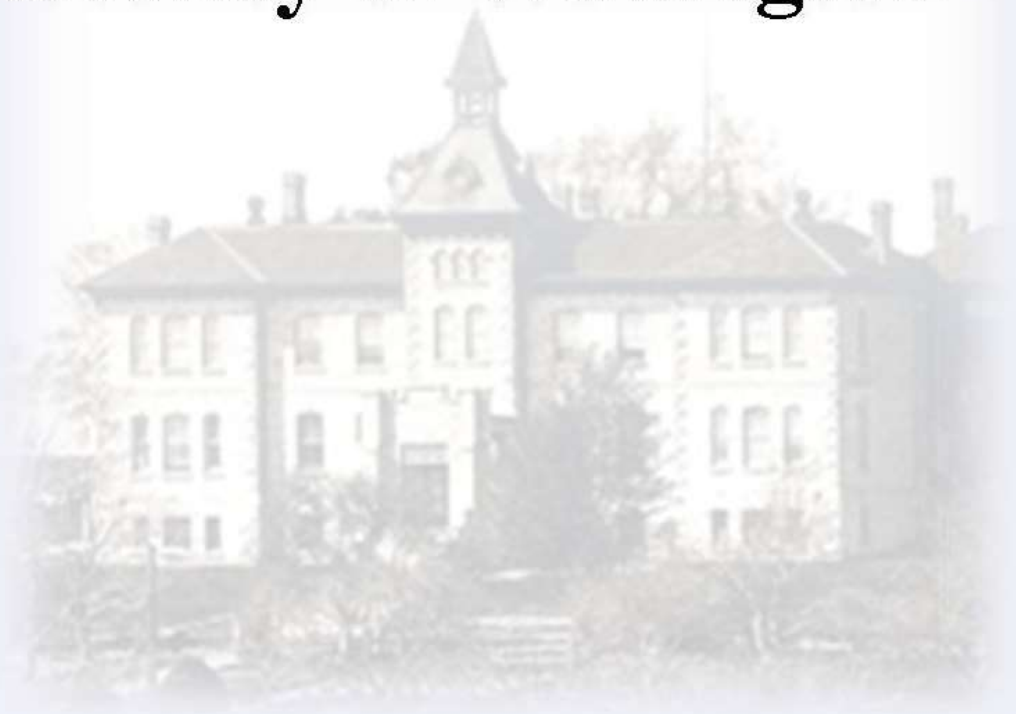




Towards Addressing Youth Homelessness in the County of Wellington



R. Paul Young, MSW, RSW
Young Solutions



**community
resource centre**
OF NORTH AND CENTRE WELLINGTON

Our vision is a community where every member has the opportunity to succeed.



**Towards Addressing Youth Homelessness
in Wellington County**

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Wyndham House

The Community Resource Centre of North and Centre Wellington

Bridging the Gap Halton

And Beyond

Appreciation is expressed to each and every young person who took the time to share their ideas, input and visions for how we can make Wellington County a better place to live for all through our services to homeless youth.

INTRODUCTION

In 2011, a study was completed in Wellington County (the County) on rural homelessness (please name the study and cite). One of the recommendations of this study was to "Provide youth with safe shelter alternatives, as well as opportunities to play and learn life skills". (Eden Grodzinski, Rebecca Sutherns, Jane Londerville, and Craig Bentham (2011) Rural Homelessness Study)

Youth homelessness is unique because young people are still in the developmental stage of their lives. For most young people, family support plays a key role as they navigate the process of becoming self-sufficient adults. Families often provide basic needs, financial support, one-on-one support and advocacy, social and emotional support, and guidance. Young people who leave home are often deprived of these essential experiences. They enter into homelessness with little or no work history and often experience high levels of criminal victimization (Boys & Girls Club of Calgary). Additionally, young people who become homeless generally possess fewer life skills (i.e. cooking, money management and job searching). Homelessness also makes it difficult for young people to attend school.

The Fergus Community Resource Centre, Wyndham House, and the County of Wellington are collaborating in an attempt to address the needs of rural youth experiencing homelessness to reduce the impact both on this population and the overall health of the rural Wellington population as a whole. These organizations have accessed funding to explore solutions to youth homelessness in the rural context. This report is a reflection of those efforts to date.

This report has been both youth led and youth driven. Data and input have been collected from youth throughout the County about the issue of homelessness. What is their experience? What challenges do they face? What do they consider necessary components to adequately address the needs of youth experiencing homelessness? The results of this are contained in this report.

If this report can help leaders, service providers, families, educators and individuals work towards the resolution of youth homelessness in Wellington County, then it will have served its purpose.

VOICES OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN WELLINGTON COUNTY



- * I was kicked out.
 - * I was staying under the bridge, and the cops were always hassling me to move on, but I had nowhere else to go, so it just kept happening, so I got charged with stuff.
 - * I know of someone living in a barn.
 - * There's a gazebo in Harriston. I lived under it. A friend brought me clothing. Then I moved to my boyfriend's cousin's house.
 - * I found caves down by the river to stay in. There's lots of them if you look.
- * I'd stay in my friend's shed overnight, and chill in stores by day.
- * My brother is homeless. He was into illegal activity. Dad was too angry, and mom just couldn't talk about it. He had no options.

- * I always feel like a burden when I couch surf.
- * It's not safe staying with other homeless people.
- * You feel like you've lost your hopes and dreams forever.
- * The pull of crime is scary if you don't have money or a place to go.
- * How do you keep your self-respect and not degrade yourself by begging.



- * I worry that being homeless would mean I might be kidnapped or raped, maybe get hurt or sick and maybe die without family or friends.
- * There are many, many teens that aren't leaving abusive situations because they don't have a safe place to go.
- * If I'm homeless, it's like I have to find a job, and give up on school, and my future.
- * It's a big deal if you have to change schools. You lose everything if you have to go to Guelph for a roof over your head.
- * You feel so useless when you can't get anywhere. The lack of transportation cuts down kid's ability to connect with new opportunities, and can further stagnate one's life situation.



