UPSTREAM

CANADA

PREVENTING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS AND SCHOOL DISENGAGEMENT THROUGH EARLY INTERVENTION

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A WAY HOME
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CANADA

MAKING
THE SHIFT
youth homelessness
demonstration lab

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OVERVIEW: WHAT IS UPSTREAM CANADA?

Young people at risk of homelessness often hide the challenges they face in their personal lives for a range of reasons, such as fear of social stigma. As a consequence, they do not access the supports they need and can slip through the cracks into deepened marginalization from school and community.

This can help to explain why, when youth become homeless, it is typically after problems have reached a crisis point and issues have become more complex and difficult to address. Setting up such youth for success, therefore, requires early identification of risk and intervention and increasing access to effective supports through an equity lens. How can we shift from addressing youth homelessness through crisis-driven reactions, toward **prevention-focused solutions**? And importantly in this process, how can we ensure these solutions are safe and accessible?

Upstream Canada is a response to this challenge and the staggering reality that 35,000 – 45,000 youth in Canada experience homelessness each year (Gaetz, 2016). Much of our response to youth homelessness is reactive – that is, we wait until young people are homeless and street involved before we offer help. This initiative is a preventive approach to the problem that works to offer supports to youth ages 12-18 who are identified as at risk of homelessness and school disengagement through a universal screening tool called the Student Needs Assessment (SNA). This universal approach sets Upstream Canada apart from other interventions as it identifies students who do not display outward signs of risk and experience barriers to accessing help. The confidential assessment is the critical initial step in a validation process that connects young people to coordinated supports before crisis hits.

Upstream Canada is an adaptation of work that originated in Australia as **The Geelong Project** (since renamed Upstream Australia), which has demonstrated a 40% reduction in youth homelessness three years after implementation.[1]

As an equity-focused early intervention that works through the collective efforts of schools and community-based organizations, Upstream Canada works to prevent youth homelessness and early school leaving. It is part of a broader strategy to prevent youth homelessness, aligned with *The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness* and its typology of youth homelessness prevention (Gaetz et al., 2018). Within the Homelessness Prevention Typology outlined in *The Roadmap* (pp. 25-26), Upstream Canada is an example of a school-based early intervention.

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1. MacKenzie, D. (2018). Interim Report: The Geelong Project 2016-2017. Melbourne, Australia: Swinburne University of Technology.

Why Early Intervention Matters

The longer a young person remains homeless, the more difficult it becomes to help them stabilize in housing and reintegrate with mainstream society. With an early intervention approach, the goal is to prevent a young person from experiencing homelessness altogether or to intervene as quickly as possible after a young person has become street-involved to minimize the negative consequences. Without intervention, these young people are set up for a trajectory of chronic homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2018).

In *The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness* (p. 25), early intervention is defined as: 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-centered case management, and shelter diversion. Early intervention strategies for youth focus on rapid responses to meet the physical, emotional, material, interpersonal, social, and educational needs of young people who are at imminent risk of, or who have just become homeless.

EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAM AREAS

ENHANCING
Family & Natural Supports

School-based EARLY INTERVENTION

Shelter DIVERSION

Housing-led SUPPORTS

PREVENTING **Sexual Exploitation & Trafficking**

Within these effective approaches to early intervention, Upstream Canada focuses on schools as key partners in early intervention. Schools can have an important role in supporting students at-risk, before the situation worsens and becomes more difficult to address. Equally, community organizations can serve as critical collaborators in this endeavour. ***Leveraging the strong professional capacities and resources in both arenas can facilitate more effective interventions that ultimately lead to better outcomes for young people.***

Using a three-step process, Upstream Canada's innovative method for identifying and supporting young people at risk of homelessness and school disengagement is adapted from the Australian model:

1 Students complete a standardized assessment;
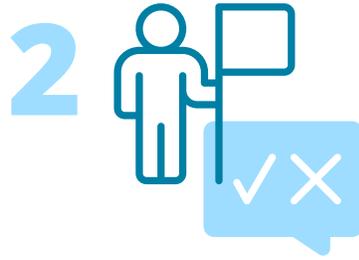
2 Based on the results, students who are flagged for potential risk have the opportunity to participate in validation interviews with case managers;

3 Once needs are determined, a collaboratively developed care plan is established and students are connected to supports.

This process ensures that students whose risk may go unnoticed and might not reach out for help for various reasons have confidential opportunities to access the supports they need.

However, recognizing that homeless youth are disproportionately **Indigenous**, **racialized** and **LGBTQ2S**, it is important to adapt this framework alongside stakeholders to ensure it is culturally and contextually appropriate for all students being supported. Stakeholders might include community leaders, knowledge keepers, people with lived experience, thought leaders, experts, frontline practitioners, and advocates.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF UPSTREAM CANADA

Risk factors for homelessness and school disengagement are not always apparent until a young person is in crisis – and sometimes, not even then. Recognizing this, Upstream Canada aims to support these students in particular, through a more proactive approach to intervention.

