



# Family Matters

## Homeless Youth

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



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REPORT #3

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## Family Matters

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

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ISBN 978-1-55014-544-1  
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#### How to cite this document:

Winland, Daphne; Gaetz, Stephen; Patton, Tara (2011) Family Matters - Homeless youth and Eva's Initiatives "Family Reconnect" Program. (Toronto: The Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press).



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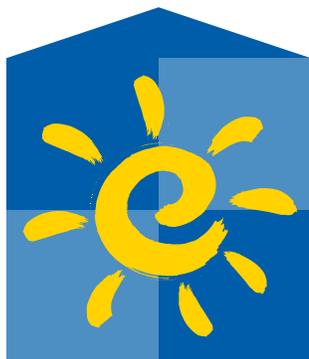
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**eva's initiatives**  
*Creating opportunities for homeless youth*

Website: <http://www.evasinitiatives.com/>

## About Eva's Initiatives

Eva's Initiatives works with homeless and at-risk youth ages 16 to 24 to get them off the streets permanently. They operate three shelters in the Greater Toronto Area that house 114 youth each night. Eva's also operates the Family Reconnect program, with funding support from the City of Toronto, and private donors. To find out more about Eva's or to make a donation, contact:

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## Acknowledgements

The authors of this report acknowledge with deep appreciation the contributions of individuals and agencies that have made this research possible.

First, we want to express our appreciation to the funders of this research, the Knowledge Mobilization Unit of York University, and SSHRC.

Second, we wish to thank the staff at Eva's Initiatives and in particular, the Family Reconnect Program, for their generous contribution of time and enthusiasm for this project.

Third, we want to thank the collaborators on our What Works for Whom grant, including Michaela Hynie (York University), Bernie Pauly (University of Victoria), Stephanie Baker-Collins (McMaster University), and Rachel Gray (Eva's Initiatives) for their contributions.

Finally, and most importantly, we wish to thank the many young people and family members who participated in this research by sharing their time and stories. It is for them that the Family Reconnect program works, and for them that we have written this report.

## 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.

## A Story . . .

We begin by recounting an incident that happened early 2009, when a 16-year-old girl named Joan ran away from home after an argument with her mother. For her this was the last straw. She had been having difficulties with her parents for years – real problems that made her feel sad, unimportant and unwanted. She was profoundly unhappy and no longer felt she could stay at home. She didn't want to run away; didn't want to become a 'street kid'; but also, in the moment, didn't feel she had any other choice but to leave.

Her mother was also upset. She tried to find out where her daughter went, and quickly found out that she hadn't gone to stay with friends or relatives. She had no idea where she had gone. She was particularly worried that her daughter would become involved in street youth life, and she was, of course, very concerned for her daughter's safety. What if she was attacked? What if she was sick? Would she wind up with a drug problem or be drawn in to prostitution? She wanted to find her daughter and try to work things out, but she didn't know what to do or where to find her. She wanted her daughter to come home.

In order to track down her daughter, the mother began calling street youth shelters. She called every shelter and made personal visits to many. Everywhere she went, she was told the same thing by shelter staff: Due to privacy concerns, they could not let her know if her daughter was there, or if she had ever stayed at the shelter. The mother contacted the school board and they could not help. Eventually she filed a missing person's report. The police tracked her daughter down at a shelter and identified that she was 'ok', but could not tell her where she was. Through this process Joan became aware her mother was looking for her, but was not interested in contacting her. Too much had happened, and by then she didn't feel it made sense to consider returning home.

The mother was beyond frustrated. It seemed that no one was willing to help her find her daughter. By chance, one of the counselors at Eva's Family Reconnect got wind of the situation. The supervisor of the program wondered; "Why didn't anyone at these agencies contact us?" She was able to get the phone number of the mother and called her. After listening to her long and frustrating story, she said:

"I will try to help you and see if I can find out if your daughter is staying in one of the shelters. I will ask her if she wants to contact you. But here is something that you could do that might help. Can you write a letter to your daughter, and explain that you want to contact her. It is important that the letter be positive and encouraging. Don't make it accusatory, don't focus on what she has done wrong. If you give the letter to me, I will get it to her."

The mother agreed. She and the father (who were separated) wrote a letter in which they expressed their love for her, that they were not condemning her actions, and how things could be different if she returned. They concluded by saying: "All we want is for you to be a loving and caring person. We love you and miss you and want you to come home". They gave the letter to the Family Reconnect counselor, who made sure that a copy was sent to every shelter and day program in the city.

The young girl eventually got the letter, and after reading it, decided she was willing to contact her mom. She became a client of Eva's Family Reconnect, and the process began. She now had a counselor who could work with her, keep her safe and start the process of mediation with her family. Eventually, a phone call was made, and parents and child entered into family counseling, with the result that the daughter moved back home.

A key intervention was made that made a big difference in the life of a young woman and her family. One only wonders how this story would have ended if there was no Family Reconnect program.

## 1

# Introduction

It is difficult to think about young people without also thinking about their families. Central to our notions of adolescent development is the idea that the movement from childhood to adulthood is generally a gradual process, one that is mediated by intensive involvement of adults, and family members in particular. Few young people live independently, and most rely on family members – not just parents, but also siblings and other adults (grandparents, uncles and aunts) - to get a variety of their needs met, and to help with the task of growing into adulthood. While we know that relations between young people and the adults in their lives is rarely without some degree of tension and conflict – no teen novel or movie can avoid depictions of sullen teens and / or parents who ‘just don’t understand’ – there is a strong belief that given time (and a whole lot of growth on both sides of the age divide) young people can move into adulthood with family relations intact.

When we talk about young people who are homeless, the focus on the family shifts. It is well established both through research and practice that young people become homeless for a lot of reasons, but one of the biggest is family conflict. Not only that, we know that for many young people, the streets become a refuge for those fleeing abusive households characterized by physical, sexual and emotional abuse. This portrait of adolescence disconnected from family is not easy to reconcile with the one above, but it does shape how we respond to youth homelessness.

In Canada, we have developed a range of responses to youth homelessness, from coast to coast to coast. Whether we are talking about shelters, drop-ins, employment programs or other services, these responses are oriented towards helping young people in crisis, with the goal of enabling young people to become independent and self-sufficient. These programs and services are often successful in helping young people move forward with their lives, and many achieve this through a combination of innovative programming, committed staff and an underlying philosophy of care.

However, an important question to ask is where does family fit into this equation? If we believe that for any young person positive family relations, and engagement with community (and school) are all important for a successful transition to adulthood, is it possible to imagine how and whether family can figure into our response to youth homelessness?

We argue that one of the defining features of the Canadian response to youth homelessness is the very absence of the family; that the notion of reconnecting with, or repairing relationships with family, is largely ignored as a potential solution to youth homelessness. Once on the streets, the orientation is to help young people become self sufficient, rather than reconnect with family. Because we know that family conflict - and in many cases, physical, sexual and emotional abuse - is often (and usually) at the root of youth homelessness, we see family more as the problem rather than as potentially part of the solution. That said, we understand that family reconnection is no panacea. There are many situations in which youth reconciliation with family is impossible. *The commitment to the protection and wellbeing of homeless or at risk youth is paramount.*

If we are committed to ending youth homelessness, we need to understand the effectiveness of our responses in relation to the different subpopulations that are homeless or at risk of homelessness. In the face of an increasing demand for solutions to homelessness, it is crucial to know *what works, why it works and for whom it works.*

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 homeless youth with family. This report profiles a unique program – Eva’s Initiatives Family Reconnect Program - that aims to address this gap.

## About the Family Reconnect Program

The Family Reconnect Program (hereafter also referred to as FRP), part of Eva's Initiatives in Toronto, offers youth (between the ages of 16 and 24) at risk of leaving home or who are homeless and living in youth shelters, opportunities to rebuild relationships with family through participation in individual and/or family related therapy. All of this begins with a consideration of the safety and well being of the young person as paramount. With the help and support of Family Intervention counselors, youth and potentially family members, however defined<sup>1</sup>, work on the root causes of their struggles including family breakdown, conflict, communication difficulties, drug and alcohol abuse, mental health issues and life and parenting skills. By focusing on building positive family relationships where possible, the program helps young people and their parents develop tools, learn to access necessary supports and build towards long lasting, healthy and supportive relationships.

This program offers an example of how we might reconsider our approach to youth homelessness. It is acknowledged that for many young people who find themselves on the streets, reconciling with family may not be possible or advisable (and some young people, may have no family to go home to). However, for many others reconnecting with family may be of paramount importance in helping them move forward with their lives.

In this report, we offer a detailed review of the Family Reconnect program. We explore key features of how the program operates, what its underlying principles are, and why such a program is important. As part of our evaluation, we also look at the outcomes of the work of Family Reconnect; how and in what ways involvement in the program leads to positive changes in the lives of homeless and at-risk youth.

A key goal of this project is to create a framework that will allow others engaged in the response to youth homelessness to incorporate key elements of Family Reconnect into programmatic responses to youth homelessness elsewhere. That is, our purpose is to shed light on how such a program can be replicated in new settings, or more broadly incorporated

into effective systems level responses to youth homelessness. We consider the Family Reconnect program as an opportunity to reimagine our response to youth homelessness in a way that places greater emphasis on prevention. We do this because we believe that for many, if not most street youth, family *does* matter and that addressing family issues can help young people move into adulthood in a healthier way, and potentially move out of homelessness.

## Methodology

The research for this report was conducted between August 2009 and August 2010 in Toronto. Our goal was to undertake quantitative and qualitative research focusing on staff, homeless youth and their families. Our research team included Daphne Winland (York University), Stephen Gaetz (York University), Tara Patton and Melissa Atkinson-Graham. A research protocol was submitted for ethics review to York University's Human Participants Review Committee, and the approved guidelines for interviewing people who are homeless were followed. Approval was granted by the Human Participant Review Committee of York University in August, 2009.

We employed a variety of methods to gather information for this report. First, we conducted interviews with staff of Eva's Family Reconnect program (Hereafter referred to as FRP). This included all counseling staff, plus the Clinical Consultant who provides direction and support for the Family Reconnect team. Interviews were conducted as a group and individually on several occasions. We wanted to get a solid understanding of how the program works, as well as staff reflections on the impact their work has on the lives of the young people they serve.

Second, in order to best assess the impacts of FRP on those who participated in the program, the research team conducted a series of interviews with program clients – both youth and family members. The interview questions probed personal and family histories, the circumstances that led clients to the streets and eventually to the shelter at Eva's Place and their experiences of homelessness. They were then asked to discuss their involvement in FRP and reflect on its role in their journeys.

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1. The Family Reconnect program understands the diversity of forms that family can take, including single parent families, extended families, and those where the primary caregivers may be persons other than one's birth parents. A key feature of the program is that notions of family are defined by young people themselves.

Participants were approached by FRP staff about their willingness to be interviewed. This resulted in a total of seven youth clients and eight family clients volunteering to be interviewed for the project. Family members interviewed included parents, aunts and uncles and grandparents. The clients and family members identified for this study were not related to each other. The age range of youth clients (four males and three females) was 19-26, with an average age of 20. Four of the youth are still street involved and staying at the shelter and the rest have since left the shelter system and either live at home or on their own. Four of the clients were people of colour and all except one, who does not have legal status in Canada, is either a permanent resident or Canadian citizen. The socioeconomic profiles of the families of these youth range from low income to affluent professionals with post graduate education, pointing to the fact that homeless youth come from diverse backgrounds.

The third research method we used was to analyse the data that Eva's Initiatives collects on its clients. Over the past five years, Eva's has been recording information about clients who participate in the program. Much of this information

is on paper, in the form of counseling notes. However, FRP also enters a certain amount of client encounter data on the computer. Because of a number of challenges (the data management system has changed several times over the years, data entry has not been consistent, and for clients who have only been seen once by the program, data may be partial), the data available was not complete. As a result, we asked staff to retrospectively fill in some of the data gaps.

What resulted was a data set of over 1,000 individuals including young people and a broad range of family members who also participated in the program. For this report, we chose to analyse data relating to young people in the program, as our interest is in the outcomes for street youth. It should be noted that there are important outcomes for family members as well, but this was beyond the scope of our analysis.

Data on street youth were cleaned up, and our analysis focused on the young people who had two or more encounters with the program<sup>2</sup>. Data were analyzed using SPSS uni-variate and bi-variate procedures.

