In Their Own Words

How Relationship-Centred Support Shaped Youth Employment, Education, and Life Journeys

Family and Natural Supports Program Cross-Site Qualitative Evaluation Report

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FAMILY and NATURAL SUPPORTS

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A WAY HOME VERS UN CHEZ-SOI CANADA

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About this report series

This report is one of three companion reports from the cross-site evaluation of the Family and Natural Supports (FNS) program, delivered under the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy (YESS). Each report looks at a different part of the evaluation, and they can be read on their own or together.

- ***Cross-Site Developmental Evaluation Report***: how the FNS model was put into practice across the seven partner sites, what supported it, and what got in the way. It is based on interviews with service providers, youth, and their families and natural supports.
- ***Cross-Site Outcomes Evaluation Report:*** how outcomes changed for youth between program entry and follow-up across employment, education, family relationships, housing, and wellbeing. It draws on surveys youth completed at both time points.
- ***Cross-Site Qualitative Findings*** (this report): how youth and their families and natural supports experienced the program, in their own words, based on interviews and focus groups.

All three reports are available on the Homeless Hub.

How to cite this report

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Executive summary

Overview

This report presents the qualitative findings from a cross-site evaluation of the Family and Natural Supports (FNS) program, implemented under the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy (YESS) and funded by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC).

The FNS model aims to prevent youth homelessness by strengthening their relationships with family and other natural supports while removing the practical barriers that stand between them and stable housing, education, and employment. Between February 2025 and March 2026, seven youth-serving organizations delivered the FNS program across five provinces: Ontario, British Columbia, Quebec, Alberta, and Newfoundland and Labrador. Through this period, the FNS project supported 152 youth and 208 family members and/or natural supports. By March 2026, 63 youth either secured employment or started a work placement, while 87 returned to school or participated in training. The project is being extended from March 2026 to continue across four partner organizations.

Employment staff in YESS-funded programs observed that strained family relationships often made it harder for youth to successfully participate in and complete employment training. In response, the YESS program asked A Way Home Canada and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness to test and evaluate whether training and supporting these staff to implement the FNS program model would build their skills and lead to positive outcomes for youth (and their families), including better employment outcomes.

This report primarily draws on semi-structured interviews and focus groups with youth participants (44 interviews and 3 focus groups) and with their family members and/or chosen natural supports (referred to throughout as FNS participants – 13 interviews and 1 focus group), conducted between February 2025 and March 2026. However, insights from staff who delivered the program were also used to strengthen the findings.

Researchers interviewed youth and FNS participants once about their experience, and staff at two time points: baseline (February-September 2025) and follow-up (January–March 2026). Together, these three perspectives (youth, their family and natural supports, and the staff delivering the program) provide a fuller, more complete picture than any single source could on its own. This qualitative report is part of a larger mixed-methods evaluation, and companion developmental and quantitative outcomes evaluations are reported separately.

What worked

- **The worker relationship as the program's core strength**. Relational support and encouragement were raised by youth, followed by responsiveness, trust, and advocacy from workers. Family members and natural supports also highlighted the importance of supportive and reliable relationships with workers.
- **Stabilization is the precondition for progress**. Food, housing, transportation, and other material supports allow young people to focus on employment, education, and rebuilding family relationships. Youth and FNS participants alike described this stabilization as what made everything else possible.
- **Strong employment and education gains.** Job-readiness support reached many of the youth in the program, along with education planning. Staff observations were consistent with this finding, with sites reporting greater success when FNS was fully integrated with employment programming.
- **Relief for family members and natural supports.** FNS participants described how caseworkers provide youth with support that complemented their own efforts, allowing them to focus on their well-being and strengthen their relationship with the youth.

Key resources for successful FNS delivery, as youth and families experienced them

- **Flexible, judgment-free funding**. Youth and FNS participants consistently identified timely assistance with rent, groceries, and household bills as the most impactful form of support. Across both groups, this flexible financial assistance was most frequently cited as the key factor that helped stabilize situations during times of crisis.
- **The worker relationship with youth.** Trust took two to four months to build, especially for youth who had been failed by prior services, but once established, it became the foundation on which every other support depended.
- **Advocacy opens doors.** Many youth described workers going beyond expectations, acting as a reference or advocate, helping them to overcome barriers to securing their first job or obtaining identification.
- **Direct connections to counselling and other services**. Youth and several FNS participants highlighted the value of workers who directly connected them to mental-health, medical, or training supports.

Challenges and barriers

- **Housing, affordability, and a difficult job market.** Housing and affordability issues were the most common barriers youth raised. FNS participants also described how the rising cost of living limited their ability to support their youth. Relational work on its own could not fully address these barriers.
- **Structural barriers of status, record, and access.** Beyond housing and the job market, youth described barriers to pursuing employment and education, such as precarious immigration status, criminal records, and gaps in health coverage.
- **Program duration.** Across youth and FNS participants, one of the clearest improvement requests was more time. Staff also shared that 12 months was too short for trust, family engagement, and employment outcomes to fully mature.
- **Planning for transitions out of the program:** Youth and FNS participants highlighted the importance of a planned transition when program support ends, helping to maintain the stability built over time.
- **Building trust and clarifying the role of FNS workers.** Some youth and families initially perceived FNS workers as connected to child protection services, creating hesitation and mistrust. Workers needed to demonstrate their role through practical, supportive assistance before meaningful relationships and deeper family-focused work could develop.
- **Worker availability and caseload strain.** Some youth and FNS participants described difficulty reaching a worker who had limited capacity to support them. Staff corroborated this from their own side, describing caseloads that generated multiple, simultaneous communication streams.
- **Funding and eligibility restrictions.** Youth identified age cut-offs as a barrier to accessing support. Staff additionally identified a “double-dipping” funding rule that made youth already enrolled in other employment programs ineligible for FNS barrier-removal funds.