Upstream Canada responds to the following overarching issues and opportunities:

- *Youth who fall through the cracks because their circumstances are hidden or unnoticed, and they do not reach out for help.*

- *Inequities faced by young people at risk of and experiencing homelessness – in educational and employment opportunities, experiences, and outcomes.*

- *Evidence that many first encounters with homelessness occur before the age of 16 (over 40%) – when youth are typically ineligible to access supports beyond child welfare (Gaetz et al., 2018).*

- *The critical role of schools as a place of intervention – as expressed by youth with lived experience themselves (Schwan et al., 2018).*

- *Teachers and other educators wanting to help but not equipped with the knowledge or capacity.*

- *The potential for effective partnerships between schools and communities.*

- *The fragmented nature of the system that is complicated and difficult to navigate.*

- *The great existing work and resources in communities that could be leveraged through collaborative partnerships to build better solutions.*

Ultimately, the goal of Upstream Canada is to prevent youth homelessness, and in doing so, support at-risk students in their educational opportunities and outcomes. The method of supporting this objective is to utilize a service delivery model that is in line with **Youth Reconnect**. This evidence-informed approach prioritizes place-based supports, to keep youth in their own communities in safe and stable housing, strengthening family relationships when possible, and supporting better opportunities and outcomes in education, employment, and overall wellbeing.

THE APPROACH

Why is Youth Homelessness an Education Issue?

When youth are homeless, their educational experiences and opportunities – and therefore life trajectories – are deeply impacted. In a **pan-Canadian study** on 1,103 youth with lived experience of homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2016), 83% of respondents reported being victims of bullying, either "sometimes" or "often." The survey also revealed that dropout rates are high among homeless youth across Canada, at 53.2%, compared with the national average of 9%. Given the extreme challenges faced by youth without a stable home, the prevalence of early school leaving among these youth should not be surprising.
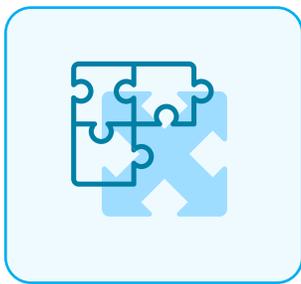
Research shows how the consequences of homelessness can manifest in multiple, interconnected ways.

Among those who dropped out of school, many reported having learning disabilities (41.8%), ADHD (46.1%), and physical disabilities (47.9%). Furthermore, homeless youth are characterized by childhood trauma, extremely unstable home lives, and low socio-economic status, which are often intersecting issues. Of course, this means they lack vital supports for positive school experiences and successful educational outcomes, leading to barriers in finding stable employment and into a cycle of instability as adults (Baker-Collins, 2018; Barker et al., 2015). In short, school disengagement – whether it happens prior to or as a result of becoming homeless – has a detrimental impact on health, well-being, and employment prospects. **As Malenfant and colleagues (2020) highlight**, research shows how the consequences of homelessness can manifest in multiple, interconnected ways. People who drop out of school have shorter life expectancies (Bor et al., 2018) and are more likely to have a chronic illness (Zimmerman & Woolf, 2015). Youth without a home tend to suffer from malnourishment, extreme stress, and inadequate healthcare (e.g., untreated infections and inadequate or lack of medications). They are characterized by social exclusion and social and emotional issues, which can be attributed in large part to relocation between unstable – and often unsafe – living situations (Liljedahl, 2013; Watson, Crawley & Kane, 2016). In turn, this results in educational interruptions and a loss of important relationships that would have been integral to supporting success in school. Given all of these challenges, it should not be surprising that so many homeless youth (50.5%) are not in employment, education, or training – in stark contrast to their peers at 12-14% (Gaetz, 2016).

"Sometimes, when people first hear about Upstream [Canada], they are resistant to it because they think it will be yet another work-added initiative.

When they find out more, they realize it will actually help because there's finally a straight-forward process in place to connect struggling, at-risk students with the supports they need… It lifts some burden off of teachers because then they don't need to worry about how they can help 'Johnny' who is clearly having problems at home and is struggling to stay awake in class.

Maybe even students who are in trouble but not showing signs until it becomes a much bigger problem."

— School board champion for Upstream Canada

While the challenges of homeless youth may seem obvious, their issues are complex and largely unknown or misunderstood by those around them – including educators. Teachers may not know when youth are at risk of or experiencing homelessness because they do not show obvious, external signs until problems reach a crisis point. Moreover, even when they are aware there is a problem, they are typically unaware of how to help and are also overburdened by the roles and responsibilities within their scopes of practice.

Given the complex nature of the problem and an overburdened school system, why should youth homelessness be addressed through schools?

Schools as Partners in Prevention

Many young people's first experience of homelessness occurs before age 16 – a period in their lives when they were in school (Gaetz, O'Grady, Kidd & Schwan, 2016). In Canada, schools are the only public institution where young people are legally required to attend in until age 16. This suggests that schools are a critical locus for intervention, ensuring that young people are connected to the supports they may need. This is a perspective that has also been shared by young people with lived experience of homelessness, who believe school would have been the ideal place for a trusted adult to intervene to prevent their homelessness (Schwan et al., 2018).

This collaborative approach is meant to alleviate rather than add to the social care burdens of educators.

COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

While schools serve a vital role in creating equitable opportunities and outcomes for young people, the onus should not be on the education system alone. Upstream Canada is premised on shared responsibility and cross-sector collaboration between schools and community based social service organizations, alongside key supporters such as funders and government. Although there are a multitude of existing social services, programs, and resources, system fragmentation and the unintended consequences of policies (in particular, age restrictions), restrict young people from accessing these vital supports. The approach is rooted in service provision principles that prioritize keeping young people in their communities and connected to their natural supports. Depending on the unique needs of the individual, supports can range from providing guidance and information, family mediation, systems navigation, access and referrals to mental health and addictions services, and connections to safe and stable housing.

This collaborative approach is meant to alleviate rather than add to the social care burdens of educators. Leveraging existing partnerships and collaborative efforts in communities, Upstream Canada provides an effective mechanism for schools to connect students to the supports they need to prevent them from experiencing homelessness and facilitate more equitable access to opportunities and outcomes in education and employment. It is vital for all stakeholders to understand Upstream Canada as part of a larger system that works to achieve this end.

Based on the Upstream Australia model, Upstream Canada is an example of social innovation in action, through its unique approach to early intervention that incorporates unconventional yet critical cross-sector partnerships. Currently, the model is being developed to enable adaptation in a range of community contexts across Canada. Ultimately, the objective is to provide better solutions to divert students from homelessness and school disengagement, toward more equitable educational opportunities and life trajectories.

An Ecological Approach: Cross-sector Collaboration

The evidence from research is clear: collective work, from design to implementation and beyond, is vital to sustaining and scaling programs – to accomplish what the initiative sets out to do and to strengthen the system.

Upstream Canada considers stakeholders as part of an ecological system.

Collaborative work is intended to create efficiencies and strengthen the system, leveraging on the capacities of all the actors involved. A well-informed approach based on evidence that has been systematically documented and externally validated is a way to build in success.

There are too many cases where well-intended stakeholders have jumped into implementing a promising initiative without doing the proper groundwork, only to have it fail after losing the initial momentum. While things could go wrong at any point in time, a common mistake is to take on a top-down, program transfer approach where strict fidelity to the model is enforced without contextual consideration. This approach excludes the valuable knowledge of frontline implementers who have critical context-specific knowledge that is key to effectiveness. For example, ensuring that the initiative is culturally relevant to the target population is crucial, yet easily overlooked. When the implementation team partners in the model development or adaptation, this builds in ownership, and as a result, sustainability of the initiative. Informed by this knowledge, adaptation through collaboration is a central component of fidelity to the Upstream Canada model. Rather than a top-down or a bottom-up approach, Upstream Canada considers stakeholders as part of an ecological system, with different yet equally valuable roles and contributions.
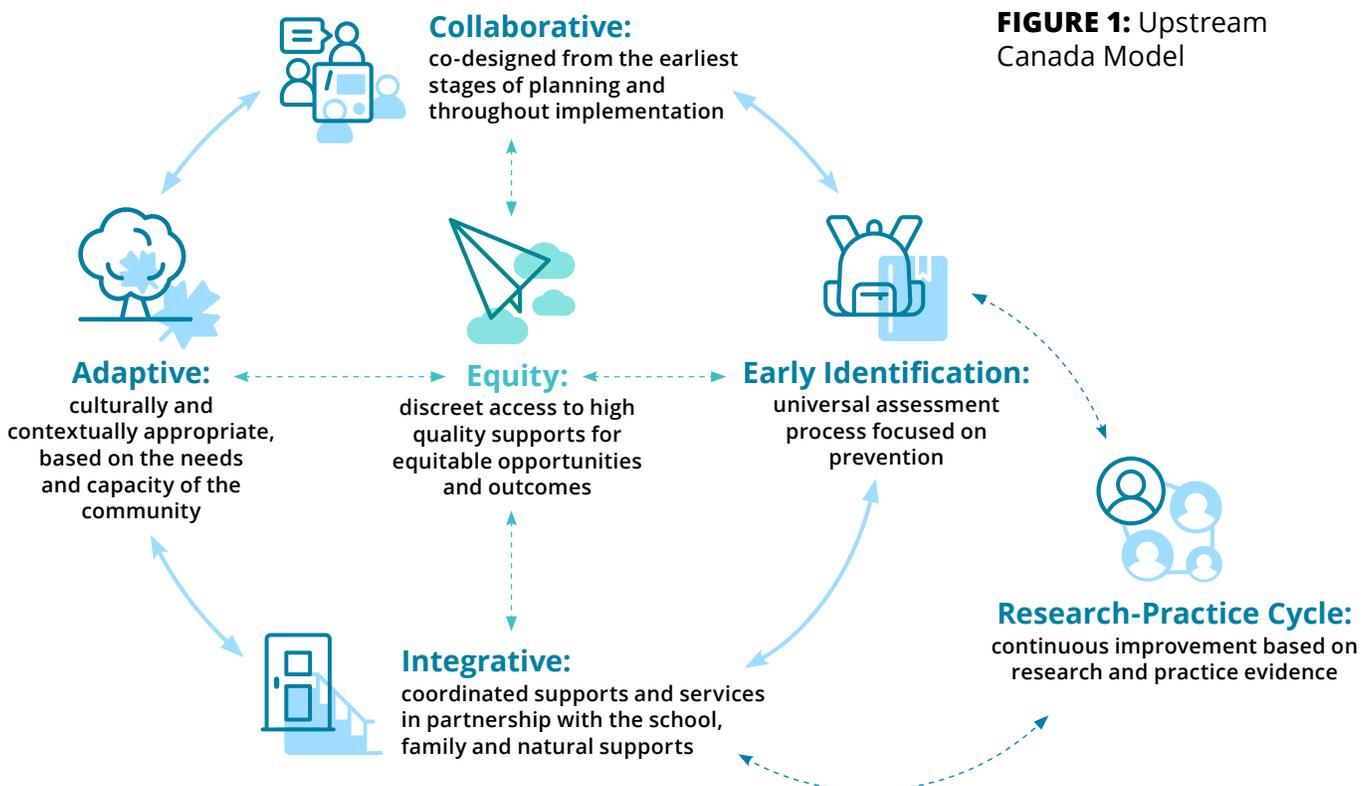
FIGURE 1: Upstream Canada Model

