Toronto Urban Aboriginal Youth Engagement
March 24th, 28th, 31st, 2012
Toronto, Ontario

REPORT

Written by:

Anishnawbe Health Toronto
Laurie Hermiston
Community Engagement Coordinator
Background

Aboriginal peoples in Canada face multiple issues, due to a history of colonization and oppression dating back 600 years. Generations of Aboriginal children were born into communities where hopelessness and discrimination were common, as well as barriers which existed to building healthy communities. These experiences have made Aboriginal people vulnerable to things like poverty, homelessness, violence, the criminal justice system, racism and mental health and addictions issues. Many of these issues are intergenerational, and so they continue to affect Aboriginal family’s generation after generation. It is often the children and the youth that are affected in the most serious ways from the experiences of the community that they live in. One of the most challenging of all of the issues facing Aboriginal communities today is issues with mental health and addictions, which can bring devastating effects to communities and families. This can most certainly be seen in the experiences of Aboriginal youth living in urban Centre’s.

While there are dedicated programs focused on Aboriginal adults with mental health and addictions issues, the same level of services do not exist for Aboriginal youth experiencing challenges in this area. Programs can be short term and dependent on inconsistent funding models; so long term effect is often not accessible. Service providers are aware of the challenges facing Aboriginal youth in urban Centre’s, as they see the frustrations daily of building services and plans of care for an Aboriginal youth when in crisis, and have shared these concerns at community forums, such as the Roundtable on Urban Aboriginal Health.

When engaged, Aboriginal youth will often share their understanding of issues affecting them and their communities as well. Issues reported by Aboriginal youth and service providers in urban areas often share common themes, and can be seen in the following inventory of issues faced by Aboriginal youth and their families, as stated in the following list;

- loss of identity, language and culture (which engenders feelings of isolation and alienation in an urban setting, makes gang involvement more attractive);
- low levels of education, poor school attendance, high unemployment levels with poor job prospects
- lack of parental involvement and support in their daily lives (dysfunctional families, absentee parents)
- being young single parents with poor parenting skills;
- substance abuse (alcohol, marijuana, narcotics, petrol, glue);
- physical and emotional abuse (inter-generational effects of residential school system, sexual abuse, family violence)
- difficulties obtaining accommodation (cannot afford adequate housing, come to urban areas without a place to stay, using emergency shelters)
- difficulties accessing services (which can range from not having enough money for transportation to not being aware of programs and services available)
- poverty (affecting health, contributing to poor lifestyles and higher rates of criminal activity)
• racism and discrimination (affects self-esteem and confidence, fosters hostility toward broader society, feelings of marginalization and alienation).


Even more challenges can occur when providing services for transitional aged Aboriginal youth, who are experiencing mental health and addictions issues. These youth are aging out of the children services sector, and often fall through invisible program cracks, placing them at a high risk to experience transitions and “touch points” with other systems. Some of these “touch points” may be justice, addictions, housing and shelter and child welfare.

This report is intended to provide qualitative data on Aboriginal youth priorities related to Mental Health and Addictions, so that appropriate programs and services can be designed for these youth in need.
The Approach

The purpose of the engagement sessions done with Toronto Urban Aboriginal youth and their families was to discuss their experiences with mental health and addictions and the kind of services that they need. The information gathered at these sessions is being used to inform a planning process for new programs and initiatives for Aboriginal youth experiencing mental health and addictions. One of the primary goals of new initiatives is to strengthen the current system of supports available in the community for transitional aged Aboriginal youth with mental health and addictions issues and to improve access to appropriate services as they transition from a children’s system to an adult system. It has been recognized that it is important to build community capacity to address the unique mental health needs of Aboriginal youth over time by building up evidence of needs and gaps through the development of engagement structures, like funded initiatives that connects meaningful evidence to inform policy, decisions and planning structures.

New initiatives in the Toronto community focused on transitional aged Aboriginal youth with mental health and addictions issues hope to encourage innovative and collaborative relationships between the Toronto Central LHIN funded Community Mental Health and Addictions Initiatives and the local Aboriginal community. The concept is to promote inclusivity in three key areas:

i. the opportunity to connect TC LHIN funded community mental health and addictions (CMHA) services with Aboriginal organizations

ii. to recognize that Aboriginal youth and their families access services from a number of providers and that we must value an individual’s right to choose where they access services

iii. Aboriginal youth must be included in all aspects of this initiative, including the overall design, development, implementation and evaluation

Once the approach to developing the initiatives was determined, it was clear that there was a lack of concrete evidence from Aboriginal youth to inform the design of new initiatives. Due to this lack of concrete evidence to inform planning, a process of engagement was designed to help guide and inform the development of new initiatives.