- * I want a hand up, not a hand out. I want to move on to success.
- * Ontario Works takes 2 weeks. I need help now.
- * Sometimes I just need a place to go & think & clear my head.
- * What would happen to my pet?
- * I'd have no future if I was homeless. It needs to stop.

DEFINITIONS AND WORKING TERMS

"Homelessness" Defined

A useful place to begin is with the Canadian Homelessness Research Network's (CHRN) "Canadian Definition of Homelessness", which defines homelessness as:

"the situation of an individual or family without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it. It is the result of systemic or societal barriers, a lack of affordable and appropriate housing, the individual/household's financial, mental, cognitive, behavioural or physical challenges and/or racism and discrimination. Most people do not choose to be homeless and the experience is generally negative, unpleasant, stressful and distressing."
(Canadian Homelessness Research Network, 2012)

The Canadian Definition of Homelessness also proposes a typology that describes different degrees of homelessness:

- 1) UNSHELTERED, or absolutely homeless and living on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation;
- 2) EMERGENCY SHELTERED, including those staying in overnight shelters for people who are homeless, as well as shelters for those impacted by family violence;
- 3) PROVISIONALLY ACCOMMODATED, referring to those whose accommodation is temporary or lacks security of tenure and finally,
- 4) AT RISK OF HOMELESSNESS, referring to people who are not homeless, but whose current economic and/or housing situation is precarious or does not meet public health and safety standards. (Canadian Homelessness Research Network, 2012)

"Youth" Defined

Stephen Gaetz in Coming of Age, proposes the age range of 13 to 24 to create some definitional coherence and shared language for youth in Canada. However, given that in Ontario, young people under the age of 16 are technically the responsibility of child protection services, the age range used for this project is 16 to 24.

"Youth Homelessness" Defined

"Youth homelessness is a sub-population of homelessness and refers to young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers. In such circumstances, they do not have a stable or consistent residence or source of income, nor do they necessarily have adequate access to the

support networks necessary to foster a safe and nurturing transition into the responsibilities of adulthood.”

“Age within the population also matters when considering youth homelessness. Developmentally, there is a huge difference between the needs, circumstances and physical and emotional development of a 16 year old compared to a 23 year old (though it must also be acknowledged that the factors that produce and sustain youth homelessness—including violence, trauma and abuse, may also contribute to developmental impairment for older youth).” (Gaetz, Coming of Age)

MOBILIZING LOCAL CAPACITY (MLC) TO END YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN CANADA

The National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness, Eva’s Initiatives in Toronto, and the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association, with funding from the Catherine Donnelly Foundation are in their second year of a new program to support communities to tackle the challenge of addressing youth homelessness in chosen communities across Canada. Over a five-year period, the program will draw on the resources of this partnership to:

- Build community awareness about youth homelessness
- Support and assist communities to develop and implement plans that will prevent, reduce and end youth homelessness
- Facilitate linkages and foster effective networks and collective action to combat youth homelessness
- Promote systemic change to Canadian public policies impacting on youth homelessness

The program has two main components: Building Local Capacity and Systemic Public Policy Change.

Building Local Community Capacity & Knowledge Sharing

This component is focused on supporting two small or medium sized communities per year, to effectively respond to youth homelessness. The program supports communities to assess local needs and identify the resources they need to develop plans to prevent, reduce and end youth homelessness. It will provide local communities with resources that encourage community exchanges, training, link them with other communities and resources and the sharing of promising practices locally and nationally. Retrieved June 2014 from <http://www.evasinitiatives.com/2012/11/19/mobilizing-local-capacity-to-end-youth-homelessness-in-canada/>

Systemic Change to Public Policies on Youth Homelessness

All levels of government, the community and the corporate sector have a role to play in ending youth homelessness. Municipal, regional, provincial/territorial and federal governments have a responsibility to provide leadership on this issue. The existing patchwork of policies and programs across the country for youth experiencing homelessness is a barrier to preventing, reducing and ending youth homelessness and to adequately house youth in Canada. Young people must be able to access safe, secure, appropriate and adequate housing.

Currently the federal government has no policy framework on youth homelessness, despite the distinct causes of and solutions to the problem. Existing systems – including child welfare, mental health, criminal justice systems, and others – must be transformed and integrated to prevent, reduce and end youth homelessness. These systems need to work together to provide effective and seamless supports. A review of existing programs and policies through a “youth lens” can help to eliminate service gaps.

“The MLC Program will encourage policies and strategies to promote and support transformative change within government services at all levels and in many areas to end youth homelessness in Canada. Collaborative action across various networks will bring together other partners and sponsors in a comprehensive movement to change public policy to prevent, reduce and end youth homelessness in Canada.” Retrieved June 2014 from <http://www.evasinitiatives.com/2012/11/19/mobilizing-local-capacity-to-end-youth-homelessness-in-canada/>

Knowledge and information have been gained and used from each of the Kamloops and the Kingston projects that were initiated in 2012.

BACKGROUND: A LARGER PERSPECTIVE

In order to fully appreciate this work, it is helpful to be somewhat familiar with the literature and current issues in addressing youth homelessness.

A good place to start is from Stephen Gaetz, PhD, "Coming of Age: Reimagining the Response to Youth Homelessness in Canada". Gaetz urges us to be innovative, passionate and to look beyond the traditional approaches to addressing homeless youth.

