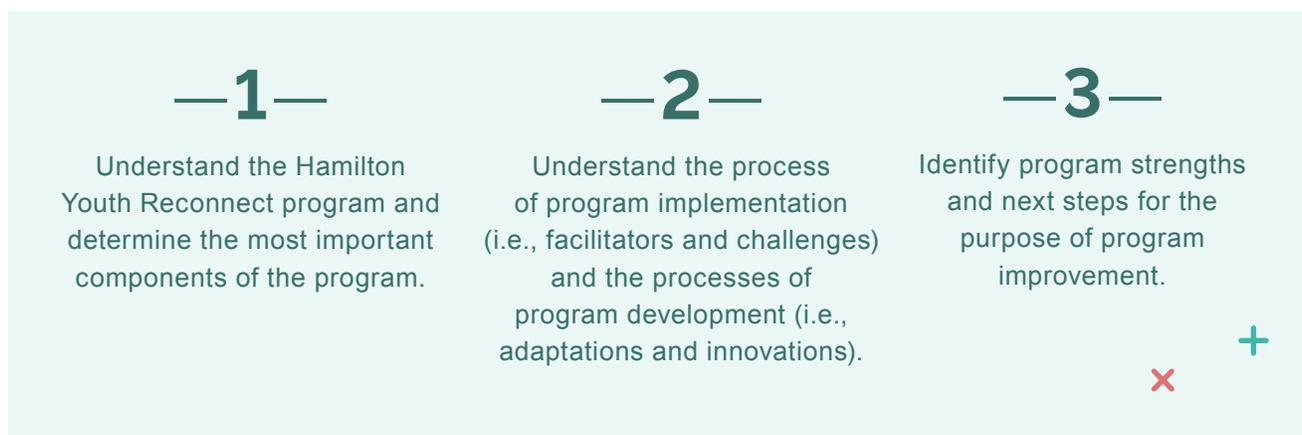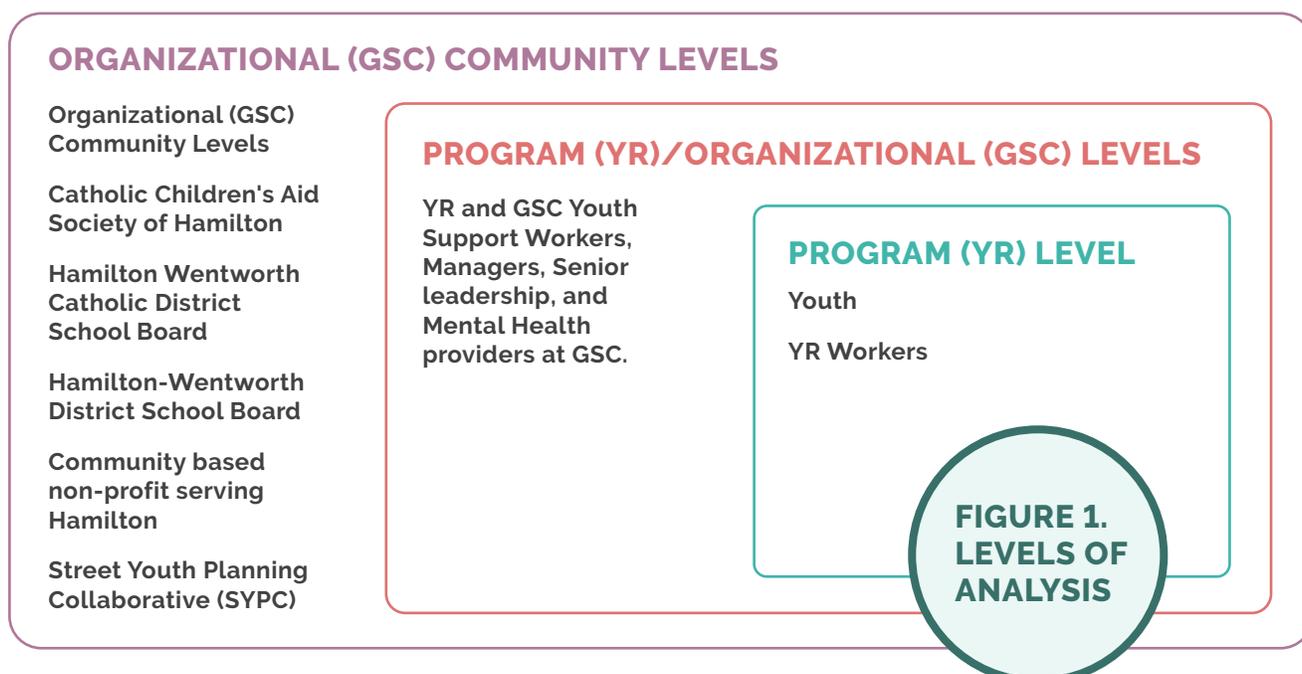Identify program strengths and next steps for the purpose of program improvement.

To meet the objectives, an ecological systems lens was used (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Kelly, 1979, 2006; Trickett et al., 1985). Stakeholders from different levels of analysis (i.e., program and organizational levels) were included in this evaluation – and at community levels in a companion evaluation – in order to better understand how the Hamilton YR program works and is impacted by the Good Shepherd Centre (GSC) within which it is housed, all of which is nested within the larger City of Hamilton's communities and public systems (e.g., education, housing, and child welfare). See Figure 1 (below).

ORGANIZATIONAL (GSC) COMMUNITY LEVELS

Organizational (GSC) Community Levels

Catholic Children's Aid Society of Hamilton

Hamilton Wentworth Catholic District School Board

Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board

Community based non-profit serving Hamilton

Street Youth Planning Collaborative (SYPC)

PROGRAM (YR)/ORGANIZATIONAL (GSC) LEVELS

YR and GSC Youth Support Workers, Managers, Senior leadership, and Mental Health providers at GSC.

PROGRAM (YR) LEVEL

Youth

YR Workers

FIGURE 1. LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

METHODS

Qualitative Approach

A qualitative approach was used for this evaluation. Since the Youth Reconnect model was recently released (Gaetz, Morton, Borato, & Story, 2020) within a Canadian context, and the GSC Hamilton YR program is a new program, the overarching purpose of this evaluation was to understand the activities, objectives, and processes involved with program development and implementation.

Participant Sample and Sampling

YR Worker (Staff) Interviews

Interviews were conducted with three YR workers. Two of the YR workers had been in their roles for less than six months, while a third was a former YR worker who had since transitioned to a leadership position within the Good Shepherd organization. YR workers were recruited through convenience sampling by which the YR Program Coordinator recommended YR workers to interview.

YR Participant (Youth and Families) Interviews

Interviews were conducted with six young people who utilized YR services within the first year of program implementation (2018-2019). Young people who participated were between the ages of 15 to 19. They described various reasons for accessing the program, including: frequently getting "kicked out" of their family home; having many family issues; living far away from their family and needing direct, regular support; and needing support acquiring housing.

A limitation of the interviews with young people was that only young people currently enrolled in the YR program were interviewed. The evaluation team was unable to connect with young people who had graduated from the program. Further, convenience sampling was used, as YR workers identified young people who would be comfortable participating in an interview. Lastly, it was a small sample of young people that participated.

At least five family members of young people involved in the program were intended to be interviewed. We were unable to recruit any family members to participate.

Program/Organizational-level Staff Focus Group

One focus group was conducted with nine members of Good Shepherd Centre's program staff and leadership team (including YR-specific staff). These staff members had different roles in the YR program and GSC more generally. Participants included YR and GSC youth support workers, as well as managers, senior leaders, and mental health providers at GSC.

Data Collection

Document reviews, qualitative interviews, and a focus group were conducted. All interviews and the focus group were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Review of Program Documentation

Program documentation, such as employee manuals and program guides, were reviewed by the research team to examine the practices of the YR program.

Qualitative Interviews

YR Workers

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with YR workers. A loosely structured protocol was used to allow for emerging concepts brought forward by the interviewees to be discussed. The semi-structured protocol focused on the key elements of the YR model, adaptations to the model, contextual influences, strengths, and challenges.

Program Participants (Youth)

Interviews were conducted with young people who utilized YR services within the first year of program implementation (2018-2019). The interviews followed a semi-structured interview protocol and focused on the services young people received, their likes and dislikes of the program, and areas for improvement. Young people were paid $20 for their participation.

Focus Group

> ## *GSC Leadership Team Members*
>
> The focus group was conducted with members of GSC's program staff and leadership team (including YR-specific staff). The focus group followed a semi-structured protocol, which focused on the key elements of the YR program; services offered through the YR program, adaptations made to the program, contextual influences, strengths, and challenges. The evaluation matrix that guided this project is found below.