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2. It should be noted that for some young people, one encounter was sufficient to meet their needs re: reconnecting with family. For instance, the FRP team may have been asked to help a young person make contact with home, or to connect with an appropriate service.

## 2

# Reconnecting with Family: Why it matters?

## 2.1 Introduction

It is safe to say that in Canada, our response to youth homelessness largely ignores the potential role of family members in helping people move forward with their lives. The orientation of many, if not most services for homeless youth is to assume that young people are fleeing damaged family situations, and that to move forward with their lives, they must leave that world behind. The work is geared, then, to support independence and “self-sufficiency”<sup>3</sup>.

Yet are all young people who are homeless irrevocably alienated from all 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 this may include family?

In this section, we set out to provide some answers to these questions. To make sense of the significance of family in the lives of homeless youth and the potential benefits of programming that supports reconnecting with family and community, we begin with a review of the literature that highlights what we know about the circumstances that produce youth homelessness, and the role of the family in it. The research shows that while there is no doubt that many young people escape family conflict and in many cases abuse, this is not the experience for all young people, nor does it mean that those who do experience conflict and violence are necessarily without any positive family connections or relationships.

A comprehensive approach to youth homelessness should have as a core guiding principle the need to address, nurture and repair or reconcile family relations if and when possible.

As we will see, however, the Canadian response to youth homelessness is not organized or funded to prioritize and effectively respond to the potential of family and community reunification.

## 2.2 Understanding Youth Homelessness

The place to begin this conversation is with a discussion of what we mean by homelessness. We define youth homelessness as including young people under 25 who are “living in extreme poverty, and whose lives are characterized by the inadequacy of housing, income, health care supports and importantly, social supports that we typically deem necessary for the transition from childhood to adulthood”(Gaetz, 2009). This includes youth who are absolutely homeless and without shelter (those living on the streets, in parks, or on rooftops); youth who stay in emergency shelters or hostels), as well as the “hidden homeless” (youth staying temporarily with friends or family), and others who are described as under housed or “at risk” of homelessness.

The intersection of structural factors including poverty, an inadequate supply of affordable housing, domestic violence, discrimination and inadequate social and health services, with individual circumstances that may include family breakdown, trauma, job loss, mental health problems or addictions is key to a better understanding of the production of homelessness. In Canada, it is well understood that the rapid increase in homelessness in the 1990s was the direct result of a number of economic changes and policy decisions that led directly to the erosion of our affordable housing stock, the reduction in levels of income for many Canadians, and the undermining of social and health services<sup>4</sup>. The dismantling of our national housing

3. The definition of “self sufficiency”, most often defined as living independently, is highly problematic as people, homeless or not, rely on networks of support (family and community), continually throughout their lives.

4. For a more comprehensive discussion and analysis of these issues, see: Chunn, et al. 2004; Gaetz, 2010; Hulchanski, 2006; 2008; Moscovitch, 1997; Pomeroy, 2007; Shapcott, 2008.

strategy in the mid-1990s makes Canada unique amongst developed nations for the notable lack of federal government investment in affordable housing. Other nations such as the UK have developed strategic responses to youth homelessness. Street youth (also described as homeless youth, street kids) are a subset of the homeless population, under the age of 25 who are living independently of their parents and/or caregivers. The street youth population is distinct from the adult population in a number of ways. That is, the circumstances that produce homelessness – and following from this, the solutions – are different for young people. Most notably, young people rarely enter homelessness with experiences of independent living. Rather, most come from a situation where they were largely dependent upon adult caregivers. This means they have little experience managing money, securing shelter, or meeting other primary needs.

One of the problems with terms like “street youth” or “the homeless” is that they pave over important differences within the homeless population. Much of the research on youth homelessness shows that males typically outnumber females 2:1 (O’Grady & Gaetz, 2004). In addition, some ethno-racial populations tend to be over represented – most significantly, Aboriginal and black youth (CMHC, 2001; Gaetz & O’Grady, 2002; Springer, 2005). Finally, a significant percentage of homeless youth report being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered (Gattis, 2010; Higgitt et al., 2003). This is likely due to the fact that in the process of ‘coming out’, many young people experience homophobia, making it difficult and/or unsafe to remain with their families or communities of origin.

### **Causes of youth homelessness**

So, what exactly do we know about the pathways to homelessness for young people in Canada? Actually, there is quite a large body of research on this, which suggests that many factors are at play in youth homelessness; that there is no single or primary reason. The other thing to note about street youth homelessness is that the path to the streets is rarely produced by a single event, and more typically is part of a longer process that may involve repeated episodes of leaving home. Finally, many young people who are homeless continue to maintain ties with family members, friends and the communities they left. Ties with home are not always completely severed as a consequence of homelessness.

Exploring the pathways to homelessness should begin with an understanding of the significance of the home that is left behind, because, as we argue, for young people the meaning of home is different from that of adults. Idealized renderings of home often stress the protective and supportive environment and relationships that help young people move into adulthood, regardless of the real and imagined challenges of adolescence. It is a place to retreat, relax and gradually learn the privileges and responsibilities of adulthood. For young people who become homeless, their memories of home may be much more conflicted or traumatic.

In addition, a key factor in thinking about youth homelessness is that the home they are fleeing - or have been kicked out of - is rarely one for which they were responsible for or in control of. Street youth, unlike homeless adults, leave homes defined by relationships (both social and economic) in which they are typically dependent on their adult caregivers. Becoming homeless thus does not just mean a loss of stable housing, but rather, it means leaving home; an interruption and potential rupture in social relations with parents and caregivers, family members, friends, neighbours and community.

The reasons for this rupture need to be explored. While there are those who will insist that teenage runaways leave home in order to seek adventure, see the world and express their independence, the research on street youth in Canada and elsewhere suggests a range of other factors are much more significant. This research consistently identifies difficult family situations and conflict as being the key underlying factors in youth homelessness (Ballon, et al., 2002; Braitstein, et al. 2003; Caputo et al., 1997; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Janus, et al. 1987; Karabanow, 2004; Poirer, et al., 1999).

More specifically, there is extensive research in Canada and the United States that points to the fact that the majority of street youth come from homes where there were high levels of physical, sexual and emotional abuse, interpersonal violence and assault, parental neglect and exposure to domestic violence, etc. (Gaetz, O’Grady and Vaillancourt 1999; Karabanow, 2004; 2009; Tyler & Bersani, 2008; Tyler et al., 2001; Whitbeck and Simons, 1993; Whitbeck and Hoyt 1999; Van den Bree et al., 2009). In some cases, parental psychiatric disorders are also a factor (Andres-Lemay, et al. 2005). Furthermore, parental substance abuse is not only a predictor of youth homelessness but also of youth substance abuse (McMorris et al. 2002).

There are clear consequences to such early exposure to violence and abuse in the home and in the community, including low self-esteem, higher rates of depression and suicide attempts, increased risky sexual behaviour, substance abuse, difficulty in forming attachments and of course, running away or being kicked out of the home (Tyler et al. 2000; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997; Tyler & Bersani, 2008; Stein et al., 2002; Van den Bree et al., 2009). Those who report early experiences of violence and abuse in the home are also more likely to be victims of crime, sexual abuse and exploitation by adults, and this is particularly true if one is street involved (Baron 1997; Browne and Bassuk 1997; Kipke, et al., 1997; Tyler et al. 2000; Whitbeck et al.1997).

Other strains on the family may stem from the challenges young people themselves are facing. Personal substance use, mental health problems, learning disabilities, disengagement with the education system and dropping out, criminal behaviour and involvement in the justice system are key factors. The causes of such behaviours, however, are complex and may be difficult to disentangle from some of the stresses associated with parental behaviour identified above (Mallet, et al., 2005). In other words, conflict with parents can result from a number of different stressors, and the inability of children and/or their parents to adequately cope with the challenges the other is facing.

One of the key indicators of family dysfunction is the high percentage of homeless youth who report previous involvement with child welfare and protection services, including young people who have become wards of the State and live in foster care or group homes (Eberle, et al. 2001; Fitzgerald, 1995; Flynn & Biro, 1998; Minty, 1999; Novac, et al., 2002; Raychaba, 1988; Serge, et al., 2002). Many young people have been in care for years, and some report being in a series of foster homes before becoming homeless. In many jurisdictions, gaps in the child welfare system mean that young people 16 and older may have great difficulty in accessing services and supports (Serge, et al., 2002). System failures in child welfare – including the fact that young people can ‘opt out’ but not back in, and that young people can age out of care – means that for many young people the transition from child welfare support is not to self-sufficiency, but to homelessness. And for many of these young people, there is, then, no “home” to return to.

Structural factors such as poverty, low income and unemployment also play a role. It has been argued that

changing economic conditions, deindustrialization and neo-liberal government policies have undermined and destabilized local institutions, including families (Clatts & Rees, 1999). The reduction in financial and social supports for low income and otherwise marginalized families contributes to stress that may result in some of the contributing factors identified with youth homelessness, including child abuse, parental mental health problems and substance use. In addition, poverty may become a “push” factor leading young people to leave home, because keeping a teenager at home and in school may not be a financially viable option for some families.

Discrimination is also a factor that contributes to homelessness. It is well established that the experience of racism and poverty combined, can contribute to school disengagement and failure, criminality and gang involvement. The ensuing conflicts with parents, community members and law enforcement officials can lead to homelessness. Homophobia is also implicated in youth homelessness, demonstrated by the fact that young people who are sexual minorities are clearly overrepresented in the street youth population. Several studies have identified that 20-40% of street youth identify as gay, lesbian or transgendered, a rate much higher than in the general population (Gattis, 2009; Higgitt et al.,2003). Homophobic responses to the ‘coming out’ process have the potential to create or exacerbate tensions between the young person in question, their family, friends and / or community (Rew, et al., 2002).

The pathways to homelessness are complex and shaped by a range of individual and structural factors that result in unique circumstances for different individuals. While the stresses and strains discussed above are experienced by a large number of young people, not all of them will become homeless, or remain homeless. Often it is a significant event precipitating a crisis that leads a young person to run away, or be kicked out of the home. Such events can range from conflicts with parents, violent encounters, to school failure and involvement with institutional authorities such as the police. Some research suggests that many teenagers may leave home under difficult circumstances, but a large number will eventually return home. In a large scale study of teenagers and housing distress in seacoast towns in the northeastern US, Vissing & Diament (1995) demonstrated that 20% were at risk of becoming homeless, and that between 5 and 10% had been homeless for a period in the past year.

Street youth who are chronically homeless typically have a history marked by repeated episodes of home leaving. That is, they may run away (or be kicked out) but will return home, only to leave home again. For different young people, the path to becoming homeless does not take the form of a straight line, but is preceded by a series of conflicts and crises, in some cases beginning in early childhood. For most street youth, then, homelessness is not merely an event or episode, but rather a process that will, without intervention, result in a degree of social exclusion that makes the transition to adulthood highly challenging and problematic.

### 2.3 The Family as the ‘problem’

The complex and difficult family backgrounds that many street youth are fleeing has a profound influence on their experience of homelessness, mental health, substance use, criminal behaviour and violence. As the research above suggests, family conflict, including high levels of abuse, is a clear contributor to youth homelessness for a high percentage of street youth.

Our understanding of youth homelessness is very much framed, then, by the notion of the family as a ‘problem’; that family abuse and conflict are at the core of the young person’s experience of homeless. The fact that such a high percentage of street youth leave homes characterized by violence and abuse should give one pause to consider whether reuniting alienated youth with their families is desirable, or even possible.

Yet, in identifying problems within families as a key determinant of youth homelessness, we must be careful how we generalize this knowledge and moreover how we apply it to practice. We need, then, to explore further the nature and significance of family relations for street youth. For instance, what do we know about how the dynamics of family relations differ for street youth compared to other young people? Are *all* relations within a family unit problematic, and for whom? Are all fractured relations irredeemable? Does – and should – homelessness mean an end to the role of the family in these young people’s lives?

The point is that we profoundly limit our understanding of youth homelessness, and how we respond to this population, if family is framed only in terms of dysfunction, then fractured family relations cannot be reconciled, even partially.