His five themes for addressing youth homelessness are:

1. It is possible to prevent and end youth homelessness through developing and implementing a plan, with clear objectives and targets.
2. Youth homelessness can only be effectively tackled through an integrated "system of care" with a recognition that the homelessness sector working in isolation cannot end homelessness.
3. There is a need for active, strategic and coordinated engagement by all levels of government and for interdepartmental collaboration. This requires frameworks for policy and funding that encourage change in responses to homelessness.
4. It is essential to adopt a youth development orientation rather than a focus on providing housing. This involves shifting the focus from the youth transition to independence, to supporting youth development to adulthood and the life skills that accompany this transition.
5. Effective plans must necessarily incorporate research, data gathering and information sharing. (Gaetz, 2014)

Housing First

Housing First is a recent, evidence-based intervention for adults who experience homelessness. At its most basic, Housing First is considered to be: "a recovery-oriented approach to homelessness that involves moving people who experience homelessness into independent and permanent housing as quickly as possible, with no preconditions, and then providing them with additional services and supports as needed. The underlying principle of Housing First is that people are more successful in moving forward with their lives if they are first housed. This is as true for homeless people and those with mental health and addiction issues as it is for anyone. Housing is not contingent upon readiness, or on 'compliance' (for instance, sobriety). Rather, it is a rights-based intervention rooted in the philosophy that all people deserve housing and that adequate housing is a precondition for recovery." (Gaetz, 2013: 3) In fact, Housing First is one of the few homelessness interventions that is considered to be a "best practice."

Gaetz specifically examines the Housing First intervention framework in the context of youth homelessness in his report, *A Safe and Decent Place to Live: A Housing First Framework for Youth*. In this report, a number of core principles of Housing First for youth are identified as sharing similarities yet containing differences from the Housing First framework for adults. These core principles include:

- 1. Immediate Access to Housing With No Preconditions*
- 2. Youth Choice and Self-Determination.*
- 3. Positive Youth Development Orientation.*
- 4. Individualized and Client-Driven Supports.*
- 5. Social and Community Integration.*

Host Homes

The National Alliance to End Homelessness outlines housing and outreach strategies for rural youth, including best practices emerging from the Rural Youth Survey. This information includes a well-regarded concept designed to support rural youth who experience homelessness.

Host homes are utilized as a low-cost, community-engaging strategy to create housing options when the use of residential buildings or apartment models are not an available option. At their most basic, host homes entail a formalized mutual agreement between a community member and a service provider wherein the community member provides shelter and basic needs for the youth with the provider delivering case management services and supports.

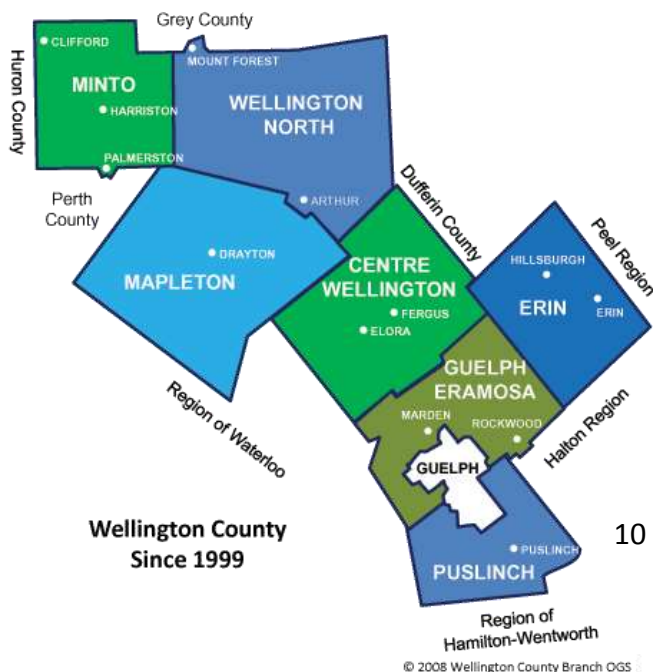
In most instances, the community member receives a small stipend to help defray associated costs, and undergoes training and background checks similar to those completed by foster parents. In fact, some providers utilize the foster care system to implement and administer their host homes program.

Depending on the age and needs of the youth, the host home might be initiated as a parent-child relationship or a mentor-youth relationship, although the model is flexible enough to accommodate both simultaneously. Private host home arrangements can last for any prescribed period of time.

BACKGROUND - WELLINGTON COUNTY

Geography of Wellington County

It's necessary to understand the geographical layout of Wellington County when trying to understand the challenges experienced both by residents and by service providers. Youth from rural Wellington may attend any of 8 different secondary schools. There are 4 public Secondary Schools in rural Wellington County, located in Palmerston, Mount Forest, Fergus/Centre Wellington, and Erin. As well, youth from North Wellington and Centre Wellington may attend College Heights Secondary school in



Guelph as well as two Separate Secondary Schools in Guelph. Youth in East Wellington may attend Erin Secondary School or any of the three schools in Guelph already mentioned.

Given the large geographical size of Wellington County, residents often connect with the services closest to them, even if it means travelling to another municipality. For example residents of Palmerston often travel 10 minutes to Listowel (Perth County) to access services instead of traveling to Guelph.

In short, there is not necessarily a natural flow of residents in the County to Guelph for services except for those in Centre Wellington, although Guelph is where services for Wellington County are largely centralized. There is often the assumption by those living in larger city centers that rural experience is standard, when in fact the rural experience is extremely varied. Living in Clifford is very different from living just outside of Fergus, but both might be mistakenly seen as being similarly "rural".

Wyndham House

Wyndham House has been providing supports and services to homeless youth aged 16 – 24 years in the community for over 40 years.

Programs:

- * Youth Emergency Shelter
- * Longer Term, Transitional Homes (2 locations)
- * Youth Resource Centre

In addition, Wyndham House provides a number of outreach and prevention based programs that are available to all youth. These include; STEPS Recreational Program, Aftercare and Transitional Supports Programs, Health Clinic and more.

All programs and services are developed to address the social, physical, and developmental needs of each individual youth. All program locations offer flexible, adaptable programs and services to meet the varying needs of youth and act as a non-traditional link to social services for those unable to access them through conventional channels.

Currently the Youth Emergency Shelter, Transitional Housing programs & Youth Resource Centre are all located in Guelph.

Rural Homelessness Study (September 2011)

In 2011, the County of Wellington facilitated the Rural Homelessness Study and a report was prepared for the County of Wellington's Social Services. That report was to be used in planning effective, sustainable solutions to address the population experiencing homelessness in East, Centre and North Wellington.