Overarching Evaluation Matrix (Individual/Program/Organizational Levels)

Questions	Methods	Sources	Number of Participants
OBJECTIVE 1: Understand the Hamilton Youth Reconnect program and determine the most important components of the program.			
↳ What are the key components/ characteristics, and activities of the YR program? ↳ What is the theory of change that links the program components to the outcomes (e.g., improved housing stability)?	↳ **Key informant** (KI) interviews ↳ **Focus groups** (FG) ↳ **Interviews** (I) ↳ **Document review** (DR)	↳ **KI –** Individuals identified as having a key role in program implementation ↳ **FG & I –** program staff; youth; families ↳ **DR –** Youth Reconnect Australia evaluation and framework and YR and GSC program documents	↳ **KI interviews** (n = 3) ↳ **Staff focus group 1** (n = 9) ↳ **Youth interviews** (n = 6) ↳ **Family interviews** (n = 0)
OBJECTIVE 2: To understand the process of program implementation (i.e., facilitators and challenges) and the processes of program development (i.e., adaptations and innovations).			
↳ What worked/is working well? ↳ What contextual modifications/ adaptations were made to the program? ↳ What were the challenges? ↳ What would you change about the program?	↳ **Key informant interviews** ↳ **Focus groups**	↳ **KI –** Individuals identified as having a key role in program implementation ↳ **FG & I –** program staff; youth; families	↳ **KI interviews** (n = 3) ↳ **Staff focus group 1** (n = 9) ↳ **Youth interviews** (n = 6) ↳ **Family interviews** (n = 0)

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To begin, the evaluation team independently coded the same transcript for each of the groups interviewed (i.e., young people, YR workers, program-organizational staff). After, the team met to compare their codes to determine if there was congruence and/or incongruence between codes for each respective group. When incongruence occurred, a discussion took place among team members to explain their codes and talk through the differences until consensus was achieved. Following this process, each team member was assigned different transcripts to code. The transcripts were assigned based upon the groups being interviewed (i.e., young people, YR workers, program-organizational staff). Each transcript was coded line-by-line and in the language of each participant (i.e., in vivo coding (Peterson, 2017)). Following individual coding, the codes were analyzed for differences and similarities across transcripts, and common codes were organized into themes within the evaluation questions.

Ethics

This project received ethical clearance from York University's Office of Research Ethics.

SECTION 5: FINDINGS

Findings are organized by themes found for each stakeholder group with respect to each of the evaluation objectives. We begin by describing the key components of Hamilton's YR program. Next, we present the facilitators and challenges of program implementation, as well as the adaptations and modifications made to the program to fit the local context.

OBJECTIVE 1: Understand the Hamilton Youth Reconnect program and determine the most important components of the program.

QUESTION ▶ **1:** What are the key components/characteristics, and activities of the YR program?

YOUTH

Young people identified the following as key program components and activities of the YR program: i) Early intervention/homelessness prevention; ii) Youth-centred support; iii) Flexibility and accessibility; iv) Access to mental health services; v) Connection and support outside of family; vi) Family mediation, education, and advocacy with parents; and vii) Reconnection with family.

i) Early Intervention/Homelessness Prevention through Access to Financial Supports to Acquire Housing

Young people discussed the importance of the program helping them access financial support, in particular Ontario Works (OW), to prevent them from having to access the shelter system. The receipt of financial assistance helped young people to afford their necessities (particularly housing), as well as the means to access transportation.

The presence of a YR worker helped young people acquire services that they were unable to acquire on their own due to ongoing stigma and discrimination against young people. One youth said:

> *Youth Reconnect helped me get housing... I had a big issue last time [trying to get OW], made me go through this huge process for no reason… They were standing behind me -- just like getting Ontario Works and they were sitting behind me, they just like gave it to me… I was able to get basic needs and what not for the month… They just helped me get OW so I can get my own place.*

Another young person said they accessed the YR program to get into a housing program. At the time of their interview, this youth was part of a transitional housing program, had acquired OW through assistance from their YR worker, and was working with their worker to acquire independent housing for himself and his mother. Another youth said that their YR worker helped them find and move into student housing. They said: "**I come down and talk to [my YR worker] about my housing... Lately I've just had problems with like, moving in and out, so basically I've just been asking her to help me move in and out**".

ii) Youth-Centred Support

Four of the six young people interviewed explicitly described their positive relationships with their YR workers. Young people expressed feeling supported and that their YR worker was reliable. One youth said that knowing they had their YR worker to rely on for their future needs was very helpful for them. Another young person said: "**I can reach [YR worker] any time I want**" and went on to say that: "**[YR Worker] makes you feel, I don't know, normal? She doesn't talk to you like she's a worker.**" Another young person described feeling supported by YR staff, particularly during challenging times in their life when they did not have anyone else to rely on. They stated:

> *Well, personally, I find this program really helpful because I can't always… run to my family and talk to them about what's going on, or ask my family for support or even ask to see my family, so to have people I can talk to everyday, or just people that I know are there to support me, is really helpful for me, personally… when I was going through some really rough times, I felt like I was supported, especially when I went to the hospital and when I was in the psych ward and stuff. I very-much felt supported by everybody since my family wasn't really supporting me. Like they were trying, but I don't know how hard they were trying. But I felt very supported and very wanted and stuff at that point.*

iii) Flexibility and Accessibility

A few young people discussed how flexible and accessible the YR program and their YR workers were. One young person noted that their YR worker's access to the GSC van was helpful, so they did not have to travel to GSC to see their worker. Instead, their worker could come to their home to visit them. Another youth described their initial apprehension around participating in the YR program, but eventually found that the flexibility of the program and their YR worker was supportive of their needs. They said:

> I'm just really thankful that I'm in it [YR program]. First, I was really nervous, and at first, I wasn't really sure I was going to be, and I was like 'ok, I don't know about this' … I'm not sure, but more like I gave it a shot and stuff, it turns out to be really good, because it's like you said, it's flexible, so… I don't constantly have to call her [YR Worker] every day of the week and be like, 'this is what's going on'. It's like some weeks she doesn't hear from me, other weeks she hears from five times a week… it's basically on my schedule and she's supportive of that.

iv) Access to Mental Health Services

While they did not describe their experiences in detail, two young people mentioned that they had accessed mental health services through the YR program. One of these young people discussed having been able to access a mental health clinician and to complete a psychological assessment that they needed, and another young person talked about being able to access mental health workers and a drug counsellor through the program.

v) Connection and Support Outside of Family

Most of the young people interviewed described the YR program, and more specifically, their YR workers as providing them with the connection and support that they needed but did not receive from their family. When asked, "What does Youth Reconnect mean to you?", one young person described the support they needed from the YR program before feeling comfortable enough to engage with their family. They said:

> … it just means that you have a network of people to support you, when in some cases, you don't have family available right away… to support you, which is like my situation. So… my mental health worker or having my YR worker... to help me... Sometimes it's easier to have those people helping you first, then my family.

Another young person described what she needed from the YR program as, "**someone to talk to**". Another youth described her experience with her YR Worker as being different - more positive - than any she had with workers in other youth-serving programs. When asked what YR meant to her, she said:

> *[YR worker] made me think about the program a lot because she's a good worker. And I haven't ever met a worker like [YR worker] ... we need more workers like her...I feel like, well, [YR worker] makes you feel, I don't know, normal? She doesn't talk to you like she's a worker.*

vi) Family Mediation, Education, and Advocacy with Parents

Multiple young people described the support they received from their YR worker in communicating and/or advocating on their behalf with their parent(s). One young person appreciated their YR worker's support in negotiating with their parent in relaxing some of the rules at home. Another youth said that despite their lack of success, they appreciated their YR worker advocating for them to be able to stay with their parents for even a short period of time in order to avoid having to move into the shelter. They said:
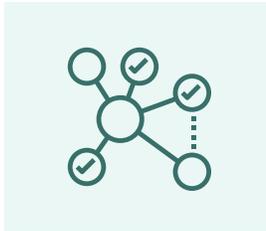
> *[YR worker] came in and called and advocated on my behalf and tried to convince them to let me stay there... Just anywhere else I could stay; she could try and help me without going into shelter… But my parents did not agree.*

vii) Reconnection with Family

Three of the six young people described the YR program as providing a way to reconnect with their families. One youth said, "**I guess it's meant… for you to be reconnected back home. With your parents or whatever. Or siblings**". Another young person accessed the YR program for support in acquiring financial assistance through OW so he could afford an independent apartment for his mother to live with him when she moves to the country. When asked if the YR program helped in his relationships with family and friends, one youth explained that his YR worker validated his feelings, providing him with the confidence he needed when he decided to connect with his family. He said:

> *… my biggest problem with my family is that I can't talk to them about things that are going on with my everyday life… So when I talk to [YR Worker] about it, it makes me feel more and more comfortable going to my family and being like, 'yeah this is what's going' on because then, I've already talked about it with somebody else, and I've already gotten somebody else's opinion… So then with my family kind of, makes me feel bad for something that I shouldn't feel bad about, I've already heard from somebody else, like I don't need to feel bad. So then, I don't overreact or something.*

The other three young people interviewed either did not mention wanting to reconnect with their families (but were clear that they accessed the program for other reasons, such as support in acquiring housing); or stated explicitly that they did not want to reconnect with their families.

