Preventing Youth Homelessness
Through School-Based Initiatives

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Everyone understands that it is better to prevent a problem before it starts, rather than have to deal with the consequences after. Whether we are talking about smoking, cancer, or car safety, prevention is always the preferable option.

So why do we not focus on preventing youth homelessness in Canada? When young people become homeless, they often lose not only the roof over their head, but family, friends, important adults in their lives (like teachers) and their community. Once on the streets, most have to drop out of school, and many suffer trauma, malnutrition, and exploitation. Mental health deteriorates, some turn to drugs and alcohol to cope, and to crime to get money, making it more and more difficult to escape the streets.

In most communities our best response seems to be to provide young people with minimal emergency supports like shelter beds and soup kitchens. Some communities don't even have that. And prevention isn't really on the table at all.

It doesn't have to be this way. We know that countries that are making great progress on youth homelessness – like England, Scotland and Australia - invest heavily in prevention. Both the UK and Australia have a strong focus on prevention. And much of this prevention occurs in schools

If Canadian communities want to make a major impact on youth homelessness through focusing on prevention, the work should begin in schools. The good news is that we know a lot about how to do this because the existing international examples provide us with clear direction on what to do, and how to do it. This document summarizes some of our current knowledge about the role that schools can play in preventing youth homelessness.

> A strategic response to youth homelessness does more than assist young people to become independent. By focusing on prevention and/or supported models of accommodation, the goal is to help young people make a successful transition to adulthood.

This briefing note highlights what is known about school-based youth homelessness prevention programs, in terms of the underlying principles, and through providing solid examples of existing intervention programs that most certainly can be adapted on a large scale level in Canada. The report concludes with a description of what is considered to be the leading example of such a school-based prevention program, **The Geelong Project** from Australia.

What is a school-based homelessness prevention program?

Early intervention to prevent homelessness means identifying young people who are at risk of homelessness, dropping out of school, or other significant and negative life altering circumstances and providing the necessary supports to reduce these risks, strengthen families and to keep them in place.

In thinking about homelessness prevention, it is important to note that such early intervention activities are not technically school programs. Rather, they are community-based strategies that are placed within schools.   The key is that a range of services and supports are integrated into a 'system of care' model, so that young people and their families are provided with the right kind of supports to adequately address the presenting issues.

A strong school-based prevention approach requires a coordinated and strategic systems approach, and must necessarily engage, include and mandate action from mainstream systems and departments of government, as well as the homelessness sector. No solution to end youth homelessness can or should depend only on the efforts of those in the homelessness sector.

Why do schools matter?

Virtually every young person who becomes homeless was once in school. Moreover, chances are there was an adult in their life – a teacher, a counselor, a coach – who knew something was wrong, but did not know what to do. Educators are often the first adults outside of the family to suspect or become aware of underlying problems that may lead to youth homelessness. Whether this means bullying, educational disengagement, signs of abuse, trauma and/or family conflict, teachers are often able to identify young people at risk. The problems begin when teachers lack the knowledge base, resources or supports in order to intervene.

Keeping young people engaged in school for as long as possible pays dividends for all young people and our communities. This is true of homeless youth as well. Keeping

young people in school also means keeping young people in their communities. The more we can help young people with 'place-based' supports that align with natural supports (family, friends, community) the greater the likelihood a young person will thrive. At the same time, we reduce the possibility that a young people will leave their community and become mired in homelessness.

The importance of family-centred prevention strategies

For school-based youth homelessness prevention programs, it is important to consider the client for such supports is typically not just the young person, but their families as well. A **family-centered** early intervention strategy works not only to support the young person, but to mediate conflict within the family, and also help parents and other family members who may be struggling to meet the needs of their children. The idea is to connect families to community resources, promote positive parenting and enhance parents' capacity to care for their children. Successful approaches often rely on "home visits" that bring the supports directly to parents and families, and/or work through schools. Such supports must necessarily be culturally sensitive, as linguistic and cultural differences can present barriers to accessing supports.

The key point of such a preventive approach is that that most youth, life chances generally improve the longer they stay with their families, and the more 'planned' their transition is to living independently. Young people and their families need to be able to make good choices about whether to continue to live together or apart, and if the latter is the case, to ensure that they have appropriate resources and skilled support in order to avoid homelessness.

> "Key elements of 'what works' include flexible and client-centered provision, close liaison with key agencies, and building in support from other agencies when necessary. The need for timely intervention was also highlighted, as was the need for active promotion of the availability of the service and early contact with clients on referral." (Pawson et al., 2007:14)

How is this approach different from "Business as usual"?