Key Learnings and Recommendations

Learning	Recommendation
The worker relationship is the program's foundation, but has no built-in exit	Design tapered, planned exits and post-program contact into the model
Practical and emotional stabilization precedes progress in education, employment, and family relationships	Treat material supports including food, housing, and transportation as core design features
Building trust takes time and requires clear communication	Lead with practical help, state the program's full scope clearly at intake, and clarify how FNS differs from child protection services
Twelve months is structurally too short for the relationship to mature and for family and employment goals to be reached	Fund multi-year FNS-employment integration for a minimum of two to three years
Flexible, judgment-free funding was what youth and families experienced as most transformative	Programs should protect this flexibility by minimizing approval processes and resourcing funds to meet actual needs.
A "double-dipping" funding rule, identified by staff, excludes the youth most likely to benefit	Eliminate the constraint so FNS and barrier-removal funds can supplement existing employment supports
Structural barriers, including housing, the labour market, and immigration status, require broader, coordinated responses beyond the scope of FNS programs	Align housing, income support, and immigration policy with program investment, and collect disaggregated data to track equity in access and outcomes

Recommendations

Frontline staff and service providers

- Embed FNS-informed, relational practice at the core of employment service delivery.
- Lead with stabilization before focusing on employment or education goals.
- Build trust deliberately and allow time for it to take hold.
- Distinguish the FNS role from child protection early and explicitly.
- Act as a sustained employment coach and not a referral agent.
- Facilitate and make direct connections to counselling and other services.
- Begin exit planning as early as possible and prepare youth and families for program transitions.

Program design and leadership

- Integrate FNS practice structurally with employment and education programming.
- Protect the FNS model by keeping caseloads low enough (8-12) to sustain it.
- Design for longer engagement, two years at a minimum.
- Build transition and exit planning in as a distinct program phase.
- Create structured opportunities for peer connection and family therapy.
- Collect disaggregated data to hold the program accountable to equity.

Community partners and employers

- Offer paid training placements as low-stakes entry points into the labour market.
- Adopt fair-chance hiring and act as references and advocates for youth seeking employment.
- Coordinate as part of a wraparound referral network.
- Provide flexible and online options to widen access.

Youth Employment and Skills Strategy (YESS)

- Embed FNS practice as a fundable, core component of employment programming.
- Remove the “double-dipping” rule that excludes youth already in other employment programs.
- Extend funding cycles beyond one year and sustain the current extension.
- Keep flexible barrier-removal funding in place as a standing commitment.

Provincial and territorial governments

- Align housing affordability and income-support policy with program investment.
- Remove age cut-offs and eligibility rules that screen out at-risk youth.
- Expand health coverage regardless of immigration or documentation status.
- Integrate FNS practices into child welfare and prevention systems to reduce pathways into homelessness.
- Expand access to education by removing financial barriers.
- Develop pathways to help youth with criminal records access education and employment opportunities.

Federal government

- Commit to developing financing models to ensure sustained, long-term funding beyond the pilot and grant cycle.
- Fund prevention and early intervention and support strategies as a distinct priority.
- Remove equity barriers tied to immigration status and citizenship.
- Mandate and resource disaggregated, equity-focused data collection.

Introduction: Youth Homelessness in Canada

Youth homelessness in Canada is driven by the intersection of family conflict and breakdown, poverty, mental health challenges, systemic barriers, and an increasingly precarious labour market that offers few pathways for young people lacking credentials, work experience, or stable housing. (Bonakdar, 2024; Gaetz & Dej, 2017; Giano et al., 2020; Grattan et al., 2022). For too long, responses to youth homelessness have been largely reactive, intervening only after young people have left home and entered homelessness, whether by necessity, force, or choice. This approach often allows housing instability to become entrenched before meaningful support is provided. Recent data indicate that 47% of adults experiencing homelessness first experienced homelessness before the age of 25, while 74% of youth experiencing homelessness are already chronically homeless (Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada, 2025).

At the same time, youth homelessness and unemployment are closely interconnected. Without timely and appropriate interventions, young people can become trapped in cycles of instability in which unemployment deepens poverty and housing insecurity undermines their ability to pursue education, training, or employment. When a young person loses stable housing, school and work participation are often among the first areas affected.

Transportation becomes more difficult, concentration declines, and the time and mental energy required for job searching or attending school are redirected toward meeting basic survival needs. Conversely, financial hardship and pressure to contribute to household income can intensify family stress and conflict, sometimes leading a young person to leave home. Indeed, family conflict and instability are widely recognized as primary drivers of youth homelessness (Gaetz & Dej, 2017). Findings from the National Youth Homelessness Survey (Gaetz et al., 2016) revealed that 77.5% of youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness identified family conflict as the main factor leading them to leave home.

Addressing youth homelessness and the equity barriers that limit access to employment and education requires moving beyond short-term crisis responses toward a deeper understanding of the systemic conditions that create and sustain housing instability. Rather than viewing homelessness as the result of individual choices or failures, it is essential to examine the broader social, economic, and historical forces that place certain young people at disproportionate risk. An equity lens offers this critical perspective by shifting attention from crisis management to the structural factors that drive youth into, and keep them in, precarious housing situations.

From this perspective, challenges such as poverty-related neglect are understood not as failures of individual parents or families, but as manifestations of broader structural inequalities that constrain families' capacity to support their children. These inequities disproportionately affect equity-deserving groups, contributing to the overrepresentation of Indigenous, 2SLGBTQIA+, racialized, newcomer, and other marginalized youth among those experiencing homelessness. Without targeted support strategies, unemployment, poverty, and housing insecurity can interact in mutually reinforcing ways, creating barriers that limit access to education, training, and meaningful employment, while increasing the risk of prolonged housing instability.

Overview and program context

About Family and Natural Supports (FNS)

The Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab (MtS), co-led by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) and A Way Home Canada (AWHC), prototyped and refined the Family and Natural Supports (FNS) program model as a prevention-first response to youth homelessness in Canada. Building on promising practices from Eva's Initiatives' Family Reconnect Program (Winland et al., 2011), the Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary's Infinity project (Canadian Homelessness Research Network,

2013) and supported by the Change Collective (2018), the model was adapted for implementation across diverse community contexts. Through a series of Demonstration Projects[1], MtS examined how and under what conditions the FNS model could effectively intervene before family conflict, housing instability, and homelessness escalate into crisis.