Collaborative: co-designed from the earliest stages of planning and throughout implementation

Adaptive: culturally and contextually appropriate, based on the needs and capacity of the community

Equity: discreet access to high quality supports for equitable opportunities and outcomes

Early Identification: universal assessment process focused on prevention

Integrative: coordinated supports and services in partnership with the school, family and natural supports

Research-Practice Cycle: continuous improvement based on research and practice evidence

THE CORE PRINCIPLES OF UPSTREAM CANADA

Upstream Canada is premised on an evidence-based approach: to sustain and build this equity-focused work, it must be a shared endeavour between stakeholders in different levels and across sectors through structured collaboration. The core principles of Upstream Canada are aligned with the **Youth Reconnect** and **Family and Natural Supports**, which are currently being implemented as part of the **Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab**. All of these models have been designed to keep youth stably housed and divert them from a trajectory of homelessness.

Upstream Canada provides young people with supports that do not require them to leave their community and remain in-place so that they can stabilize and improve their housing situations and home lives and enhance school engagement. Upstream Canada is unique in that it also includes an assessment that is meant to capture risk that could otherwise go unnoticed and therefore unaddressed.

The values governing Upstream Canada include the following elements:

Collaborative: Upstream Canada is co-designed from planning contextual adaptation to implementation with the education sector, the broader community of social services, schools, the lead community-based organization, youth, and their families.

Equitable: there are significant disproportionalities in youth homelessness related to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Risk assessment and supports are offered with this in mind, highlighting culturally appropriate and needs-based social and community inclusion. For example, the SNA asks questions related to gender and cultural/ethnic identity to capture data that will be used towards future research on entrenched systemic and structural biases. The follow-up validation interviews and care plan development ensures young people are connected to culturally appropriate services and supports.

Integrative: supports are coordinated and delivered in partnership with local service providers, who are committed to a positive youth development and wellness orientation that focuses on individualized, client-driven supports.

Longitudinal: ideally, there are no time limits on supports, although this is subject to resource availability. Upstream Canada also aims towards longitudinal measurement as a way to ensure young people are supported to thrive, while building knowledge about more effective solutions. Longitudinal measurement is critical to understanding the aspects of intervention that are effective and the areas that might need adjustment. It also ensures that young people are offered supports that are aligned with their evolving needs. At the same time, this data will also assist the Upstream Canada research team with important information on how the initiative can be sustainably scaled.

Perspectives:
FROM YOUTH WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESSNESS

Mike* and Aden* (ages 18 and 19) face intense distress in their lives. They both excel in school, so their teachers do not notice anything is wrong. Their hopes for the future and career aspirations motivate them to do well. School is the one place that offers stability; and focusing on their studies is a way of coping with their difficult circumstances.

Mike has a complicated relationship with his mother, who is a single parent living with mental health and addictions issues. He understands her episodic abuse as coming from a place of illness and stress and hides his circumstances out of fear of stigma and consequences for his mother. In order to help pay the bills, Mike worked two part time jobs, juggling his studies with a demanding work schedule. When his mother's partner moved in, Mike was often the target of verbal and physical abuse from both his mother and her partner. Years of hiding his home life contributed to isolation from peers and relatives, so he had nowhere to go and ended up in a shelter. As a result, his school attendance suffered, which was the first time there was any outward indication to teachers that something was wrong. By the time the school reached out, Mike had been exposed to drugs and used them to help him cope with his pain. He disengaged from school but is currently working with a social worker at the youth shelter to re-engage with education and explore opportunities for employment.

Aden dreams of becoming a cardiologist. His late mother had a heart condition and his wish is to help others like her. Aden is an astute and keen student who often studies on his shelter bed, for lack of anywhere else to do his schoolwork at night – after libraries close. As an English Language Learner, he finds he must invest a lot of time into his studies. Despite his educational aspirations, Aden worries that a lack of stable housing will inevitably contribute to poor academic outcomes, especially as shelters do not have separate study rooms or structures in place to facilitate study. There are several reasons why Aden avoids seeking help, including not wanting to contribute to refugee stigma; beliefs related to his culture and personal preferences that he should be self-sufficient; and the trauma that is triggered when he recounts his past.