In reframing our understanding of the families of street youth, we need to consider that the **family units defined as problematic are themselves complex and diverse in composition**. That is, young people who become homeless come from different kinds of families. Some come from two parent homes. Some live with birth parents, step parents and / or adoptive parents. Others are raised by single parents, grandparents, older siblings or other caregivers. Households may include siblings (or not), extended family members, and others who are not directly related to the individual, but who nevertheless may play a key role in a young person’s life.

Family composition – and relations – may also change over time. Personal histories of homeless youth reveal that many move through different family situations throughout their life – from originally living with birth parent(s), to living with relatives such as grand parents, or in foster care. The point is that there is no single version of the family, and that complex social and cultural configurations of families mean that young people will have different kinds of relations with different family members.

A second point, related to the first, is that **many if not most young people exist in a web of family relations, some of which may be problematic, others which may not**. When one uses the term “family dysfunction”, “family conflict” or “abusive home”, many people become implicated in the tensions between the young person who becomes homeless, and their caregivers, other family members and community. A person may experience conflict (even violence) with one or more members of their family, but may have positive relations with others. Family conflict thus does not necessarily mean that young people have difficult relationships with all family members, all of the time. This also means that even if a young person comes from an unsafe household where there is abuse, there may in fact be potentially redeemable relationships with some family members, for instance, aunts, uncles, cousins and/ or grandparents.

Third, it is important to consider that **for a significant percentage of street youth, serious family conflict and/ or abuse may not be the driver or defining factor in their leaving home**. Canadian research has been useful in helping us understand pathways into youth homelessness. Most notably, research in Canada consistently reports that about two thirds of street youth identify having experienced physical, sexual or emotional abuse at home, and that this is a key factor in

contributing to their homelessness. However, there is often a tendency to generalize such conflict – and the experience of abuse in particular – to the street youth population as a whole. Much of the street youth literature focuses on family dysfunction and its impact on homelessness. There has not been the same attention paid to the analysis of young people who do not identify such abuse as a significant factor in their pathway to the streets. Where there is no abuse, however, there may still be conflict.

Finally, an important point to consider is that ***relationships characterized by conflict are not always irreconcilable***. It goes without saying that human relations often involve conflict of one kind or another, and this is especially true of family relations. When conflicts become more serious there may be opportunities to improve things. In some cases, situations resolve themselves as individuals grow and adapt. In other cases, people learn to tolerate a certain level of conflict. Sometimes people in conflict require the chance to live temporarily apart, to cool off or to think things through. Where conflict becomes really entrenched, there may in the end be a need for outside interventions such as individual and family therapy, or mediation. The point is that even when conflicts lead to young people leaving home, we should not forego the possibility that those conflictual relations can improve.

Conflict, and in some cases violence and abuse, clearly contributes to youth homelessness. Interventions are required in cases where relations are defined by violence and abuse, as the safety and security of young people should always be paramount. When such interventions fail to protect young people or provide a safe alternative, homelessness is often the outcome.

This knowledge should not lead us to frame family as a 'problem', and then disregard family as potentially being part of a solution to youth homelessness. For many youth who find themselves on the streets, the conflict that resulted in their homelessness could be ameliorated through proper interventions and supports. And, for those who *do* come from abusive backgrounds, it is important to remember that while some relationships hold little hope for reconciliation, the potential for redeemable relations with at least some family members exists. The streets and shelter system should never be the only options.

## 2.4 Becoming Homeless

When young people become homeless, they enter a new world, defined not so much by the families and the communities they left, but rather, by the street youth serving agencies they encounter, and the new social networks they form with other street youth. For most people, becoming homeless must be understood as a traumatic event. Not only do young people leave their households, but they may experience other losses as a consequence – the loss of friends, family, community, important adult relationships outside of the family (teachers, counselors, physicians and nurses, coaches), of all things familiar. They may also drop out of school, quit a job, and cut ties with organizations and activities they enjoy and which may hold a great deal of meaning for them. Leaving home comes at a great cost and is a most difficult transition, especially for young people who may have little experience in dealing with adult responsibilities such as running a household, taking care of bills, setting up doctor appointments, etc.

The experience of homelessness thrusts young people into a new world which, on the one hand, may feel liberating – the freedom of being away from the conflicts and tensions that led to homelessness – but in the end winds up being very limiting. We do know that the longer young people remain homeless, the greater the negative outcomes. When one is homeless, health inevitably suffers (Boivan, et al., 2001; Ensign & Bell, 2004; Rew, 2002). Young people who are homeless suffer nutritionally during a crucial time of physical growth and development. Unfortunately, the inability to consistently obtain proper quantities of nutritious food occurs whether they get all their food from money they earn or from homeless charitable services (Tarasuk, et al, 2009). In addition, mental health and addictions become more challenging the longer one remains homeless. Young people also become more depressed (likely exacerbated by the losses described above), and are more likely to contemplate or attempt suicide. The relationships that young people develop with other homeless youth are often described in terms of being a 'street family'; a caring substitute for a real family. Unfortunately, however, these relations are not always based on trust, and in the end become limiting, because while the knowledge and connections that street youth have may be useful for surviving on the streets, they are of limited value in helping young people develop long term trusting, healthy relationships.

There is very little research that compares the outcomes for young people who return home after a period of homelessness, with those who do not. However, the research that does exist (from the United States) shows that young people who reunify with their families have more positive outcomes than those who do not, including those who manage to secure their own housing. A study by Thompson, Pollio and Bitner (2002) found that those who returned home after a shelter stay reported “more positive outcomes in school, employment, self-esteem, criminal behaviour and family relationships than adolescents discharged to other locations”. Other research shows that those who fail to reunify are more likely to have longer shelter stays, increased sense of hopelessness, pessimistic tendencies and had more suicidal thoughts and behaviours (Teare, et al., 1992; Teare et al, 1994).

What factors predict successful reunification? Sanna Thompson and her team have explored this question. Perhaps not surprisingly, young people who run away from homes with family conflict, but where differences are not considered irreconcilable, are more likely to return home. Young people who are kicked out are more likely to have been involved with the criminal justice system and/ or the child welfare system, to have had addictions problems and dropped out of school, and have greater difficulty reconnecting with family. They therefore require a different kind of intervention. Thompson argues that if they receive more comprehensive and intensive services over a long period of time that focus on addressing problems associated with school, criminal justice and addictions, they are more likely to return home. Also, families must be engaged, and that “efforts should focus on educating parents regarding ways to attend to the developmental needs of their children” (Thompson, Safyer and Pollio, 2001: 169). Finally, they argued that for some homeless youth who are particularly independent and who see their families as irrelevant, reunification is much more challenging and a more appropriate intervention would be to connect young people with services and supports in the communities from which they came, or the communities they have adopted.

## 2.5 Responding to Youth Homelessness

### The Canadian Response

It almost goes without saying that young people who are fleeing difficult or problematic family backgrounds would be better off if they were able to retain strong ties to their communities, schools and families while their problems are being sorted out. It can be argued, however, that the way we approach youth homelessness in Canada does not prioritize or even mildly support maintaining these links.

An effective response to youth homelessness would balance prevention, emergency responses, and transitional supports to rapidly move people out of homelessness. Preventive strategies range from working with families, schools and the community to either help keep young people at home through resolving or mitigating family problems, or alternatively, providing young people with the supports they need to live independently in a safe and planned way, ideally with community (and potentially, family) relations intact. Prevention also means that other institutions – including corrections, mental health and health care and child welfare services – work effectively to ensure that young people leaving their care have necessary supports in place (including housing) and do not end up homeless. A truly preventive approach requires coordination of services, the ability to identify when young people may be at risk of becoming homeless, and a commitment to intervene when young people are at risk of homelessness.

Elsewhere in the world – most notably Australia and the United Kingdom – preventive approaches are central to their responses to youth homelessness. The Family Connect program of Australia is not an agency-based service, but rather, is a program model integrated into schools and other community-based services that young people and their families engage. Through early detection and assessment, interventions are designed to help young people and their families manage and resolve conflicts (through mediation), so that young people either remain at home, or if this is not possible, are able to move into supportive housing in a planned way (Australian Government, 2003, 2009; RPR Consulting, 2003; Evans & Shaver, 2001). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, there are a range of programs in place that focus on preventing youth homelessness through family mediation and other interventions, and they also work to rapidly re-house young people who do become homeless,

either with their families or in the community (Quilgars et al., 2008; Pawson et al, 2007; Shelter, 2004; HQNS, 2004). The preventive models of these two countries (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5) offer thoughtful examples of the ways in which the principles of family reconnection might be integrated into a radically reformed approach to youth homelessness in Canada.

An effective and strategic response to youth homelessness in Canada should place priority on prevention and rapid transitions out of homelessness, with the emergency response in place to do what it is designed to do; provide short term supports when other systems break down. Unfortunately, this does not describe the Canadian response to youth homelessness. Youth homelessness is not addressed in a strategic or coordinated way at either the national or provincial levels, and rarely at the municipal level. It is certainly not the case in Toronto.

Some programs exist in Canada that help young people who do become homeless to move off the streets. This includes programs like *Eva's Phoenix* in Toronto, *Blade Runners* in Vancouver, *The Doorway* and the *Boys and Girls Club* in Calgary, *Warm Up Winnipeg*, and *Choices for Youth* in Newfoundland. Many of these programs focus on training and employment as a pathway housing independence.

However, if one were to characterize the Canadian response to homelessness, it would be that most of our effort and investment goes into emergency response. This 'emergency services' model that characterizes the street youth sector in many ways replicates the broader homelessness sector, except with a different age mandate. Across Canada, there are a range of services and programs for homeless youth, including shelters, drop-ins, employment programs and health services for instance, intended to help young people meet their needs once they become homeless. Typically these programs are operated by NGOs, and are community based. While this has resulted in the development of a number of excellent community-based programs across the country, these agencies and programs are not integrated into a broader strategic response that works to keep people off the streets in the first place, or to intervene quickly to either get them back home or obtain the supports they need to live independently. There are complex reasons

for this, including an historical emphasis on community-based services rather than a strategic systems approach and a complacent acceptance by politicians (and arguably, much of the general public) that the fragmented web of street youth services takes care of the problem. Emergency services are for the most part funded to provide support for people *while* they are homeless, and this shapes the orientation of the services themselves.

What would street youth services look like if they were funded on the basis of *preventing* youth homelessness, or worked effectively to help rapidly move youth out of homelessness? In spite of the presence of some promising models that focus on the latter, it is still the case that most services are funded to only provide supports for people while they are in a state of homelessness.<sup>5</sup>

There is a greater concentration of services for people who are homeless in large urban areas. While some cities have a number of street youth serving agencies, many communities do not. This means that when many young people are homeless, they are forced to leave their communities and migrate to larger centres, thus weakening or severing important ties and supports in the communities they have left.

There is no consistent approach to youth homelessness across Canada. Where services exist, it is not clear the degree to which they are designed to meet the special needs of adolescents, which are indeed distinct from those of adults. The street youth sector typically serves young people between the ages of 16 and 24. Currently, the sector does not have the mandate to serve those under 16 years of age. The needs of adolescents (under 18) are considerably different than those of people over the age of 18, and are best served in a supportive environment with consistent adult mentoring, educational opportunities, and safety.

Perhaps more significantly, the needs of young people under the age of 16 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are not well met at all, and are often deemed to be beyond the scope of the street youth sector. While these children are legally under the mandate of child protection services, these interventions are not adequate to prevent youth

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5. Most shelters in Canada are funded on a per diem basis. That is, they receive funding based on how many beds are filled per night, regardless of the fact that their overhead (staffing) remains constant. Most drop-ins and shelters are funded to provide services that address people's most immediate needs, including a place to sleep, shelter from extreme weather, food, perhaps clothing or hygiene supplies, and in some cases a small amount of money.

homelessness, nor are interventions adequately resourced in schools, corrections and mental health services. While there is mounting evidence that the younger one is when one becomes homeless, the worse the outcomes (Public Interest, 2009; Gaetz, O'Grady & Buccieri, 2010), including greater risk of victimization and exploitation (hence more difficulty getting off the streets), there is no coordinated, strategic (and certainly not effective) response in Canada to the needs of youth.

### Self sufficiency vs. returning home

While the street youth sector is mandated to work with young people, a key feature of the dominant service delivery model is its emphasis on giving young people the knowledge and skills required to live independently. In addition to meeting immediate needs and providing a level of care, the key program goals of most street youth serving agencies (if they have a program beyond meeting immediate needs) is to provide instrumental support to develop capacity within individuals to become independent, and move towards economic self sufficiency<sup>6</sup>.

