



Family Matters

Homeless Youth

& Eva's Initiative's *Family Reconnect* Program

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Homeless Youth and Eva's Initiatives "Family Reconnect" Program

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Executive Summary

Young people become homeless largely because of challenges they experience within their families. In fact, the way we typically respond to youth homelessness reflects this reality. We know well that conflicts within family - whether related to abuse, mental health, or addictions issues of either young people themselves or other family members – often lead young people to the streets. It is unfortunately true that for many homeless youth, relations with family members are profoundly damaged and irredeemable.

This sad reality underlies the dominant approach to working with street youth in Canada. The overwhelming research evidence suggesting that the majority of street youth are fleeing abusive and otherwise problematic family contexts means that street youth services must first and foremost provide young people with a protected alternative to the home they left. The orientation of many, if not most services is to assume that because young people are fleeing damaged family situations, in order to move forward with their lives they must leave that world behind. That is, most services and interventions for street youth largely ignore the potential role of family members in helping people make the transition to adulthood.

But is this an adequate response? Are all young people who are homeless irrevocably alienated from all their family members? Is there any chance of reconciliation, and if so, what are the potential benefits to young people, to their families and to their communities? And can we really think about self-sufficiency without recognizing that this necessarily entails establishing important relationships and relying on others; that people flourish most when they have supports, and these supports may potentially include family?

While there are many programs across Canada that have developed innovative approaches to youth homelessness, there are only a select few that focus specifically on reconnecting

“If we are committed to ending youth homelessness, we must consider the effectiveness of our responses - what works, why and for whom.”

homeless youth with family, or that attempt to mediate and resolve underlying family conflict. That said, we understand that family reconnection is no simple panacea, for there will always be many situations for which family reconciliation is impossible. Solutions must maintain a commitment to the protection and wellbeing of homeless or at risk youth – this is paramount.

This report profiles a unique program – **Eva’s Initiatives Family Reconnect Program** - that aims to address this gap. We explore key features, including how the program operates and what its underlying principles and program outcomes are, in order to better understand how and in what ways the program leads to positive changes in the lives of young people who are homeless. Our purpose is to shed light on how this program can be replicated in new settings, or be more broadly incorporated into systems level responses to youth homelessness. There is a need, we argue, to reconsider and reform how we respond to youth homelessness in a way that highlights the importance of *prevention*, and the potential role of family mediation and reconnection.

We do this because we believe that for many, if not most street youth, family *does* matter in some way, and that addressing family issues can help young people move into adulthood in a healthier way, and potentially move out of homelessness. Highlights of the report include:

Background

Academic research tells us much about the conditions that produce youth homelessness, and the role of the family. This research consistently identifies difficult family situations and conflict as being the key underlying factors in youth homelessness. Between 60 and 70% of young people flee households where they have experienced physical, sexual and / or emotional abuse. Many have been through the child welfare system due to parental abuse, neglect or addictions. For some, foster care and group homes do not provide the necessary support.

This reality frames the dominant response to youth homelessness in Canada, where the potential role of the family as part of the solution is largely ignored. Family is deemed to be part of the past. Emergency services focus on providing refuge for young people, and helping them reach self-sufficiency and independence. This is perhaps not surprising, nor entirely unreasonable, given the high percentage of young people who are fleeing abuse or the child welfare system. For them, moving home may be neither desirable, nor possible.



“For many young people who become homeless, family still matters.”

One must consider that research identifies a sizeable percentage of street youth who experience family conflict and who do *not* come from abusive family backgrounds. At the same time, just because one comes from a household characterized by abuse does not mean that there are no healthy or redeemable relations within the family.

A strategy that supports youth moving towards self-sufficiency must necessarily start with a focus on the needs and protection of the young person in question, but at the same time need not ignore the potential significance of family relations. In fact, any healthy self-sufficient adolescent or adult depends on others, including friends, co-workers, other adults and community members. For many, linkages with family will become part of this web of support, and self sufficiency may be achieved by reconnecting with relatives. Unfortunately, however, family and recovery of family (and community) relations is not at the centre of our response to youth homeless in Canada.