YR WORKERS

YR workers identified the following as key program components and activities of the YR program: i) Early intervention and homelessness prevention; ii) Youth-centred support; iii) Flexibility; and iv) Family mediation, education, and advocacy with parents.

i) Early Intervention and Homelessness Prevention

The YR workers consider prevention to be a key component of Youth Reconnect. YR workers described the program as a shelter diversion intervention. The only two eligibility criteria for youth to participate in YR are that they be between the ages of 13-19, and that they have never been in shelter. YR workers connect with youth who are at imminent risk of homelessness, with the goal of diverting from shelter, and ultimately, preventing homelessness. The YR workers stressed that the three main pillars used for shelter diversion are connecting youth to family, school, and community supports. One YR worker said: "**I just say it is homeless prevention. It is everything within the community that we can connect the youth to make sure that they have everything, that they don't ever need to come to shelter**".

YR workers also educate youth on the realities of the housing market in Hamilton, by accompanying them to viewings for apartments that they could afford while receiving social assistance.

ii) Youth-Centred Support

Youth-centred support is a foundational component of YR. By addressing the young person as their client, YR workers can support the youth in addressing their needs and achieving their goals. To effectively support young people, trust and rapport-building were identified as essential. YR workers meet young people at a location chosen by the youth, in order to foster a sense of safety and choice. YR workers promote "youth choice and youth voice," as they support youth in finding housing, connecting with community supports, family mediation, and other identified areas of support.
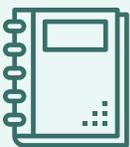
iii) Flexibility

Due to the variability of needs presented by youth, YR workers provide flexible supports. As one YR worker expressed:

> *I can do anything from housing supports, to finding you a family doctor, to connecting you with community supports that could get you out of your house, family mediation, family counselling. I help with school to help them [reintegrate] back in school. I've done some very basic mental health support by giving skills and tips as to how to cope with things. So, my role is hard to describe because…I feel like I do everything.*

Flexibility of the YR program was identified as one of its key components, as it provides YR workers the freedom to support the youth in navigating the system and creatively find solutions for problems which functions to reduce barriers to access and provision of support for youth.

iv) Family Mediation, Education, and Advocacy with Parents

Youth Reconnect workers described family mediation and education as key components of the YR program. YR workers mediate familial conflict to facilitate youth staying at home rather than having to find housing elsewhere. YR workers described that parents would call the GSC to inquire about the possibility of their child going to shelter to "**learn a lesson**". These calls are often forwarded to a YR worker, who proceeds to engage in informal counselling and education about the dangers of shelter immersion (e.g., human trafficking, drug use, street-culture).

PROGRAM-ORGANIZATIONAL STAFF

*GSC leadership identified the following as key program components and activities of the YR program: **i)** Early intervention and homelessness prevention; **ii)** Youth-centred support; **iii)** Flexibility & accessibility; **iv)** Access to mental health services; **v)** Family mediation and education; **vi)** Community integration; and **vii)** Organizational support.*

i) Early Intervention and Homelessness Prevention

Managers and staff at the GSC described prevention as a fundamental component of the YR program. Participants emphasized prevention in the decision to lower the age of eligibility from 16 to 13 years old. Staff understood prevention broadly as: diverting youth from entering the shelter system and its associated harms (e.g., drugs and sex trafficking); preventing youth from losing their housing with family if deemed safe; diverting youth from becoming involved with the child welfare system

(e.g., Children's Aid Society); and preventing youth from becoming socially isolated if they choose to live alone. As one shelter worker shared, "**My perspective [...] is 'Ok, now that I get a phone [call] about a 15-year-old, I don't have to call just CAS [Children's Aid Society], I get to connect them to someone right away**.'" Another member of the leadership team said:

> *No one really wants CAS involvement. No one wants police involvement, right? So, the natural instinct is… (claps) I'm just going to go here, I'm going to go there. I'm going to figure out, I'll figure it out on my own, right? Now, they have someone they can connect with.*

ii) Youth-Centred Support

Youth voice and choice is considered essential to the YR program by leadership staff and managers. YR workers promote youth choice and voice when supporting youth to find housing, engaging with family and other important relationships, and finding new connections and supports in the community. On this key component, one interviewee shared:

> *We really focus on youth voice, so I'm only looking for housing that the youth want. I'm only mediating with the family if the youth feels that that's their go-to. [...] whatever they want to be involved in, is what we're looking for.*

iii) Flexibility and Accessibility

Staff shared that the flexibility of the YR program is what sets it apart from other early intervention efforts. Mobility is also a fundamental component. By going out into the community and meeting at places that are convenient for youth, staff can maintain a high level of engagement and ensure that young people feel safe. Youth also have (limited) access to transportation through the GSC's van. In addition, YR is adaptable and staff were described as working with young people in creative ways.

iv) Access to Immediate Mental Health Services

An important component of YR identified in the staff focus group is immediate and on-site access to mental health services for youth, parents, and staff. Youth and families have access to consulting psychiatrists and psychologists with short wait times (they strive for same-day support). In addition, youth, family, and staff have access to GSC's Mental Health Clinician and children's mental health services in Hamilton.

v) Family Mediation and Education

Staff shared that another key feature of the program is family mediation and education. Staff described using a family mediation model developed by the GSC that combines a youth-centred, strengths-based perspective with Indigenous philosophies regarding Restorative Justice. YR workers will negotiate between parents and youth on areas of conflict, such as curfews, social interaction, chores, etc. All family mediation is done in the participants' preferred location – in their family home, at a neutral location, or at the GSC. They employ the family mediation model in their sessions with youth and parents. They also engage in informal coaching and education over the phone and/or in person to parents and youth on subjects such as mental health, adolescent development, parenting, and other areas that participants identify.

vi) Community Integration

According to leadership, community integration is another integral feature of the YR program. Staff mentioned that after a young person's housing is stabilized, the staff support them with integrating into their community through sports activities, school programs, and other community organizations. Staff believe that by encouraging youth to engage with their community, they develop positive relationships outside of their home (especially for those whose home life involves a lot of conflict).

vii) Organizational Support as Integral to Implementation of the YR Program

Many referrals to the program come from the child welfare system, the mental health system, and through other programs within the GSC. It was clear from the focus group that the GSC is central to the work of the YR program. GSC provides access to its own resources such as in-house clinical supports and resources in the community through its well-established networks.

OBJECTIVE 2: Understand the process of program implementation (i.e., facilitators and challenges) and the processes of program development (i.e., adaptations and innovations).

QUESTION > 1: What worked/is working well?

YOUTH

Youth were asked: "What have you found to be helpful, if anything, about YR? Why are these things helpful?" Themes included: i) Early intervention and flexibility; and ii) Mental health supports; however, iii) One youth, who was recently enrolled in the program, was unable to report on program elements that were working well ("Nothing yet…").

i) Early Intervention and Flexibility

A few young people described their YR Worker's support and flexibility in diverting them from the shelter system as helpful. One young person said that their YR Worker helped them find temporary housing through a group home when they had no other options. Another young person described that their YR Worker's ability to meet them in the community - away from the shelter at the GSC - was helpful for them. They said:

> *At first I felt like that, when I got banned from the [name of other shelter], but then my worker reassured me that you can come into the community to meet me, and it's kind of like private and stuff. Like [YR Worker] met me at the library and stuff one time… that made me feel a lot better, and that way I don't have to be around the shelter and be around that kind of lifestyle and stuff, since I'm trying to get out of that lifestyle, so… I find it's pretty helpful, that they have different locations they can meet you at.*

ii) Mental Health Supports

One young person described having immediate access to mental health support (through the GSC) as a helpful part of the YR program. The youth said:

> … I needed to talk to a counsellor and normally you'd have to book an appointment and wait for perhaps weeks to see somebody, but I can just call [GSC Mental Health Counsellor] at her office, or [GSC Mental Health Counsellor] comes to us and I can see her then. And it's really, really – even though she comes once a week to us, so even if it's just once a week, knowing that I have at least someone, once a week, that I can talk to, it's really nice.

iii) Nothing yet…

It is important to note that one of the young people interviewed was not yet satisfied with the outcome of their involvement with the YR program at the time of their interview. During several points in this young person's interview, they expressed wanting support to resolve ongoing conflict at home with their parent. When asked what part of the YR program has been helpful for them they said: **"Well, I just started working with [YR worker]. Um… mostly been like, interviews with her. So… I think we're getting there. I can't say any… well helps been done, but I can't say everything's fixed."**

YR WORKERS

***When asked what was working well, the themes from the YR workers' responses were: i)** Early intervention/homelessness prevention; **ii)** Flexibility of YR; **iii)** Homelessness and shelter education; **iv)** Transportation; and **v)** Intersectoral collaboration.*

i) Early Intervention/Homelessness Prevention

The YR workers believed that homelessness prevention and shelter diversion has been working well in the YR program. They reported anecdotally that Hamilton's youth shelter numbers have decreased markedly since YR began. Notably, they also reported that GSC's shelter was serving fewer young girls since YR began. As a result, shelter workers have been able to devote more time and attention to young people living in the shelter with the highest needs.

ii) Flexibility of YR

The YR workers expressed that the flexibility of the YR program has facilitated its implementation. Structurally, the flexibility of the program facilitates rapport-building with youth.