*This orientation reflects the degree to which the notion of the dysfunctional family sits not only at the centre of how we think about youth homelessness, but how we design services to meet their needs.* The explicit focus of youth serving agencies on independence and self sufficiency draws from an implicit logic that family and home life is irredeemably damaged beyond repair and that there is no going back. From this perspective, the notion of family and reconnection disappears or is ignored. Family is deemed to be part of the past, and 'moving forward' is framed in terms of independence and self sufficiency. This in spite of clear evidence that while many street youth do come from difficult and abusive family backgrounds, a large number have potentially redeemable relationships with at least some family members, not to mention the fact that many wish to return home.

A strategy to support youth moving towards self-sufficiency needn't ignore the importance of family relations. In fact, any healthy self-sufficient adolescent or adult necessarily depends on others, and linkages with family and community become part of this web of support. Self sufficiency can be supported through reconnecting with family. Unfortunately, family

and recovery of family (and community) relations is not at the centre of our thinking about services for homeless youth in Canada.

### Are there alternatives?

In spite of the fact that there is not a strong philosophical orientation or programmatic approach to preventing youth homelessness in Canada, there are some important exceptions. In communities as diverse as Abbotsford BC, Kelowna BC, Edmonton and Calgary AB, Merrickville ON, and Halifax NS, there are now programs in place that help point the way in terms of how we might reorient our approach (See Appendix A). Like Eva's Family Reconnect, these programs focus on prevention, family mediation and family therapy as part of community-based front line services. Elsewhere in the world, however, there are interesting examples of how the notion of family reconnection can be successfully incorporated into strategic systems level responses to youth homelessness, most notably in Australia and the UK.

While these programmatic responses provide interventions to help young people who become homeless reunite with family and/or community, they also place great emphasis on prevention, and extend their focus to young people well below the age of 16. In fact, there is much to be said for doing whatever is possible to prevent young people from becoming homeless in the first place (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2010; Public Interest, 2010). There is evidence that the emergency response to homelessness is expensive when compared to other alternatives, including providing people with affordable housing (Eberle, et al., 2001; Halifax, 2006; Shapcott, 2007). For young people who experience homelessness, the benefits of prevention and alternatives to being stuck in the condition of homelessness are potentially greater. In Canada, we take it as axiomatic that for young people to become healthy contributing members to society, they need a good education, strong adult support, and time to grow into adulthood. Why does the same logic not apply to homeless youth?



6. A 2006 study conducted in Ottawa identified this as a key ethos of street youth serving agencies (Klodowsky, Aubry and Farrell, 2006).

A strong preventive approach is not only beneficial for individual young people, but is good for society as a whole. There are many good ideas on how to accomplish this. Countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia (and it should be noted that the United States is moving in this direction) which take a more systems-based and strategic approach to the issue, place a strong emphasis on prevention, and build this into a systems-wide approach. Prevention in their terms, refers not only to doing what is necessary to keep people from becoming homeless in the first place, but also to strategies that rapidly re-house people in the event they do become homeless.

At the centre of this prevention work is early intervention (which means working with schools, social services, health services, etc.) and family mediation. Indeed, intervention in Australia starts at age 12, much sooner than in Canada (16 yrs of age). The ethos of this approach is that family and community are not things that young people must move away from in their quest for independence and self-sufficiency, but rather efforts should be made to improve family connections and relations (where possible) and young people do best in healthy and inclusive communities.

It is difficult for the existing youth homelessness sector alone – focused as it is on emergency services – to take on the task of preventing youth homelessness. Individual agencies are not designed, structured or funded to address the issue of youth homelessness. However, with the necessary shifts in focus and priorities from all sectors, productive solutions are possible.

## 2.6 Conclusion

Research has contributed greatly to our understanding of the causes of youth homelessness, as well as the situations and experiences of young people once they find themselves on the streets. This research does indeed highlight the degree to which family conflict – and in many cases, violence and abuse – contribute to youth homelessness. We know, for instance, that between 60-70% of street youth are fleeing abuse, be it physical, sexual or emotional. Many street youth leave home unable to cope with the mental health and addictions of family members. A large percentage have had some involvement with child welfare services, and many have spent some of their childhood and youth either in group homes or foster care. Finally, for many youth, there is no family to go home to. Their

separation and disconnection with family happened at an early age, and attachments to family and relatives are extremely weak.

The reality of the damaged past of many street youth has had an impact on the systems that we have created to support homeless youth. The response to youth homelessness in Canada has been developed based on an understanding of the degree to which fractured family relations lead young people to the streets. This logic underlies how we think of emergency services, and our propensity to focus on helping street youth become self-sufficient.

What is unfortunate is that this same logic has led to the family being largely written out of the picture as part of the solution to youth homelessness. While acknowledging the troubled family histories of many street youth, we need to consider that a sizeable percentage are not fleeing family violence and abuse (30-40%), and even those who are may have some relationships with other family members worth saving. Helping young people repair damaged relations, or build on healthy relations still existent can and should be part of our response to youth homelessness.

We know from examples elsewhere in the world that effective, preventive responses to youth homelessness can include, as a central tenet, the notion that family matters, and thus should be part of the solution to youth homelessness. These approaches, and this kind of thinking, also have a place in Canada.

# 3

## Eva's Initiatives Family Reconnect Program

### 3.1 Introduction

Numerous organizations within the homeless sector are dedicated to working with and supporting homeless youth to become independent and self-sufficient. Eva's Initiatives has played a leading role in Canada in developing innovative responses to youth homelessness. Through its three shelters (Eva's Place, Eva's Satellite, and Eva's Phoenix) the organization strives to provide youth with a supportive, diverse, and welcoming environment. The Family Reconnect program is one of Eva's most innovative programs, with its focus on supporting the reconnection of young people with family and community.

The underlying ethos of Family Reconnect is that family is important to *everyone*, and 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.

In this section, we introduce Eva's Family Reconnect program. First, we present the context in which Family Reconnect operates, describing how the program works within Eva's Initiatives, and more broadly, as a service operating as part of Toronto's response to youth homelessness. From here, we provide a program overview that looks at the goals of the program and its structure (how it is staffed, etc). This is followed by a detailed description of the program itself, and how the different elements - from intake and assessment, to individual and family counseling, to group work - all contribute to improving the lives of young people who become homeless in Toronto.

### 3.2 Program Overview

Eva's Initiatives is a not for profit charitable organization that strives to help homeless youth, or those who are at imminent risk of becoming homeless, live productive, self-sufficient, and

healthy lives (Family Reconnect Program Strategic Plan, 2009). In Toronto, Eva's offers a range of highly innovative programs through each of its three main sites. Eva's Phoenix is a transitional housing and training facility located in downtown Toronto and houses up to 50 youth at a time in a supportive housing environment. Eva's Satellite, located in the north end of the city, is a harm reduction emergency shelter with 32 beds. Eva's Place, the first shelter developed by Eva's Initiatives, opened in 1994, and is the home of the Family Reconnect program. This co-ed shelter regularly provides emergency accommodation for up to 17 males and 15 females under the age of 25. Eva's Place is located next to a police station in a suburban, light industrial area in the north east end of the city, next to a major highway.

### The Goal of Family Reconnect

The shelters supported by Eva's Initiatives are dedicated to helping youth stabilize their lives by providing them with a supportive, diverse, and safe environment. Like other shelters, the goal is to help young people become independent and self-sufficient. In 2001, the staff and management at Eva's recognized the importance of family in the lives of street youth, and that many of the youth staying in their shelters and utilizing their services, maintained some contact with their families, and/or expressed a strong willingness to reconcile with their families.

As a result, the Family Reconnect program was established with a mandate to assist young people aged 16-24 interested in addressing and potentially reconciling differences with their families (Family Reconnect Program Strategic Plan, 2009). The foundational principle of the program is that family is significant in everyone's lives, and that this is equally true for street youth.

The main focus of the Family Reconnect program is to offer individual and family support for youth who are in the shelter

system, and those who are still living in the community but are at risk of becoming homeless. Working with young people who are interested in developing healthier relationships with their families, staff offer individual and family counseling, referrals to other agencies and services, psychiatric assessments, psychological assessments for learning disabilities, as well as accompaniment and advocacy assistance.

There is no single or set outcome expected from the work with the Family Reconnect Program. Young people may improve their relationships with family members to the point of being able to return home. For others, moving back home is not possible or advisable, but moving back to the community with the support of family members may be a realistic goal. For others still, there may be no significant improvement in relations with family, but young people may be helped to reconcile themselves to this fact, allowing them to move forward in their lives in a meaningful way.

## Funding

The Family Reconnect Program received its original funding through the federally funded, but municipally administered SCPI program (Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative, now the Homeless Partnering Initiative (HPI). Furnishings were also provided by IKEA. Past support has also come from the Canadian Tire Real Estate Division. Since then, the core funding for the Family Reconnect program continues to come from the City of Toronto (supported by HPI), with some additional private support from the Canadian Tire Corporation.

The program's annual budget is currently \$224,000, the majority of which goes to cover salaries and benefits for three full time staff, consultancy fees (e.g. psychiatric assessments), as well as program costs including staff training and travel (HPI Final Reporting Form, 2009). Approximately \$17,000 of the budget is used to cover overhead costs, including building operations, audit/legal/bank charges, office supplies and materials, and administration and staff support. In 2009, the budget funded Family Reconnect Program services for 241 clients.

## Staffing

Since the launch of the Family Reconnect program in 2001, the program has grown from one staff member, who was initially an employee of Eva's Place shelter, to three full time

*"The goals of the Family Reconnect Program are always to shift the relationship between the youth and their family, and how the youth define family. So, it's different now, from when they chose to leave home or were kicked out. The program's strong belief is that family are significant, and often the most significant people in young peoples, in all peoples lives. And our goal is to improve those relationships so that the youth either moves home or moves to the community with family support".*

Family Intervention counselor

staff. The Supervisor is responsible for program development and management, but also maintains clinical responsibilities. The Family Intervention counselors have a broad range of responsibilities, including individual and family counseling for youth and their families, case management of youth with mental health issues, as well as consulting regularly with shelter staff. They also lead weekly group programs with youth who reside in Eva's Place.

The work of the Family Reconnect team is supported by a *Clinical Consultant*. The Clinical Consultant rarely deals directly with clients involved in the Family Reconnect program. Rather, his role is to provide clinical supervision to the Family Intervention team as well as to occasionally conduct client assessments. This includes both case specific consultations, and general guidance to promote professional growth and development.

In addition to fulfilling his clinical duties, the consultant provides input with respect to program development, program growth (which includes program referrals), as well as team dynamics. The role of the clinical consultant for a program like Family Reconnect is vital for both client and staff related reasons. Not only is clinical direction, advice and assistance critical to working with a challenging client population, it also provides an additional level of accountability and expertise (interview with clinical consultant, 2010).

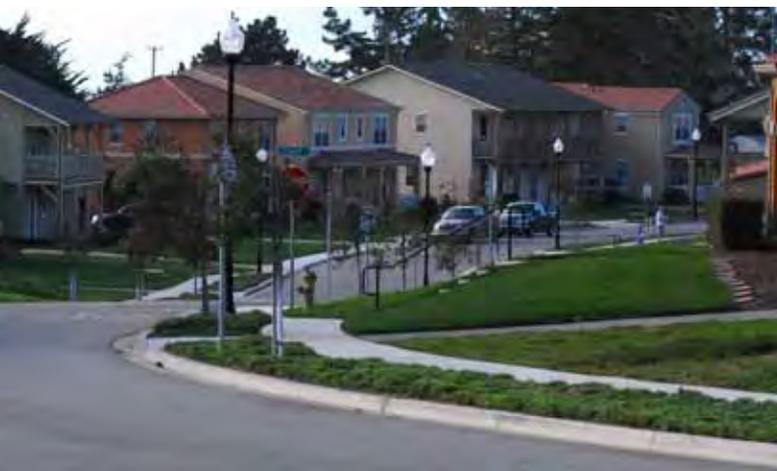
## The Local Context

The Family Reconnect program must also be understood in relation to the broader street youth serving sector. The City of Toronto is Canada's largest city, and arguably has the greatest

number of street youth serving agencies, including nine shelters, several drop-ins, health services, and employment services. However, in spite of the breadth of services offered, the array of street youth serving agencies do not work in a systemic or integrated way. Rather, it is a fragmented network of community-based services. While many of these programs are excellent, the whole unfortunately is no more than the sum of its parts. There is no strategic approach to solving youth homelessness in Toronto and the emphasis of investment is on emergency services, rather than on prevention and / or transitions out of homelessness.

