Employment Supports
within GTA Youth Shelters, Life Skills for Homeless Youth
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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FOREWORD:
The Canadian Council for Youth Prosperity (CCYP) Fellowship provides youth with the opportunity to explore existing projects that are core to CCYP’s work, and youths’ interests. CCYP supports youth with their research projects throughout a seven month paid placement. The CCYP Fellowship Program assists bright young thinkers in mobilizing, advocating, and providing young doers with the opportunity to learn how to create system-level change.

A word from Lina Pulido, Project Officer, the CCYP Fellowship Program

The intention of the fellowship program was to provide a cohort of young people with a platform to conduct research, connect, and advocate within the spaces that they were already operating in. This approach led us to four fantastic people that had a clear intention to make change. This being the first cohort of our fellowship program, was an excellent opportunity to learn from the fellows—Since November 2020. I have had the privilege of being with them (virtually) throughout the entire process. I have seen them create their research plans, execute their focus groups, interview and connect with experts in their field, and provide insight into the spaces they move in that I truly believe is needed.

This would not have been possible without the help and support of our internal CCYP team as well as the partners that we have had, and have made along the way. I want to thank Howard Tam and Nate Gerber from Think Fresh group for their support in creating a well-rounded approach to advocacy, and the people that spoke and presented on a variety of topics including Scott Leon from the Wellesley Institute, Mariam Guled from Eva’s Initiatives for Homeless Youth, Nika Lennox from Future Majority, and Amanda Noble from Covenant House.

I hope everyone reading these reports comes away aware, inspired, and knowing that these young people are making noise and actively working to push for the change they want to see.

Sponsors & Funders

The Canadian Council for Youth Prosperity is a non-profit organization supporting youth workforce development in Canada. We are a cross-sector, collaborative table of highly-skilled community and corporate leaders improving the sector through engagement, coordinated activities, research, and advocacy.
I recently graduated from York University—during the COVID-19 pandemic—while living in an emergency youth shelter. As a Health & Society major and a youth that has experienced homelessness, I have always been curious about exploring how societies manage complex socioeconomic challenges and what structural improvements can be made to create an impactful change. My experiences living in the City of Toronto’s shelter system during a global pandemic have significantly impacted my perception of the many barriers youth face when navigating the system. I have developed a passion for learning, understanding and addressing the intricacies of systemic barriers. Specifically, my goal is to develop resourceful, mandated programs across the City of Toronto.

As an advanced peer worker, it is clear to me that inequality and a lack of culturally reflective resources have resulted in a continuous cycle of harm to marginalized communities. Being a part of the Satellite Peer Outreach Training Program named (SPOT) changed my life for the better, and influenced me to advocate for other youth like myself. SPOT delivers a 12-week Peer Outreach program in which youth aged 16-24 learn about a variety of topics including harm reduction, mental health, anti-oppression, and healthy relationships. This program was designed and orchestrated by program coordinator Mariam Guled at Eva’s Satellite. Additionally, Mariam introduced me to CCYP and enlightened me of the opportunities available.

In my experience, there were limited resources that offered life skills or a possible career in employment. These barriers often reinforce and enhance the challenging circumstances faced by disadvantaged youth rather than mitigating them. Employment initiatives offered by agencies and government offices are intended to help create, sustain, and retain a workforce beginning with our future leaders, the youth. Yet, there is a persistent lack of adequate information dissemination. In my time navigating the homeless system, the biggest barrier I faced was a lack of information. As someone who sees the advantage that knowledge and networks can provide in transitioning out of the homeless system, I find that our current system of information dissemination is outdated and does not connect with today’s youth. As a result, supportive resources provided by the government are not utilized, leading to the termination of these supports. As an advanced peer worker with first-hand experience living in the system, I believe in connecting young people with as many resources and supports as possible.
Youth living in homeless shelters across the GTA need amplified support, and access to mandated programs that deliver life skills, helping them to attain a career in their preferred field. It is common for youth living in shelters to have weak social, and human capital in terms of education, friends, families, and other networks. It is also common for these youth to find themselves in overwhelmed systems (Wade, J. and Dixon, J, 2006.). While youth experiencing homelessness often lack access to developmental training for employment, research has shown that they do want to work, but homelessness makes this near impossible (Youth, 2016. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness).