The KEY FINDINGS from that study are worth reviewing as we move towards solutions for the youth population in the County:

- The magnitude of the homelessness problem is a heavily contested issue. Rural homelessness, perhaps even more so than urban, is tough to quantify and measure.
- The majority of individuals who were interviewed for this study were very reluctant to self-identify as being homeless, even if they were living in a car or couch surfing. Perhaps this is due to the stigma and stereotypes that accompany this designation, but most likely it is because they simply do not perceive themselves as such.
- Rural residents are reluctant to access emergency shelters in the city. At present, 5-6% of Guelph's shelter users come from the County.
- Rural homelessness is largely hidden/concealed. People prefer to couch surf, stay in uninhabited shelters (e.g. sheds, cars, tents), or return to their family homes and what are often unsafe conditions.
- Poverty and substance abuse now trump mental health as leading causes/ triggers of homelessness, particularly for youth.
- The rural context presents issues that differentiate the rural homeless experience from more urban settings. For example:
 - There is a lack of infrastructure, such as emergency shelters, drop-in centres and public transportation.
 - Many essential services (that do exist) are located in large urban centres. Clients are required to travel long distances to access these services in person.
 - Travel time and distances, combined with a lack of public transportation and winter road conditions, make it extremely difficult for individuals to attend appointments, food shop, and go to the laundromat.
 - The close-knit nature of rural communities, which in some cases marginalizes homeless people in part by making their presence more overt, can also have positive implications. For many individuals, rural ties and friendships are the greatest deterrents to leaving, especially for youth.

- There is limited affordable rental housing. And while rental rates may be cheaper than in urban areas, other costs of daily living (e.g. food and transportation) tend to be more expensive.
- There is a lack of appropriate social housing, especially family sized units. Much of the existing stock is designed for seniors.
- Many individuals are reluctant to recognize the existence of homelessness in their communities, thereby impeding the funding and development of mechanisms that are truly supportive.
- Overall, it appears that homelessness is a challenge, but not a priority issue in the community. More concerning is that the triggers that lead to homelessness - poverty, substance abuse, lack of well-paying jobs, lack of affordable/suitable rental housing are on the rise. (Rural Homelessness Study, 2011: 2)

The Rural Homelessness Study also makes reference to youth several times, noting them as a priority population largely because of their vulnerability to poverty and homelessness, among other risks. The study notes that in general, homelessness is a consequence of various contributing factors which include strained or broken relationships sometimes involving abuse, and a history of trauma, conflict or instability at home. As a result of the immense stigma associated with the experience of homelessness and poverty, youth experiencing homelessness described feeling both judged and marginalized as a result of their precarious situations, "homeless youth, in particular, described feeling judged by their peers, by workers in the system, by prospective employers and by landlords refusing to rent to them. Some are, and most are perceived as being involved in illegal activities" (Rural Homelessness Study, 2011: 4-5). Further, as a result of the lack of infrastructure, such as emergency shelters, drop-in centers and public transportation in the County, youth often rely on the close-knit nature of their rural communities, with rural ties and friendships being strong deterrents to moving to an urban centre for supports.

The study also notes that as a result of low population levels and the vast geographic area of Wellington County, "it is not financially sustainable to open a traditional youth shelter here" (Rural Homelessness Study, 2011: 30). A Host Homes program similar to the "Bridging the Gap" program in Halton has been discussed as an alternative solution to a shelter. The goal of this program would be to offer "a home-based alternative to emergency shelters", and to assist youth in "achieving their personal goals while maintaining a connection to their community" (Rural Homelessness Study, 2011: 30).

Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Youth Charter of Rights

The Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Coalition for Report Cards on the Well-Being of Children is a committee of community service providers in Wellington County, the County of Dufferin and the City of Guelph. The coalition is committed to raising the profile of children in our communities by examining and reporting on the state of their well-being. Agencies involved in developing the Report Card include:

- Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health
- City of Guelph
- County of Dufferin
- County of Wellington
- United Way of Guelph Wellington Dufferin
- Guelph Community Health Centre,
- Community Resource Centre, Fergus
- Ontario Early Years Centre
- Family and Children's Services of Guelph and Wellington County
- Dufferin Child and Family Services
- Canadian Mental Health Association Waterloo Wellington Dufferin
- Wyndham House
- Upper Grand District School Board
- Wellington Catholic District School Board
- Conseil scolaire de district catholique centre-sud

The Youth Charter of Rights originated from the Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Coalition for Report Cards on the Well-Being of Children. It was created by youth in these communities, and outlines a vision to make Wellington, Dufferin, and Guelph better places for youth and their families. It includes a series of statements that outline the responsibilities that our communities have for ensuring healthy development and bright futures for all of our children.

From this document, it's clear that those members of the Coalition support that **all** youth have a right to:

- A voice in the issues that affect their lives.
- Good health by having their social, emotional, mental, physical and spiritual needs met.
- A place to sleep, clothes to wear, food to eat, and supportive friends and/or families.
- Affordable activities and programs, and safe places to hang out;
- Education, training and opportunities that prepare us for our future lives;
- Quality time with our friends, family and/or other positive role models in our community;

- Be and feel safe in our homes, schools and communities;
- Be accepted for who we are and what we believe without being discriminated against;
- Access to quality and affordable child care, early education programs and/or parenting supports. (Appendix 1)

THE PROCESS

One year funding was successfully secured by representatives of The Community Resource Centre, The County of Wellington, and Wyndham House in the summer of 2013. R. Paul Young of Young Solutions was hired in the fall to manage the research process and to write the subsequent report with a goal of completing the process by the summer of 2014.

It was identified as a priority for this research component of the project that the process of collecting data would be to seek input directly from relevant youth in rural Wellington, understand their experiences, and to collect their ideas as to what was needed to address the issue of youth homelessness. It was felt this approach was more relevant than taking the same approach through the service agency standpoint.