This broader context is important to understand, as the current Family Reconnect program works within – and is profoundly limited by – the existing environment in which agencies typically operate quite independently, where collaboration is difficult and challenging, and systems-level responses are not encouraged, supported or funded.

In an environment characterized by an integrated network of services, and a commitment to ending youth homelessness that privileges prevention and transitions out of homelessness (where agencies are funded to do this work, rather than ‘fill beds’), the approach to Family Reconnect might look quite different.



### 3.3 How the Program Works

#### i) Client Intake

Young people (16-24 yrs of age) and families come into contact with Family Reconnect through a number of channels. For most clients, the first point of contact is through staff working at Eva’s Place shelter. In fact, the Family Reconnect staff rely heavily on referrals by front line shelter staff, who will inform the FRP team of cases in which a youth might be interested in and/or can potentially benefit from youth and/or family counseling. In these cases, youth are not obliged to consult with the Family Reconnect Program staff but are made aware of the resource.

In some cases, parents and/or other family members may directly contact the FRP before a young person becomes homeless. They may request the involvement or intervention of the FRP staff, however, counseling may only proceed with a youth’s explicit consent. This kind of preventive work often involves young people under the age of 16.

Other sources of client intake include referrals through external agencies, such as child services, community agencies (including those serving street youth), hospitals or health facilities and in some cases agencies outside of Toronto. Family Reconnect Program staff occasionally liaise with Toronto Police Services, specifically 33 Division located near Eva’s Place shelter. Officers who engage in family disputes may refer young people and parents to the Family Reconnect program.

#### ii) Casework and Counseling

The client-centred casework model of the Family Reconnect program involves a range of interconnected activities designed to help clients deal with problems, improve relationships and lead to positive outcomes for young people and their families. A three-pronged approach to counseling involves individual counseling with youth clients, family counseling involving youth and family member(s), and counseling with family members separately. It is important to understand then that in many, if not most cases, casework involves more than the clients by themselves, and can include a range of other significant persons in the young person’s life, including parents, siblings, and other relatives such as aunts/uncles, cousins and grandparents.

Each case is managed by a member of the Family Reconnect team. The Family Reconnect counselor is responsible for providing the client and family with counseling, support in accessing services, referrals to appropriate community, social and health services and, where appropriate, diagnostic assessment (for mental illness, addictions and / or learning disabilities).

The key work of the Family Reconnect program is counseling based on a systems theory perspective. According to this theory, individuals and social groups are enmeshed in dynamic systems that provide a context for understanding the situations that impact on individuals, and how they make decisions in such contexts. Counseling may involve instrumental and/or therapeutic counseling, as well as family counseling. **Instrumental counseling** provides someone with information and resources to undertake tasks, such as obtaining a health card, learning how a system works, writing a resume, etc. In the case of Family Reconnect, it may also involve helping someone initiate contact with family members, or facilitating the process of moving home. **Therapeutic counseling**, on the other hand, involves helping a client come to a better understanding of their challenges, strengths and relationships. The focus is often on the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of the client, with the understanding that greater knowledge in these areas will help clients make positive changes.

*“We are a program of many hats. We do a lot of the mental health support, and programs, and provide some expertise around the mental health stuff. It’s hard to describe because we have many hats so, it’s not always about providing counseling to the youth, it’s about supporting them and the staff in the shelter. We support the youth in the shelter, we help them get some community support, help with their medications, getting them to their appointments. But the youth who live in the shelter, it is really not about the counseling, it’s about getting them support.”*

Family Intervention counselor

For young people who participate in the FRP, the content or focus of counseling – what actually gets dealt with – is quite broad and varied. Because family conflict is at the root of most youth homelessness, this is often the original focus of the work. In some cases, clients are interested in renewing contact with

family members, and the work begins with an attempt to learn about the causes and potential pathways to resolution and/or reconciliation. This may involve eventual reconnection with family members or recognition of the need to break ties either temporarily or permanently. The staff is committed to ensuring that whatever decisions are reached, these occur in a safe, secure space where family and youth clients can work towards moving forward with a healthier perspective on relationships and coping strategies.

Counseling may also involve family members. That is, family counseling sessions may be arranged where the goal of the work is mediation and the development of a more empathetic understanding of the issues that underlie family conflict. The key approach here is **Family Therapy**. Based on Family Systems Theory (Sholevar, 2003), the idea is to work with individuals (in this case youth), in conjunction with their families and caregivers in order to nurture and promote change. This approach suggests that individual problems are often best addressed by drawing in family members and involving them in solutions. Strategies include helping family members understand relationship patterns, often by revisiting specific conflicts, and helping them consider other ways of addressing the conflict, as well as, come up with new ways of thinking about relationships, and engaging with each other. While young people and families may enter therapy in crisis, the work actually involves going beyond the immediate issue to look at the big picture, and dig deeper to identify and work on underlying problems.

Counseling may also occur with family members alone, as in many cases the key work that has to be done is not so much with the client, but with the family member who has issues and challenges to address. In some cases this work is to help family members understand their child better, especially in cases where conflict stems from undiagnosed or untreated mental health and/or addictions issues, LGBTQ issues including homophobia in communities schools and families, or in some cases learning disabilities.

### iii) Mental Health Problems, Addictions and Disability

There are a large number of youth (and families) for whom mental health issues may be at the centre of (or outcome of) family conflict. It is well understood that young people who

are homeless are more likely to experience mental health problems, ranging from depression to more serious mental health disorders including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder (for more details, refer to Chapter 2 of this report). Many also struggle with addictions and in some cases these occur alongside mental health problems. Still others suffer from disabilities, including ADD and ADHD. The staff at Family Reconnect echo concerns raised by others in the street youth sector, that the number of young people who are presenting with serious mental health problems and addictions has been increasing in recent years.

All psychological assessment recommendations that include a suspected mental health diagnosis, must be confirmed by a psychiatrist. Only a psychologist and/or a psychiatrist can make an official mental health, developmental or learning disability diagnosis. The FRP staff access these professional services at a number of facilities including the Centre for Addiction and

Mental Health, Surrey Place, Central Toronto Youth Services' New Outlook Program as well as the psychiatrist on staff at Eva's Satellite. The FRP now has a psychiatrist on staff that visits Eva's Place on a weekly basis. Psychological testing is paid for by a parent's insurance plan (when possible) or through the Family Reconnect Program's budget.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

Eva's Family Reconnect program is designed to provide supports for young people who want to reengage their families and communities. In existence for less than ten years, the Family Reconnect team has developed an innovative and flexible approach to working with young people and their families. In the following chapter, we will draw on our research to assess the program and highlight its strengths and some key challenges.

# 4

## Understanding the Impact of Family Reconnect

### 4.1 Introduction

There is a strong and compelling case to be made for providing street involved youth with the supports that they need to reconnect with family, if that is what they (or their families) desire, and if it is indeed possible. In this chapter, we offer a more in depth analysis of the Family Reconnect program, and present our findings from data (both quantitative and qualitative) gathered in our study of the Family Reconnect program, its clients, their families and staff.

Our goal is to deepen our knowledge of the way the program works, the experience of clients – including young people and family members – as participants in the program, and the perspectives of staff. We are interested in how needs are assessed, the focus of the work of the program, and perhaps most significantly, the outcomes. That is, at the end of the day, what does the program achieve for young people, and how (and in what ways) are their lives – and the lives of family members – affected by their involvement with the Family Reconnect program.

The description and analysis we present here is drawn from a variety of data sources. All FRP staff were interviewed, as well as the Clinical Consultant. We conducted open-ended interviews with seven current and ex-clients of the program, as well as eight family members. Finally, we were able to do quantitative analysis on data that the Family Reconnect program has gathered over the past five years. Together, these sources of data help us paint a picture of the Family Reconnect program, and its impact on the lives of young people and their families.

In reviewing the outcomes of the Family Reconnect program, we offer a word of caution. We are presenting data on the impact of the Family Reconnect program without being able to compare the outcomes of program participants with those of young people who did not participate in the program at all. In other words, while we do identify changes in young people, we cannot identify for certain if the changes were the result

of the Family Reconnect program alone, other services or supports young people were accessing, or because the young people themselves developed resilience and were able to make important changes on their own. Nevertheless, we do feel these results suggest some significant changes in the lives of young people, and their participation in Family Reconnect undoubtedly contributed.

*"I think it's more about how youth define family. So I would say most of our youth define family as a parent or a grandparent, some define it as an uncle or an aunt, . . . We have a family right now that's mother and neighbour, so then it's a neighbour who is very involved, and whom she has had a lot of contact with. But yes, normally youth define family and to be honest it is usually quite accurate."*

Family Intervention counselor

### 4.2 Profile of clients

Between 2005 and the summer of 2010, the Family Reconnect program has taken on 376 clients. The majority participated in individual and/or family counseling (85%) while 15% participated primarily through group work. It should be noted that the AchEVA group which meets weekly at the shelter (see below p. 50 for a description of AchEVA), often becomes a pathway to individual counseling.

More females (53.5%) than males (44.4%) access the Family Reconnect program. While research consistently shows that in Canada there are two homeless males on the streets for every female, the higher percentage of female clients is likely due to the make up of Eva's shelter clientele (which is roughly balanced between males and females) and the fact that in general young women are more likely than men to seek health care support and counseling.

The clients at Eva's come from a diversity of family backgrounds, which in one sense should not be surprising as, in Canada, there is no single or 'typical' family model. An examination of the backgrounds of Family Reconnect clients demonstrates the variable forms of family. While the data is incomplete (35% of clients do not have an identified family type), what is clear is that almost as many young people come from single parent families (27%) as do those from two parent families (32%). Smaller percentages report having lived with a grandparent, a guardian, or a relative (including aunts and uncles).

Family Reconnect does not currently collect ethno-racial data on their clients, which means it is difficult to determine how reflective the client base is of the street youth population, or the broader population of Torontonians. However, of the young people who participated in face-to-face interviews for this report, four were people of colour and most were either permanent residents or Canadian citizens. As the interviews reveal, immigration status and length of time in Canada is an important factor for several reasons. First, there is a need for staff to employ an anti-discrimination framework in doing their work (this is the case for Family Reconnect). Second, the range of supports made available for diverse clients must reflect their needs. The staff at FRP seek out and provide information on the services that are best suited to immigrants/refugees in addition to advocating on behalf of those who do not have the language or requisite skills to seek out advice or help in accessing the proper resources.

The age range of clients is important to consider, for the needs of a 16 year old are significantly different from those of a 24

year old. The data from Family Reconnect reveals that clients range in age from 16-25, with 94% being between the ages of 16 and 21.

For the purposes of analysis, we will use gender (male/female) and age categories (16-17 yrs, 18-20 yrs, 20-25 yrs) as the key units of measure. This is the most reliable data relating to client identity, and as stated above, the needs of young people based on gender and on age are relevant to consider.

### **4.3 Presenting Issues: What brings clients to Family Reconnect?**

There are many pathways to Family Reconnect, and young people who need this support usually have some assistance in finding their way there (see Chapter 3). Whether it is through referrals from staff at Eva's or other shelters, or parents who make initial contact, engagement with a Family Reconnect counselor can be a big first step. "The fact that they come in and sit down and say 'I am interested'. I think it's about opening a door, and people walk through." (Family Reconnect counselor).