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* Names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.
** This story is based on a focus group that took place in a Toronto youth shelter. A group of 10 young people (ages 17–19) experiencing homelessness gathered to discuss Upstream Canada. Most were keen to share their unique interests, dreams, and worries, and later on, feedback about Upstream Canada. Bright and engaged, there was unanimous consensus that risk is not always apparent, and fears and worries about repercussions (e.g. bulling, stigma, child welfare involvement and punitive responses) had prevented them from reaching out for the help that could have diverted them from becoming homeless.

How Does Upstream Canada Work?

Johnny is quietly struggling with an unsafe home life. For the last week he stayed at a friend's house because he couldn't go home. He is struggling to stay engaged in school and worried about his future.

Screening

Johnny takes part in the universal, confidential Student Needs

Assessment

~30 minutes to complete

Analysis

Johnny is flagged as at risk based on the assessment results

Validation

Johnny agrees to participate in a validation interview with an Upstream Canada social worker

Connection to Supports

Based on a full assessment of his needs by the social worker, Johnny is connected to coordinated services and supports

The stories of Mike and Aden illustrate that some students do not exhibit the early signs of homelessness risk, and for a variety of reasons, do not seek out help. Upstream Canada would have assessed Mike and Aden's life circumstances to determine their risk of homelessness and the likelihood of disengagement from school. Based on the results of the assessment, they would have been connected to appropriate, community-based services and supports to address their needs – well before a crisis hit.

For instance, Mike's need to take on two part-time jobs because of income insecurity would have been addressed in his coordinated care plan. An Upstream Canada case manager could have worked with him and his family to find relevant income support programs in the community (e.g., Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit). He might have also been connected with family mediation and mental health support for his mother, which might have prevented his experience in the shelter system and struggles with addiction.

As a proactive and confidential intervention, Upstream Canada is designed to identify and support students like Mike and Aden, who would otherwise have to manage challenging personal situations on their own for fear of stigma and not knowing about the supports that could have been available to them.

HOW DOES UPSTREAM CANADA WORK?

Upstream Canada is an early intervention initiative designed to prevent youth homelessness and school disengagement. Upstream Canada is unique in its approach to identifying students at risk through universal screening and connecting them to individualized supports – all through the collaborative design and implementation with cross-sector partners. This initiative relies on the partnership of schools and community organizations working towards shared, interconnected goals: namely, supporting youth with unstable home lives and insecure housing toward educational equity and well-being.
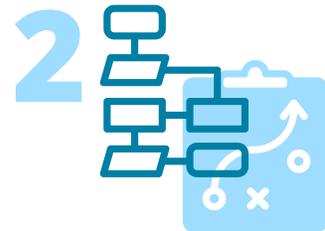
Community-focused Planning and Consultation

As an early intervention, Upstream Canada targets students aged 12-16 but can support students until the end of high school, depending on their needs and the available resources within the community.

There are two important considerations for planning:

1

Take a community-asset based approach

2

Prepare the community for implementation

1. Take a community-asset based approach

Collaborative planning at the earliest stages will set Upstream Canada up for success. Thorough planning entails meaningful, committed engagement from diverse stakeholders who bring experience and knowledge to how Upstream Canada will take shape and ultimately achieve the common goals of the community. A community-based organization takes the lead on convening stakeholders and working to establish the deeply collaborative processes for backbone supports and implementation planning based on strengths and assets.

All stakeholders involved in the process – from the implementation team (e.g., school staff, case managers, etc.) to the community level leads (at the school district level, government staff, funders, and organizational leaders) – must agree on shared objectives based on an understanding of the needs of young people and the assets of the community. Some communities have strong, existing partnerships. Others will need to form them. Regardless, communities must consider the long-term investment of time and resources it takes to plan Upstream Canada well.

For example, a critical aspect of this work is a paradigm shift in understanding the issues and effective approaches to addressing youth homelessness. From there, stakeholders must consider the landscape components of their communities – demographics, infrastructure, and resources to support youth at-risk, the political climate, the extent to which there is knowledge and support within the community for an initiative like Upstream Canada, and so on. This vital information will inform how Upstream Canada leads can project need and capacity, to ensure commitments are fulfilled to the highest possible extent. In addition to context, cultural appropriateness is a key consideration. For example, the unique historical and cultural contexts and issues of Indigenous young people must be considered in relation to structural, systemic, and individual barriers in understanding appropriate approaches to supports and processes. For numerous reasons, forming advisory groups with broad representation is essential to the process of planning.

2. Prepare the community for implementation

Students, staff, and families need to be informed of and on board with the purpose and process of Upstream Canada well before implementation. Setting the stage through operationalizing an education plan could range from classroom discussions facilitated by homeroom or other teachers, to assemblies, posters, informational letters, and newsletters – any or all of the above and beyond. This critical education component further illuminates the need for solid, collaborative planning. Inviting input and questions from the community of stakeholders will help identify potential issues that could affect implementation and help to ensure it is aligned to the needs and assets of the community.