The research component of this project began in November of 2013. Youth leaders were sought to assist in leading the research project and collecting data from other youth. In particular, youth who had first-hand experience with homelessness were sought with ties to each of the geographical areas of the County, North, Centre, and East Wellington. From this search we were able to engage three youth to lead the process. They were a 16 year old female youth leader from Clifford, who attends school in Palmerston, an 18 year old female youth leader from Elora, who had recently graduated CWDHS in Fergus and a 20 year old male, also from Elora, working several jobs.

The strategy for the research project had several components. The first was to run focus groups in the four secondary schools in the County. The second component was to run focus groups with youth who attended drop-in programs in townships throughout the County. The final component was to host specific individual meetings for any identified key youth whose input was decided to be particularly relevant and did not attend any of the previous groups.

Data Collection

Data from the focus groups was collected between December and April of 2014, using the information obtained from the focus groups and distributed surveys (attach as appendix?). It is worth noting that when schools were first contacted in the fall about putting together a list of students who should be asked to attend, there were a significant number of youth considered. However, when the focus groups were run after Christmas, the majority of those students were no longer attending school. This would appear to reflect that schools are able to identify students that are having difficulty either in their personal lives or other areas prior to these youth leaving the education system.

Incentives for attendance and participation were provided and the youth leaders were compensated for their time as they assisted with the research project.

Questions for Focus Groups with Youth

Original intentions were to ask the exact same questions of each focus group. Through the process of research collection however, it was found that a more 'organic' format was appreciated by the group and yielded better results. Additionally, the groups held in schools were limited in the time available and so the format used there was necessarily varied to fit the time allowed.

The focus group questions posed were based on the following outline:

1. What is needed to prevent youth homelessness in this community?
2. If the model decided upon here was a system of host homes where you could choose between them, and maybe stay more locally, what aspects would be important to you?
3.
 - a. If we could afford to build a single brick and mortar solution , where ideally would it be built for all youth in rural Wellington?
 - b. If it were not built here but in another Wellington community, would it be better than going to Guelph?
 - c. If it were not built here but in another Wellington community, would you likely access it if you became homeless?
 - d. If it were not built here but in another Wellington community, what transportation would be needed?

BREAK - Surveys distributed now to create fresh ideas.

4. Is there another concept in housing homeless youth that you can imagine working, and how?
5. Options explored in the group were then listed and participants were asked to vote on their preferences.

6. How do we best make all youth in our community aware of this solution once it is available? Where should we advertise so new youth find out how to come in from the cold?

Surveys Used with Youth

The following questions appeared on the surveys which were provided for the youth to complete.

1. What choices or 'safe shelter alternatives' (places you would go) do you have locally?
2. Do you know about Wyndham House as a shelter option in Guelph for youth? If so, what do you think about it?
3. Do you know of any other services to help youth who become homeless. If so, what other services can help?
4. How does transportation, or the lack of, impact homeless youth locally?
5. What is most scary about the idea of being homeless?
6. What else needs to be said about youth homelessness in Wellington County?

Youth Population Accessed

By the time data collection was completed, 63 youth participated by providing input into the project. They represented 3 different County secondary schools and 7 of the 11 largest towns in the County.

The age range represented in the focus groups was from age 13 to age 26. Input was received in the group format, as well as in written form via surveys that were completed by youth and through individual consultations.

Program Consultations

Given best practice recommendations noted in the literature review, a meeting was arranged with the staff from Bridging the Gap, Halton. Several of the youth leaders, Ron McKinnon of the C.R.C. and Mary-Jane McKitterick who coordinates the Mobilizing Local Capacity program from Eva's Initiatives in Toronto, and R. Paul Young, attended.

This meeting provided both an overview of their multi-component youth homelessness program as well as the opportunity to meet with several youth who were very forthcoming about their positive experiences there.

Of particular interest is that the Bridging the Gap program covers both a large urban centre and a significant rural area. The program utilizes a combination of host homes as well as emergency shelters and residential facilities in supporting youth experiencing homelessness in Halton Region.

DATA SUMMARY & THEMES

The following is a summary based on the questions from the surveys collected from all of the focus groups. Each question is broken down to look at patterns and any anomalies in the data.

Question 1: What choices or 'safe shelter alternatives' (places you would go) do you have locally?

Each subgroup of youth in the County had the same first response to the question of where to find safe shelter; family and friends. Others were unable to identify any shelter alternatives or were vague in their responses (ex. I would catch a bus somewhere). Two groups that stood out were the focus groups associated with the Door Youth Centers in both Fergus and Arthur. It is clear from the answers that the Door provides a safe network of resources and people that these youth are able to rely on in times of crisis. It appears that youth involved with some type of programming or drop in center are better prepared to handle a crisis situation as they have a reliable and safe group of adults to turn to for support not only for housing but for advice and guidance on where to find help and resources.

Question 2: Do you know about Wyndham House as a shelter option in Guelph? If so, what do you think about it?

The majority of youth contacted through each focus group stated that yes they knew of or had heard of Wyndham House, although the majority of them seemed unclear in their understanding of what Wyndham House is or if it would be a good resource for themselves. One surprise was that the two groups with the overwhelming answer of 'no previous knowledge of Wyndham House' were the focus groups associated with the Door Youth Centers. It appears that the responses from the first question indicate that youth recognize the Door Youth Centres as safe areas where they can access knowledge of resources and crisis housing needs, yet it appears information on resources for youth homelessness are not encompassing.

Question 3: Do you know of any other services to help youth who become homeless? If so, what other services can help?

The majority of respondents stated that they did not know of any other services available to help youth once they become homeless. Many of the services that did get listed were vague (ex. 'kindly folk', 'shanty town Fergus'), or were services that the youth were already in contact with, like the Door Youth Centre. Of the respondents that were able to list services, they named the Food Bank, Second Chance Employment, Ontario Works, Trellis, Community Resource Centre in Fergus, the police, and schools. One helpful service of interest, supplied by a youth in an

Elora focus group, was 'Elora Community Share' which is an online platform for community members in the Fergus/Elora area to share resources, material or otherwise.