When people seek out the support of the FRP team, there is often a specific reason or presenting issue that underlies this first encounter. Often this presenting issue is identified by the client; in other cases it is a staff member who makes the referrals based on their own assessment of a situation. In Table 1 we outline the key presenting issues:

Table 1

Key Presenting Issues: Family Reconnect Program <sup>7</sup>						
	TOTAL	By GENDER		By AGE		
		Male	Female	15-17	18-20	21-25
Reconnecting with Family	34.9%	31.6%	37.6%	42.6%	32.2%	35.7%
Mental Health	39.5%	43.0%	36.6%	29.8%	43.7%	53.6%
Intellectual / Developmental issues	7.0%	10.1%	4.3%	6.4%	3.2%	9.7%
Dual diagnosis	2.9%	2.5%	3.2%	2.1%	4.6%	0%
Conduct disorder	3.5%	5.1%	2.2%	0%	2.3%	14.8%
Addictions	9.9%	10.1%	9.7%	6.4%	12.6%	11.1%
Sexual orientation	1.7%	2.5%	1.1%	0%	2.3%	10.7%
General assessment	1.7%	2.5%	1.1%	2.5%	1.1%	1.7%
No specific presenting issue	37.8%	35.4%	39.8%	40.0%	36.8%	25.0%

N = 169

The two top presenting issues, perhaps not surprisingly, have to do with ‘reconnecting with family’, and ‘mental health’. It is important to note that females are more likely to have been identified with the former, and males with the latter. Mental health challenges also loom larger for older homeless youth, while reconnecting with family is a more significant presenting issue for those who are younger. Approximately 38% of young people began counseling without a key presenting issue. This should not be so surprising given the complexity of the struggles that young people face, and the fact that many appear to be in crisis. In some cases young people are able to clearly articulate the kind of support they need, and in others, things are not so clear upon the first visit with an FRP staff member. As will be seen, it is through assessment and therapy that a more detailed understanding of underlying issues is achieved.

Not all young people who access Family Reconnect are homeless at the time, or are living at Eva’s Place. Even those who technically *are* homeless at the time – that is, they are living in the shelter system - are often uncomfortable with the homelessness label, and continue to feel connected to family and community, in spite of their circumstances and estrangement. Several of the youth interviewed wanted to make it very clear that they were not homeless when they sought out the Family Reconnect Program.

“The label of ‘homeless’ bothers me a lot. I needed help with my family situation and even though I didn’t want to go back home, I never thought of myself as homeless. I called the shelter because someone gave me the name of one of the counselors at Family Reconnect, otherwise I wouldn’t have known about them, but am I glad I did. I would have been a lot worse off”  
(former client, 19 years old).

Almost 12% of Family Reconnect clients were living at home with family at the time of first contact. This is important to note, because a key aspect of Family Reconnect is its focus on early intervention and prevention. That is, when FRP staff come in contact with families where young people are at risk of becoming homeless, program staff actively strive to divert the youth away from the shelter system by working with family as well.

Staff at FRP are particularly committed to early intervention and the need to be proactive on the issue. For example, one of the main benefits of family counseling is being able to identify *all* members of the family who are at risk, including siblings. According to a FRP counselor:

7. Percentages are presented for the total sample, as well as for gender (male / female) and age group (15-17/18-20/21/25)

"I am seeing a family right now where there is a 17 year old but there is also a 14 year old in the family and that is primarily where the concern lies with the parents, they really feel that the 14 year old is who they want to get support for. Now fortunately I can work with this family because their older daughter is within our mandate but I think there are probably a lot of families where by the time they are 16 it is more challenging because the family has been entrenched in so much dysfunction for so long that it is hard to change."

This story is informative because it highlights the need for early intervention before problems escalate, and young people find themselves in the homelessness sector. Once in the system, it can be harder and harder to reconnect young people with their families, especially if young people become entrenched in the street youth culture. At the same time, this reveals the limitations of the age mandate of street youth services – a truly preventive model would involve a great deal of work with those under 16:

"I think that for this type of program to be effective it has to start at 14 or 15, you know at the emergence of adolescence. Think about a 13 or 14 year old, they experience all those hormonal changes and that's when we start to see all these extreme behavioral shifts and that is when the drinking starts and the drug use starts because the stress in the family is so much"  
(Family Reconnect counselor).

The literature on early intervention through family reconnect programs in Australia and the UK consistently demonstrates the benefits of working with at risk youth under the age of 16. Canadian literature on youth homelessness also demonstrates the long lasting and negative impact of becoming homeless at an early age (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2010; Public Interest, 2010). This view is echoed by FRP staff, one of whom states that "youth are slightly more motivated to be involved in family counseling the younger they are, because at that point they are sort of scared of the idea of going into a shelter and being kicked out of a home". Early intervention can therefore contribute significantly to homelessness prevention.

## 4.4 Assessment: Staff Identification of Key Issues

Once a youth has connected with the FRP, they typically engage in a one on one counseling session with a staff member, where they go through a thorough assessment. The Family Reconnect Program staff complete individual assessments of the youth and, when needed, a psychologist is available to assess learning disabilities, developmental challenges etc. These assessments go much deeper than the original presenting issue, in an attempt to uncover other factors that provide a more comprehensive understanding of the pathways into homelessness, and the needs and challenges young people face. That is, while the presenting issue is the thing that a client or staff member identifies as a key reason for counseling, the assessment uncovers a range of underlying issues that support the need for, and help sharpen the focus of, counseling. According to one Family Intervention counselor, "people are so layered, situations are so layered. You are never just dealing with one issue. So a youth may have a mental illness, but that is only one piece of the 50 million other things going on in their lives".

In Table 2, below, the key Assessments of Family Reconnect clients are revealed. It is important to note that in this table, the focus is on the issues of family tension and conflict that contributed to homeless, and which become a focus of counseling and support. It should be noted that a range of other issues also may be taken up in counseling.

While the assessment data on the entire client population is not complete, this table demonstrates the degree to which issues related to family conflict are important to family reconnection work. A very small percentage (6.5%) was assessed as having no family issues at all (and virtually no one in the 15-17 age group). The issues related to family conflict are diverse, and Table 2 demonstrates that a broad range of factors may underlie tensions between family members. The most commonly reported factor was ongoing conflict with family members (36.2), again, a more common factor with young women, and younger teens. In other cases, traumatic events are disruptive to the family – for instance, parental illness, family breakdown, death in the family – can have a profound impact not only on the (mental) health and well-being of the young person in question, but also on relations between family members.

Table 2

<b>Counselor Assessment: Identification of the key underlying issues relating to family</b>						
<b>By Gender and Age</b>						
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>By GENDER</b>		<b>By AGE</b>		
		Male	Female	15-17	18-20	21-25
Ongoing conflict with family members	36.2%	25.0%	45.7%	46.8%	33.7%	39.3%
Family breakdown / divorce	13.6%	14.1%	13.2%	13.0%	17.4%	3.7%
Illness in family	2.1%	4.5%	0%	2.6%	0%	8.7%
Family member's addictions	7.2%	7.7%	6.6%	4.3%	9.3%	7.4%
Family member's mental health problems	9.8%	11.3%	8.6%	15.2%	9.0%	7.1%
Family income / poverty	5.3%	7.5%	3.2%	6.5%	5.6%	3.6%
Family death / trauma	5.0%	1.3%	8.1%	9.3%	3.6%	0%
Immigration / cultural conflict	12.1%	15.6%	9.1%	18.2%	11.8%	7.7%
Sexual orientation issues	3.0%	3.8%	2.2%	0%	3.4%	14.3%
Being an adopted child	5.3%	5.7%	4.9%	3.0%	3.6%	15.8%
No family issues	6.5%	7.7%	5.4%	.0%	9.2%	11.1%

N = 169

What stands out in many cases are the underlying issues that lead to tensions in the family which do not necessarily originate with the young client, but may have more to do with challenges facing other family members. For instance, when referring to Table 1, youth addictions issue were identified as significant for approximately 10% of respondents. In table 2, it is the addictions of family members (7.2%) and / or mental health issues of family members (9.9%) that are implicated in contributing to family conflict and youth homelessness. More often than not, the tensions and conflict that result in homelessness are the product or symptom of multiple factors relating to family.

Challenging identity issues can also play a role. For three percent of respondents, conflicts with family, friends and community can be traced to issues relating to sexual orientation and homophobia. For other young people, clashes with family members can be traced to inter-generational, cultural conflicts. While the program does not currently collect data on the ethno-racial background of clients, staff acknowledge that for almost twelve percent of clients, cultural issues and tensions between generations result in the family

conflict that is at the centre of counseling and therapy. This seems to be a more significant issue for males, and for young (under 18) homeless youth. Homophobia or the inability of all or some family members to acknowledge or accept the sexual orientation of youth is a significant cause of homelessness, which in many cases can be exacerbated by the ethno cultural and/or religious backgrounds of families. Mental health issues also have a particularly negative stigma in certain communities and families may be reluctant to acknowledge the presence of mental illness or the validity of a diagnosis. Said one Family Intervention counselor: "We have a case of a young man from the African continent with mental health problems that were very challenging, because of the difficulties his family had in accepting this. His mom was a highly educated woman who believed that he had demons and could not understand that his problems were psychiatric."

Similar situations sometimes emerge in cases where youth are assessed for learning disabilities. According to one counselor, assessments may be outright rejected by parents.

“We have this youth who was assessed as ADD and she talked about not wanting to be labeled. Her mom’s perspective is that this is a ridiculous diagnosis and it’s not. This girl tested off the charts in distractibility and hasn’t done well in school for the past six years so to say there is nothing wrong, well there is.”

In several other cases, parents did not understand the signs of disability and interpreted bad behavior negatively, as in the case of one young woman who couldn’t tell time and therefore was late for her curfew – she was operating developmentally at the level of a 12-year old. The inability or lack of willingness of parents to understand or accept diagnoses only compounds the trauma that homeless youth experience.

## 4.5 Casework: Overview of the key work of Family Reconnect

As mentioned in Chapter 3, casework potentially involves a broad range of supports and approaches to counseling. In Table 3 below, the key work of the Family Reconnect program is outlined, and demonstrates the range of activity that is part of their work. This includes individual and family counseling,



group work, assessment, advocacy and referrals, for instance. Depending on the needs of clients and the length of their involvement in counseling and support, a young person may in fact benefit from a combination of these activities.

In some cases, the intervention may involve only one session or contact. A crisis or problem is identified, and is dealt with, and the young person moves on. In other cases, the work will continue over many sessions, and may involve other family members in the process.

*“I have a family, a really tragic family. As we go through the history we see a lot of addiction and alcohol. It’s a mom and two children, children from two different fathers. When we asked when the struggles started with Albert, they identified them as going back two years ago. After being a good student, he started to do lousy in school; started smoking dope. We had to go back and forth about it, but it was clear there were all these family struggles. Then it was said that his father committed suicide two years ago. So sometimes there is a marker, sometimes there is a tragedy that is already lost in the behaviour. The one person in this room who really knew what happened two years ago is the young man. It is ever present for him.”*

Family Intervention counselor

Table 3 outlines the key focus of Family Reconnect counseling with young people who have had more than one encounter with the program. What becomes immediately clear is that while there are no significant differences in participation rates in individual, family and group interventions between males and females, or between age sets, there are significant differences in terms of the broader range of services accessed. For instance, older youth (those 18 and over) were much more likely to participate in mental health counseling and have a psychiatric assessment. Perhaps as a result of this, they were also much more likely (particularly those over 20) to make use of accompaniment, advocacy and transportation services, as well as key referrals. It is not clear whether this is due to older youth having higher needs, or to the program focusing more intensively on the needs of this population.

Table 3

Key Work: The Focus of Family Reconnect Counseling and Support						
	TOTAL	By GENDER		By AGE		
		Male	Female	15-17	18-20	21-25
Individual counseling	70.3%	71.2%	69.7%	70.0%	65.2%	85.7%
Family Counseling	34.7%	40.4%	30.3%	43.3%	31.8%	38.1%
Group programs	23.7%	23.1%	24.2%	26.7%	24.2%	19.0%
Mental health counseling	39.0%	40.5%	37.6%	21.3%	49.4%	46.4%
Psychiatric assessment (external)	14.4%	19.2%	10.6%	6.7%	9.1%	38.1%
Developmental / LD assessment	5.1%	9.6%	1.5%	0.0%	7.6%	9.5%
Accompaniment and Advocacy	23.3%	30.0%	18.2%	17.2%	21.5%	42.9%
Transportation to referrals	17.9%	23.5%	13.6%	3.3%	20.0%	38.1%
Key referrals	41.0%	56.9%	28.8%	26.7%	43.1%	66.7%

N = 169

At the same time, there are significant gender differences to note. While relatively equal percentages of males and females participated in mental health counseling, males were more likely to access external psychiatric assessments. Again, as a consequence, males were also more likely to access a broad range of support services. This may suggest that the mental health needs of young homeless males are more acute. Below is a more detailed discussion of the kinds of support young people access as part of their involvement in the Family Reconnect program.