FNS is both a philosophy and a practice that aims to prevent homelessness by strengthening young people's relationships with family members and other trusted adults or peers (Gaetz & Bonakdar, 2026). Importantly, the model adopts an expansive definition of "family," encompassing not only biological or legal relatives but also the "natural supports" identified by youth themselves, including friends, mentors, coaches, teachers, Elders, employers, and other trusted individuals who play a meaningful role in their lives and long-term success.

FNS's philosophy rests on the premise that care workers serve as coaches and facilitators, and once youth build skills, they can rely on an expanded network of family and other natural supports, because professional help won't last a lifetime, but that network will. The model recognizes that these self-identified relationships are critical sources of support, connection, and protection as youth navigate the transition to adulthood (Gaetz & Bonakdar, 2026). This understanding changes how supports are offered and how staff work with youth across the full continuum of services, even outside a dedicated FNS program. FNS provides individualized supports that help young people reconnect with and strengthen their support networks while addressing the barriers that contribute to housing instability and social exclusion.

Program context

A key iteration of the FNS program focused on integrating its core foundations with employment and education programming was funded under the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy (YESS), a Government of Canada initiative led by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC)[2]. The FNS model was then implemented across seven

[1] The Making the Shift (MtS) Youth Homelessness Social Innovation Lab is co-led by A Way Home Canada and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (housed at York University) that supports the facilitation of sustainable exits from homelessness by identifying, developing, prototyping, testing, evaluating, and mobilizing innovations in policy and practice through the implementation of demonstration projects. Blending experimental program delivery with research and evaluation, the demonstration projects include 15 sites across Canada in 12 communities in Ontario, British Columbia, Quebec, Alberta, and Newfoundland and Labrador.

[2] The Government of Canada's YESS initiative supports organizations across the country in helping youth aged 15 to 30, particularly those facing multiple barriers, gain the skills and experience they need to find and keep quality jobs.

partner organizations in five provinces between February 2025 and March 2026. Through this period, the FNS project supported 152 youth and 208 family members and/or natural supports. By March 2026, 63 youth either secured employment or started a work placement, while 87 returned to school or participated in training. The project is being extended from March 2026 to continue across four partner organizations.

Rather than treating family support and employment preparation as separate program streams, the embedded FNS practice within an employment-focused model allows workers to address the relational and practical dimensions of youth labour market simultaneously. The program helps youth who were furthest from employment, including those with disabilities, racialized youth, newcomers, Indigenous youth, and 2SLGBTQIA+ youth. As such, this report focuses on that integration, examining how an FNS-informed approach shapes young people's capacity to enter and sustain employment, pursue education, and build toward economic independence.

Implementing partner agencies were based in Ontario, British Columbia, Quebec, Alberta, and Newfoundland and Labrador. Each agency, while sharing the FNS program's core principles, used different approaches. For example, in Ontario, one of the agencies combined an in-house high school and a full suite of employment programs with FNS practice. Furthermore, they created an FNS Employment Worker role to bridge the two streams. In Newfoundland and Labrador, a social enterprise operated alongside a pre-employment training program. An employment support worker and an FNS worker collaborated to provide integrated services. In Quebec, the agency focused on serving newcomer and street-involved youth with wraparound supports including education, employment readiness, and case management. In British Columbia, supports focused on mental health and informed employment and school re-engagement support alongside FNS case management. In Alberta, the FNS program was integrated with a dedicated youth employment service, focusing on pre-employment skills (e.g., resume building, interview preparation, workplace etiquette).

Methodology

Study design

This qualitative evaluation included interviews and focus groups with youth, FNS participants, and staff. Youth and FNS participants were each interviewed once about their experience of the program. Staff were interviewed at two time points, between February

2025 and March 2026. Focus groups supplemented individual interviews for youth, FNS participants, and staff.

Research questions

This report is guided by the following questions, with a focus on employment and education outcomes:

1. What aspects of the FNS program did youth and families and/or natural supports find most effective?
2. What material and relational supports have been most important in enabling employment and education?
3. What barriers, unmet needs, and improvements did youth and families and/or natural supports identify?

Participants and recruitment

The study was reviewed and approved by the Office of Research Ethics at York University (certificate #2021-402). Participation was entirely voluntary and participants could decline the interview, skip any question, or withdraw at any point without any effect on the supports they received. All participants provided informed consent (online, verbal, or written) before taking part. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent. Youth, their families, and natural supports received an honorarium for each interview in recognition of their time.

This report's qualitative evaluation is based primarily on semi-structured interviews and focus groups with youth participants (44 interviews and 3 focus groups) and their FNS participants (13 interviews and 1 focus group), conducted between February 2025 and March 2026. Staff interviews (baseline: n = 14 and follow-up: n = 10) were used to provide additional insights when applicable. Qualitative data collection used purposive sampling to select youth, FNS, and staff participants with direct experience of the FNS program across the seven sites. Priority was given to youth and FNS participants who were actively engaged in the program and completed the baseline and follow-up surveys.

Analytic procedures

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically through iterative cycles of coding, drawing on descriptive coding, in vivo coding, and analytic memos. The research team coded inductively, allowing themes to emerge from participants' accounts, and refined

categories through discussion until no new insights emerged from the data. Themes were then examined across participant groups and across sites. The findings reported here recurred consistently across narratives from youth and their family and natural supports.

It is important to note that "worker" is used throughout this report for consistency. In practice, staff in varying roles delivered support, including dedicated FNS workers, employment workers, and case managers, all of whom received FNS training, though not all were exclusively FNS-focused in their day-to-day role.

Quotations are presented verbatim, with filler words removed for readability. Participant characteristics are redacted and altered, and pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the anonymity of youth and their family members. Staff are identified by role and the province in which they operated, but identifying information was removed.

Limitations

This evaluation should be read with several limitations in mind. It draws primarily on interviews with youth and their family members or natural support, with staff interviews used only to strengthen and contextualize the findings. Participation was voluntary and self-selected, and youth and their family members or natural supports who remained engaged with the project may have been more likely to take part at follow-up. Additionally, because this qualitative evaluation lacks a comparison group, the findings are best understood as participants' reported experiences and perceived changes. Finally, seven model sites delivered the FNS model but adapted it to their distinct contexts, populations, and existing services, so participants' experiences reflected these local variations.