Meetings were held with youth leaders and service providers in the community, to inform the process of engaging Aboriginal youth in a thoughtful, to way to ask the questions of what is working and what is not working for them. From these meetings, it was determined that Aboriginal youth must have meaningful opportunities to inform the development of the initiative, while being considerate not to exhaust youth resources in the community. In response to this concern, it was decided that Aboriginal Youth
Mentors would be brought in to assist in the work of engaging local Aboriginal youth, and bringing their perspective into broader planning initiatives. In having dedicated youth mentors on the project, we are ensured that there is a strong youth voice present at all times in the planning and development. They were able to connect the initiatives to Aboriginal “youth perspectives”, which then ensured that the youth voice was heard. The mentors were instrumental in planning the engagement sessions and the design of the discussions that were held.

Three youth engagement sessions were planned to inform the overall direction of the Aboriginal Youth Mental Health and Addictions Strategy. One session gathered a group of Aboriginal youth ages 16-19 for a one day discussion, the other gathered Aboriginal youth ages 20-24 for another day of discussions. The last session included parents and caregivers of youth experiencing or having experienced mental health and addictions issues participating in a talking circle. Note takers were present at each session to ensure that all of the important information shared was gathered effectively, so that it could be developed into recommendations to the TC-LHIN on priorities for Aboriginal youth experiencing mental health and addictions. Other ways of gathering the voices of the youth on the engagement days included collecting ideas on coloured paper and chart paper and having youth complete evaluations at the end of the day.
The Engagement Sessions – What We Learned.

Three engagement sessions were held in Toronto to discuss Aboriginal youth and their experiences with mental health and addictions issues. The purpose of the sessions was to ask Aboriginal youth and their families what types of services they need, what is working and what is not working for them in the current service model. We also asked them to describe the best possible program that they could attend and the worst possible program, so that we could get a vivid picture of two types of service models; one that works and one that does not.

The following priorities are taken from the messages communicated by Aboriginal youth and their families in regards to programs which address Aboriginal youth mental health and addictions issues.

(Please see the addendum at the end of the report for key messages received by the youth)

What works?

1. Services based in Language, Tradition and Culture

   • Aboriginal youth and their families sent a strong message at all three sessions that what is working are Aboriginal programs that have a strong sense of tradition, language and culture. Programs that foster self-identity and self-worth in Aboriginal youth and their families will achieve the best results as they bring with them a sense of purpose, belonging and spiritual peace. This moves through someone’s life in many different ways, allowing for growth in all areas of self (mental, physical, emotional and spiritual). Services based in language and culture work best when they are considerate of the diversity of the nations in the community, and when they allow for celebration and ceremony to happen in a fair and equitable way, rather than “cultural policing”.

2. Programs that foster resiliency, self-worth and self-identity

   • Aboriginal youth may not always have a family member present to offer them support and guidance, as many of their families are dealing with trauma and crisis in their lives. Building their spirits is very important and this message was clear. Aboriginal youth face challenges every day, so programs that work are programs that build sense of self and identity, which ultimately allows the youth to be resilient in the face of traumatic challenges. Unfortunately effective role models are not always available to young people in the community, and so programs that allow them to build confidence in their decisions, reactions and understanding of the world will serve them best.
3. Aboriginal youth/ peer led initiatives – youth leading youth

- This was perhaps one of the strongest messages that came out in the discussions with youth; that youth leading other youth is one of the best options for providing program and services. Youth stated loud and clear that they are happiest when they can relate to the program which they attend. They want to know that the person providing the services understand their perspective and point of view. They are looking for mentors and role models to provide them with options for the future. Many youth stated that at times they feel that the workers are “out of touch” with their needs. Being led by their peers provides an optimal program for Aboriginal youth.

4. Harm reduction approaches to services in mental health and addictions.

- Aboriginal youth and their families communicated that they respond best to programs that honour a harm reduction approach to providing services to support mental health and addictions. Youth shared a need to be “safe” on the streets and when they come into the urban centres from reserve communities. It is important to allow equitable services for the community in the area of mental health and addictions, and at times youth feel “pushed away” when services are needed most because of abstinence policies. It was not felt that these work all of the time and so more options are needed.