The answers to this question highlight the need for increased awareness not only on the prevalence of youth homelessness in Wellington County, but also the need for better representation of services for youth who experience homelessness. The raw data collected from the conversations at each focus group suggest that youth could be more informed about this type of information if it were readily available in the places they frequent, which include schools, Tim Horton's, recreational areas, social media, drop in centers, and print/ radio media. It is clear that youth are aware that there are services designed to help them but are unclear in knowing exactly what these services are or how to access them.

Question 4: How does transportation, or the lack of, impact homeless youth locally?

At first glance this question received a fairly basic answer, with all of the youth in agreement that there is a lack of available and affordable transportation that creates a huge barrier for them to access resources. Beyond the surface level of transportation, this question reveals the larger issue of opportunity within the rural areas of Wellington County. Many respondents felt that transportation was essential to finding good work or helpful resources. It appears that the majority of youth feel that the opportunities needed to succeed in life, avoid homelessness or overcome the situation are all located in larger city centres like Guelph ("never hungry in Guelph").

This has two interpretations; 1) Youth assume it would be easier to be homeless in Guelph. There may need to be an increase in knowledge to understand what homelessness is like in Guelph and what it means to relocate to Guelph in an attempt to change their situation; and 2) Youth, beyond the issue of homelessness, feel that the rural area has nothing to offer in the long term. This is evident in the movement of our youth to urban areas, for school, work or other reasons. Largely, youth do not return to rural areas until they are adults, if ever. This speaks to the larger issues of youth retention in rural communities.

Question 5: What is most scary about the idea of being homeless?

Short term fears were most common in the answers from all focus groups, weather being the number one short term fear. Other fears indicated were; lack of stability, experiencing harm both physical and mental, loss of community, and loss of a parental figure. The type of answers recorded show a focus on survival rather than a full picture exploration of the fears associated with experiencing homelessness. Much like any crisis, it is often difficult for people to think beyond the short term,

often leading to poor decision making and a continued loss of control/ safety in any given situation. The long term consequences of experiencing homelessness, such as dropping out of school, future employment opportunities, loss of skills and basic social interactions need consideration.

Much like many of the other survey questions, this one leads into a deeper issue: once the short term issue of obtaining shelter is addressed, how are the other long term needs of youth experiencing homelessness met?

Question 6: What else needs to be said about youth homelessness in Wellington County?

The answers to this question made it clear that respondents feel there continues to be a lack of knowledge by the majority of youth and adults about what homelessness actually means. Awareness and changing the common perception of youth homelessness needs to occur. Also discussed in a number of the answers was the importance of recognizing the difference between rural and urban youth, and how resources are allocated between the two areas.

GENERAL THEMES

Throughout the responses to the six questions and in the overall data, a few themes emerged as key points in the discussion of youth homelessness in Wellington County.

Family Conflict is the Predominate Cause

Family conflict and problems with parents was the dominant reason given by the youth for facing homelessness. As one youth states, "we need affordable places for parents or kids to get help when we have problems at home before we get kicked out."

Help Us To Succeed

Youth don't simply want to be free and independent. Youth were generally clear that they wanted help to become successful as they transitioned to adulthood. School, the development of independent living skills, having a positive future and keeping jobs were all mentioned. Typically the youth spoke of prevention through access to family counselling to assist with resolving issues in their family home and a preference to avoid experiencing homelessness.

Many youth also highlighted the need for improved education, implying that there are skills they want to learn that the school system is failing to teach altogether, or in a manner that is conducive for them.

Keep Us Local & Connected

Consistently, youth state their strong preference for familiarity. If they must leave their homes, they would prefer to go stay with family or friends than elsewhere. It is seen as critical to keep access to their friends, schools, and work connections. They value the connections they possess with professionals they know. Local youth centres like the Door and Bungalow 55 can be central to their sense of community.

In addition in leaving their local area they not only lose their current resources and supports, but reduce their access to opportunities that naturally arise when part of a community. These lost opportunities further hold youth back.

Youth also see resource allocation as a barrier not only to the youth experiencing homelessness, but to general youth success rates. At a young age youth already see that funding and the allocation of resources are disproportionately located in city centers. Perhaps this perceived lack of resources and supports, in addition to their reluctance to move from the County, accounts for their sense of hopelessness around their homeless experience.

Give Us Choice & Control of Ourselves

Youth are not looking for someone else to make their decisions. "Don't tell us what to do" was the phrase often stated by participants. Youth want control of their lives and destinies. A likely extension of this theme is that many youth would prefer to learn and receive help from other youth.

Transportation is a Critical Issue

The importance of transportation and the need for better transportation, though recognized by residents and service providers alike, cannot be emphasized enough. Wellington County is large and the population centres are widely spread out. Transportation impacts virtually all aspects of the lives of the youth in the County. Youth were unanimous in citing transportation as a major issue and a key driver to youth being successful in maintaining employment, accessing services, staying in school, being able to connect with family in the event that they experience homelessness, and keeping connected with their friends and activities. One youth cited, "we need better transportation to places."

Our Geographical Differences Matter

While there was a strong preference displayed by all youth to stay local and maintain connections to known resources, schools, friends and family, relative geography reveals some differences in preferences of where they would be willing

to relocate. Youth in the Mount Forest and Arthur area the central north part of the County, tend to consider moving south towards Fergus in Centre Wellington. As long as services were available they would prefer Fergus over Guelph if relocating to a shelter. If located farther from Guelph in areas like Mount Forest, Palmerston or Harriston, youth were more reluctant to move to Guelph for services and had stronger preferences to stay local than those located closer to the city.