Youth often enter the shelter system upon traumatic experiences (Hopper, Bassuk and Olivet, 2010). Among many other barriers, it is common for these youth to lack life skills like budgeting, time management - soft skills and hard skills, vocational training, and employment, and access to mentorship or role models offering encouragement to pursue career opportunities. While employment training and life skill programs can help to develop life skills, services are unequally distributed throughout emergency shelters in the GTA, often because emergency shelters are not meant to be permanent housing – as will be elaborated later in this paper. Some programs across the city are extremely useful, but inaccessible to some youth due to restrictions like ethnicity or age. For example, some programs are restricted to youth of aboriginal descent, and some programs are restricted to youth under the age of 18, leaving youth above the age of 18 to their own devices, or designated caseworkers. This may be an issue because caseworkers are not specifically trained to support youth’s development in education, training, or any aforementioned skills so that youth may find work. If homeless youth do not have access to developmental training, it is likely that they will remain stuck in a cycle of homelessness, and not successfully transition out of the system into
employment. Youth living in Homeless Shelters across the GTA need amplified support and access to mandated programs that deliver various life skills that will enable them to join the workforce in the future. This is why I am advocating for **Homeless Youth Development** with mandated programs in emergency youth shelters across the GTA.

Mandated programs revolve around controlled services and equality throughout GTA youth shelters. These programs include training workshops and life skill programs aiding in financial literacy, communication skills, self-awareness, healthy eating, among others. These mandated programs should have solid aims and end goals like providing life skills that will support youth in living healthy lives and obtaining future employment. ‘Controlled services’ are services that follow protocol and are continuously under review with regards to meeting set goals. My hope is that all Toronto youth will have the same opportunities that I attained through life skill programs and training workshops. These programs should be made mandatory across homeless shelters in the GTA by the Municipal governments. Specifically, these programs will pay youth by the hour, and allow for youth to gain an understanding of life skills and working experience. I will be discussing first hand examples and experiences of my time spent in a Toronto youth shelter amongst different support workers. I will also be discussing a program that altered my understanding of shelters and their ability to improve lives, and is an example of the types of program that should be mandated across GTA youth shelters.

**Context**

I am going to provide context regarding Toronto’s youth shelters to set the scene and enlighten those unfamiliar with the system. Once how the system works is understood, it is expected that one would be able to put themselves in the shoes of these youth whilst reading this report.
Not only is Toronto one of the wealthiest and largest cities in Canada, it also has the largest homeless population. The National Youth Homelessness Survey revealed that 20% of the homeless population in Canada consists of youth aged 13–24 (S. Gaetz, T. Gulliver, and T. Richter. 2014.) Seventy-four percent of youth in Toronto shelters identify as a member of a racialized group, and 14% of youth identify as indigenous. There are at least 2,000 youth experiencing homelessness every night in Toronto (B. O’Grady and S. Gaetz. 2002). Similarly, with Toronto’s high youth unemployment rate of 43.5%, many young people face difficulties finding jobs (S. Geobey. 2013.).

**Emergency shelters** serve individuals and families experiencing homelessness with or without a referral. Clients for both emergency shelters and youth emergency shelters are able to self-refer in person or over the phone. However, **transitional housing** is only possible through direct referrals from emergency shelters, central intake, and other agencies. Although the typical length of stay in an emergency shelter is intended to be of short duration, this is rarely the case due to the shortage of affordable housing in Toronto (Zhang, B, 2020). The average length of stay in a transitional home is intended to be of longer duration in order for clients to address what it is they require from housing. However, Transitional housing is usually filled to capacity, forcing youth to remain in shelters or wait upon the extensive Toronto Housing list (Pinki, D. B, 2019).

Long waiting lists and the shortage of transitional housing potentially impacts the quality of programming within emergency housing. Considering that emergency shelters are intended to serve as temporary housing, importance may not be placed on programming. Therefore, programming designed to accommodate the needs of youth entering emergency services— the way they need to be supported— may not exist. This is an interesting way to understand the strain that transitional housing, as well as Toronto’s housing crisis, places on the emergency shelter services.
Upon reviewing the City of Toronto’s website, there are currently over 7,000 beds across 63 shelters in Toronto. Shelters for youth offer short-term accommodation and supports including counselling, meals, recreation and emergency transportation. Some shelters also provide longer-term accommodation however, there is no standard length of stay in a shelter (City of Toronto, 2021.). During intake, a support worker will assess the client’s circumstances and needs before informing them of the rules and expectations of that specific shelter. It is common that residents will need to complete daily chores including keeping rooms clean, washing laundry, and other chores around the shelter. Once intake is complete and the youth is shown around their new home, they are assigned to a personal case-worker. Caseworkers work and plan with their clients, identify their goals and priorities, and organize goals into manageable steps. Residents are able to book meetings, and plan ahead with their designated caseworkers when they’re available. Moreover, caseworkers are continuously reviewing the progress of their clients– and updating service plans. The average youth shelter in Toronto holds approximately 25–50 beds, and the length of one’s stay depends upon the client’s circumstances (Toronto Shelter Standards, 2015). Among many other rules and stipulations, youth in shelters usually have a curfew of which they must be present at their residence, or face being discharged.