5. Support circles, Talking Circles for families, parents and caregivers of youth experiencing mental health and addictions issues.

- Both youth and parents and caregivers expressed a need to be able to talk, share and connect with other Aboriginal families dealing with mental health and addictions. This allows families to feel less alone in their journey and connected to the community. It will also allow for connection to a broader range of knowledge and service provision, as they are more likely to end up in the right place of care.

6. Programs that offer opportunities for artistic expression

- Aboriginal youth in the engagement sessions, front line workers and parents and caregivers all expressed how positive artistic expression will allow an Aboriginal youth to build all elements of their spirit in a positive way. It was stated that the way to bring youth into programs is to allow them to do the things that they are interested in, that allow them to build skills and knowledge, while also fostering self-esteem. Artistic expression can be seen in many different ways, from beadwork, leather work, painting and singing, to graffiti art, traditional art, spoken word, hip hop and rap. It is anything that allows the spirit to open to new experiences. Examples of programs where street youth were attending a hip hop/spoken word program that allowed them share their words and thoughts in an open forum inspired the youth at the sessions to want that type of programing.
7. Programs that offer support and incentives.

- In order to attend programs, many Aboriginal youth require support like transportation, food, and childcare. This is imperative to successful programing. One youth shared her experience as a “youth and a mother” and her inability to attend programs for youth as many do not have childcare available at them. Inadequate access to food was an issue for all of the youth that attended the engagement sessions. There is simply not enough food in many of the youth’s homes, for not only them, but their families. Access to healthy food options is a major incentive for youth to attend programs, as often they are not getting enough in their home environment. Transportation to get to programs is also very important. Many youth live a great distance from where programs are happening so providing support in the way of tokens to and from events is seen a positive thing.

8. Better and more access to information about programs and services in the community – More collaboration!

- Youth, parents and caregivers stated it would be helpful if they had better access to information of where programs for youth are happening, and not just at one centre, but all programs in the community. It was described as a “live calendar” that would inform them when they needed information. Often, agencies are focussed on their own programs only, when they should be focussed on the best possible place for the youth to go when they are looking for a program. Youth feel that would attend more programs if they could look at the big picture. It was suggested that attaching a calendar to a social media site would be helpful, where opportunities to connect with other youth exist.

9. Opportunities for workers to build knowledge and deal with vicarious trauma.

- Aboriginal youth want programs to be led by workers who are healthy and able to provide them with the level of services they require. Often, they find that workers are dealing with their own stress from personal lives as well as on the job stress, so the level of care they receive as youth can be affected. The youth sent a clear message the front line workers in the community need opportunities for healing so that they can be trusted. Programs where workers go the “extra mile” are appreciated.
Closing

Through the engagement work done with Aboriginal youth in the area of mental health and addictions, we are closer to understanding the needs of the youth in our community.

It is clear that youth are seeking meaningful opportunities to become involved in the community that they are part of. While many of the youth that attended the sessions came from different nations, walks of life and places on their own journeys, they all shared a common respect for the circle that they were part of on that day, and the teachings that were provided to them.

They all knew the importance of honoring the fact that they are Aboriginal youth, and that carried a special place for them. Aboriginal tradition, language and culture are often see as the way to heal our communities, and while this may be true, one of the strongest messages that was received in the engagement sessions is that Aboriginal youth want to be accepted for who they are, for their unique place in society as a young Aboriginal person. They want to be part of the planning process, not informed of what is needed for them, and they want to be surrounded by people that they can relate to, and express themselves freely.

Anishnawbe Health would like to thank the Aboriginal youth mentors who worked on this project (Ryan Besito, Brad Stone, Jenifer Rudksi and Noelle Watson) for offering their personal stories and expertise to assist the youth in sharing their own experiences. Also, we would like to give gratitude to the Elders present on that day, Vern Harper and Dolores Esquimaux for their time and presence.

A thank you also goes to the Aboriginal note takers from Ryerson University, to the Aboriginal childcare providers and to Central Neighborhood House for the use of space for our sessions.