Overview of Eva’s Family Reconnect program

Eva’s Initiatives has played a leading role in Canada in developing innovative responses to youth homelessness. The Family Reconnect program is one of Eva’s most innovative programs, in that when working with youth who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, it considers re-engagement with families and communities as integral. Through assessment, counseling, and access to appropriate services and supports, young people will improve relationships, strengthen life skills, and engage in meaningful activities enabling them to return home or move into the community, ideally with family support.

The underlying ethos of Family Reconnect is that family is important to everyone and that a truly effective response to youth homelessness must consider the role that family – and the potential of reconciling damaged relationships – can play in helping street youth move forward with their lives. This is a unique program perspective in Canada, and in this report, we provide a detailed description of the goals, structure and outcomes of Eva’s Family Reconnect program.

The Impact of Family Reconnect

There is no doubt that for many street youth, reconciling with families is not possible, nor would it be safe. However, this is not the case for all, and the focus of Family Reconnect is to work with young people in a protected environment that supports their efforts to address family conflict in a way that helps them move forward in their lives. In our evaluation of the Family Reconnect program, we examined the kind of work undertaken, and the outcomes of this work. Key learnings include:

Presenting issues:

- Many young people wanting to deal with family conflict, and improve relations with some or all family members seek out the Family Reconnect program.
- Many underlying problems leading to youth homelessness have more to do with issues faced by family members rather than by young people themselves.

Casework: what is the key work of Family Reconnect?

- The Family Reconnect staff use a client-centered case management model, and facilitate access to appropriate and effective services and supports for young people and their families. In addition to facilitating access to supports, staff may accompany young people to services in those cases where they are having difficulty accessing their appointments.
- Counseling is at the centre of the work of the Family Reconnect team. Based on family systems theory, counselors provide short term and ongoing counseling and support.
- Counseling may also involve family members, with the idea of nurturing and promoting positive change and understanding. In some cases young people and family members participate together in family counseling; in other cases family members themselves receive counseling and support.
- Mental health supports are central to this work. Many young people, and in some cases family members, have mental health problems and/or addictions that underlie family conflict. Mental health support is provided by counselors, and access to other mental health professionals is facilitated through the work of the program.
- Many young people receive crucial psychiatric diagnoses that help identify mental health challenges, learning and other disabilities. This often paves the way towards more effective solutions and supports.

Outcomes

- Many young people renew contact with family members as a result of program involvement. This may happen quickly, or may be the result of longer term work.
- The work of the Family Reconnect program demonstrably improves relations between many young people who participate in the program, and family members. Even where relations have not been completely reconciled, there is often an increased understanding of the nature of family conflict that helps young people and families move forward with their lives.
- The housing and material circumstances of young people improve as a result of program involvement. With appropriate supports, many move off the streets, either back home or into independent living.
- Mental health issues become more clearly identified, greater understanding of these issues is gained by all family members, and better supports are put in place.
- Family Reconnect shifts the work of street youth services, by focusing on prevention and in supporting young people in reconnecting with families and communities.

Cost Effectiveness

There is also a strong case to be made for the cost effectiveness of this program. By preventing youth homelessness on the one hand, and on the other helping those who are homeless move quickly into housing (either at home or independent living), both short term and long term savings accrue.

“As a cost effective program, Family Reconnect makes good economic sense.”

It is well established that it costs well over \$20,000 to keep a young person in a homeless shelter (annually) and this is not taking into account the added costs for health care, mental health and addictions support, and corrections that are a direct result of being homeless. According to data collected by

Eva's in 2009, the cost of funding Family Reconnect to help 32 young people to return home, move into stable housing (and for some, preventing them from becoming homeless in the first place) was only \$7,125 per youth. If they were to remain in shelter for a year, the total cost would be well over \$600,000.

One can only speculate the cost savings if Family Reconnect expanded into a systems-wide program.

Replicating Family Reconnect

Eva's initiatives Family Reconnect program is clearly an effective program that offers some interesting insights into both the strengths and challenges of the Canadian response to homelessness. It is a program that fills an important niche, but more than this, offers some new ways of thinking about solutions to youth homelessness. In this report, we offer a detailed summary of how this program can and should be adapted to other locations, either as an agency based program, or as part of a more comprehensive, integrated preventive strategy.