There are approximately 489 youth beds across the City of Toronto, with most youth shelters taking in youth aged 16–24 (Toronto Shelter Standards, 2015). Given there are 850–2000 homeless youth nightly in the city of Toronto, the number of youth beds provided is clearly insufficient.

Programs within emergency youth shelters are intended to be all inclusive, and easily accessible. Programs vary across different shelters, depending on the needs and wants of youth. Workshops and programs include - but are not limited to - cooking, relationship, and wood workshops. These various programs are scheduled based on that specific shelter, on different days and at different times. Funded by the City of Toronto, these programs are usually free of charge for youth. Although these programs prove positive end results, I have observed that there is a gap between these programs throughout Toronto youth shelters. Whilst examining the Toronto Central Healthline website, I gathered that there are not enough paid employment opportunities across shelters and they are not mandated.
It is important that we understand the system and how it works before identifying how youth can move within it. It is also important to understand in order to provide solutions and recommendations for how youths’ experiences can be improved in a strained system. Part of this, is understanding who some of the key players are.”

**Program coordinators** are responsible for assessing the community’s needs, and developing programs to meet clients’ needs. They design, manage and evaluate outreach activities ranging from support in the area of legal help, medical attention, financial assistance, housing, employment, transportation, substance abuse treatment, and behaviour management (HRSDC, 2020). A **Peer support worker** is a client who has shown reputable interest in, and ability to assist program coordinators in organizing and running community-based social programs and services.

**Caseworkers** work and plan with their clients, identify their goals and priorities, and organize goals into manageable steps. Residents are able to book meetings, and plan ahead with their designated caseworkers when they are available. Moreover, caseworkers are continuously reviewing the progress of their clients and updating service plans. The average youth shelter in Toronto holds approximately 25–50 beds, and the length of one’s stay depends upon that client’s circumstances (Toronto Shelter Standards, 2015). Among many other rules and stipulations, Youth in shelters usually have a curfew of which they must be present at their residence, or face being discharged.

**About SPOT - Satellite Peer Outreach Training (SPOT) Program**

Why are paid life-skill programs beneficial to homeless youth? In order to understand, it is important I provide a first-hand description of a program that I believed benefitted me, and the other youth that participated.

The SPOT program was initially intended to teach youth about nutrition but the program’s founder Mariam took it upon herself to expand the scope further and include much more. This flexibility was key to the success of the program. Youth join their peers from 10am–3pm, three days a week. Although this program was intended to teach youth about is a program that was created and implemented by Mariam Guled, a program coordinator –amongst many other titles– at Eva’s Satellite. SPOT is a paid program offering 12-weeks Peer Outreach in which youth aged 16–24 learn about a variety of topics including harm reduction, mental health, anti-oppression, and healthy relationships. Youth join their peers from 10am–3pm, 3 days a week. During this shared time, each youth has the chance to be a leader, learn how to facilitate workshops, present on an important topic of their choice, participate in innovative group activities, and most importantly gain life skills. This program is funded by the province of Ontario and the Shelter Support and Housing division of Toronto handles the funding of city shelters.
Considering that this program and its benefits completely changed my life, I made it my mission to understand if other youth facing homelessness had the same opportunities in Toronto. I had always longed for something to do during the day, especially considering that Covid had begun, and things seemed more hostile. Unfortunately, I have found these types of programs are not widely available and this is highly problematic. Not only is this a clear issue of inequality throughout different shelters, but also inaccessibility. Some shelters offer beneficial programs and training which lead to employment while other shelters do not. For example, Covenant House Toronto – a youth shelter – offers a Cooking For Life program where 70% of youth secured employment (Covenant House Toronto administrative data (2020). Cooking For Life is a pre-employment culinary arts training program that gives youth hands-on training and skills that can be used in the hospitality industry and more. Youth learn time management, teamwork, accountability, and a sense of personal growth (Covenant House, 2020).