### i) Counseling

Individual counseling was the primary support accessed by over two thirds of young people. Family Intervention counselors use different approaches to counseling based on the needs and situation of the young person involved. In some cases, young people may need instrumental counseling to help them access services and supports they need. In other cases, there may be a need for therapeutic counseling, either on a short term or ongoing basis. It may take many sessions for a young person to feel comfortable enough to begin the difficult work of recovery. Progress, then, is often measured in small steps. Said one counselor:

“There is such a range. There was a young man who was kind of stuck, (and for him the change may be) coming to this meeting and having the willingness to hear about programs that he might want to explore. It may be that that youth got out of bed in the morning to come to the meeting. I have a family where a young man wore a hoodie over his face for the first three sessions, and finally he comes to the next session with his hood off which gives us the understanding that he is ready to share.”

The length of time an individual is involved in counseling may vary. In some cases, the counseling can be very brief, and may involve a single session (about 12% of all cases). For instance, if a person expresses an interest in reconnecting with their family, but is not sure how to do this, the counseling session may facilitate this contact, (hopefully) leading to a successful outcome. This approach is particularly effective for young people who are new to the streets and left home because of an argument with family or other circumstances.

## Case Study: Making a simple connection

Helping a young person make contact with his or her family may be all that is needed from the Family Reconnect program. The story of a young man from North Bay helps illustrate this. He came to Toronto to look for work with a friend. Things didn't turn out so well – the friend took off and he eventually ended up in the shelter system. He approached a Family Reconnect staff member and simply stated that he wanted to call his grandmother in Sudbury but couldn't afford the call. The Family Reconnect Program has a long distance code, enabling him to call his grandmother. They arranged for him to call her:

“He talked to his grandmother from North Bay, and we spoke to his grandmother and arranged for him to go home. We gave her our name and number if there was anything we could do to be helpful or if they required any other services, like community services”.

This short intervention enabled a young person to reconnect with family and move back to his community. This approach to rapid rehousing and / or reconnection with family is a critically important intervention strategy that should be available to all young people who enter the system.

### ii) Working with Families

Counseling typically focuses on individual youth, but for many young people in Family Reconnect (approximately 35%), counseling sessions may eventually involve family members, including parents, siblings and other members of the extended family. Young males are slightly more likely than females to participate in family counseling, which is interesting because family conflict is more likely to be identified by females during the assessment process. This suggests that for many young women, the complexity and depth of family conflict may preclude family counseling. The fact that young men are also more likely to exhibit mental health problems and learning disabilities suggests that family counseling may play an important role in helping parents and young people cope with these challenges.

Getting family members to participate in counseling can happen in a number of ways. Family members are approached by a Family Reconnect counselor once the youth client has indicated an interest in contacting family. It is important to remember that it is the youth who initiates the process and must be willing to continue counseling with or without family members. Decisions to meet separately or individually are

made collaboratively with family, youth and a counselor. Once the counseling process, described above, is decided upon, Family Reconnect staff determine the needs of both youth and family members, (assessments for mental health or learning disabilities, appropriate counseling strategies, and/ or the involvement of or referral to additional supports). The work of the counselor is to facilitate the development of better communication and the establishment of goals among and between family members. “The goal is to build their strengths and to help them realize that they have reached their goal and the need for a counselor probably is not there anymore because they can advocate for themselves and each other” (FRP counselor).

Though issues relating to family conflict are typically at the centre of the work, there is often much more being discussed. Understanding family conflict may require an exploration of past and ongoing relations with different family members, but it may also focus on issues that produce, or conversely, are a product of such damaged relations. This may include problems at school, addictions (involving either the young person or family members), issues relating to sexual orientation and/or problems stemming from cultural conflict within families.

## Case Study: Cultural Conflict within Families

Lisa's story, about a girl from an immigrant family, highlights how family tensions stemming from cultural conflict can result in homelessness, and present barriers to moving forward with one's life. Support through family reconnection can help address these tensions. Her story is best told in her own words: "I didn't start living with my parents until I was six years old, because both my parents had to work, so I lived with my grandmother which is what people do where my parents come from. The main struggle when I was 13 or 14, really with my father, was a cultural clash. It was really difficult for me and even though I had really high grades at school they were so hard on me. The conflict started getting physical and I actually got involved with child services, until I was 15 which ended because they don't deal with you after you're 15. My dad was charged with I guess, assault, but later the charges were withdrawn because I retracted my statement. My parents were just typical Asian parents and ...they were just destroying me. When I was in grade 11, I realized I just couldn't be at home but I want to clarify I was never really homeless. I guess I was on the verge of it. I started researching shelters and Eva's was the only one that was really helpful. The others were like, 'you know what, we're really sorry that your case does not warrant enough priority...we have to keep you on the waiting list for a while because you know, we have other emergencies coming in'. I was panicked and I came to Eva's. I left a message with a counselor and she took me in the next day. The situation at home was really hostile and we worked out strategies of how to deal with it. So like instead of retaliating I retreated to my room and chilled out. My parents aren't really big believers in counseling being Asian – family matters are private – you don't wash your dirty laundry in public...so I did the counseling myself but learned how to deal with a situation that I knew was headed for the street.<sup>8</sup> I learned that although I can't live with them *ever* and now I don't have to because I'm 18, I learned how to deal with them and understand a bit where they are coming from. I'm letting go of the ego and the anger and realizing that sometimes they may have been right and I'm not always the victim." This youth is now at a university in another province on full scholarship.

Sexual orientation, a common cause of youth homelessness also often intersects with cultural and religious attitudes towards sexuality. For example, one youth interviewed, experienced severe breakdown with her mother as a result of her identifying as a lesbian.

"My mom wouldn't accept it because she would be shunned in the community. People back home get killed and tortured for being gay so she was so scared for me. So that landed me at Eva's. Through the Family Reconnect program I reconnected with her but even though we set ground rules and I went back home, I broke them so came back here. I

was bringing too many girlfriends home and some of them were pretty rough. I was tired of them picking on my girlfriends. I had a fistfight with my mom and I snapped. When me and my mom have a conflict we separate for a while and I go to a friend's. I'm back home now but going through the process of figuring out how to work this out with my parents. My parents agree to meet with the counselor and we meet and talk about stuff. "

This youth has mental health issues and a learning disability, but maintains a relationship with her family, which although strained at times, still makes this youth feel supported.

8. This client saw the Family Intervention counselor secretly for two years and worked on her family issues in this way because her parents were vehemently opposed to counseling.

## Case Study: The Limits of Reconciliation

The work of Family Reconnect does not always result in a young person moving home, or even a dramatic improvement in relations with their family. In some cases, family therapy simply results in the young person coming to terms with the inherent limitations of their relationships with family.

One young man, now 26 years of age and the eldest of five, left home at 16 as he was in his words “hard to handle” as a teen. His mother was very abusive towards the children and he was forced to leave. He spent months “bouncing from friend to friend’s couches” but remained at school and with the support of Eva’s shelter staff and several other youth agencies, was able to complete his Ontario Secondary School Diploma. By working with FRP staff he was able to reconnect with his sisters and contacted his mother. Although he does not have a strong relationship with his mother (and none with his step father) he has come to terms with the limits of this relationship, but is happy to have maintained consistent and stable relationships with his sisters.

Dealing with trauma and sudden changes within the family, including death of a family member, loss of family income through job loss and family break up, can also precipitate crisis. In some cases the issue or tension has little to do with the young person him or herself, but may be related to the challenges faced by another member of the family, for instance, a parent or sibling struggling with mental health or addictions. When parent(s) cannot function as effective care givers, it is sometimes the case that they themselves are the product of a dysfunctional family. They then repeat this pattern with their children, as evidenced in the storied of several of the youth who were interviewed.

Another service provided by the FRP staff, is facilitation of overnight visits, a process that can open the door to bettering relationships with family. If youth express a desire to make a long distance call home, but cannot afford to, the FRP offers this service. They also have a long distance code that can be used by youth who wish to contact family members out of town. Therefore any youth who wants to make a long distance phone call home has the freedom to request a phone call to a family member

### Individual Counseling with Parents and Family Members

Because the work of Family Reconnect invariably deals with issues relating to family, it may mean that family members are also engaged in individual counseling - that is, without the young person present - in one way or another. In some cases, adult family members become ‘clients’ and engage in individual counseling directed towards improving their understanding of, and relationship with, their child<sup>9</sup>. “The Family Reconnect Program has brought me strength, to be a better parent to my daughter. I’ve learned how to ask for resources.”

While we did not analyze quantitative data relating to family members, we did interview eight caregivers, whose children were in the family reconnect program. All of these caregivers became clients of Family Reconnect, either as participants in family or individual counseling. The opinions and views of caregivers in terms of FRP dealings with families were all positive, albeit for a variety of reasons. Most often, it was the role of individual counselors to help caregivers work through issues of loss, confusion, anger and frustration, acceptance, and other feelings associated with seeing one’s child leave the family home for a life, however long, on the street. In addition

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9. A large number of family members receive counseling through Family Reconnect, but for this study, we have not focused on, or analyzed the outcomes of this work. Rather, our focus is on the work done with young people who access the service.

to the importance of personal/family counseling, there was consensus on the role of staff in helping family members access services and resources available through government and nongovernmental agencies and supports. Overall, family

members valued the interventions and support they received throughout their involvement with the FRP. Several cases below illustrate the variety of situations that lead to individual family counseling.

### Case Studies: Counseling and Support with Families

**Case 1:** Families come in different shapes and sizes, and with unique circumstances. In this case, the key family relationship of a young schizophrenic woman was her 88-year-old grandmother who lives on a fixed income and has few resources. The young woman left home when she was 14 years old and has moved between inpatient care, living in homeless shelters (at Eva's Place where she connected with a Family Intervention counselor), and living somewhat independently. The young woman's severe mental health problems were complicated by other factors. Her parents divorced when she was a child, largely due to the father's severe addiction problems and her mother's deep depression and fibromyalgia, her only available support therefore is her grandmother. Since leaving home, she has managed to stay in contact with her grandmother, usually when needing money, a place to crash or do her laundry. Her grandmother is the contact person for the CAMH health professionals who (attempt to) treat her. She often refuses help, but given that her grandmother is her main contact (and is in constant communication with the Family Intervention counselor), this young woman has indirect access to supports and treatment. Throughout the interview, the grandmother despaired over what will happen to her granddaughter when she's gone.

**Case 2:** The parents of a former Eva's shelter and Family Reconnect Program client have been involved in counseling with FRP staff for a prolonged period of time. Their son, who was adopted at an early age, displayed serious behavioral issues – specifically, aggression - and was easily frustrated. The parents made numerous attempts to have him assessed and treated but with little effect. His stay at Eva's shelter was short-lived as he, according to his parents, "hated it". Nonetheless, the initial connection made through Family Reconnect during that period has meant that the parents are able to work together with the Family Reconnect counselor to better cope with their son's difficulties. "He could never focus, he can't stick with anything. We would be at a complete loss if it weren't for the support we get here". Their involvement in counseling has continued even though their son now lives on his own, albeit with their financial support.

**Case 3:** In 2007, a family made contact with Family Reconnect after their street-involved son was murdered (the case has not been solved). The family got in touch with Eva's because a Family Reconnect Program card was found in his pocket at the time of his murder. The youth's family, including parents and aunts were aided by Family Reconnect staff through the provision of grief counseling, and payment for his funeral. Although this story has a tragic end, we have learned about the path that led this young man to the streets and the gaps in the education, shelter and service sectors that contributed to his fate. Through counseling, the father, step mother and aunt are learning to understand what led to his death, how to cope, heal and move forward with their lives and those of their children (the victim's half siblings, also deeply affected by the events).

The cases above demonstrate what is seldom acknowledged – family plays a significant role in youth homelessness, and services are needed to help youth and their families salvage or improve the relationships that will lead youth home again.