> *There's so little mandate. Housing workers need to get the youth housed and that's their goal. [YR workers] are connecting them to community, home, school. To do that, [the YR worker] needs to know about you and build that relationship with you. Because if you're going to invite me to work with your family, you're going to need to trust me. If I'm going to connect you to community supports, I need to know the things that you enjoy and things you like.*

iii) Homelessness and Shelter Education

YR workers described that education about the realities and dangers of homelessness and shelters have been well-received from both parents and youth. YR workers described that following the demystification of the realities of shelters and street-culture, youth and families seem more open to considering YR services as a homelessness prevention and shelter diversion program. Education about youth shelters with community agencies has also been effective in emphasizing the importance of prevention interventions, such as the YR program.

iv) Transportation

The mobility of YR workers was referenced as a key component of the successful implementation of the YR program. YR workers stressed the importance of having access to the GSC's van, as it allows them to transport youth to appointments, community events, or other meetings which they may otherwise not have been able to afford to get to. If the van is unavailable, the YR workers have bus tickets they can provide youth. In addition, the mobility of the YR workers facilitates connecting with the youth wherever is most convenient for the client, whether that be at school, home, or in the community.

v) Intersectoral Collaboration

The systems navigation component of the YR program has facilitated intersectoral collaboration and relationship-building between the YR workers and other agencies. Building relationships with people who work at various social service organizations, schools, and community programs has solidified awareness of the effectiveness of the YR program and has increased referrals. In turn, YR workers also feel comfortable referring youth to these agencies. In addition, the collaboration between Hamilton's youth shelter and YR has been supportive, particularly through the housing department's sharing of resources and knowledge.

PROGRAM-ORGANIZATIONAL STAFF

When asked what was working well, the themes from the program-organizational staff's responses were: i) Planning; ii) Family mediation; iii) Flexibility; iv) Youth and family engagement; v) Visibility within the community; and vi) MtS support.

i) Planning

Staff shared that good planning of YR allowed for smooth implementation of the program within the community. This was attributed to program planners having well-established networks and partnerships, knowing the local context, and understanding the gaps that needed to be filled in the community.

> *I had a community partner say to me that she sometimes views the youth serving landscape in Hamilton as islands. […] And she said, 'you know, I feel like Youth Reconnect is like a river, the water that flows between them.'*

ii) Family Mediation

Family mediation was mentioned by leadership as something that is working well in the program. As one participant remarked:

> *We realized that kids are kicked out of homes sometimes because they break curfew, agreement with their parents then we try to negotiate with their parents and try to make them understand that, the importance of social life for the youth, that they just can't go to school, come home and sit down and read. They need – just like us – when you finish work, you feel like going out with your friends or going to the gym, just like us they need that. [...] If she has a good friend that you know that she wants to hang out with for 1-2 hours, can we negotiate that she does that, and we have like seen that working better.*

iii) Flexibility

The flexibility of the YR program allows it to work well within the Hamilton context. This feature was described by one participant as having a broad mandate. The program's flexibility results in best outcomes for youth and provides a strong motivator for staff because it allows them to be creative and problem-solve. One participant shared, **"They're dealing with heavy situations, high stress; [...] it's problem-solving and it's thinking outside the box, and I think that's a big motivator for a lot of the work that we do."**

iv) Youth and Family Engagement

Leadership reported youth engagement as working well in the YR program. YR workers meet with young people in person and accompany them to meetings and appointments. At the time of the focus group, the mental health team was developing a parent support group and offering parent training. While engagement was working well, participants also noted that youth voice should have played a bigger role in the beginning of the program and its development.

v) Visibility Within Community

Also working well is the visibility of the YR program within the community. For example, by the time of the focus group, one of Hamilton's child welfare service staff members were already referring youth to Youth Reconnect instead of the shelter.

vi) MtS Support

The flexibility and support provided by the Making the Shift Demonstration Lab team was cited as another aspect of implementation that went well. Staff felt that they received additional support through an initial training session, and that consultations about the evaluation process kept them aware and informed.

QUESTION ▶ **2:** What modifications were made to the YR program?
Young people were not asked this question.

YR WORKERS

When asked what modifications were made to fit the context of Hamilton, themes from YR workers' responses were: *i) Housing support; ii) Shelter education; iii) Schedules; and iv) Program eligibility.*

i) Housing Support

YR workers found that they were being asked to do more housing work by young people than the program had planned for initially. The YR program itself does not have any funding or extra training opportunities for housing support. YR workers are simply able to assist youth with finding housing. Participants explained that while they could refer youth to housing workers at the GSC, the waitlists are very long. As such, they try to support youth to find housing through online searches (e.g., through Kijiji).

ii) Shelter Education

Providing education about shelters was not a planned component of the implementation of the YR program. However, YR workers found that one of the main activities of their case management is educating parents about shelters, drug use, and human trafficking in Hamilton. This education has led to parents being more open to family mediation.

iii) YR Workers' Schedules

To maximize the availability of staff, YR workers aligned their schedules so that there was always someone available on weekends. This was a positive change for the program, as youth are often busy during the week and it can otherwise be difficult to seek-out services on weekends.

iv) Program Eligibility

Originally, the YR program accepted any referral, as long as the youth was between the ages of 13 and 19 and living within the Hamilton catchment area. Modifications were made to the eligibility criteria as the referral numbers increased. YR workers expressed the need to work explicitly with child welfare agencies to clarify eligibility terms. Notably, youth who are Crown Wards, already assigned to a child welfare agency worker, or who only needed housing support, are ineligible for YR services.

PROGRAM-ORGANIZATIONAL STAFF

When asked what modifications were made to fit the context of Hamilton, themes from the program-organizational staff's responses were: *i) Clinical supports for parents* **and** *ii) Outreach.*

i) Clinical Supports for Parents

Participants found that parents of youth needed clinical support, so they changed the program to offer clinical support to parents as well.

ii) Outreach

Leadership reported that outreach was not as successful with school boards and child welfare services as they had hoped. Participants also shared that they needed to do more education and outreach about the YR program with the healthcare system (particularly hospitals) to prevent discharging patients into shelters, which is a common practice.

YOUTH

When asked of the challenges they experienced in the program, the themes from the youths' responses were: i) Housing; ii) Transportation resource limitations; iii) Limitation in access to YR worker due to external factors; and iv) Transitioning from the YR program.

i) Housing

Young people described challenges when looking for housing. For one youth, finding affordable housing was a challenge. For another young person, affordability was not the issue. Instead, availability of apartment units near transportation so that they could get to work was the challenge. Additionally, the same young person was having a difficult time accessing any type of shelter and/or housing that would allow her to bring her dog.

ii) Transportation Resource Limitations

Young people identified a need for transportation resources that are dedicated specifically to the YR Program (as opposed to being shared with other GSC programs). They would like to have guaranteed bus passes for their travels to and from seeing their YR Worker. They also mentioned that their YR Worker having to share the GSC van with youth workers in other GSC programs interfered with their plans to connect with their YR Worker in person.

iii) Limitations in Accessing YR Worker Due to External Factors

During their interview, one young person described the challenges they experienced in trying to get in touch with their YR Worker when their parent took their cell phone away from them or cancelled their phone plan. They expressed how distressing this experience can be for them at several times during their interview. Similarly, another young person described having trouble getting in touch with their YR Worker when they lost their cell phone. Another youth described challenges around providing adequate consent so that their YR Worker could speak on their behalf with the OW program to assess their eligibility for a housing benefit.

iv) Transitioning from the YR Program

One young person expressed a feeling of worry about transitioning out of the YR program, saying:

> *The only thing that really sucks is that it's only temporary and like I feel like it's going to be really hard for me to transition out of the program when it's over, just because, like I said, it's like my go-to when I don't have family support, or friend support, so it's like, these people are kind of like replace that and are trying to help me find other community supports, so I really hate how temporary [it is].*

YR WORKERS

When asked of the challenges they experienced in the program, the themes from the YR workers' responses were: *i)* *Housing for youth;* *ii)* *Lack of designated meeting spaces;* *iii)* *Discharge;* *iv)* *Resource limitations;* *v)* *Outreach;* and *vi)* *Shelter education.*

i) Housing for Youth

A challenge for program implementation raised by YR workers was the difficulty in finding housing for younger youth. The YR program works with youth between the ages of 13 and 19. However, many social service housing programs have an age minimum of 16. There are very few social housing programs available for youth under the age of 16 in Hamilton. YR workers shared that it is difficult to find affordable housing for youth to rent in Hamilton, due to a lack of affordable housing options and resistance from landlords to rent to minors without a credit check or proof of income other than OW benefits.