Very rarely do young people leave home for frivolous reasons. Rather, it is usually a combination of a number of factors at play. The presenting issues of homeless youth can include a history of family violence, involvement with child protection services, mental health problems

or addictions, learning disabilities, bullying, school disengagement, social exclusion and discrimination. Yet when young people are at risk of homelessness or become homeless, if they are lucky they will be provided with emergency supports of some kind, such as shelters or day programs. This is typically a traditional welfare approach that focuses on crisis support after a problem has emerged, with the short term goal to meet immediate needs and the longer term goal stabilization.

In spite of the presence of complex needs, young people are often presented with a fragmented, incoherent range of service responses that make addressing their issues a challenge, and in many cases needs in fact go unmet. Young people are often expected to adapt to program requirements, rather than the other way around which would make more sense. That is, programs and supports for homeless youth should in fact fit the needs of the young person. And ideally, this work should begin well before a young person is at serious risk of becoming homeless.

Successful school-based prevention programs operate in a very different way, and by definition rely on an integrated systems response involving homeless service providers, schools and a range of other mainstream services and supports. Programs, services and service delivery systems are organized in an integrated way at every level – from policy, to intake, to service provision, to client flow – based on the needs of the young person. Integrated service models are typically client-focused and driven, and are designed to ensure that needs are met in a timely and respectful way.   This is often referred to as a **"System of Care"** approach. Originating in children's mental health and addictions sectors, the concept can be defined as: ''an adaptive network of structures, processes, and relationships grounded in system of care values and principles that provides children and youth with serious emotional disturbance and their families with access to and availability of necessary services and supports across administrative and funding jurisdictions'' (Hodges et al., 2006:3).

Ultimately, then, school based interventions ensure that when a young person presents as being at risk of homelessness, they and their family's needs are immediately assessed, their needs are identified and plans are put in place. All of this is done with a client-centered focus, so that they are in charge of determining their needs and where they need to go. As they move through the sector, different agencies work collaboratively to help meet those needs, and move them out of homelessness as quickly as possible.

EXAMPLES of School Based homelessness prevention programs[1]

The prevention strategies that address youth homelessness in Australia and the UK recognize the central role that schools play in young people's lives. In communities across both countries, governments support a number of programs and resources that are delivered by non-profit organizations in schools and community centres. In Australia, the government funded *Reconnect Program* delivers education and prevention services to young people in schools (see section on early intervention for further details). In the UK, community-based organizations develop and implement programs, working within a prevention framework supported and funded by the central government. Importantly, this prevention work begins in schools and targets youth even *before* they turn 16.

Key to this work is to enhance a young person's protective factors and personal development, thus making them more resilient. This means helping young people develop more effective problem-solving and conflict resolution skills, and supporting programming that enhances educational engagement. In other cases, there is an active effort to engage parents and enhance their parenting skills.

Finally, there are programs designed to provide information about homelessness, help people work through and identify risks (both students and teachers), and inform them of available supports if ever they are in crisis. These programs also serve another purpose: because they impart information about youth homelessness, they become an early warning system, and may serve to get young people and their families to self-identify and report a need for support. The presence of agencies in schools also provides teachers with key points of contact when they suspect something is wrong.

In their review of preventive strategies in the UK, Quilgars et al., (2008), argued that such programs provide a means to:

- "increase young people's awareness of the 'harsh realities' of homelessness and dispel myths about the availability of social housing;"
- "challenge stereotypes about homeless people, particularly regarding their culpability;"
- "educate young people about the range of housing options available to them after leaving home and raise awareness of help available;"
- "emphasize young people's responsibilities with regard to housing;"
- "teach conflict resolution skills that may be applied within and beyond the home and

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[1] Note that much of the content is borrowed from: Gaetz, Stephen (2014) *Coming of Age: Reimagining our Response to Youth Homelessness in Canada.*

school." (Quilgars et al., 2008:68)

Furthermore, Quilgars et al., (2008) report that these programs are generally well received and highly effective. They are particularly well received when there is a peer-educator component to the work. The **Schools Training and Mentoring Project** (STaMP), operated by St. Basils in Birmingham (UK) targets older teens, and includes workshops on the harsh realities of being homeless. The STaMP program also provides school staff with robust assessment tools to help them make a determination of someone's risk of homelessness. When they identify someone deemed to be at risk, they are able to refer the young person to the STaMP project, where the young person will be linked to a trained peer mentor who has direct experience of homelessness (the peers are trained and given a lot of back-up). The mentoring relationship can then be established and nourished, and the mentor can help the young person look at a number of options and links to appropriate resources.

