



VULNERABLE YOUTH STRATEGY PHASE ONE LEARNING REPORT 2012-2014

The Vulnerable Youth Strategy is a collaboration with community service providers to improve peer, family and adult social supports for youth (15-24) who struggle to transition successfully into adulthood.

SUMMARY OF KEY LEARNING IN THE AREA OF NATURAL SUPPORTS

Over the course of three years (January 2012 – December 2014), work under United Way of Calgary and Area's Vulnerable Youth Strategy has supported learning and innovation in the area of natural supports for vulnerable youth. This first phase funded three learning projects focused on natural supports: the Fusion Project (Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary), Enhancing Supports (The Alex and Calgary Sexual Health Centre) and YES (Big Brothers Big Sisters of Calgary and Aspen Family). As well, Burns Memorial Fund partnered as a strategic advisor to the initiative.

This learning report summarizes the highlights of this work for practical application and looks towards the next phase of the Vulnerable Youth Strategy.



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LESSONS LEARNED

Understanding the connection and reconnection to family and other natural supports was central to the learning strategy. Below are key lessons learned through the funded projects.

- 1. Reframe family and natural supports:** Instead of framing family and other natural supports as the problem and the youth as a victim, this work emphasizes thinking about family as a potential asset for youth.
 - 2. Family work and youth work are disconnected:** From a service perspective, there is a divide between family workers and youth workers. To adequately connect youth to natural supports, staff need skills and expertise that transcend these silos.
 - 3. Vulnerable youth want to connect to their natural supports:** Contrary to practitioner assumptions, youth want to connect with natural supports, even in times of crisis; for example, being homeless, struggling with mental health or addictions, or involvement in the justice system.
 - 4. Engagement takes time:** Youth who have experienced trauma, lived on the streets, or struggled with addictions and mental health issues often resist connection with positive adults as a protective measure. Youth resistance does not necessarily mean they are not interested in connecting with these supports; instead, it can mean they are testing the relationship or they have more pressing challenges to deal with first.
 - 5. Supports should be unconditional:** Professionals work with youth and their families without judgement, and programming includes “whatever it takes” supports and case management.
 - 6. Create space and don’t rescue:** The “whatever it takes” support needs to work alongside using the “gentlest touch”, such that youth learn the skills to negotiate their own relationships and do things for themselves.
 - 7. Professional systems create and reinforce disconnection:** Practitioners became aware of ways in which existing practice reinforces youth disconnection from natural supports, particularly in scenarios where the safety of the youth is at risk.
 - 8. The work is both an overarching approach and a specific intervention:** Supporting connection to natural supports does not need to be done in the context of a specific program, but can be applied as an overarching approach to all youth work (although constrained by current organizational cultures and system structures).
 - 9. What we’re learning is common sense:** Practitioners note that many of these ideas are common sense, based on their own experiences with natural supports in their lives.
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CHANGING PRACTICES

The learning initiatives created space where team members could reflect, challenge assumptions, try new things, fail, learn from the failure and develop different ideas about how to work with vulnerable youth.

1. **Relentless and barrier-free engagement:** Youth hesitation and resistance do not always mean that youth are unwilling or unable to engage. Team members will reach out to youth repeatedly and intermittently; there is no pressure, just an ongoing invitation to connect.
 2. **Meeting youth and family where they're at:** The teams adapted their practice so their work became mobile, meeting youth and families in coffee shops, at school, at the library, or elsewhere. The teams also paid attention to engage youth based on their skills, goals and values.
 3. **Surrendering the expert position:** The teams embraced positions of humility and curiosity, understanding that they have an important skillset to offer, but that they must take more time to listen and observe before jumping in with solutions.
 4. **Asking more questions and different questions:** Team members began asking more questions about family, something many youth workers have been trained to avoid. As well, they are asking questions that direct youth back to their natural supports.
 5. **Whatever it takes and the gentlest touch:** Team members will now do many unconventional things; they are not bound by strict program guidelines in terms of what they can or cannot do with or for a youth or family. They use unconventional approaches when no one else can.
 6. **Get the right people:** Skills and capabilities of frontline staff that have come to be seen as essential include humility, patience and persistence, being non-judgemental, responsive, reflective and adaptive.
 7. **Build relationship skills and capacity for reciprocity:** Frontline staff need to build capacity to coach and practice conflict resolution, communication, boundary setting, and decision-making skills.
 8. **Principle-based approach:** Developing and applying a set of principles was among the most significant shifts for team members. They shifted from developing tools, strategies and procedures to focus on the articulation and operationalization of principles to guide them in their work. The principles act as a map and compass to support decision-making and interactions, rather than a prescriptive set of program rules. The principles are: Being relationship-focused, providing an open invitation to engage, ensuring the youth and family lead the work, showing authenticity and respect, and working towards social justice by being adaptive and reflective.
 9. **Supervision is about reflective practice, not just abiding by rules:** Supervision has become more about asking questions rather than giving direction to staff. Managers are using the principles to empower frontline staff to make good decisions and supporting them to engage in reflective practice.
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IMPLICATIONS AND RISKS

The learning from this project has implications for, and is sometimes constrained by, broader systems. Below are implications and risks related to changing practices in regards to connecting with natural supports.

1. **Measuring and reporting results:** Measuring changes in relationship skills, reciprocity and strength of relationships is challenging, particularly when working with transient youth and a responsive approach.
2. **Recruiting and retaining staff:** Teams have experienced turnover, and have had trouble attracting staff with sufficient skills. As well, the ambiguity associated with the learning initiatives has been difficult and sometimes frustrating.
3. **Risks to professional credibility:** Some staff expressed fear of being judged by other professionals for working in this new way as it challenges conventional professional boundaries. Staff need to be supported by their leadership, and continue to support a broader shift in practice across the sector.
4. **Crisis of confidence:** For almost all of the frontline staff involved in this work, the learning and reflection involved led to varying degrees of anxiety and discomfort, and to deeper questions being asked about the merit of their work.
5. **Change from the bottom is challenging:** Much of the learning in this initiative took place at the frontline through interactions between youth and their natural supports, and in dialogue with other frontline professionals. Frontline participants worry that it may be difficult to garner understanding and support among senior leaders because they don't work directly with youth and their families.
6. **Safety concerns:** Many rules and policies around youth-serving work are intended to reduce risk and keep youth safe. However, these same rules often create barriers between youth and their natural supports, making it difficult for youth to build their own capacity to engage in relationships, negotiate health boundaries, and make good decisions. The principles developed in this project enable youth to fail safely and learn from mistakes. Re-assessing risks and re-examining and amending policies and procedures so that they don't inhibit real-life capacity building in vulnerable youth will be a complex and challenging part of the organizational and systems change processes associated with this strategy.

GOING FORWARD:

PHASE TWO OF THE VULNERABLE YOUTH STRATEGY

The Vulnerable Youth Strategy has now moved into Phase Two of its work, building on the learning of Phase One. Funding was renewed for the learning initiatives, and a Change Collective was formed, convened by United Way, Burns Memorial Fund and Mount Royal University, which brings together representatives from more than 14 human service organizations. The Collective will initially focus on building practitioner capacity, and will then focus on organizational cultures and structures, and eventually to systems-level constraints.