As mentioned earlier, we should replicate where we see success. This ultimately allows all youth the fair opportunity at life and learning some skills while living in an environment that can be challenging. Funders should focus on programs like this in order to ensure that funds are being used for the correct purpose: where funds are able to directly reach the clients in need, and train them how to cope in the real working world. More needs to be explored with programs like this in future research. It is important that we recognize the important players like program coordinators who go out of their way to provide for youth. Program coordinators allow for some of the most substantial changes within the system– providing youth with life skills.
First-hand experiences and knowledge led me to conduct further research regarding the opportunities available to youth across GTA shelters, and to perhaps identify some gaps. I relied upon primary data gathered through expert interviews and surveys. Both interviews and surveys were specific to those who worked in the shelter system and those who had lived experiences. Those who participated are individuals with reputable knowledge regarding the listed topics. Qualitative and quantitative secondary data were also used to substantiate this research.

**Interviews**

In order to maintain reputable results, each participant interviewed was employed in the sector of discussion or resided in youth shelters across the GTA. Each interview and focus group was completed on Zoom at a time agreed upon by the participants, each lasting approximately 30 minutes. All five interviewees had the option of utilizing their webcam or keeping it off since all interviews were recorded on Zoom. Three of the five participants utilized their cameras. Interviews were semi-structured as questions were made specific to the person being interviewed. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was applied. This involved coding all data before identifying and reviewing key themes in order to better understand participants’ ideas or point of view. The Participants’ perceptions and motivations offered evidence for underlying themes.

**Survey**

Essentially, the survey respondents consisted of the general public, then split into those with lived shelter experiences and without. These individuals have reputable knowledge of youth homeless shelters through personal experiences, and or someone they know. The survey was used to select those who belonged to the target group of 18–29 years old. Participants who have background knowledge and/or have lived experiences of being at a homeless shelter were invited to complete a short online questionnaire. Participation involved completing one anonymous 5–10 minute online survey of 10 questions. The Survey was open March 8 – 31, 2021, and included 84 respondents. The response rate seemed to increase drastically a few days before the survey closing date, ostensibly due to the CCYP’s promotion efforts. Responses were coded and analyzed using Microsoft excel. – For survey questions, see Appendix 2

**Analysis**

In the interviews, there was a general consensus amongst interviewees who had experience providing youth services. Interviewees had background history and knowledge from childhood, growing up in this specified field of giving back to the community. They believed in the importance, value, and potential of youth through personal experiences. Throughout the interviews, the apparent belief was that all those who connect with youth are responsible for ensuring that they have life skills. In other words this task is not one person’s job, but a collective effort. A number of themes and common ideas arose around the collective responsibility for youth, one interviewee referring to the saying ‘it takes a village to raise a child’.
When the topic of cultural competency arose, each interviewee understood the term and provided different feedback. They suggested that those providing services to youth, and youth who receive services need cultural competency training. Also, they suggested that individuals should be provided with information and knowledge of cultural competency, and understand different cultures and dynamics. For example, ‘Mental health for black and indigenous youth are different’. This refers to the different obstacles and hardships that these youth endure, indicating that these youth need to be supported accordingly. One interviewee believes that the pairing of caseworker and client is important when they connect. Generally, suggestions surrounded cultural competency training, youth and worker programming, cultural reflective referrals, follow-ups, and youth feedback. Bringing youth into conversations like case management and its structure was of high importance throughout interviews. Interviewees believed that councils and bi-weekly meetings between youth clients and service providers should take place in order to understand whether or not services are matching and meeting needs. This way troubled areas can be identified and improved. Overall, it is evident that participants believe that youth voices deserve to be heard in order to assist them in the long run.