Assessing Needs and Connecting Students to Local Supports

The processes of assessment and referral include several common steps, keeping in mind they will look different, based on the context, needs, and assets in each community.

The general process is as follows:	**1.** Early identification through universal screening	**2.** Validate the Results	**3.** Prepare the community for implementation	**4.** Connect Students to Supports

1. Early identification through universal screening

Universal screening (or, a general assessment available to all students within the given grade/cohort it is being offered) is a safe, discreet and accessible way to determine whether a young person is a risk of homelessness – even if they are not exhibiting signs that are apparent to others. The Student Needs Assessment (SNA) is the evidence-based screening tool – a self-administered survey that examines risk indicators within several categories, including: current housing situation, experience with homelessness, level of school engagement, and mental health and well-being. Beyond risk, the SNA also includes a strengths-based section that focuses on resiliency indicators.

2. Assess student needs

The SNA is administered according to the capacity of the community. The timing and format will be slightly different in each school, depending on factors such as the school's scheduling, accommodation needs, and existing staff and resources. It could be administered on a single day during the school year or staggered throughout a period of time such as one month.

～～～ On each assessment day, the following plan is expected: ～～～

1. Homeroom/designated teachers explain and administer the SNA. Students will already be aware of the purpose and process based on prior promotional and outreach activities. They must provide assent or informed consent prior to the assessment.

2. Students fill out the assessment, which is comprised of 27 multiple choice questions. It takes approximately 30 minutes to complete. To ensure confidentiality, students do not provide their names; only student numbers. They will also indicate their preferred method of communication if the assessment results indicate potential risk. They may also opt to decline follow up.

3. The administering teacher collects the SNAs and the office submits them to a designated third-party organization to process and hand over to the Upstream Canada research team at the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH). The data is compiled as a list of student numbers with the responses to corresponding questions.

4. The COH research team will analyze the data and assign "alert flags" (high or moderate) to the response, based on indicators of risk. The number of flags in each risk category will be tallied and assigned to the student numbers. The COH will compile a list of student numbers with the corresponding number of risk flags in the high and moderate categories and forward it to the school's Upstream Canada point person, whether it is a designated community case manager or school staff. This must be collectively agreed upon by the individual site implementation teams as existing processes may be in place. Responses to individual questions will not be provided and only the designated Upstream Canada professionals who have signed data confidentiality agreements will have access to the list.

3. Validate the Results

On the assessment, students have the opportunity to indicate who they would wish to hear from as well as method of communication in the event risk is indicated. Options include school personnel such as guidance counselor, social work, psychologist, teacher or administrator; or someone outside of the school such as a case manager or other, with the option to name specific individuals. These students will have the option to participate in a confidential validation interview, which will be conducted by an Upstream Canada case manager. Depending on existing resources and practices, this case manager will either be employed by the school or a participating community-based organization. The case manager will have been trained on the principles of Upstream Canada, with an approach that is youth-focused, prioritizing place-based, coordinated care that may evolve with the needs of the young person.

4. Connect Students to Supports

Students have agency in the entire process of validation. It is an opportunity for them to provide context to the assessment questions if they wish to, to enable the case manager to support them in determining the kinds of resources they may benefit from. The student might also wish to involve family, friends, or natural supports in the process of intake and coordinate care plan development. There are many ways in which the young person could opt to move forward. For example, a youth might wish to accept supports by way of an extensive coordinated care plan, depending on their needs. Or they may wish to simply take note of contact information for specific supports should they wish to reach out for help on their own – whether immediately or in the future. There is a broad range of potential supports available, including family mediation, counselling, housing supports, therapies, collaboration with other services (such as cultural centres, specialists, networks), and access to resources.

Upstream Canada uses a flexible and responsive service delivery model based on the needs of young people. The lead community-based organization works in close collaboration with the individual school to provide continued support and follow up with students – as needed and agreed upon - throughout the course of their middle and high school years. The level and nature of supports may change over time as the needs of the student evolves throughout their adolescence. For example, short-term, intensive case management may be required when a young person is experiencing a particularly difficult event (e.g., a death or separation in the family). In other cases, longer-term, intensive case management may be required to support young people with more complex needs (e.g., intellectual and/or developmental disability; mental health issues or family trauma; addictions; justice involvement). Given the range of complexities that a care team may encounter, it is recommended that Upstream Canada case managers do not take on a caseload that exceeds 25 young people at a time.

Depending on the community, there will be a range of organizations, agencies, institutions, and resources that can assist in coordinating supports and services for young people. The lead community-based organization will ensure all involved service and support providers are on board with the Upstream Canada principles of care, formalized through a Terms of Reference.

CONTEXT

Upstream Canada is an adaptation of a successful initiative in Geelong, Australia (formerly called The Geelong Project), where researchers have documented a 40% reduction in the number of adolescents (ages 12-18) entering the local homelessness system and a 20% reduction in the number of adolescents leaving school early over the three years following implementation of the original model (MacKenzie, 2018). Trend data over time and comparisons to nearby schools and communities suggest that these results can be attributable to **the project**.