Findings

1. FNS program strengths: the worker relationship and flexible, wraparound support

When asked what they valued most, youth highlighted workers' ability to see them as whole people and adapt their support to their individual needs. Many also credited the natural supports model as what set the program apart from anything else they'd experienced. Overall, most youth reported positive experiences, with two strengths emerging most consistently: their relationship with FNS workers and the program's flexible, wraparound support.

The worker-youth relationship

Youth collectively named the relationship with the worker as the program's core strength, with many appreciating the flexibility and individualized support they received. Almost all youth identified relational support as the most prominent theme, describing how emotional support, reassurance, and a consistent presence helped them feel less alone and more capable. Closely related, and almost as widespread, was the worker's responsiveness and availability, sometimes bordering on genuine friendship:

> *"I'd say we are… definitely friends. We have gone out to places, eaten at restaurants, talked about a multitude of things. We've talked personal talk, we've talked business talk. We've talked about the program. Very easygoing. It's very pleasant, very nice, and very good to have a friend like that."*
> *— Malik, youth participant, 21 years old*

> *"She's [the FNS worker] really sweet, and she's not judgmental anyway, and that I find really nice. You know, you can tell when someone's a little judgmental and they're trying to not be — she's genuinely not judgmental."*
> *— Rose, youth participant, 19 years old*

> *"She [the worker] helps me a lot. She's a support person that I find like a friend. I can contact her by phone… sometimes I go into her office and I stay for two hours where I chat and she listens, she gives me her full attention… she's the only one where I feel confident to share my things without barriers, because she doesn't judge me, she gives me solutions, she helps me advance." (translated)*
> *— Louis, youth participant, 19 years old*

Many youth described how workers built trust and a sense of safety by listening without judgment, and helping them feel heard, respected, and comfortable being themselves. They described workers who advocated for them and went above and beyond, taking extra steps to coordinate supports or vouch for them.

This relationship also shaped how youth experienced the program's impact overall. Some credited their worker directly with developments in both employment and housing, stating that they wouldn't be where they are now without that support:

> *"I think there's just developments happening that fall a bit better with me, job wise, living situation. So I also think the support from her [worker] has been incredibly helpful. I wouldn't be where I am now if it wasn't for her."*
> *— Ivonne, youth participant, 22 years old*

"I feel like I have a support system that I didn't feel like I had prior to getting support from my worker."
— Razieh, youth participant, 19 years old

Another youth described the experience as "eye-opening" overall, noting that consistent, regular engagement with the worker helped overcome past challenges. One youth described an overall positive experience, with finding employment as the main challenge, while emphasizing real gains in their mental health. Taken together, these reflections suggest that youth experienced progress that was developed through consistent support and an ongoing relationship with workers they could trust:

"So if I had to choose one word, I would say eye-opening. But an overall description: extremely helpful. There have definitely been a few challenges, but I can't even think of a lot of the challenges that I went through anymore, because I've done such a good job at getting the help regularly and just pushing through the difficult experiences that I've been through whilst going through this program."
— Kaka, youth participant, 18 years old

"I had a very positive experience other than through the job issues, but otherwise, they've helped me however they can, and it's been very beneficial, and I am definitely doing a lot better mentally."
— Priya, youth participant, 24 years old

Flexible, wraparound support

Beyond the relationship itself, youth valued the program because it adapted to their needs. Asked what they found most valuable, youth most often pointed to the program's wraparound and relational approach:

"They've been helpful in their own specific areas, the transportation, the passport... the food with keeping me alive, the support with employment... connecting me with people that can connect me to other things. It's been pretty great."
— Hikaru, youth participant, 19 years old

"We used to talk about mental health support and what different careers I can take, in case this one doesn't work out, and where I can get family supports... So every problem that comes in my life right now, I know where I can go get help."
— Wesley, youth participant, 21 years old

> *"I don't think that I would even be able to live in the housing situation I have right now had it not been for my worker... I'm getting all the help that I need, which is really nice."*
> *— Raul, youth participant, 23 years old*

Family members and natural supports also describe how the program adapted to each household's particular circumstances rather than delivering a fixed set of services. Several emphasized the importance of practical, financial, or relational supports to the program's overall value. One single parent, whose youth was supported by an FNS worker explained:

> *"[The worker]'s been so wonderful, I have nothing to really complain about... Like, each family is different, right? So each family needs different supports or different needs. ... ...Now, because he [the worker]'s been able to help, either provide a ride with himself, he'll come get the youth, or provide a taxi, which is a huge help, huge help, because I can't always get the youth on a bus."*
> *— Adele, family member of a youth participant*

Our findings demonstrate that when youth and families are overwhelmed by unresolved issues, they have limited capacity to focus on longer-term goals. By providing wraparound supports that reduce some of those pressures and strengthen relationships, youth are better positioned to engage in employment and education planning.

> *"The other strategy is not coming in hot with 'what's your education and employment goals?' It's working on the root cause of what the family is really struggling with... When they don't have to think about one aspect of what they're stressed about, they're actually able to focus on it."*
> *— FNS Worker, Ontario*

2. The intersection of FNS program and employment supports

Material and relational stabilization: the foundation for employment and education

Reading across the themes supports the idea that material and relational stabilization is a precondition for educational and employment progress. Food, groceries, and material assistance helped youth focus on employment and educational goals that otherwise would not have been possible. Referrals and coordinated supports were offered, connecting youth to doctors, mental health services, and training. Alongside this material support, youth also received housing supports, including help with rent, housing searches, deposits, and transportation.

"Most of the problems I faced, they were family in need support, like in case of groceries or in case of any home emergency. That's where [the worker] came in, because sometimes it gets overwhelming. Like when I was in school, then I had to focus on school, and because my parents used to give the money for the housing, money from income support, I had to go, I had to work, or to stay home, or to go to school, so I had to decide."
— Dev, youth participant, 23 years old

"… So the program offers support for different things, whether like, for an example, when [the youth] needed a phone, they were able to help pay for that or clothing, as long as they can give a legitimate reason to what it's being used for…"
— Hannah, family member of a youth participant

"But what … I gained the most is this program, like this program got me into Uni, got me a laptop, and got me focused, and made my mental health better so I can actually study now."
— Fatima, youth participant, 23 years old

Beyond the material support youth received, relational supports were foundational to their personal growth, sense of stability, and independence. As a result, life skills, mental health, and emotional well-being improved.