Accordingly, the following question surrounded how we could receive more input from youth clients, and how this could be implemented into the system. Some of the ideas that arose were creative outreach i.e. social media, youth engagement, a safe space to speak out, youth surveys, and more youth employment. There was a general consensus that service providers should be meeting youth where they are through more engagement, and allowing for the ideas mentioned above to take place. It is important that youth are able to contribute to the system in real-time to allow meaningful change - in real-time. A program coordinator commented that ‘Seeing more young faces within would be beneficial so that they can be in tune with what’s going on now’. Service providers implied that some youth may feel afraid to speak up out of fear of getting into trouble or being discharged from their shelter. In order to reduce these issues, it was suggested that there should be an anonymous phone number to understand what is going right and wrong. Youth need an open forum where they are free to speak however they want, as long as they want, with no fear of getting into trouble, being discharged, or losing their bed. Opportunities are needed where folks can have their voices heard in not just tokenistic ways, but in ways that are meaningful and in ways that help. It was suggested that it would be beneficial to hear from youth who have moved out of shelters through surveys. Having transitioned, they may feel more comfortable speaking up. Client feedback is necessary for these workshops and programs to remain efficient.
All respondents agreed that programs for youth living in shelters are necessary, and suggested that equality should be the first priority. Considering that useful programs exist across the GTA, it was recommended that we replicate where we see success, and then standardize programs. Programs also need to reflect youths’ interests and wants, as they are not always reflective of the realities experienced by young people in the different stages of their development in life. Each shelter should enable easy access to programs and services in order to reduce the in and out rate. Additionally, programming should engage in an interesting way, whether it be through music or other arts. Most importantly, youth need to be equipped to handle the realities of life e.g., understanding budgeting and finances, cooking/nutrition, financial literacy, mental health etc.

When asked what one would change or add to policies to improve youth employment in homeless shelters, a variety of different ideas came up. Firstly, it was recommended that cultural competency be made a part of basic policy within homeless shelters. Cultural competency could be delivered through frequent training programs with youth and service providers. If youth clients and service providers are able to better understand one another, employment programs can be directed towards youths’ exact needs and or skill advancement. It was stated that policies should be youth-driven and focus on inclusivity as well as engagement. Not only should policies be clear, but they should alter with time to reflect the continuously changing community.

Additionally, one participant suggested that paid programs or apprenticeships of any kind would give young people ‘a better fighting chance because it’s a part of building life skills’. However, in order to carry out these programs, safe spaces are needed.

Throughout the survey analysis, I coded the results and themes through graphs and pie charts. The first part of analysis is regarding demographics whilst the second part focuses on the respondents’ opinions on the youth shelter system. Secondary data was also necessary to back up my initial statements and understandings.
**Survey Respondents Demographics**

**Figure 1:**  
*I am...* 81 responses

*Figure 1* represents the age of respondents that participated in the survey. Majority of respondents were aged 17-27 years old. This is the ideal target demographic considering youth shelters usually accept youth aged 16-24. Therefore, it is likely that the survey results received are as accurate to youth experiences as possible.

**Figure 2:**  
*I identify as...* 79 responses

*Figure 2* shows that 79 out of 84 respondents answered the question regarding their identities. On a whole, the majority of respondents (43%) are Latin American. This appears to be a limitation as this survey could potentially have been distributed to a Latin American only community. Apart from this limitation, this graph shows a wide variety of ethnicities took part.

**Figure 3:**  
*I am someone who...* 84 responses

*Figure 3* shows how these respondents are connected to the Toronto Shelter system, and how they know as much as they do about it. The majority of respondents know someone who currently lives in a youth shelter, followed by those who have lived in the system, and those who work within the system. This solidifies arguments as it can be confirmed that these respondents have real life experiences.
Respondents Opinions

**Figure 4:**

On a scale of 1–10, how important are life skills (financial literacy, budgeting, communication skills, self-awareness, time management, hard skills, etc) to youth?

84 responses

![Bar chart showing the responses to the importance of life skills on a scale of 1 to 10.](chart1)

*Figure 4 shows that the majority (78.5%) of respondents believe that life skills are highly important to youth. The acknowledgement of the importance of life skills was a positive discovery considering that the focus of this report is the enhancement of life skills for youth.*

**Figure 5:**

How likely is it that you would recommend all youth shelters to offer life skills training/paid programs?

83 responses

![Bar chart showing the likelihood of recommending life skills training or paid programs.](chart2)

*Similarly, Figure 5 shows that the majority (73.5%) of respondents would more than likely recommend all youth shelters to offer life skills training or paid programs.*
**Figure 6:**
Have you heard of ‘Cultural competency training’ (Yes/No)
84 responses

Figure 6 shows that 92% of respondents have some knowledge of the term: cultural competency. This is significant to this report as it was previously stated that the connection and relationship between the client and service provider is important. It was recommended that cultural competency be made a part of basic policy within homeless shelters.