We Feel a Stigma to the Homeless Experience

Data suggests that not only do most youth consider the "homeless" experience as being undesirable, but that by being homeless, others will judge them negatively. Despite this feeling, youth appeared to remain hopeful that their communities will be supportive of them in this situation. Interestingly, some youth seem to hold that same stigma concerning homelessness, as evidenced by their concerns about being exposed to other homeless individuals.

Our Age Relates to Our Preferences

There is a variation amongst youth of different ages as to what they would typically prefer as a model to address homelessness. Older youth tend to prefer less of a parent model that provides a sense of connection and instead prefer a safe place to get out of the weather or a shelter where they could remain more anonymous. In contrast, younger youth preferred to make a connection to adults as supports, including the host home model.

BUILDING ON YOUTH RECOMMENDATIONS

Not only were the youth able to articulate some of the key problems linked with homelessness, they were also able to identify possible solutions. They indicated that the solution to shelter and homelessness may need to be varied across the geography and communities of Wellington County, and that the issue of shelter should be addressed using a combination of housing alternatives. One quote goes a long way towards summarizing this, "We need short term shelter, long term care and a route to a sustainable life." This needs to focus on more than merely helping youth achieve independence but rather on supporting them to successfully transition to adulthood and wellbeing (Gaetz, 2014).

PREVENTION RECOMMENDATIONS:

Prevention Recommendation #1) Improve Family Supports & Access

Youth in the County see unresolved family issues as the predominant cause of youth homelessness. They would like to see better availability of professional family counselling, as well as suggesting that more informal supports such as receiving help/counseling from a family friend would also be beneficial. Also recommended is to increase public awareness of supports regarding mental health and family counselling, and family mediation services that are already available.

Prevention Recommendation #2) More Youth Centres

Another idea noticeable in the meetings is the importance of a safe space within a community for youth to meet, hang out, and interact with positive adult role models. It seems extremely important that each community, big or small have a drop in centre that would preferably be open long hours. This centre could then act as a gateway for youth to access all required resources when any type of crisis should arise.

SHELTER RECOMMENDATIONS

Many general ideas about shelter options were provided by the youth. Youth want to be able to get indoors without conditions being put upon them. They want services that will "work with you from where you are at." The first priority is to get "shelter and warmth, then a group of supportive people (community), then problem solve" with them. Youth noted that there should be more focus on goals and not conditions, to help them towards self-determination. The vast majority of youth stated their preference, if homeless would to be housed in a room they could call their own. Youth indicated they would want to know from the start what the conditions and rules were and how long they could stay. Ideally they would be able to stay until they could support themselves financially and had adequate life skills . The shelter or residence would need to feel safe and have people available to talk to about what the youth were dealing with.

Shelter Recommendation #1) Funding to Stay with Family or Friends

Overwhelmingly, youth identified a preference for staying with extended family or friends but were worried about feeling like a burden. It was primarily the youth leaders who spoke of some form of flexible funding to be available to support them in homes of friends or extended family, or perhaps some form of work exchange for the youth to feel more responsible and less like a burden in the homes of someone they may already know.

Shelter Recommendation #2) Host Home Network

Many of the respondents felt that the host-home solution would be the best option. Youth liked the idea of having choice, staying closer to their home community, the connection to supportive adults to help guide them, and the general feeling of being supported in a 'more normal' family environment. This idea was preferred by more of the younger youth interviewed, as well as those further from the city of Guelph.

A potential consequence and concern noted with the host home living environment was feeling isolated. Youth overwhelmingly noted a preference to be able to interact with other youth living in similar situations, and felt it important to have an available community of supports outside of a single family home. Youth also preferred to have a role in the selection of a host-home for them, and in the development of rules at the home. Youth expressed that moving into a supported host home would be a quick way to "feel better right away." A network of supported host homes spread throughout the County would be appreciated by the youth and a significant component of a comprehensive shelter program.

Shelter Recommendation #3) A Homeless Youth Residence

Respondents were quick to realize that a brick and mortar shelter would not be the ideal solution in Wellington County because of the lack of affordable and accessible transportation. However, there were a number of youth who would prefer this concept as a solution to their situation if the shelter were to be located in their geographic area. Some youth preferred less of a family model, depending on their age and situation. Fergus, because it's the largest town in the County, has a secondary school and is relatively central in the County, would be the location of choice. Walking distance to the school would be preferred. However, unless there was a great improvement in transportation, a residential program would only benefit those in close geographic proximity to the building. With adequate transportation to access school, work, family, friends and activities, more youth would consider a centralized residential facility as a viable option.

Shelter Recommendation #4) Crisis or Short-stay Option

Many of the youth realized that the host-home solution may not provide emergency shelter. Many youth felt it would still be important to have a 24hr emergency shelter option. It was a common desire to have options for urgent overnight or brief stays, often voiced as needing an option or a place to think, or to "get yourself together". One thought was to use empty rooms in motels as a short-stay or crisis overnight option.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

General Recommendation #1) Improve Transportation Services

Youth voiced several ideas on the topic of improving transportation. A transportation system that effectively connects youth to needed services and activities is vital. Many would even consider moving to Guelph if the transportation problem was resolved and they could stay connected to their own communities. Funding for taxis was put forward as an idea. In a host home situation, youth liked to think that the families would provide some transportation.

General Recommendation #2) Increased Role for Schools/Education

Youth see a larger role for the schools to play in supporting youth experiencing homelessness. Youth suggested schools as a place to increase awareness of the issue of youth homelessness, and their ideas include schools using yearly assemblies, or having a 'Youth Homelessness' month at secondary schools in the County. As an access point to services, youth highly value the support of the school Social Workers and Child & Youth Counselors, and many also felt connected with their Guidance Counselors. Finally, youth would like to have access to education regarding more practical life skills to help them become increasingly self-sufficient and capable.

An interesting idea raised was the development of some sort of program, perhaps through the summer, to teach youth to build better relationship skills with authority figures, and to learn to become more independent. Another idea mentioned to help youth succeed was to have speakers present to youth struggling with homelessness such as youth who had overcome their experience of homelessness and become successful.