"…, with the family, it's difficult, because I'm still working on that with my counselor and my therapist. But [the worker] helped me connect with the therapist and that so I could work on it."
— Seywei, youth participant, 18 years old

Strengthening relational supports matters because they provide youth with ongoing, personal, non-professional support. While service providers and programs play an important role, their supports are often time-limited. Family members, friends, mentors, and other trusted individuals can provide sustained encouragement, guidance, and practical support that helps youth maintain stability and navigate challenges over time. These enduring relationships can build a foundation for improved well-being and housing stability, which in turn can strengthen youths' ability to engage in and sustain employment and education opportunities.

"Once you get the house in place and their natural supports in a better place, then everything else seems to sort of fall into place a lot easier… Without that, it's a lot harder for those other pieces to fall into place. We all need that one person that we

can call on or talk to about situations that isn't a worker."
— Family and peer support lead, British Columbia

Family and natural supports also spoke positively about such supports as accessing counselling, describing it as a help during periods of struggle or anxiety. They reported that after receiving counselling, some youth were less distressed and more willing to open up. In one case, a youth was reluctant to attend counselling, but their family encouraged them to go so they would have someone to talk to outside the home, and they reported the youth responded well.

"*Counseling was really helpful. He's [the youth] not as angry as he was the whole situation that we've been through now the last year. …He is probably going to need the extra counseling for that. … that that's there for him, and he can open up."*
— Emilie, family member of a youth participant

"I think she's [the youth] been better. Like when she wasn't doing it, I think she was way more stressed out because she didn't really have anyone to talk to. But I think things are different now, since she's talking to people."
— Camille, family member of a youth participant

Consistent with the program model, youth reflected on changes in their relationships with family and chosen natural supports. Strengthened relationships and trust were the most common themes, describing growth in closeness and mutual understanding, though some youth reflected that these relationships remained difficult. Workers facilitated connections between youth and their family and helped them see each other's perspectives:

"I feel like she [the youth] is better with family… we didn't talk for a little bit, and then I don't know if this changed her, but she started talking to me again, and I saw her change… So she wasn't like that before. She would just hide in her room and would hate me. So now she's not like that anymore. And she's actually, reaching out to me for things, like coming to my house to hang out with me, when she didn't do that before."
— Qulthum, family member of a youth participant

Employment: from job-readiness to lasting placement

Relational support and family stability helped youth focus more fully on employment. Combined with workers' support on skills such as job search and job-readiness, including

resumes, interview preparation, and training, youth were more likely to secure a placement. Employment access and placement was almost as common as job search and readiness, and was generally described positively:

> *"Being able to have the opportunity to work in a professional environment definitely helped me realize, what aspects are important for working and maintaining a job. And also definitely helped me become more professional in school environments as well."*
> *— Atefeh, youth participant, 23 years old*

> *"I think so. I think having a job has, you know, helped her [the youth] get out of the house a bit more, like she has, has always sort of had some issues with, or some trouble with, you know, social anxiety. And I think having a job where you're sort of interacting with people there, I think that helps her definitely, like, I've noticed that once she has a job, she's more willing to go out into places and just go out in general."*
> *— Chloe, family member of a youth participant*

> *"I feel like …, now that I have an actual good job that I love, and I feel like … getting back on my feet, I feel like I'm a lot more confident in myself and …I'm really happy going to my job and everything.. I wouldn't have made it there without them [the workers] helping me."*
> *— Amarati, youth participant, 20 years old*

As service providers have noted, employment services often work better when youth have stronger family relationships, emotional support, housing stability, transportation help, encouragement, and other practical supports. Similarly, family-based support strategies may be more successful when youth are making progress toward employment and independence. The two approaches reinforce each other, and combining FNS with employment supports makes employment outcomes even more tangible and effective:

> *"When you add FNS to any kind of support you're providing a youth that's at risk of facing homelessness, their success rates go up; whether that is leaving shelter, getting mental health support, food security. Everything gets better when you provide FNS."*
> *— Manager of Prevention Programs, Ontario*

Taken together, these accounts suggest that workers played a sustained coaching role in supporting youth toward employment, staying involved from resume preparation to job placement. As a case in point, one young person's account indicates the relationship with

their employment worker didn't end with an application or an interview. It continued until they actually had a job in hand, and the partnership held for over a year afterward:

> *"I was working with this girl named [the worker] from employment. She helped fix my resume, teach me what to say, what to do on an interview, and teach me skills and stuff like that. And she also put me in programs, like courses, food handler certificate, food safety and ..... She didn't leave me until I actually got a job, which was really good. I have stayed together for, over a year."*
> *— Amanda, youth participant, 26 years old*

Additionally, supports often served as a first, low-stakes entry point into the labour market. Paid training placements allow youth to build a resume, learn professional norms, and earn income at the same time, easing the risk of a first work experience for those with little or no job history. For some, that first placement led naturally to a second job they secured independently, demonstrating that the skills and confidence built through the program had begun to stand on their own:

> *"It's been good, honestly. They helped me a lot get my first job ever, and I just recently got a job on my own here. Yeah, just last week. "*
> *— Mohammed, youth participant, 25 years old*

Education: clearing the practical barriers to the classroom

Regarding education, youth described receiving substantial support from workers, particularly with applications and planning their next steps. Many youth said this support was the backbone of their educational progress. As one youth put it:

> *"They've definitely helped me with some school related stuff... I've gotten accepted into post secondary. That's probably been my biggest accomplishment."*
> *— Adrian, youth participant, 21 years old*

> *"Even to get into university, She [the worker] helped me... in high school, and then she helped me apply to the university. She helped me pick my course. So she helped a lot."*
> *— Sasha, youth participant, 18 years old*