**Figure 7:**
Those supporting youth should have the ability to effectively communicate with people across cultures.
84 responses

Figure 7 solidifies the common belief that those supporting youth should have the ability to communicate with youth across all cultures. Earlier on in this report, it was suggested that cultural competency could be delivered through frequent training programs with youth and service providers.
The opinions of those who have experienced living in a youth homeless shelter:

On a scale of 1-10, how important are life skills to you?

Figure 8 and 9 represent the opinions of those who live, or have lived in a Homeless youth Shelter. It is clear that these individuals think highly of life skills, and highly recommend all youth shelters offer these types of paid programs.
The opinions of youth who have experience living in a homeless shelter:
Who is responsible for providing youth living in shelters with life skills?

- Shelter System as a whole: 11.1%
- Program Coordinators: 22.2%
- Their caseworker: 66.7%

The opinions of those who do not have experience living in a homeless shelter:
Whose responsibility does teaching life skills fall to?

- The government needs: 1.6%
- Shelter System as a whole: 29.7%
- Program Coordinators: 46.9%
- Their caseworker: 21.9%
**Figure 10** shows that 66.7% of youth who have lived in a shelter believe that caseworkers are responsible for providing youth with Life Skills. Contrasting this, **Figure 11** shows that the majority of survey respondents who have not lived in a shelter believe it is the program coordinators’ responsibility to provide life skills.

This could indicate that the case workers’ role is not completely understood by clients. Also it is clear that clients are unaware of a program coordinator’s role within the shelter system. Furthermore, it could indicate that those with lived experience in the shelter system depend heavily on their case worker, even when it might not make sense based on the case worker’s job description. A larger effort needs to be made when providing youth with information in regards to what they are entitled to whilst going through the shelter system, as well as who they go to when they have specific questions or needs when navigating through the system.

I expected for those who live in shelters to value life skills more than those who do not. I realized that one doesn’t need lived experience in a shelter to understand the importance of these youth receiving valuable life skills. Based on the recommendations above, I will provide a detailed list of different examples, and how they will fill in the gaps discovered thus far.
Recommendations

For Youth Shelters

1. Improve information and outreach to ensure the youth understand the roles of the workers within the system.
   a. Make assessments, discussions, or a “Get To Know” meetings with workers the youth mandatory as part of the intake process
   b. Strive to customize employment supports according to the young person

2. Expand the role of the caseworker to provide employment supports and/or facilitate more communication between the caseworker and program coordinator
   a. Create a working caseworker module, along youth in the shelter that outlines what the role of the caseworker is, and what youth see their role to be
   b. Prioritize cultural competency training for shelter workers

3. Co-design employment supports with youth at the organization-level, so programs are more reflective of youth interests - when they adopt these programs
   a. Get input from youth by establishing a Youth council and having bi-weekly meetings
   b. Incentivize attendance to meetings and make them part of a paid program

For Policy Makers:

4. In order to recognize the reality that youth stay in emergency shelters longer than they were designed for, I recommend formally mandating paid employment programs in all youth shelters across the GTA
   a. Start with a small cluster of Shelters then expand
Research has proven that innovative youth job training programs are successful, and more are needed throughout Toronto youth shelters (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2021). Often, youth enter the shelter system due to traumatic circumstances, and this is one of the main reasons why it is important to focus on their wellbeing. Expanding the role of the caseworker (while offering more support), enabling them to offer extra employment support, and/or facilitating more communication between the caseworker and program coordinator would be a good start in meeting youth where they are at. Additionally co-designing employment supports with youth at the organization-level will result in programs that are more reflective of youth interests.

Establishing bi-weekly youth councils and meetings could possibly lead to additional youth input. Youth need to be given the opportunity and information to navigate the shelter system and understand the support they receive. There is reason to believe that providing youth structure and compensation will incentive them to take part in meetings—gaining work experience and feeling like they have a say in the system they are moving in, however temporary.

This report has outlined that while the shelter system protects youth physically, further investments need to be made in their development. I recommend that paid employment programs offering various life skills be formally mandated across GTA youth shelters, especially because youth are part of shelter systems for longer than they were designed for.