Safe Place is a national youth outreach program in the United States that focuses on educating young people about the dangers of life on the streets, and also provides supports and interventions for young people who are at imminent risk of homelessness. The 'safe place' sign helps identify Safe Place locations, which are typically distributed in communities that are accessible to young people, such as schools, fire stations, libraries, grocery and convenience stores, public transit, YMCAs and other appropriate public buildings. When a young person goes to a Safe Place and makes contact with an employee, they are provided with a quiet comfortable place to wait while the employee contacts a Safe Place agency. Trained staff (volunteers and paid staff members) meet the young person and will help them access counselling, supports, a place to stay or other resources, depending on their needs. Once a plan is in place, the family will be contacted, and efforts are made to provide families with help and professional referrals. Young people find out about Safe Place through presentations in schools, word of mouth, social media and public service announcements.
For more information: **http://nationalsafeplace.org/**

Homelessness Curriculum for Schools

The **Homeless Hub** offers a range of free resources for primary, intermediate and secondary teachers. This includes lesson plans across a number of subject areas, backgrounders, supplementary resources such as videos, and resources for students. It is worth considering how these resources might be used (and expanded) as part of a broader school-based prevention strategy.
http://www.homelesshub.ca/Education/

Youth Reconnect
RAFT Niagara Resource Service for Youth

Youth Reconnect is an early intervention shelter diversion program developed in Southern Ontario's Niagara region. This region includes rural areas, many small towns and a mid-sized city, St. Catherines. The outcome of a collaborative pilot project involving youth homeless service providers, the goal of this community-based prevention program is to help homeless and at-risk youth, from both urban and rural areas, stay in their communities and obtain needed supports. "The initiative helps clients access resources and increases their self-sufficiency, by assisting adolescents to maintain school attendance, secure housing and develop a social safety net in their home community" (RAFT, 2012:1). The desire is to prevent them from frequenting youth shelters in St. Catherines or Toronto, by which time their exposure to a range of risks, including addictions, crime and sexual exploitation, may make helping them move on with their lives that much more difficult.

Program Design. The program developed as a partnership between a broad range of service providers. The program targets young people between the ages of 16 and 19, who are referred by high schools, community partners, social service agencies and police. The young person is then met by a Reconnect worker to assess their needs and develop a community-based plan of action designed to help them draw on local supports, enhance protective factors, reduce risk and stay in school. If they need crisis housing, they are transported to one of the local hostels on a temporary basis until arrangements are made for them to move back into their community. Typical program interventions include:

    i.)   Helping youth remain in schools whenever possible by securing living arrangements.

    ii.)   Working directly with individual schools and school boards to develop plans for youth returning to school after dropping out or creating education plans to help at-risk youth remain in school.

    iii.)   Connecting youth with financial support programs and stable housing to ensure youth are able to continue with their education.

    iv.)   Securing affordable housing and a stabilized income by reducing access barriers and providing advocacy when needed.

    v.)   Linking youth to specialized services (i.e. mental health, addictions, family counselling) as required.

    vi.)   Directly assisting youth to develop a social safety net to support them in the future, and to help them as they move forward from the program.

"By creating a localized support network and keeping youth within their home communities, the youth reconnect initiative is able to help youth remain connected to their communities, with the support they need, instead of forcing youth to relocate to a larger urban area, where they are more susceptible to engaging in high risk behaviours" (RAFT, 2012: 2).

School-based youth homelessness prevention in Australia

There is no doubt that Australia is a world leader in school based youth homelessness prevention. They have a long history of doing this work through the Reconnect program, which is funded by the central government and delivered through schools throughout the country. More recently, the Geelong project has advanced this work further by providing an early intervention strategy that works upstream. Below is a brief summary of the two program models.