Across these accounts, education support helped youth overcome barriers to continuing their education. Workers stepped in on concrete tasks like getting an old transcript released or covering a deposit before a deadline. These were often barriers that youth

struggled to address on their own while also managing housing instability or work. In several cases, the youth had already set the goal, sometimes well before connecting with the program, and the support workers provided helped youth turn these goals into action:

> *"I applied for school before I even became homeless, I already knew... as soon as the January semester application opened up, I applied. So by the time I met with them [the workers] to get into this program, social work is what I want to do. However, that's not what I needed, the deposit... I don't have the funds for this. Can you guys help with this? They were like, yeah, of course. So that's when they stepped in."*
> *— Liam, youth participant, 22 years old*

> *"They [the worker] helped me pay for... the standard fee before you pick your courses... They help me pay for that, and also let me know we have access to tutors if you need it."*
> *— James, youth participant, 22 years old*

Family members and natural supports also described the logistics of getting into school, where supports received helped youth overcome financial barriers. Family members also appreciated the wraparound supports such as transportation to school. This allowed both youth and their families to concentrate on the schoolwork:

> *"I think she [the youth] has a lot, you know, educationally, because whatever she gets, it helps her to get some of the materials in school. Assignments together, our projects, our presentations, on our home. She's been able to get things to support our education."*
> *— Mandara, family member of a youth participant*

These findings reinforce the importance of both relational and material stability. Educational support was most meaningful when youth also had a stable foundation in their lives.

3. Program challenges and unmet needs

Caseloads and worker availability

When asked what challenges youth faced and what would make the program stronger, youth indicated that more resources, stable funding, and lower caseloads for workers would be needed. This was, by a wide margin, one of the most cited challenges youth

wanted to see addressed. In some cases, higher caseloads meant less time for youth and their FNS, reflecting how directly youth felt the strain of a program stretched thin:

> *"I'd say more workers. Sometimes it's hard to get a hold of someone. If someone's not available, most people are in need. You have a hard time getting someone that is available… So I feel like more workers would be beneficial."*
> *— Halimeh, youth participant, 24 years old*

> *"I feel like she [the worker] was meeting with a lot of people. So I feel like maybe if she had to meet with less people, then maybe she would be able to meet with me more often."*
> *— Maxime, youth participant, 26 years old*

Staff and family and natural supports echoed this concern. Staff explained that FNS practice requires considerable time and effort, as workers often need to navigate multiple, overlapping, and sometimes conflictual conversations involving youth, parents, step-parents, teachers, fellow workers, and employers:

> *"I would say more workers would be ideal, because we do find the cap, I mean, we can take up to 12, but when you have families and it trickles down to one individual having three to four supports, to do that deep family work sometimes requires more attention?"*
> *— FNS coordinator, British Columbia*

> *"Lack of time, lack of support — structural, because I was hired for employability, except that they added FNS to it, which is a full-time job. So now I'm doing two jobs at the same time." (translated)*
> *— Employment program coordinator, Quebec*

> *"He [the youth] tells me he won't be able to get him [the worker], but they could send a cab because he's busy, because he gets stuck doing something else."*
> *— Riley, family member of a youth participant*

Program exit planning

Youth and family members described the end of the program as a moment of real uncertainty. For many youth, the worker had become a central source of stability, making the prospect of losing that support difficult to navigate. One youth described feeling

settled and supported throughout the program, but admitted not knowing how they would cope once their worker was no longer part of their life.

> *"Ever since I've been more in contact with her [the worker], the whole program in general, I just felt this stability. And… I don't know how I'm gonna feel once she's not there."*
> *— Catherine, youth participant, 27 years old*

Family members raised similar concerns, noting that youth often developed close relationships with their workers and relied on their support to deal with daily struggles and barriers to stability. The end of the program could leave youth uncertain about where to turn for support. Participants suggested a more gradual transition to help youth prepare for the end of the relationship and identify other sources of support:

> *"So I think the youth was really becoming dependent on her [the worker] to fix her problems, and … now the program's ending. Now what, right? She's not there no more. So maybe very supportive at the start, and then maybe start weaning them off as they get towards the end, would probably be a better approach, from my own opinion."*
> *— Kiley, family member of a youth participant*

> *"Know this program is done in March… and nothing's been guaranteed that there's going to be another one, but I'm hoping and praying that they either continue another program for a year or something similar, especially now more than ever, with the economy and everything."*
> *— Jasmina, family member of a youth participant*

Connection, specialized support, and service gaps

Youth also described breaking isolation as one of the program's most meaningful outcomes, but also as an area where more could have been offered. Some youth underscored the importance of connecting with others facing similar circumstances. One youth spoke of the relief of group therapy with peers sharing a similar condition, describing how it helped them feel less alone in what they were going through:

> *"Breaking isolation is also… meeting other people who are similar… having had the possibility to do group therapy with other people with my condition… it really helped me… to not feel as alone in it"*
> *— Lionel, youth participant, 21 years old*

At the same time, other forms of relational support surfaced as gaps. One youth pointed to the limits of the one-on-one intervention-worker model itself, noting that a family therapist could have better helped them work through the questions and concerns affecting them and their family. However, this kind of specialized support seemed to be beyond what a worker was trained or resourced to provide:

> *"The one thing that I think would have helped me foster a relationship with my family would be the help of a family therapist… it's good having an intervention worker, but there's a certain level of help that can't be offered from an intervention worker just based off of a lack of training… I mean, the help was always offered… But being unable to answer questions that I had before having that meeting really prevented me from looking into it further."*
> *— Soon-hi, youth participant, 25 years old*

Although workers offered a mediated conversation, the youth often struggled to use this opportunity without first having space to work through their concerns and consider how to express them. Together, these accounts suggest that youth valued connection, whether with peers or family, but didn't always have enough structured opportunities to pursue it as fully as they wanted.

A smaller group pointed to specific gaps in education and employment support, including a desire for more job opportunities and online options that would widen access for youth who couldn't easily attend in person.