What originated in Geelong is now being internationally branded as Upstream Australia to support this work. The model (figure 1) consists of four foundations – collaboration, early identification, the practice framework, and early intervention support work with families and a robust, embedded longitudinal monitoring and measurement of outcomes. This Community of Schools and Services (COSS) model that underpins The Upstream Project Australia is place-based, focusing on bringing together people and resources in a given community to impact rates of homelessness and early school leaving.

FIGURE 2: The Community of Schools and Services (COSS) Model

Collaboration
organize a community collective of agencies and schools

Identify At-risk Young People:
screen the school population to identify young people before crises occur

Practice Framework:
work with a cohort of vulnerable youth and their families throughout adolescence

Outcome Measurement
Measure the outcomes continuously to inform practice

Currently, Upstream Canada is being implemented and evaluated in Kelowna, British Columbia and St. John's Newfoundland, as part of the Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab. The model is being developed based on the knowledge that emerges from these sites to better understand adaptation to the Canadian context across diverse communities. As **homeless youth** are disproportionately Indigenous, LGBQTS, and newcomers to Canada, equity is at the forefront of the work. The Upstream approach has gained international attention as an effective intervention in youth homelessness and is also in the early stages of adaptation in the United States and Wales. An international consortium has been established as a collaborative effort to exchange knowledge and contribute to the model's continuous development.

INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION: THE UPSTREAM INTERNATIONAL LIVING LAB (UILL)

The Upstream International Living Lab (UILL) consortium is part of a growing international movement for change, toward better solutions in preventing youth homelessness. Current membership is comprised of teams from Australia, the United States, Wales, and Canada. There has been increasing recognition that schools are a critical place for intervention, necessitating cross-sector work alongside service providers. In order to do this effectively, the role of embedded research is central to the success of the model. As such, the ongoing collection and analysis is important for continuous improvement, quality assurance, supporting systems change, and informing sound public policy and investment. For this reason, leading research institutions in each member country play a central role as part of the consortium.

Living Labs are real-world environments.

The UILL is an international social research and development consortium focusing on the design, implementation, and study of program and policy interventions that foster systems change resulting in the prevention of youth homelessness. Currently, the focus is on early intervention through schools via Upstream initiatives.

Living Labs are real-world environments. In this case, the focus of the Living Lab is service system transformation through the development and implementation of early intervention for vulnerable young people (i.e. upstream). The problem being addressed is the way youth support systems remain problem and crisis-oriented, somewhat fragmented, and delivered through program and departmental silos. A place-based community collaboration promises a more responsive and grounded approach that will achieve much better outcomes, such as preventing homelessness, raising school completion, avoiding other adverse issues, and generally assisting young people onto a pathway to a sustainable livelihood and future life.

At the outset, the core work is to take what originated as the Geelong Project in Australia, an innovative and effective early intervention system involving deep cross-sector partnership between the community, schools, service providers, and researchers and facilitate its adaptation and implementation within each of the countries participating in the consortium.

GETTING READY: HOW CAN COMMUNITIES PREPARE TO IMPLEMENT UPSTREAM CANADA?

Every community is unique in its history, context, priorities, and resources in addressing youth homelessness, which will influence the way Upstream Canada is adapted. Recognizing this, it is intentionally flexible by design. As the Upstream Canada model is currently being developed alongside the demonstration communities, it will not be scaled at this time. However, the following are broad considerations for communities interested in planning for Upstream Canada upon model establishment. Communities may need to begin planning far in advance of implementation in order to create and strengthen relationships with partners as the following elements are considered:

As a first step, it is vital that stakeholders who wish to adopt Upstream Canada in their communities conduct a **readiness assessment** – collectively, alongside key actors. Based on this, a clear implementation plan must be developed. While the **Canadian Observatory on Homelessness** (CoH) and **A Way Home Canada** (AWHC) are national partners providing guidance and support, communities must take collective ownership of the initiative based on knowledge of the strengths, assets, and needs of their own communities. Communities leads will also have critical knowledge about the opportunities and challenges of implementing Upstream Canada within the broader systems framework. This knowledge is integral in informing the implementation strategy in terms of priority setting, leveraging existing resources and partnerships, as well as setting realistic goals about outcomes and improvements.

Contextual considerations such as demographics, institutional and policy priorities, and resource availability will determine the capacity of Upstream Canada to meet the project needs.

For example, based on this information, the community Upstream Canada team will be able to determine the numbers of students at risk they are able to support. The following dimensions broadly outline the key considerations to community preparedness in adopting Upstream Canada.

Preparedness to Implement Upstream Canada:
6 COMMUNITY DIMENSIONS

1 **Existing efforts in youth homelessness prevention**
(e.g., programs, activities, policies)

2 **Community knowledge of youth homelessness as an issue**

3 **Leadership support for prevention efforts through collective impact principles**

4 **Community climate**
(e.g., prevailing attitudes within the community concerning the issue and whether and how to address it)

5 **Community knowledge of the efforts to address youth homelessness through prevention**

6 **Resources available to support addressing youth homelessness prevention**

Adapted from Plested et al. (2006)

It is important that planning is not based on anecdotal knowledge alone but rather, systematically documented, validated by diverse stakeholders as well as archival data. This ensures that all stakeholders are aligned in their understanding and different perspectives and knowledge are integrated into the plan. Not only will this knowledge inform implementation and make for a smoother, more efficient coordinated care and use of resources, it will also establish critical baseline information for research and evaluation. This aspect of the planning will be guided and supported by the COH and whenever possible, affiliated local researchers.