**Limitations:**

This report is not one without limitations. It is important to acknowledge that despite all efforts, being able to engage every youth who has experienced the homeless system in Canada is unrealistic. While this report seeks to bridge the gap between youth experiencing homelessness and receiving life skills opportunities, this report is not representative of the entirety of all youth experiences in Canada or the GTA. While this fellow with support of CCYP did due diligence to try and engage youth from a variety of different groups, we wanted to take the time to recognize the limitations of this report alongside its ambitions.

As a team, we acknowledge this report is not comprehensive of the many challenges youth from all diverse communities face in shelters across the GTA. This report is not complete of all youth voices, but the CCYP team did the best with our available research and stakeholders. The efforts made to address homeless youth, the lack of opportunities, and unequal distribution of programs across GTA shelters in Canada must consider the unique lived experiences and historical context of these groups. While the data collected is not generalizable, the report is critical to reshaping the services offered to youth through out GTA youth shelters. Limitations where acknowledged as we weren’t able to determine where or who exactly participated in the Survey. 43% of the survey respondents where Latin American and this could lead to a skewing of survey results. It is also important to note that the larger number of Latin American respondents could be a result of the survey not getting to a larger diversity of people and/or places, or simply because of the larger population of Latin Americans throughout youth shelters, more research is needed. Another limitation we like to highlight is the challenges of mental health for youth during the pandemic. While mental health was not exclusively approached through this report, our team recognizes its importance in post pandemic strategies for youth and youth life skill opportunities. Thank you to everyone who participated, for educating as an organization, individual, and/or as a group.
Appendix 1: Interview Questions

Youth

1. What are your interests? Discuss your dream future or Career path.
2. What does your average day look like?
3. What type of support do you seek or wish you had within the shelter system?
4. What do you think would enhance your day to day at the shelter?
5. What do you think we could add or change (to policies) in shelters to improve youth employment?
6. How can we get more input from youth clients?
7. How do you think this could be implemented into the system?
8. Describe your relationship with your caseworker.
9. How could your relationship with your caseworker be strengthened?
10. How can we make case management more culturally relevant?
11. How can we collectively ensure that your voice is being heard?
12. How do you feel about the current existing opportunities being offered? I.e., programs
13. How do these programs make you feel? Are they accessible?
14. How has COVID-19 affected the things we have discussed today?
15. Why do you believe youth return to shelters?
Case workers

1. What is current training like? What is standard protocol?
2. Describe your relationship with your clients.
3. What skills have you seen youth bring forward?
4. How are your past clients? Do you have any follow ups?
5. How could your relationship with your clients be strengthened?
6. How do you think we can make case management more culturally relevant?
7. How can we get more input from youth clients? How do you think this could be implemented into the system?
8. How has the shelter system adapted to change over time?
9. Whose job/responsibility do you think it is to provide youth with life skills?
10. Realistically speaking, what measures do you think should be taken to enhance youth employability?
11. Why do you believe youth return to shelters?

Support workers

1. What makes you go above and beyond in your advocacy work?
2. Where did you get these ideas from?
3. Whose job/responsibility do you think it is to provide youth with life skills?
4. How do you think we can make case management more culturally relevant?
5. How can we get more input from youth clients? How do you think this could be implemented into the system?
6. How would you go about designing programs for youth in shelters?
7. What are the challenges with formulating and executing workforce development programs for youth in shelters?
8. What do you think we could add or change (to policies) in shelters to improve youth employment?
9. Why do you believe youth return to shelters?
Appendix 2:
Survey Questions

1. Do you understand the above and consent to completing the above survey?
2. Age
3. Ethnicity
4. Have you lived in a youth shelter or do you know someone who has lived/ lives in a youth shelter? Other
5. On a scale of 1-10, how important are life skills (financial literacy, budgeting, communication skills, self-awareness, time management, hard skills, etc) to youth?
6. On a scale of 1-10, how important are life skills (financial literacy, budgeting, communication skills, self-awareness, time management, hard skills, etc) to youth?
7. How likely is it that you would recommend all youth shelters to offer life skills training/ paid programs?
8. ‘There should be a consistency of programs throughout the youth shelters in the GTA’. True/False or Other
9. Do you think youth should be a part of the development of shelter policies ie. case management policies?
10. Whose responsibility is it to provide homeless youth with life skills?
11. Youth Programs are supposed to reflect:
12. Have you heard of ‘Cultural competency training’? Yes/No
13. Toronto is the most multicultural city in the world.
14. Those supporting youth should have the ability to effectively communicate with people across cultures.
APA References:


8. National Case management Network (NCMN)