> *"I was hoping more of like job opportunities. Because I've been working two jobs for a while… I think when I first got into the program, I was hoping more of bigger job opportunities or going to school to kind of pursue something. That was the original plan."*
> *— Jared, youth participant, 26 years old*

System barriers and structural challenges

The barriers youth described were often about pressures outside any single worker's control. For example, the cost of housing and the broader housing affordability crisis, financial strains, and policy and eligibility rules regarding age cutoffs prevented some youth from accessing support:

> *"I would say some of their rules require people to be 19 to get support with, and I'm just not 19. I was just a young kid who was kicked out of her house young, so I wasn't*

able to get set up with certain stuff."
— Julien, youth participant, 18 years old

"[The worker] even helped me with a few like deposits for, some apartments, because it's crazy now that they all want, a first and last month, almost deposit, and then you have to wait two weeks for a response."
— Abia, youth participant, 19 years old

"It's been a struggle for me making sure we have food in the house more often. It's hard to afford food… I tried food banks and that, but half the time their food, I appreciate them giving me some, but half the time it's expired."
— Kamala, family member of a youth participant

Beyond housing and food, youth described persistent structural barriers, from years-long job searches to limited paid employment opportunities:

"She [the worker] knew that I had been looking for a job forever… the job market is so horrible. I know I'm only 17… I've been searching… since I was 15."
— Sky, youth participant, 17 years old

"The only thing… was the amount of time that you can work at their employment places. And that is not the program's fault; it's the government budget cuts, because it used to be more hours and a longer program, but because of the budget cuts, they had to cut it from 40 hours a week."
— Shaun, youth participant, 28 years old

For some youth, the hardest barriers were matters of legal status and record. These barriers created seemingly insurmountable walls between them and the jobs and schools they were trying to reach. For newcomer youth, immigration status shaped everything else. For one youth on a study permit, strict limits on work hours prevented them from meeting basic living costs, making their legal status the necessary starting point for stability:

"I have a work permit for my studies… so that's why they always kept me with minimum hours, which are less than 24 hours. … With [the worker], we took a lot of time to talk about everything that is immigration. Because… if it gets fixed, it's certain that I will have stability in my life afterwards. So it was the first goal to settle." (translated)
— Khalid, youth participant, 25 years old

Criminal records proved to be another critical barrier just as youth were ready to move forward. For one participant, difficulties with credential recognition and a criminal record both prevented them from accessing employment opportunities:

> *“They have my diplomas here, they have everything. I gave everything to do my equivalence. But I decided to work. But now, what I learned, is that if I go into …university, the problem is that they are going to check, they are going to check for a criminal record or something. They will see that I have a criminal past because of that…”*
> *— Charlotte, youth participant, 23 years old*

Staff saw the same barrier from the hiring side. They described employers rejecting youth with criminal records, preventing them from accessing placements arranged through the program:

> *“Another challenge we had with one employer was they wanted clear codes of conduct …. They wanted a clear criminal [record], and a lot of our young people couldn’t provide that… I can think of three young people that didn’t get placements.”*
> *— Manager of Training and Support, Newfoundland and Labrador*

Youth and families also pointed to gaps in access to basic healthcare. One youth needed his worker to vouch for him just to get a health card reinstated.

> *"I got my health card again… stuff that would have been a lot harder to do without a worker basically vouching for me."*
> *— Andrea, youth participant, 27 years old*

> *"The ability to go to a doctor and have a full physical and full blood work, even if you don’t have a health card — some sort of ability to access that would be really great."*
> *— Xabi, family member of a youth participant*

These accounts show what workers could change and what lay beyond their reach. Within the program, youth identified several areas for improvement, including more structured opportunities for peer connection, accessing specialized family-therapy support, and wider, more flexible pathways into work and school. Other structural barriers included unaffordable housing, food insecurity, a challenging labour market, restrictive eligibility rules, precarious immigration status, criminal records, and gaps in health coverage.

The recommendations that follow respond to the findings, strengthen what the program can directly provide, and call on the systems around it to address the structural conditions that continue to stand between young people and stable employment, education, and housing.

Recommendations

Frontline staff and service providers

- **Embed FNS-informed, relational practice at the core of employment service delivery**. Strengthening young people's relationships with family and natural supports is a primary driver of stability, which enables better employment and education outcomes.
- **Lead with stabilization before focusing on employment or education goals.** Youth consistently described food, housing, transportation, and other material supports as what made everything else possible. Meeting basic needs first is the precondition for relational and vocational progress.
- **Build trust deliberately and allow time for it to take hold.** Trust took two to four months to establish, especially for youth who had been failed by prior services. Offer early practical help to demonstrate reliability before deeper family-focused work begins.
- **Distinguish the FNS role from child protection early and explicitly.** Youth and families sometimes associated workers with child protection services, which contributed to hesitations and mistrust. Clearly explaining the worker's role and demonstrating it through concrete, supportive assistance is essential to building trust.
- **Act as a sustained employment coach and not a referral agent**. Youth valued workers who stayed involved throughout the full trajectory from resume to placement and beyond. Staying engaged after the application or interview turns support into lasting outcomes.
- **Facilitate and make direct connections to counselling and other services.** Youth and families valued workers who connected them directly to mental-health, medical, or training supports.
- **Begin exit planning as early as possible and prepare youth and families for program transitions.** Youth and families described the program's end as a moment of real uncertainty. Building a gradual, planned transition should be built into the support process from the outset to protect the stability established over time.

Program design and leadership

- **Integrate FNS practice structurally with employment and education programming.** Sites where FNS was fully embedded with employment programming saw success rates rise markedly. Bridging roles such as a dedicated FNS Employment Worker should be built into the program design.
- **Protect the FNS model by keeping caseloads low enough (8-12) to sustain it.** The worker relationship is the program's most valued feature, and it depends on workers having the time to sustain it. Caseload limits and staffing levels should be treated as core design requirements.
- **Design for longer engagement, two years at a minimum.** Twelve months was widely described as too short for trust, family engagement, and employment outcomes to fully mature. Program timelines should reflect the program's depth of engagement.
- **Build transition and exit planning in as a distinct program phase.** Continuity and exit felt under-addressed for both youth and families. Programs should include a structured, gradual transition phase to sustain progress and maintain stability beyond the program.
- **Create structured opportunities for peer connection and family therapy**. Youth valued breaking isolation through group settings and specialized family-therapy supports. Peer programming and access to clinical family support should be resourced as part of the model.
- **Collect disaggregated data to hold the program accountable to equity.** Collect disaggregated data to assess equity in program outcomes. Tracking outcomes by equity group, when safe and appropriate, can help demonstrate the program's reach, identify differences in outcomes, and highlight gaps in support.