One worker questioned whether the work the YR staff are doing related to housing is making a difference. Since YR workers are not trained as housing workers, they can provide limited supports in this area. One worker said:

> *Are we really doing anything to make that better, other than just sitting with them and looking at listings and stuff because, you can do that at home, I can do that at home. What difference is Youth Reconnect making to that, and how can we make that better?*

ii) Lack of Designated Meeting Spaces

A main challenge for YR workers was the lack of a designated, private space to meet with youth. YR workers will meet youth in a public space of their choosing; however, one participant shared their aversion to meeting the youth in public spaces is not trauma-informed case management. One worker said, "**I really struggle with the idea of asking youth to divulge their whole story in a public space that is Tim Hortons**."

iii) Discharge

YR workers reported that the discharge process of the program can be challenging as some youth do not want to disengage from contact with staff. For some youth, the YR workers are the only adult support they may have, and youth were resistant to severing that support. Youth ultimately decide when they no longer need the support of the YR program. As one participant explained, "**the youth discharge us**." However, YR workers also explained that the discharge process ends in a "**soft closing of files**." That is to say, that if a youth re-contacted the YR program they would be able to without re-starting the intake/mediation process.

iv) Resource Limitations (staff, transportation)

As YR builds its reputation and network in Hamilton, the program has experienced an exponential increase in the number of referrals. Although this may be a positive reflection of the effectiveness of the YR program, the program's capacity has not scaled as effectively. YR workers aim to respond to youth within 48 hours, however, this has become difficult with a small number of staff and high caseloads. YR workers cited the need for more staff to manage the increasing incoming number of referrals. YR workers also expressed the need for a mode of transportation that belongs to the YR program staff itself, as it is difficult to share a single van with the GSC. One of the YR staff members said that they share the GSC van with seven other workers in the housing department, and lack of van availability can be a hindrance to scheduling meetings with young people.

v) Outreach

The sustainability of YR has been addressed through outreach and presentations to community partners and social services about the program. YR workers explained that a challenge in the implementation of the YR program has been pushing-back against the misconceptions surrounding the program model and responsibilities of YR workers. YR workers described the need to push-back on the misconception that YR is a housing service. One participant also described the need to return to do outreach on a yearly basis to account for high turnover rates in social service sector jobs.

vi) Shelter Education within Other Systems

There is a lack of knowledge and understanding in other systems (e.g., health system, correctional system) about the causes and pathways into youth homelessness. The lack of shelter education in the system is a barrier to prevention and diversion. Hospitals and jails are mandated to discharge their youth to shelters if they have nowhere else to go. As one YR worker described:

> *A lot of these kids really don't need to be in shelter, and I think we need to be more aware of that. And the health system and judicial system and their awareness on what shelter is. [Shelter] is a really integrated community that youth get pulled into really*

> *quickly. In the vulnerable state that they are in, and just being teenagers in general, let alone being homeless and experiencing the trauma that they've went through, it's too easy. It's too easy to become involved. It's too easy to be sucked into the substance use up here in Hamilton, and I wish people understood that more.*

PROGRAM-ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL

When asked of the challenges experienced in the program, the themes from the program-organizational staff's responses were: *i)* Lack of residential programs; and *ii)* Administrative paperwork.

i) Lack of Residential Programs

Participants identified a lack of residential programs in Hamilton for young people who need to secure temporary housing. Participants reported long waitlists for residential programs, which has the unfortunate consequence of young people accessing shelters instead. As a way to mitigate this problem, YR workers will determine if the young person can remain in their current residence or, if that is not a safe or viable option, will find a support person in their life that can host them temporarily.

ii) Administrative Paperwork

Staff reported that the Participant Identification Forms (PIF), identification, and other required paperwork are a barrier to rapport building during the intake process. The PIFs are especially challenging because they ask young people for their Social Insurance Number, which many youth and families are not comfortable sharing and/or do not remember. Staff felt that this requirement created an unproductive obstacle to the YR Workers' primary objective when a young person enters the program:

> *We're talking about youth who are battling their own mental health, some are probably battling their own addiction, to sit down and do paperwork is difficult. [...] Even with the older youth, like those 16-year olds, we know like any time a youth comes into the shelter on our end, ID is a big thing, right? It's not an easy thing to have right off the bat.*

QUESTION ▶ **4:** What would you change about the program?

Young people were asked what they would change about the program.

YOUTH

When asked what youth would change about the program, the themes from their responses were: i) Increasing the exposure of the program; and ii) Improved training across the system.

i) Increasing the Exposure of the Program

One young person said that they wished more people in the community knew about the YR program, saying that:

> *… the biggest thing I wish is that, more people in the community, knew about this program 'cause I have friends and stuff that aren't in the program, but could probably benefit from just having someone else to talk to… maybe not the staff at [a community-based organization], or not their own family, and I feel like, I don't know, it's like a way to realize that other people can support you and can help you… it's just… another resource and connect... maybe if more people in the community knew about it, maybe, I don't know?*

ii) Improved Staff Training Across the System

The five other youth interviewed did not provide feedback regarding the YR program specifically. However, one young person emphasized the need for youth workers within the youth homelessness serving system in the community to be better trained in working with young people. This young person said:

> *Personally, I think you need better workers… Well, not like all better workers, but you need workers that actually know how to talk to you… Well, I mean, my whole life I've had [child welfare services] involved because I was adopted… But workers need to know that when you talk to youth like you are bigger than them and better than them, it doesn't work… If you ask any youth, I'm pretty sure every youth has [had this experience] ... There's a lot of workers like that… They need to learn how to interact better; do a program or something.*

SECTION 6: DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The Youth Reconnect program is making a difference for youth at risk of homelessness in Hamilton. Program staff indicated that they have observed a decline in the number of young people accessing GSC's emergency shelter system since implementing the YR program. While we cannot attribute this observation to the YR program, GSC leadership believe that the program has played an important role in this decrease, as they have been able to safely divert young people from the emergency shelter system. Below, the results of this evaluation are interpreted through the four central principles that Hawe (2017) outlined to understand how community-based interventions work ecologically. Recommendations for program improvement are provided as well.

KEY COMPONENTS AND ACTIVITIES OF YR

Early Intervention and Diversion

Early intervention was defined as the essence of the YR program. Staff at all levels saw the program as a means to keep young people in place. The ability of the program to work with young people under the age of 16 is essential, as the Australian Reconnect evaluations found that the age of becoming "at risk" of homelessness is decreasing (Australian Government, 2013). Early intervention programming is important, since young people can become quickly entrenched within this system and be at risk for addictions, trauma, crime, and sexual exploitation (Gaetz, Schwan, Redman, French, & Dej, 2018).

Although some participants framed the work they do as shelter diversion, much of their work was focused on family mediation and educating parents on the negative impact of the shelter system. This aligns more with a reunification model as opposed to a shelter diversion model. In collaboration with the child welfare sector, the program also worked to prevent young people from becoming involved in the child welfare system, when appropriate. Although the child welfare system provides an essential service, the outcomes of young people who exit this system are variable.

RECOMMENDATION ▷ ONE

The program should continue to work with young people under the age of 16. The ability to work with young people under the age of 16 meant that the YR program could engage in early intervention work. Since most youth emergency shelters have age restrictions (e.g., 16 to 24 years old), the YR program serves an important function in a community-based response to homelessness. Reaching out to young people in the community who are not accessing shelter services and who are below the age of 16 is recommended.

Flexible, Adaptable, and Accessible Supports

The supports offered by the program were defined as youth-centred, flexible, adaptable, and accessible. Being youth-centred meant listening to the needs of young people and working toward goals identified by young people. This work requires trust from young people, so the YR staff indicated that relationship- and rapport-building are essential components to being youth-centred. Young people appreciated this approach. One young person said that their YR worker made them feel "normal" and spoke to them in a way that was relatable. Young people also did not feel overburdened by the program, since the program was listening to their needs. Youth choice is also a key component of the Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) model (Gaetz, 2017), and demonstrates that the YR program is aligning its work with the principles of the HF4Y philosophy.

Related to flexible and accessible service delivery, YR staff meet with young people in the community, at locations chosen by the young people. Because the needs of each young person is different, YR workers must be flexible and creative in their service delivery. One facilitator of having a flexible and accessible program is access to the GSC's van, so staff can take young people to appointments across the city. Flexible and youth-centred approaches are vital and young people experiencing homelessness have highlighted these as essential components of service delivery (Schwan, Gaetz, French, Redman, Thistle, & Dej, 2018).

The flexibility of the program has been described as a motivating factor for YR workers. One of the leaders at the GSC said: "They're dealing with heavy situations, high stress; [...] it's problem-solving and it's thinking outside the box, and I think that's a big motivator for a lot of the work that we do." By including flexibility as a core tenet of the YR program, it provides staff with a certain level of autonomy in how they work with young people and can provide added meaning to their work.

RECOMMENDATION ❯ TWO

The program should continue to offer flexible, accessible, and adaptable supports. The YR program needs to be nimble in its work with young people as each young person will have unique needs. The program should continue to empower staff members to work from a youth-centred lens, with a focus on relationship development and rapport building.