Agency based Family Reconnect programs: Drawing from our research and evaluation of Eva's Initiatives "Family Reconnect" program, we have identified essential elements of an effective reconnect program offered at an agency level.

Systems level approaches to Family Reconnection: It is important to approach the issue of family reconnection from a more integrated systems level perspective, bringing together a range of services and approaches that work across the street youth sector, and ideally, also engage with programs services and institutions 'upstream' – that is, before young people become homeless in the first place.

Shifting the Focus: The Role of Prevention

One of the key arguments of this report is the need to rethink our approach to youth homelessness by placing a stronger emphasis on prevention and rapid re-housing. Scaling up key elements of family reconnection programming can thus be seen as a key component of a preventive approach to youth homelessness. Working with young people and their families prior to the experience of homelessness, or intervening to mediate family conflicts (where possible) once young people leave home, offers young people the opportunity to effectively

improve or resolve family conflicts so they can return home and/or move into independent living in a safe, supported and planned way. Prevention is not a major focus of the Canadian response to youth homelessness. In this report we review two key examples of effective and integrated systems level, preventive approaches from the United Kingdom and Australia that focus on family mediation / reconnection. This integrated approach not only helps improve the lives of young people and their families, and the communities they live in, but it also makes economic sense.

"Prevention through an integrated approach is the most effective means of helping young people to stay off the streets."

Conclusion

This review of Eva's Family Reconnect raises some important questions about the Canadian response to youth homelessness. We argue for a rather radical transformation of this response, one that reconsiders the role of strengthened family (and community) relations in *preventing* and responding to youth homelessness.

While it is acknowledged that for many homeless youth reconciliation with family is not desirable, nor possible, helping young people understand and come to terms with this can be part of the work itself. For others, reconciliation of some kind is in fact possible. This may or may not mean moving back home, but it does mean an improvement in family relations, and the possibility of moving forward with some degree of family support.

Furthermore, this program points to the need to reform how we deal with street youth. The Canadian response to youth homelessness focuses very little on prevention. However, we do know from the preventive approaches to youth homelessness in Australia and the United Kingdom, that early interventions at the time young people become homeless – and/or even prior to such an event – can and should become a central focus of the work we do with young people at risk. Such interventions focus on family mediation, and attempt to repair damaged relationships so that young people can remain at home, or if that is not possible or advisable (particularly in cases of abuse),

young people can move into the community with proper supports, in a safe and planned way. These approaches work best when the efforts of youth serving agencies are integrated into a broader strategy that involves a more integrated network of key services in schools, corrections, and child welfare for instance.

The status quo is no longer acceptable in Canada, and the recommendations that follow have been formulated with this in mind.

“The success of Eva’s Family Reconnect program demonstrates that family matters!”

Recommendations

1. Government of Canada

- 1.1 The Government of Canada, as part of its Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS), must adopt a strategy to end youth homelessness.

2. Provincial Government(s)

- 2.1 All provinces, including the Province of Ontario must develop a strategy to end youth homelessness that includes a focus on prevention and family reconnection.
- 2.2 The Child and Family Services Act should be amended to enable young people to continue their involvement with Children’s Aid Societies up to a more appropriate age.
- 2.3 The Province of Ontario should establish an inter-ministerial committee to develop an effective intervention strategy to reduce the number of young people between the ages of 12 and 17 who become homeless.

3. Municipal Government(s)

- 3.1 Municipal governments, in creating their strategy to end youth homelessness, should incorporate family reconnection as a central tenet.
- 3.2 The City of Toronto should expand the current Family Reconnect program.
- 3.3 Municipal governments should require that all street youth serving agencies adopt a family reconnection orientation as part of a preventive strategy.
- 3.4 Municipal governments should adopt a rapid rehousing strategy for young people who are new to the street.
- 3.5 Municipal governments should offer ‘time out’ or respite shelter that is separate from the regular shelter system.