Community partners and employers

- **Offer paid training placements as low-stakes entry points into the labour market.** Paid placements allow youth to build a resume, learn workplace norms, and earn income at once. They provide a lower-risk work experience for those with little or no job history and can lead to a second job secured independently.
- **Adopt fair-chance hiring and act as references and advocates for youth seeking employment.** Employers should adopt second-chance hiring practices and be willing to vouch for candidates. Criminal records and a lack of work history were identified as barriers to employment.

- **Coordinate as part of a wraparound referral network.** Youth benefited most when connected directly to mental-health, medical, training, and identification supports. Community partners should function as an integrated network.
- **Provide flexible and online options to widen access.** Some youth wanted online and more flexible offerings so they could participate without attending in person. Partners should build accessibility into how they deliver opportunities.

Youth Employment and Skills Strategy (YESS)

- **Embed FNS practice as a fundable, core component of employment programming.** Integrating FNS with employment support outperformed either approach alone. YESS should support and fund FNS-informed practice as a core element of delivery.
- **Remove the "double-dipping" rule that excludes youth already in other employment programs.** Staff identified a funding restriction that made youth enrolled in other employment programs ineligible for FNS barrier-removal funds. This restriction limited access to support for youth facing multiple barriers, making it important to align eligibility rules across programs.
- **Extend funding cycles beyond one year and sustain the current extension.** A one-year timeline ends just as the integrated work begins to produce results. Multi-year commitments are needed to allow outcomes to mature and to avoid leaving families without support.
- **Keep flexible barrier-removal funding in place as a standing commitment.** Because judgment-free, on-time assistance with essentials like rent, groceries, and bills was consistently the most decisive support youth and families received, it warrants stable, protected funding that doesn't hinge on year-to-year renewals.

Provincial and territorial governments

- **Align housing affordability and income-support policy with program investment.** Flexible funding can address immediate financial barriers but cannot overcome limited housing supply and unaffordable rents. Provincial housing and income policy must align with program investment for outcomes to hold.
- **Remove age cut-offs and eligibility rules that screen out at-risk youth.** Youth described that they couldn't access supports because they weren't yet of qualifying age. Eligibility thresholds should be re-examined to ensure younger at-risk youth aren't excluded before they can access help.

- **Expand health coverage regardless of immigration or documentation status.** Lack of citizenship or health documentation prevented some youth from receiving essential care. Provincial health access should be extended so that status does not become a barrier to care and income supports.
- **Integrate FNS practices into child welfare and prevention systems to reduce pathways into homelessness.** FNS is fundamentally a prevention model that works best before crisis. Provinces should connect it to child welfare as an early-support strategy to reach youth before family conflict escalates into homelessness.
- **Expand access to education by removing financial barriers.** Workers often covered tuition deposits, application fees, and school materials, easing financial pressure on the whole household. Provinces should expand grants, fee waivers, and other targeted financial aid so that youth facing housing instability can enroll and stay in school without relying on program funds.
- **Develop pathways to help youth with criminal records access education and employment opportunities.** Criminal records stood between youth and the jobs and schools they were pursuing. Record-suspension and reintegration pathways should be made accessible to young people trying to move forward.

Federal government

- **Commit to developing financing models to ensure sustained, long-term funding beyond the pilot and grant cycle**. The relational infrastructure built in families and communities will outlast any single funding cycle. Durable federal commitment is needed so support does not depend on one-off grants that end just as results emerge.
- **Fund prevention and early intervention and support strategies as a distinct priority.** Most responses to youth homelessness remain reactive, intervening only after young people are already in crisis. Prevention should be resourced explicitly given that nearly half of adults experiencing homelessness first become homeless before age 25.
- **Remove equity barriers tied to immigration status and citizenship.** Lack of citizenship documentation prevented some youth from accessing essential services. Federal policy should close the gaps that exclude newcomer and non-status youth from care and income supports.
- **Mandate and resource disaggregated, equity-focused data collection.** Federal reporting should, when safe and appropriate, include disaggregated data to examine program outcomes across equity groups, identify gaps in support, and inform more equitable service delivery.

Conclusion

This report examined what youth and their family and natural supports found most effective about an FNS-informed approach to employment and education, and what stood in the way. Across seven organizations and five provinces, young people mentioned that they did not experience employment and education support as a discrete service, but as something made possible by a trusted relationship and a foundation of stability. The worker-youth relationship, characterized as consistent, responsive, non-judgmental, and often extending to the whole family, emerged as the program's core strength. Flexible, wraparound support helped workers build on these relationships to support youth and families in making progress. When the program first addressed food, housing, transportation, and family tension, young people were able to pursue goals that had previously been out of reach.

Our findings show that FNS and employment support work better together than either alone. By addressing the relational and material root causes of labour market exclusion, FNS creates the conditions for employment and education programming to finally work. Youth secured first jobs, returned to school, earned certifications, and strengthened relationships with their family and natural supports. These gains were most pronounced for those facing the greatest structural barriers.

At the same time, participants spoke about the model's limits. Twelve months was too short for trust and family engagement to fully mature. Caseloads were sometimes too high for the depth of work the model demands, and program endings tended to arrive without the gradual, planned transitions that youth and families needed. Beyond the program's reach lay structural barriers, such as an unaffordable housing market, a difficult labour market, precarious immigration status, criminal records, and gaps in health coverage. These barriers repeatedly constrained what even the most skilled and committed workers could achieve.

Taken together, these findings highlight the value of the FNS model and the conditions needed to support its implementation. Scaling FNS across communities will require longer timelines, manageable caseloads, protected flexible funding, and a policy environment that addresses structural barriers to employment and education. Professional support is temporary by design, but the relationships it helps rebuild are what endure. Investing in the conditions that let FNS do that work is, ultimately, an investment in preventing youth homelessness before it begins.

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