UPSTREAM CANADA PARTNERS

While successful outcomes of Upstream Canada depend on the collective work of many different stakeholders at the local, national, and even international level, the following section summarizes the roles and responsibilities of a few particularly important lead partners in Upstream Canada's implementation in Canada and early adopter communities.

As it has been emphasized throughout this document, Upstream Canada works to provide more effective solutions to youth homelessness through a cross-sector collaboration between schools and social services in communities. Toward this end, the approach includes leveraging existing infrastructure and resources as much as possible. Research & development underpins this dynamic systems approach, with a continuous focus on data, evidence, and innovation in the design and scale-up of Upstream Canada.

With research and community engagement at the centre of the initiative, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) and A Way Home Canada (AWHC) will collectively lead Upstream Canada, leveraging on the strengths of each organization.
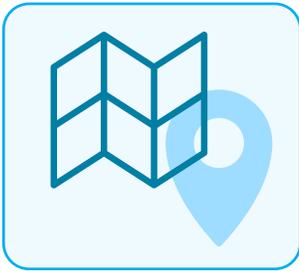
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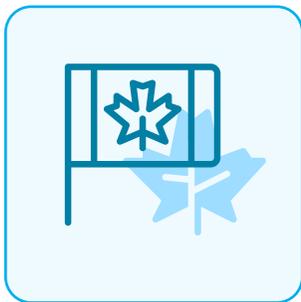
The COH will lead research and development in the design, implementation, and data-informed iterative learning. Throughout implementation, the COH will provide actionable data at the individual student level and the aggregate school level, supporting innovation, cross learning, and quality assurance in keeping with the model.

AWHC will lead in community and government engagement activities including capacity building and systems planning.

Collectively, the COH and AWHC aim to mobilize evidence of program effectiveness to inform an integrated systems approach to preventing youth homelessness.

Local universities or research groups may also collaborate on research and evaluation activities. The COH and/or its research partners will lead the process and impact evaluations and, alongside AWHC, the dissemination of evidence and policy implications locally and nationally.

Local

Lead community-based organization (CBO): A lead local CBO would take responsibility and accountability for coordinating and overseeing the local collective impact efforts of multiple systems and agencies, including the development of a system of coordinated care. It would oversee local implementation, deliverables, timelines, and progress toward intended results. It would work closely with the COH and AWHC in receiving support and ensuring fidelity to Upstream Canada and evolving evidence base. While a range of service providers can and should serve as referral options, one CBO would function as a lead local partner in collaboration with the school system. The lead local CBO would generally function as the primary grant applicant for major local Upstream Canada funding and the conduit for funding to key partner organizations and, in some cases, the school district.

This youth and family service organization should have deep expertise and successful track record with youth and family homelessness and vulnerability, trauma-informed care, positive youth development, counseling and case management, project management, and collaborating well with relevant public systems and other agencies in the community. The approach of the lead CBO as well as any involved service provider is place-based, youth focused, and family centered, prioritizing stable housing. This organization would help to mobilize the referral options needed and/or ready its own service capacity to meet the needs of students and their families that will be identified through the universal screening process. The lead local CBO would also employ, supervise, and support the "early intervention workers" (the primary case managers, navigators, and advocates for students and families identified through the Upstream Canada screening and risk detection).

School district (and participating schools): The participating schools play a key local leadership role in planning and delivering Upstream Canada. Typically, the school district leadership will co-chair the local Steering Committee, which includes school level staff (e.g., educators, counselors), frontline case managers, and, whenever possible, youth with lived experience. With close engagement from the COH and AWHC, participating schools facilitate the logistics of administering the universal assessment and the associated consent processes. Leveraging its school well-being personnel and engaged, knowledgeable staff, the school system co-implements tiered supports and services corresponding with its strengths and capacity.

Other partner community-based organizations (CBOs): This collective work depends on wraparound services and supports tailored to the needs and circumstances of individual students and their families. A range of other local systems and organizations should be identified in the community mapping and planning stage and engaged collaboratively as partners in delivering Upstream Canada successfully. These could include organizations that specialize, for example, in case management and service navigation, homelessness diversion assistance, shelter, or housing programs, youth development, mentoring, mental health or substance use treatment, legal aid, family strengthening, LGBTQ youth and family support, social and economic assistance, and teen parenting prevention or assistance, among others.

Local funder(s): Local funder(s) play an important partnership role. The local funder(s) provide or help mobilize resources for executing the activities successfully and, if successful, sustainability and scale up of Upstream Canada locally (for sustainability and scale-up, resources should come as much as possible through public systems, but the local funder partner(s) can help to advocate for the best available options for this to take place). The local funder partner(s) also bring local expertise, and networks.

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