Working with Families

The YR program provided young people with support to work on their relationships with their family. This included help with communicating with family, but also advocating on their behalf with their parent(s). The program works to mediate conflicts related to house rules such as curfews, social interactions, and chores, so that the young person can safely and comfortably live at home. In some cases, the program works to educate family members about the dangers of shelter entrenchment (e.g. human trafficking, drug use, street-culture). The program uses a family mediation model that was developed by the GSC, which combines a youth-centred, strengths-based perspective that incorporates Indigenous philosophies related to restorative justice. Working with families is a key program component of the Australian Reconnect model (Australian Government, 2013; Barker et al., n.d.) and the HF4Y model (Gaetz, 2017). As described by Crane (2009), early intervention programs should combine relational and rights-based approaches when working with families. This means acquiring the perspectives of both young people and their parents.

RECOMMENDATION ❯ THREE

The program should continue to work with young people and their families, with the consent of young people. The work the program completed with young people and their families was instrumental to the program's success. After engaging in family mediation work, several young people were able to safely return to their family home. Thus, dedicating time and resources to engage in family work is important.

Immediate Mental Health Supports

Immediate access to mental health services, particularly those internal to GSC, was described as a key component of the program by program-operational staff. Two of the young people shared that they had accessed mental health supports through the program. Access to mental health support is critical, since some young people in Canada have linked their homelessness to mental health issues that were untreated due to the limited availability of support and services (Schwan et al., 2018). Addressing mental health challenges is also a critical ingredient of the Australian Reconnect model (Barker et al., n.d.).

RECOMMENDATION ▶ FOUR

The program should continue to provide immediate access to mental health supports for young people and their families. The ability of the program to refer young people and their families to mental health supports is vital. The program may act as the conduit to access mental health supports for young people and their families.

FACTORS SUPPORTING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE YR PROGRAM

Flexibility to Work with Young People on a Variety of Issues

The implementation of the YR program was facilitated by the program's ability to work with young people on several different issues. Unlike programs with strict mandates, the flexibility of YR's mandate meant that the program could focus on helping young people to connect with their family, find home, and establish networks within their community. This flexibility allows YR workers to understand the needs of young people and, as a result, build stronger relationships with young people. As stated by a YR worker, "If I'm going to connect you to community support, I need to know the things that you enjoy and things you like." Again, this type of support follows the Australian Reconnect model (Australian Government, 2013) and HF4Y principle of youth choice and youth voice (Gaetz, 2017).

RECOMMENDATION ▶ FIVE

The program should continue to have a flexible mandate that respects the unique needs of young people. The program has a broad mandate to divert young people from the shelter system and provide place-based, local support. Shelter diversion work does not have a clear trajectory. Instead, the support offered to young people meet their immediate needs. This means YR workers are providing family mediation support, housing support, and/or case management support with each young person. Therefore, the program should continue operating under a mandate that can be adaptable to meet the needs of young people.

Program Development and Organizational Support

The ample time dedicated to developing the program was highlighted as a facilitator of implementation. Therefore, prior to implementation of the YR program within the GSC of Hamilton, the leadership team – in close collaboration with community partners – focused on the cycling of resources in order to utilize local resources most effectively (Hawe, 2017). Utilizing an ecological systems perspective, Hawe (2017) states that: "finding ways to strengthen or add value to resources in communities is integral to community interventions" (p.91). The GSC and YR leadership team had an excellent understanding of the local context and had well-established networks to rely on. Staff knew where gaps existed in the community (Hamilton) context and developed the program to fill these gaps. Tangible support from the GSC also enhanced the implementation of the YR program. The GSC provides access to its own resources such as in-house clinical support and access to the organization's van. The strong reputation of the GSC in the community also opens resources in the community through its established networks. Ample time to develop programs, and report on program outcomes, are essential when building up a new program (Gaetz et al., 2018).

Intersectoral Collaboration

From an ecological systems perspective, interdependence – "interconnections across the system (i.e., the community) should be identified. There will be direct and indirect relationships so that one can see how having an impact in one part of the community might have effects and ramifications elsewhere" (Hawe, 2017, p. 91) is an essential part of community-based interventions.

The flexibility of the YR program, and the systems navigation component, meant that YR staff were interacting with several different systems. This required the program to build relationships with social service organizations, schools, the child welfare system, and other community programs. This work to develop relationships increased community awareness of the program and resulted in an increase of community-based referrals. Intersectoral collaboration is an essential feature of the Australian Reconnect model (Crane, 2009; Government of Australia, 2013) and the Reconnect programs played a strong role in strengthening service networks and collaborations among participating agencies (RPR Consulting, 2003). Further, collaborative approaches are imperative, since young people can be referred to services in a more coordinated manner (Gaetz, 2017).

Although the program did a good job at developing partnerships in the community, it was thought that relationships with schools could be enhanced. Engaging with schools is a core component of the Australian Reconnect model, as young people who require support can be identified and quickly linked to supports. It should be noted that the timing of the evaluation may have impacted feedback regarding school engagement. Since the evaluation was conducted in the summer, it may not have reflected the program's work engaging with school boards.

RECOMMENDATION ▸ SIX

Enhance the partnership with the local school boards and increase outreach into schools.
The YR program has developed some partnerships with local schools, but partnerships could be strengthened. Looking at other YR programs, The RAFT's program receives referrals from teachers, coaches, and counsellors who identify young people at risk of homelessness. The YR program in Hamilton should look to develop a similar referral system within the Hamilton-Wentworth School Board and the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic School Board.

RECOMMENDATION ▸ SEVEN

Enhance partnerships with child welfare agencies. Program and organizational staff also reported that outreach with the child welfare sector could be improved. There appeared to be a disconnect between what YR provides versus what child welfare services understands to be within YR's mandate. There is a need to clearly delineate between organizations and create clear eligibility criteria, for example, when child welfare services can/should refer to YR.
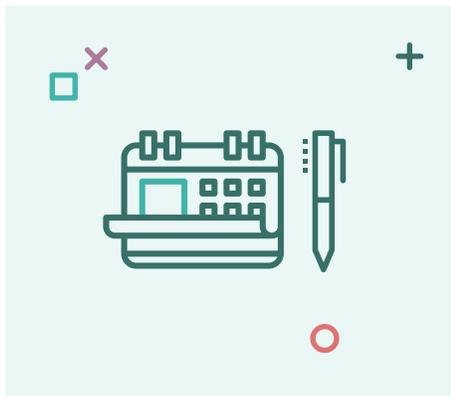
PROGRAM MODIFICATIONS & ADAPTATIONS

From an ecological systems perspective, adaptation (Hawe, 2017) by the YR program allowed for a better fit between the YR intervention and young people being served within the Hamilton community.

Housing

The program made several adjustments to fit the context of Hamilton and to fulfill the support requirements of young people and their families. The program spent more time than anticipated on housing searches for young people and educating parents on the impact of emergency shelter system on young people. Although the program does not provide funding for housing, it supports young people in housing searches and links them to financial resources (e.g., income support programs, subsidized housing lists) for housing. The program was also able to advocate for young people when connecting with income support agencies, such as OW and ODSP. For young people, the physical presence of an "adult" is helpful to get services. Providing practical support, such as housing searches, is also a core component of Australia's Reconnect model (Barker et al., n.d.).

RECOMMENDATION ▸ EIGHT

The program should continue to advocate for young people, particularly around housing and income support. Young people appreciated the support received from YR workers when working within systems, such as OW or ODSP. Young people felt that they were taken more seriously when there was an adult present. Therefore, advocacy should be considered a key component of the YR model.

Staffing Hours

The program also adapted their staff coverage. YR staff members adjusted their hours to have coverage on the weekend, which is important since the schedules of young people did not always permit accessing services during standard weekday hours. Access to services that extend into the weekend and evenings is a program feature young people experiencing homelessness have recommended for system improvement (Schwan et al., 2018).

RECOMMENDATION ▸ NINE

The program should continue to expand their staffing coverage. The program made several adjustments to ensure that they had coverage that extended beyond Monday to Friday. The program should continue this expanded coverage as it meets the needs of young people and their families.

Working with Parents

YR staff found themselves working with parents to a degree that was not expected. The program increased access to mental health supports for family members but spent a significant amount of time educating parents about the impact of emergency shelters, drug use, and human trafficking in Hamilton. Educating family members is important, as it may improve the relationship between the young person and their family member. The Australian Reconnect model also has an educational component, but it is focused on educating school staff, teachers, and administrators on youth homelessness (Australian Government, 2013). As discussed by young people in a national study on youth homelessness, public education and awareness campaigns should be developed that focus on the causes and consequences of youth homelessness and dispel myths (Schwan et al., 2018).

RECOMMENDATION ▶ TEN

Develop informational materials for parents on the impact of the emergency shelter system on young people. YR staff members spent a considerable amount of time educating parents on the impact of youth homelessness. To enhance these conversations, it will be useful for the program to develop materials that they can pass along to parents. These materials may help to reduce the amount of time YR workers spend on dispelling myths about homelessness with parents.

CHALLENGES WITH IMPLEMENTING THE YR PROGRAM

Lack of Housing

Access to housing and supportive housing was a challenge. Young people listed affordability, a lack of housing options near public transit, and housing options that accepted pets as barriers to housing. YR staff listed the lack of affordable housing for young people as a barrier. They also mentioned the difficulty in finding housing options for young people under the age of 16 and how landlords discriminate against young people, especially if they are on social assistance. To address the lack of suitable and affordable housing, program staff noted that they try to keep young people living with their families, where safe, or with a supportive adult/chosen support.