Finally, we were honored to have so many Aboriginal youth from the community and their families and care givers present at the engagement sessions. A thank you goes to them for their courage to share their stories and their confidence in being heard.
ADDENDUM

Summary of Notes from
March 24th, 28th and 31st, 2012
Aboriginal Youth Engagement Sessions

What are the needs for youth

Staff and Program Support

- Friendly and thoughtful staff to provide guidance by engaging and connecting with youth in a real and tangible way.
- Staff should be open minded and able to share personal experiences while interacting with hands on activities.
- Staff should represent a demographic closer to the demographic of service users (Peer and youth led programming, Youth advisory councils) because it makes youth feel more at ease and comfortable.
- Programs that provide work placements and work opportunities as well as academic initiatives are needed.
- Innovative programming designed by the youth for the youth.
- Providing intergenerational trauma supports.
- Updated social media – Create a Live Calendar of Events so youth know what is happening based on the community, not the agency.
- Support for new parents.
- Workshops that support self-expression (music and arts).
- Needs based programming (rape, criminal, counselling).
- Native studies programming and education for all age groups.

Housing/ Environment

- Having a comfortable and non-judgmental environment to access that is welcoming, is essential for youth.
- Having enough space to interact with others and community in a location close to where the youth live so that transportation isn’t a deterrent is also beneficial.
- Outdoor activities provided and made available even in winter months will increase the sense of home.
- Transitional housing programs with more spaces need to be made available.

Culture and Traditions

- Elders available who have teachings to provide the youth with guidance.
- Promotional and education materials available to engage the community.
- Ideal to have programming representative of culture, utilizing the Intergenerational transference of indigenous languages.
- Realization and acknowledgment of the diversity within the Aboriginal community (many Nations).
- Being able to practice culture within urban environments.
- Having spaces available for children to be immersed in culture.
- Pow Wows, workshops, and having different ceremonies for youth.
- Cultural involvement without fear of culture policing.

Community and Access

- Support in terms of transportation allowances to community gatherings.
- Access for the entire community regardless of age and nation, and services provided in multiple locations.
- Programs that provide feelings of community connectedness.
- Web sites with updated info utilizing social media.
- Providing street specific programming for youth, focused on harm reduction approaches (STREET TEAMS).
- Equity for men, women, children and age groups.
- Access to info about rights and police communication strategies that can break down barriers to services.
- More days that programming is offered.

What’s Working

Staff and Program Support

- Someone to talk to, knowing someone is available to talk to.
- Feeling bonds with others going through similar difficulties.
- Staff helping to educate youth.
- Childcare provided at programs.
- Talking circles.
- Incentives available for youth.
- Compassionate staff.
- Community kitchen (food support).
- Varied programming (when there are choices in what kind of programs to attend).
- Social media APTN, Twitter and Facebook.
Housing/ Environment

- Housing workers, Native based housing support.
- Youth led space – when youth can make the decisions.

Culture and Traditions

- Traditional models utilized to provide support (medicine wheel teaching).
- Cultural boundaries with substance and alcohol abuse.
- Drawing strength from cultural teachings.
- Access to ceremonies like full moon and naming ceremonies.

Community and Access

- Free programming (trips), Internet access.

What’s Not Working

Staff and Program Support

- Staffs that don’t engage youth and who are not sensitive to needs of community and youth are viewed as unprofessional and judgmental.
- Unorganized and unprepared for staff facilitating youth engagement whose lack of initiative reflects poorly on programming.
- Staff disseminating misleading information and programmers that do not start when advertised is also not working for urban Aboriginal youth.
- Overall lack of compassion and support leading to ineffective programs.

Housing/ Environment

- Not enough space leads to awkward and uncomfortable situations.
- Also a lack of youth friendly environments leads to not accessing.
- Youth not having a say to the rules and guidelines that serve the environments that youth access leads to lack of participation with the environment as well.

Culture and Traditions

- Lack of cultural sensitivity indicated by Cultural events/ceremonies without access for struggling youth (addictions, mental health). This promotes an environment of exclusion, as the reasons for the exclusion are seldom explained to youth. This indicates a cultural expectation that youth should already have all available information, when many often do not.
- Medicines stored in an unhealthy way, indicating that lack of teachings and cultural awareness in the people that are providing services and ceremony.
- Overall lack of culture with programs.
- Cultural Policing – when "expectations are placed on the way teachings are delivered and practiced, making someone feel "small" because they may have different ideas about Culture and Traditions.

**Community and Access**

- Programs are often offered in locations that can be hard to access for many youth, so they will go without the services that is often instrumental to their recovery as it can connect them to the community and workers that will assist them.
- Confidentiality issues that stem from accessing services within home communities need to be addressed to ensure equitable access for all community members.
- Waiting lists are too extensive to provide any real hope or support to youth.