General Recommendation #3) Improve Access to the Full Range of Human Services & Supports

Youth recognized their need to be able to access a variety of services to be successful no matter what the residential solution. They want access to counsellors and family mediators; Ontario Works, job opportunities and agencies like Second Chance Employment and Northern Lights; the Community Resource Centre in Fergus for a variety of supports; C.M.H.A. for mental health issues; Homewood's C.A.D.S. program for addiction services; supportive independent living skills programs; shopping centres, etc.

Visioning or goal setting was valued by most participants, with choices amongst opportunities valued and self-determination being critical. Either more services spread through the County, or better transportation to access existing services is needed. Perhaps the new 'Here 24-7' access line (1-844-437-3247) that provides coordinated intake for mental health, addictions and crisis services will play a

significant role in providing youth experiencing homelessness the access they need to services.

General Recommendation #4) Provide Coordination & Easy Access to Homelessness Supports

In several ways, youth have expressed a need for some sort of coordination of the crisis system. In reference to access, we heard youth talk of their preference for being able to call a single phone number and be connected to a live person, preferably the same person each time, and not an answering machine. If not that single phone number, youth would choose to access the system via professionals they already know, in their schools, or youth centres. In discussing host homes, it was mentioned that the homes would need to be somehow screened for safety and appropriateness as well as supported by a system. Perhaps the provision of educational components also fits within this role for a coordinator.

General Recommendation #5) Improve Awareness of Youth Homelessness

There appear to be three vital components to improving awareness regarding youth homelessness:

1. Access points need to be better known for the youth in need, and those access points need to be coordinated to fully understand the system. Police were identified as one access point, with youth centres and schools also being identified.
2. Improved community awareness of the issue of youth homelessness in order to reduce the stigma, and increase the ease of access to supports by youth needing assistance. The awareness should target everyone: youth, families, service providers, business people, police, etc.
3. Communication and marketing methods to spread the word about the resources available to support youth experiencing homelessness should include the use of social media sites, school special events, newspapers, billboards, radio stations, Tim Horton's (one of the first places a youth experiencing homelessness is likely to go), Sharing Elora, etc.

FOLLOWING UP & MOVING FORWARD

Youth of Wellington County want to feel safe, supported, successful and accepted within their home community. They do not want to leave their friends, family and other connections in order to find help. Youth want a community made up of peers and adults that support them no matter what their needs are.

Youth want to learn skills not currently taught in school, many of which relate to learning how to become self-sufficient. Youth want to have meaningful employment and the transportation necessary to get them to and from work, school, and recreation. Rural youth express a desire to know that their needs are just as important as those youth in urban settings. Youth want a solution to homelessness that sees prevention as the most important aspect, second to a combination of shelter solutions for both the short and long term. Most importantly youth want to be involved in making the decisions that will shape the rest of their lives.

Informed by the voices of rural youth, the recommendations outlined here present an opportunity for those engaged in service provision for youth to listen and respond in a coordinated and informed way.

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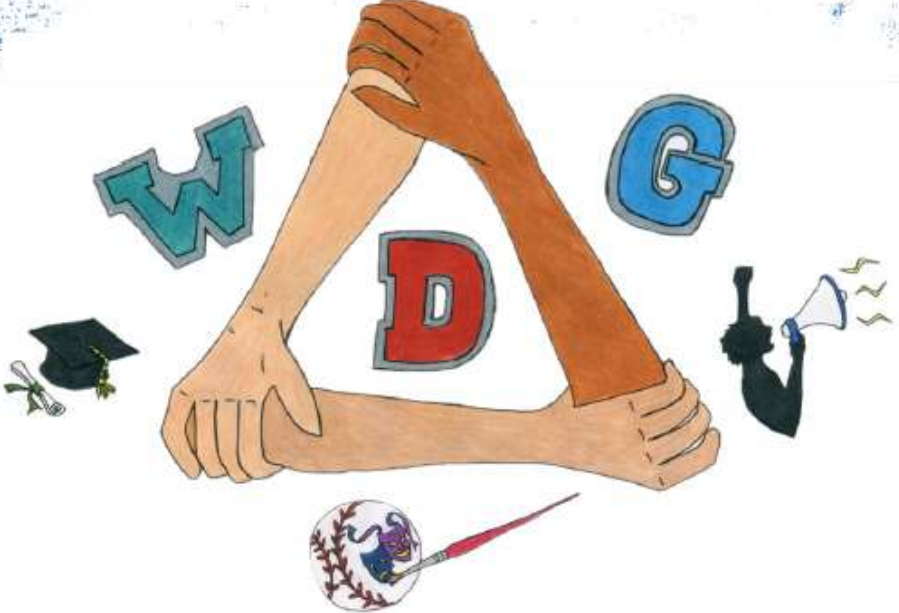
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Appendix #1



The illustration features three hands of different skin tones (light, medium, and dark brown) holding the letters 'W', 'D', and 'G' in a triangular arrangement. The 'W' is green, 'D' is red, and 'G' is blue. To the left of the 'W' is a graduation cap with a tassel. To the right of the 'G' is a silhouette of a person shouting into a megaphone. Below the hands is a globe with a red pen nib pointing at it.

Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Youth Charter of Rights

All youth in Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph have a right to:

- » A voice in the issues that affect our lives;
- » Good health by having our social, emotional, mental, physical and spiritual needs met;
- » A place to sleep, clothes to wear, food to eat and supportive friends and/or family;
- » Affordable activities and programs, and safe places to hang out;
- » Education, training and opportunities that prepare us for our future lives;
- » Quality time with our friends, family and/or other positive role models in our community;
- » Be and feel safe in our homes, schools and communities;
- » Be accepted for who we are and what we believe without being discriminated against;
- » Access to quality and affordable child care, early education programs and/or parenting supports.

All youth deserve basic rights and freedoms. A fair share of society's resources must be devoted to ensuring this. While families are responsible for raising their children, all levels of government, in partnership with communities, have a duty to support families by putting the health and well-being of children first.