RECOMMENDATION ▶ ELEVEN

Refer young people requiring independent housing to youth housing programs. The YR program is meant to be a relatively short intervention that diverts young people from the emergency shelter system. For young people who require more support, particularly around acquiring independent housing, the YR program may not be a good fit. In these cases, the YR program should make the appropriate referral to a youth-focused housing program.
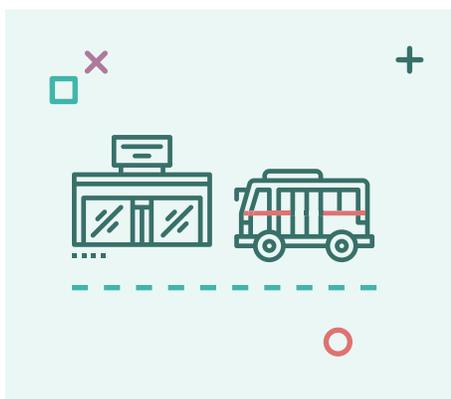
Program Mandate

There was some concern that YR was viewed as a housing program by community partners and social service agencies for young people over the age of 16. Program staff did their best to educate these partners and agencies on the shelter diversion mandate of the program, but it also provided an opportunity to reflect on its mission. Several of the young people who participated in this evaluation indicated that they needed housing supports. As the program was not designed to support the housing needs of young people that extended beyond a return to one's family home, YR staff wondered how they could better support young people with their housing needs.

This also indicates that the YR program may be working with young people that are not necessarily a good fit, since they require a different level of support. This challenge highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to youth homelessness. A System of Care approach involves integrating systems through the coordination of services designed to ensure that young people (and their families) get timely and appropriate access to services (Gaetz et al., 2018). An early intervention System of Care includes programs focused on enhancing family and natural supports, school-based early intervention, shelter diversion, and housing-led supports (Gaetz et al., 2018).

RECOMMENDATION ▶ TWELVE

The YR program should ensure that it is providing services that are aligned with the YR model. The YR program is providing an excellent service to young people, but it is sometimes experiencing program drift. Young people who exclusively need independent housing supports should be referred to more appropriate programs. The YR program should focus on building up the supports of young people and working with their family and natural supports.

Transportation

Young people and YR staff appreciated the availability of the GSC van. Challenges emerged when the van was unavailable, as it limited opportunities for young people to meet with their YR worker. To address this challenge, young people said that access to a guaranteed public transit pass would be beneficial. Free or reduced transit passes have been identified as key supports for young people experiencing homelessness (Schwan, 2018).

RECOMMENDATION ▶ THIRTEEN

Request the City of Hamilton provide affordable transit passes to young people. Young people listed transportation as a challenge to accessing support. They felt that having access to an affordable transit pass would help. Currently, the City of Hamilton has an affordable transit pass program. To qualify, one must have an income under the Statistics Canada Low Income Cut-Off and/or receive OW or ODSP. The program is for individuals between the ages of 18 and 64. Young people under the age of 19 who are currently enrolled in school can qualify for a discounted youth transit pass. Although some young people may meet the criteria for discounted transit passes, others may not. The program may also consider a car sharing pass for staff to use.

Access to Supports

Some young people shared that they had challenges accessing the program when they lost their cell phone or had it taken away by their parents. Although outside of the program's control, it demonstrates the importance of having multiple lines of communication with the youth.

RECOMMENDATION ▸ FOURTEEN

Ensure that there are at least two lines of communication with young people. Young people shared that they did not always have access to their cell phones. As a result, they said they had difficulty contacting the program. Therefore, in addition to the youth's cell phone number, the program should acquire at least one additional mode of communication, such as an email address.
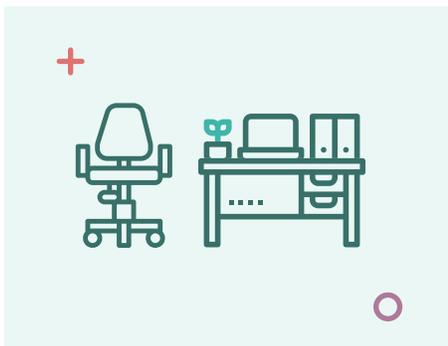
Program Discharge

The program generally took the lead from young people as to when they were discharged from the program. As described by the program staff, sometimes YR workers are one of the only supportive adults a young person has in their life. This can lead young people to hesitate wanting to exit the program. One young person in the evaluation expressed their hesitation by saying that the program has become a place they could rely on for support. Although the program conducts "soft discharges", meaning that young people can still contact the program when crises emerge, it demonstrates the need for effective aftercare planning. Evaluations of the Australian Reconnect programs highlighted a need for transitional supports out of the program (Australian Government, 2013). It can be challenging for young people to transition from receiving intensive supports to, potentially, receiving no supports upon exiting the program. Gaetz & Dej (2016) state that community-based services to provide aftercare supports (e.g., income, social and health supports, system navigation) are important parts of transitional supports and transitional planning.

RECOMMENDATION ▸ FIFTEEN

The program should develop its aftercare support. Aftercare support will help a young person's transition from the program. The YR program may want to gradually decrease the intensity of support they offer to young people as they progress through the program, as long as it is in line with the needs of the young person. When a young person is ready to exit the program, the program may want to keep their file open for a set amount of time in case the young person requires further support. Further, the program should continue to develop partnerships with agencies that provide transitional aftercare support. This may require partnering with the adult sector depending on the age of the young person.

RECOMMENDATION ▸ SIXTEEN

The program should track where young people are diverted to and conduct a follow-up check-in with young people once they are discharged from the program. There is little research available on the long-term outcomes of shelter diversion programs. Although young people may be diverted from the emergency shelter system, they may be diverted to temporary accommodations. It will be important for the program to capture where young people are being diverted to and to conduct standard check-ins with young people after they have been discharged. This could include a three-month and six-month check-in.

Office Space

Much of the work completed by YR workers is conducted in the community, in places such as cafes. This approach is in response to the needs of young people. Although this is an excellent practice, it can limit the opportunity for young people to share sensitive information since they are in public settings. Having a private space that YR workers and young people can access, preferably outside of the shelter, could be beneficial.

RECOMMENDATION ▸ SEVENTEEN

Develop a partnership with a community-based organization to create office space for staff and a private space for young people and their workers. Although it is essential that YR workers meet young people in the community, sometimes a private space to meet with young people and their families is required. Therefore, the program should look for an available private space at a community-based organization that is not the GSC.

Program Capacity to Meet the Demand for the Program

The success of the YR program in diverting young people from the shelter, and its ability to fill a necessary gap in the broader homelessness-serving system in Hamilton, meant that the program received an increasing number of referrals since its launch. With a small staff team and increasingly larger caseload sizes, it meant that YR staff members had greater difficulty to meet with young people within 48 hours of a referral and to maintain support for their existing caseload. The immediacy of the response is an essential component of early intervention practices (Crane, 2009). The RAFT program also uses a 48-hour benchmark for meeting with young people referred to the program (Pettes, 2012).

RECOMMENDATION > EIGHTEEN

The program should hire more staff and develop a standard for caseload ratios. Additional YR workers will be required to meet the demand of the program. To ensure that staff can work with young people in a meaningful way, caseload ratio standards should be developed. Looking at other programming, HF4Y recommends that caseload sizes range from one staff member to seven to ten young people (Gaetz, 2017). Intensive Case Management programs generally have a caseload size of one staff member to 15 to 20 clients (Dietrich, Irving, Park, & Marshall, 2010). Given that the YR program provides a short-term intervention to a population that has not been entrenched in the emergency shelter system, caseload sizes that range from 15 to 25 may be optimal. This caseload size will need to be examined in greater detail, in consultation with the program.

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APPENDIX 1: Youth Interview Guide

The purpose of today's discussion is to learn about your experiences as part of this YR program. Feel free to say as much as you feel comfortable sharing, and if you don't want to give your opinions or voice your experiences when we get to any of the questions, feel free to pass.

Note for interviewer: Try to differentiate between program and services internal versus external to the YR program [YR program services in house versus referred out into the community]

1. What does YR mean to you?

2. What types of services do you/have you need(ed) from YR?

3. What type of services are you currently receiving, or have you received, in this program?
☐ Housing   ☐ Work   ☐ Cultural Connection   ☐ Financial
☐ Relationships   ☐ Physical Health ☐ Religion   ☐ Legal
☐ Education   ☐ Mental Health   ☐ Transition Planning   ☐ Other?

4. What have you found to be helpful, if anything, about YR? Why are these things helpful? Based on services checked off in question 3.

Probes:
↳ Accessibility (e.g. location, hours, language)
↳ Quality (e.g. helpful people, comfortable setting)

5. What challenges have you had, if anything with the YR program? Based on services checked off in question 3.

Probes:
↳ Accessibility (e.g. location, hours, language, rules/barriers that get in the way of receiving services)
↳ Quality (e.g. unhelpful people, uncomfortable setting, feelings of judgment, stigmatization)

6. Has the YR program helped you in your relationships with family and friends? In what ways?

7. What do you think should be changed about the services available in this program and in this community?

Potential probes:
↳ a. How could the services you are receiving from the program be improved?
↳ b. Are there any services that are not currently available that you think would be helpful?