The Reconnect Program

The "Reconnect Program" has been in operation in Australia since 1999. Though a government sponsored initiative, the early intervention program is delivered through community-based services. The goal of Reconnect is to work with young people when they are identified as 'at risk' of homelessness and help them to stabilize their living situation, and 'improve their level of engagement with family, work, education and training in their local community" (Australian Government, 2013: Reconnect). The program is a classic example of a systems level approach to early intervention, in that it is widely available across the country, and works across institutional jurisdictions to provide young people who become – or are at risk of becoming – homeless with the supports they need to stay at home, or find alternative supportive living arrangements. There are over 100 Reconnect programs, and some specialize in supporting sub-populations such as Aboriginal youth, refugees and new immigrants, and lesbian, gay and bisexual youth. While funded by the central government, these programs nevertheless operate through a network of community-based early intervention services that share the goal of assisting youth to stabilize their current living situations, as well as improve their level of engagement and attachments within their community (Australian Government, 2009).

The Reconnect Program targets young people aged 12-18 (and their families) who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness. The service delivery model of Reconnect includes:

> "a focus on responding quickly when a young person or family is referred; a 'toolbox' of approaches that include counselling, mediation and practical support; and collaboration with other service providers. As well as providing assistance to individual young people and their families, Reconnect services also provide group programs, undertake community development projects and work

with other agencies to increase the broader service system's capacity to intervene early in youth homelessness."   (Australian Government, 2003:8)

The Reconnect program emphasizes accessibility, a client-centered orientation, and a holistic approach to service delivery, and one that has been extensively evaluated (Evans & Shaver, 2001; Australian Government, 2003; 2013. In a comprehensive evaluation of the program (Australian Government, 2003), they identified the following positive and sustainable outcomes for young people and their families, including improvements in:

- the stability of young people's living situations
- young people's reported ability to manage family conflict, and this improvement was sustained over time
- parents' capacity to manage conflict
- communication within families
- young people's attitudes to school
- young people's engagement with education and employment
- young people's engagement with community

TGP: The Geelong Project

The Geelong Project (TGP) is a ground breaking partnership to help young people at risk of homelessness. It utilizes a 'community of schools and youth services' model of early intervention for young people at risk of disengaging with school, becoming homeless and entering the justice system. This unique partnership has been in place for over five years, has been extensively evaluated and has a strong evidence base.

> "The strength in this model of 'community of schools and youth services' is that it engages and integrates the work of all of the key people and providers that together can make the difference in helping to re-engage the young person with school, family and community." (The Geelong Project: 3)

Led by led by Time for Youth with Barwon Youth, Swinburne University and Geelong Local Learning & Employment Network (LLEN), TGP represents a unique partnership between schools and agencies who are committed to confronting and resolving long-standing issues of school disengagement, homelessness and offending in the Geelong community. It has been developed over a period of five years and is based on a solid body of research in early intervention.

TGP sets out a new way of integrating and delivering services in area of early intervention through system and service delivery development and reform. It is a more "upstream" prevention program than Reconnect, which is described above, as it tries to capture young people long before a crisis may lead to homelessness.

The project has been extensively evaluated, with a focus on measuring individual outcomes such as specific (positive) changes in the attitudes, behaviours, knowledge and skills, relationships and functioning at home and at school that lead to remaining in school and in the family home.

Here is how TGP works. It begins with a school wide population screening survey. The Student Needs Survey (SNS) is a solid, evidence based assessment tool that looks at both risks and assets. It is filled out and completed by every student in a secondary school, and the results are combined with other sorts of knowledge obtained about students, whether through teachers or counselors. Those deemed to be at risk are given a brief screening interview that is designed to check whether or not information about risk is valid and current. It also becomes an opportunity to engage the student and introduce them to the TGP project.

Those deemed to be at risk of homelessness, dropping out or criminal involvement are then referred for case management support, that can include family mediation and reconnection. The TGP uses a flexible service delivery model based on a three tier response, with Tier One offering the least extensive case management and intervention, and Tier Three the most.

Tier 1
Active monitoring by school staff, or a secondary consultation where a referral is made to another program or agency.

Tier 2
Casework support, either a brief counseling type of casework or case management by TGP

Tier 3
'Wrap-around' case management for complex cases requiring the formal involvement of several agencies.

This tiered case practice framework is tied to the needs of individual students and is underpinned by a youth-focused, family-centred approach. It is not crisis focused but rather is intended to support young people and families over a longer period of time. Based on evolving needs, young people can 'step up – step down' from one level of support to another, and this is done in a seamless way.

As such, this tiered approach is considered to be the

> "foundation for effective and multi-disciplinary service responses to the range of needs in the at-risk population. … This model supports young people, their families, their schools and communities to address issues that left unresolved lead to youth homelessness and disengagement from education" (The Geelong Project: 14)

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