As we bring this interview to a close, we would like to know about your experiences (how you feel, what you are thinking) about having participated today/tonight. What was it like for you to participate in this interview? Is there anything we could do to improve the focus group?

APPENDIX 2: Family Interview Guide

The purpose of today's discussion is to learn about your experiences as part of this YR program. I will give everyone a chance to respond to each question. If you don't want to give your opinions or voice your experiences about the question, feel free to pass.

1. What does YR mean to you?

2. What type of services are you currently receiving, or have you received, in this program? (Program = housing and support from worker)

3. What things are helpful about this program? Why are these things helpful? How have they helped you in your relationship with your family? ***Probe for:***
↳ a. Accessibility issues (e.g. location, hours, language)
↳ b. Quality issues (e.g. helpful people, comfortable setting)

4. What things are not helpful about the services you are receiving or have received? Why are these things not helpful? How have they not helped your relationship with your family? ***Probe for:***
↳ a. Accessibility issues (e.g. location, hours, language, rules/barriers that get in the way of receiving services)
↳ b. Quality issues (e.g. unhelpful people, uncomfortable setting, feelings of judgment or stigmatization)

5. What do you think should be changed about the services available in this program and in this community? ***Potential probes:***
↳ a. Are there any services that are not currently available that you think would be helpful?
↳ b. How could the services you are receiving from the program be improved?

As I bring this focus group to a close, I would like to know about your experiences (how you feel, what you are thinking) about having participated today/tonight.

What was it like for you to participate in this focus group? Is there anything we could do to improve the focus group?

APPENDIX 3: YR Worker Interview Guide

The purpose of today's discussion is to focus on your understanding of the YR program, as well as how it is being implemented and operated by Good Shepherd Centre. Feel free to respond to the questions and share what you are comfortable sharing and skip any questions you are not comfortable responding to.

1. To begin, could you please each explain your role in the YR program at Good Shepherd?

YR MODEL

2. What is your understanding of the key activities of the YR program?

3. Have there been any modifications between what was planned for and the actual implementation of the program?
↳ *If yes,* What are they? Why were these discrepancies present?

GENERAL FORMATIVE ISSUES

We'd like to know your thoughts about which parts of the YR program are working well and which aspects are not working as well so far.

4a. What parts of the implementation of the YR program do you think are working well?
↳ *Probe question:* What things have helped program implementation to go smoothly (e.g., service team, project team, wider community, partnerships, research, the national team)?

4b. What parts are not working well?
↳ *Probe question:* What challenges and barriers have emerged as the program has been implemented (e.g., systemic issues, other organizations, team dynamics, leadership, human resources, etc.)?

YOUTH AND FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Next, we'd like to ask you to talk about the role of youth and family participation in the implementation of the YR program.

5. How have youth and families been engaged in the development and implementation of the project, if at all?
↳ *If no,* skip to question 6
↳ *Probe question:* So, things like incorporating feedback from youth and families, advisory committees of youth and families. This can be through formal or informal means.
↳ *If yes,* what factors have made it easier for youth to share feedback on the implementation of the program and/or project as a whole? Have you encountered any barriers in this feedback process?
↳ *If yes,* what factors have made it easier for families to share feedback on the implementation of the program and/or project as a whole? Have you encountered any barriers in this feedback process?

PROGRAM MODIFICATIONS**

Next, we'd like to ask you about the ways that the program has changed, developed, or adapted over time.

6. What has been done (if anything) to adapt the program to the local context?

7. We have heard that some young people's difficulties are being resolved before making it to the point of completing the PIF form, for example after an initial conversation with YR staff. Has this happened in your experience?
↳ a. ***If yes,*** what has led to this outcome? (***Probe:*** What kind of work were you doing with these young people? How did you help resolve the young person's difficulties so quickly?)
↳ b. How do you think this preventative work can be captured in the YR model?

SUSTAINABILITY
8. How is the sustainability of the YR program being addressed at GSC?

RELATIONSHIPS (MANDATORY)
9. How have the research, service providers, and other stakeholders been working together? (Probe: What has that looked like?)
↳ ***Prompt:*** How have working relationships evolved since the beginning of the project?
↳ ***Prompt:*** Is there anything that needs to be addressed to improve working relationships?

10. What has the relationship been like between the national team overseeing the project (the Making the Shift team) and your site group during the implementation process?

11. What other stakeholders have been involved in the implementation process and in what capacity?
↳ ***Probe:*** stakeholders could be those that are making referrals to the YR program, but it could also be agencies that the YR program refers to (e.g., mental health, addictions support, etc.)

RESOURCES
12. What resources have been important for successfully implementing the YR program?
↳ ***Probes:*** Funding, staffing, program promotion in the community

13. What did you do initially to train for this work?
↳ ***Probe:*** Local training, National training (in Calgary, 7 Cities Conference), webinars, site visits, meeting with RAFT team, etc.
↳ a. How did this training prepare you to implement the YR program? What was missing?
↳ b. What qualities and skills do you think are critical for staff who do this work? Did the training touch up these qualities and skills?

14. What qualities and skills do you think are critical for the staff who do this work? What did you do initially to train for this work?

ASSESSMENT TOOLS

15. Do you use an assessment tool in the YR program? ***If yes:***

↳ a. What is it/are they called? (e.g., in Hamilton: ChYmH-S (child); Youth mental health screener)

↳ b. What is useful about it/them if anything?

↳ c. What is not useful about it/them, if anything?

16. Would you like to be using an assessment (new) tool in the YR program? ***If yes:***

↳ a. What would you want from that tool?

17. Are you using the YAP tool?

↳ a. In what ways is it helpful, if at all?

↳ b. In what ways is it not helpful, if at all?

INTERNAL PROGRAM SERVICES VS. EXTERNAL REFERRALS

18. What services does YR offer internally and directly?

19. What services to you refer to externally?

DISCHARGE (QUESTIONS FOR YR WORKERS)

20. What is the process of discharge/ "graduation"?

21. What kind of goal planning, if any, do you do with youth and their families?

ENDING THE INTERVIEW

22. Are there any other thoughts about the program you haven't had a chance to mention that you would like to add before we finish up?

23. As we bring this focus group to a close, we would like to know about your experiences (how you feel, what you are thinking) about having participated [today/tonight]. What was it like for you to participate in this focus group?

APPENDIX 4: Youth Reconnect Program and Good Shepherd Organizational Leadership Focus Group

The purpose of today's interview is to focus on the key program components of the YR program being operated by your agency. By components, I mean the critical ingredients of the services that are being delivered in the program.

1. To start, could you share [for the recording] which agency you work with and please explain your role within the YR program?

2. In your opinion, what are the most important program activities of the YR model for your agency?

3. What outcomes do you anticipate as a result of the YR program?
↳ *Potential probe:* What is the short term vs. long term outcomes and anticipated timelines for their impact?

4. Can you explain how the YR program is intended to produce positive outcomes for clients?

Checkbox probes* that apply: *Same as checkbox for youth interviews

☐ Housing   ☐ Work   ☐ Cultural Connection   ☐ Financial
☐ Relationships   ☐ Physical Health   ☐ Religion   ☐ Legal
☐ Education   ☐ Mental Health   ☐ Transition Planning

↳ *Potential Probe:* What specific activities, services, or supports are central to producing outcomes? How are clients (both youth and family members) affected by these program components?

5. Expand on probes that were checked.
↳ a. "We have heard that some young people's difficulties are being resolved before making it to the point of completing the PIF form, for example after an initial conversation with YR staff. Has this happened at your site?
↳ b. *If yes,* what has led to this positive outcome? (Probe: What kind of work were you doing with these young people? How did you resolve the young person's difficulties?)
↳ c. How do you think this preventative work can be captured in the YR model?"

6. What has been done (if anything) to adapt the program to the local context? Were changes made to the YR model that are specific to your program? Why were these changes made?

7. What other organizations or partners are needed to produce program outcomes?

8. What do you hope to achieve with youth and families by the end of the program?

9. If you had more time, what would you like to have done to further define or develop the interventions or services delivered by YR?

10. Do you know of any other YR programs doing similar work to your program?
↳ a. What relationship do you have with them?
↳ b. How has this supported the development of your program?
↳ c. Have you provided support to other YR programs?

*Implications for community practice
*Refer to RAFT in Niagara

11. Tell me about GSC and YR's relationship with the Street Youth Planning Collaborative

12. Does YR impact shelter diversion? In what ways/strategies?

13. What is YR's relationship with other programs/services in the city of Hamilton?
↳ a. What facilitates these relationships?
↳ b. What hinders these relationships?

14. Tell me about the services you provide directly through YR versus through GSC vs. external agencies (e.g., Probes: psychoeducational assessment, mental health support, legal support, family mediation, educational supports-teachers).