### iii) Group Programming

Twenty-three percent of clients participated in the FRP group program, AchEVA, and for 15% of those clients, this group is their main form of engagement. AchEVA's Youth Group is a popular group session (attended on average by eight to twelve youth) run by FRP staff member(s) every Wednesday evening. Youth contribute to discussion topics and program events. A central part of FRP programming is the weekly peer discussion groups run by and for youth. This group work focuses on building communication around and understanding of issues identified by the youth themselves as significant discussion topics. For example, one group activity revolves around movies with messages. On one occasion, the film *The Blind Side* was shown. The staff running the group stopped the film at numerous intervals to ask for youth reflections on key scenes that explore questions about relationships. Youth often attend because of formed relationships with Family Intervention Counselors, the week's topic is of interest to them and/or they have been encouraged to attend by regular group members. Participation in the group is important as a means of building relationships between staff and clients, and many young people move from only participating in achEVA, to becoming clients of individual or family therapy. Several interviewees were achEVA participants and identified by Family Intervention counselors as clients who would potentially benefit from the FRP.

### iv) Mental Health and Psychiatric Supports

It is well understood that young people who are homeless are more likely to experience mental health problems, ranging from depression to more serious mental health issues including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder (for more details, refer to Chapter 2 of this report). Many young people also struggle with addictions (in some cases, alongside mental health problems). The staff at Family Reconnect echo concerns raised by others in the street youth sector that the number of young people who present with serious mental health problems and addictions has increased significantly in recent years.

A significant proportion of the youth who enter the shelter system and therefore become part of the FRP, not only display signs of symptomatic psychological trauma/distress, in addition to having suffered abuse of various kinds, they also exhibit signs of mental illness or learning and developmental difficulties. For example, the incidence of learning disabilities was disproportionately high, including frequent assessment of Aspergers Syndrome and ADD or ADHD.

In Table 4, below, one can see that for thirty nine percent of Family Reconnect clients, mental health issues were a main focus of counseling and assessment. The incidence of this is slightly truer for males than for females. However, there is a significantly larger percentage of young males for whom the focus of the work was intellectual or learning disabilities. This is important because in some cases, undiagnosed learning disabilities have contributed to other problems including disengagement and low achievement at school.

Table 4

Focus of Counseling by Gender and Age						
	TOTAL	By GENDER		By AGE		
		Male	Female	15-17	18-20	21-25
Mental health	39.0%	40.5%	37.6%	21.3%	49.4%	46.4%
Dual diagnosis	4.7%	6.3%	3.2%	13.0%	17.9%	3.7%
Intellectual or learning disability	8.7%	12.7%	5.4%	2.6%	0%	8.7%
Client addiction issues	7.2%	7.8%	6.1%	4.3%	9.5%	7.4%

N = 169

*"It's really about youth who are staying at the shelter. So if there was a lot of talk about mental health or relationships, we would talk about that in group. Or if we had a group that requested a specific topic of conversation we would do that. Most of our group programming for the adolescents here is really focused on communication and relationships, stigma, self-esteem building. It is really life skills focused conversations."*

Family Reconnect Counselor

Issues of disability become complicated for families when the disability is either undiagnosed, or the family is unable to come to terms with the diagnosis. For example, one client's learning disability (he was eventually, with support from Family Reconnect, diagnosed with ADD) manifested as problems at home and in school. His engagement and performance at school were compromised, and he was identified as having 'behavioural' problems. Through time, his personal challenges became a source of conflict within the family – not just between he and his parents, but between his parents as well. As things escalated, his father became more aggressive and violent with family members. Said the mother:

"My husband wouldn't let him come home after he kicked him out, so I would sneak him in to the house or to the daycare where I worked down the street to get washed up or have a warm meal while my husband was at work. If he found him at home, he would have beaten him and that would spill over into him emotionally abusing me and my daughter. It started with a phone call for my son to Eva's. I'm a resourceful parent I have to say so I looked around for the best places to stay for him because my husband didn't let him come home. We were having meetings on a regular basis at the shelter because I was scared to bring my son home. So my daughter, and myself and my son and (Family Reconnect counselor) would meet at the shelter."

Her son is now married with two children and has reconnected with his mother and to a limited extent his father, as well as. Family members who are dealing with the mental health or

learning/behavioral problems of their children often become extremely frustrated and are often at wit's end. Family Intervention counselors report that often in desperation, parents will drop their children off at the shelter. It is in these moments of crisis that the staff can connect with parents and help them work through problems with their children, and connect them with relevant support services and resources. Without proper interventions parents often are at a loss and often react in frustration, which to many youth, feels like abandonment and rejection. Family members, where possible, can and should become partners in their children's futures.

### **The significance of mental health problems**

All of these factors can impact on the growth and development of young people. In some cases, underlying mental health, addictions and disability issues produce the conditions that lead to homelessness. This includes family conflict and distress. There are several factors at play here. The first being that such problems may manifest themselves in terms of 'problematic behaviour' that can lead to problems with teachers, the police, as well as different family members. It is well established that mental health disorders and learning disabilities can have an impact on school engagement and achievement and lead to a whole other range of problems, often expressed through difficult and aggressive behaviours, including 'acting out', withdrawal, and substance use. In many cases, through family counseling, family members identify problematic behaviours as being at the root of problems. Sometimes young people themselves will focus on their own behaviour as being the problem, without really understanding why they do what they do.

Program staff suggest that a lot of the mental health cases they see stem in large part from the system having failed the families. According to one Family Reconnect counselor: "So in the hospital they often don't have the services set up for them when they leave, so they often get missed and end up in the shelter". The number of mental health clients has increased over the past number of years reinforcing the need for counselors trained specifically in mental health. Another stated: "In the shelter system it is a huge factor. Youth who end up here, or many youth are either struggling with it, or a member of their family is struggling with mental health or an addictions issue."

One reason the Family Reconnect team works with so many young people who have mental health issues and learning disabilities, is the profound lack of mental health supports found within the homelessness sector, and the difficulty in getting access to services outside of the sector. There are very few people in the shelter system with expertise in mental health counseling.

“What happened here was, and it wasn’t surprising was the shelters came to the program and said ‘we need you to case manage these kids’. Right? These ‘bizarre’, and some young youth workers would say, ‘these crazy kids’. We need you to take over these kids’, and for us it is over a 1/3 (of our caseload). We picked up those youth as part of our case load, so we see family related cases and we see young people with mental health problems.”

This brings us to a related problem, involving the underlying factors that produce problematic behaviour (at home and once they are homeless) often go undiagnosed. In the absence of a clear diagnosis, parents, teachers and others will only see the problematic behaviour. At the same time, a lack of proper assessment means youth may not have access to good solutions and appropriate interventions. In some cases, the intervention may be a response to the behaviour (school expulsion, arrest, inappropriate medication) – a symptom rather than the source of the problem.

*“I just don’t think we look at behaviour as behaviour. At Family Reconnect, we look at it differently. We often look at it not as oppositional or ADD or ADHD, or lazy or abusive, or bad, or as trouble with the law. We see behaviour as having a meaning. What is the behaviour really about? Youth don’t choose to be the bad kid. They don’t want to be the bad kid. They don’t want to be miserable, they don’t want to be rejected. So often we are exploring what that is really about, both in the context of the youth and the context of the family.”*

Family Reconnect Counselor

When young people become homeless, they may bring the ‘problematic behaviour’ with them, and this may interfere with their ability to establish good relations with staff and other

street youth, and may also get in the way of their ability to move off the street. Clinical Assessment

All of this speaks to the importance clinical consultation and assessment that the Family Reconnect program offers. Figuring out what exactly is behind family conflict is a central goal of counseling and therapy. Such knowledge can also contribute to the identification of appropriate interventions and a focus for both individual and family counseling.

A clinical assessment is a process used to evaluate and diagnose a range of physical, mental and educational conditions or circumstances. Assessments are typically conducted by trained specialists in the fields of education, mental health and health. Such assessments, when done well, can provide a useful diagnosis and potential direction for treatment. Assessments, more importantly, can help counselors, clients and their families understand what may appear to be problematic behaviours, patterns and presenting issues in a new light.

If a staff member suspects that additional psychological, psychiatric and/or developmental assessment is needed, then diagnostic testing performed by outside specialists is arranged and provided where possible. A psychologist is contacted when staff who have worked with a youth for a while suspects there may be an issue that would benefit from assessment. According to a FRP counselor, a staff person may realize that: “there are some attention issues, some issues around learning, maybe Aspergers or Autism, and that’s just through meeting with the youth and their family, getting to know their family history”.

The FRP staff access these professional services at a number of facilities including the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Surrey Place, Central Toronto Youth Services’ New Outlook Program as well as the psychiatrist on staff at Eva’s Satellite. The FRP now has a psychiatrist on staff that visits Eva’s Place on a weekly basis. Psychological testing is paid for by a parent’s insurance plan (when possible) or through the Family Reconnect Program’s budget.

The Family Reconnect team sees family engagement as important in the work they do with young people who experience mental health challenges or learning disabilities, and diagnosis of problems can be a key catalyst for change. A diagnosis can be a shock to parents who interpret their child’s problems simply as ‘behavioural’. On the other hand, it can be

a catalyst to understanding their child better, as well as the factors that underlie conflict.

“You know, if you are sitting in a meeting and you hear that your son is on the Autism scale, which pretty much makes everybody’s hair stand up, or that he has Aspergers then you start talking about what Aspergers is, what does this mean?

What does this mean for your son? What does this mean for how you parent your son? It becomes a (very different question for them). You will need very different parenting skills when you have a symptomatic daughter or a bipolar son, you need to parent differently, and we can help you with that. We are going to help you understand this” (Family Reconnect counselor).

### Case Study: Diagnosis and Change

John was a young man who came from a family that included his disabled mother, his grandmother and his sister. He had a long history of what were defined as ‘behavioural problems’, and in the second grade, he received a diagnosis of ADHD. At 16, John had been living in a group home for several years, and the behavioural problems continued. He was in grade 9 at school, and was struggling. He eventually became involved with the Family Reconnect program along with his family members. At that time, staff suggested that he undergo a new psychological assessment. The results suggested that he had significant learning disabilities, and was operating at a grade 2 level. The new psychiatric summary led to some key changes.

“The first thing we did was we changed the parenting. We talked about him taking direction from one person (his mother) rather than two. We explained that words had to be simple, and people needed to speak in short sentences. His mother and grandmother had to take more time to show him what to do, and how to do it. In order to do laundry they had to show him how to pick up towels, and operate the machine. They had to do this over and over. Then we placed cartoons all over the house that showed him what to do. Rather than words, depictions of actions were used.” (Family Reconnect Counselor).

The second outcome occurred at the group home where changes were incorporated based on his assessment. “There was a gradual shift from seeing everything as ‘behavioural’ to understanding his special needs.” A key part of this was that he was allowed to withdraw from school, which was a big relief for him. Instead, he was enrolled in a four week ‘work-readiness’ program, which he attended faithfully through to completion. After that, he was helped to get a job in a kitchen. The group home staff worked with the employer to support him, and explained how best to teach him; relate to him. “They were told to spend time with him, spend time next to him helping him learn to cut potatoes and peel carrots”. With support, he was able to maintain his employment, and was happy in ways that were unimaginable while he was in school.

The new diagnosis and assessment led to major changes and improvements in his life, but it wasn’t always easy for his family, who had to come to terms with their understanding of his limitations and disability. His mother found it challenging to see a young man who was over six feet tall and 280 pounds, who could only read at a grade 2 level.

“The importance of this story is that this young man got missed by lots of professionals. Nobody tried to think outside of behaviour. They just saw opposition, laziness and ADHD. Now the family had new skills and resources to manage. This is a family that had been dealing with challenging behaviours for years, and they did not have a lot of capacity to deal with him, and it is not clear how much help they were given. An exhausted family.”

## v) Advocacy, transportation and referrals

A key piece of work for Family Reconnect is to advocate for youth, when dealing with outside agencies, services, often by working closely with community and agency partners. For example, situations arise where it is not only a youth but his or her family that is at risk of homelessness due to eviction or family breakdown. The intervention of FRP staff thus may involve working with housing tribunals or help with credit counseling services.

Staff also do referrals, and help facilitate access to necessary programs and services that young people might not know about, or experience barriers in accessing services. Sometimes this involves filling out forms, phone referrals and phone investigation with agencies and services. Referrals may also be facilitated by virtue of a clinical assessment. Access to mental health and addictions support is often contingent upon having an assessment by a health professional such as a doctor, psychiatrist or nurse practitioner.

One of the main benefits of a program that deals not only with clients, but with family members is that counselors have an opportunity to deal with the multitude of factors that complicate a youth's path to the streets.

Youth and/or family sometimes experience anxiety and are reluctant to go to service agencies unaccompanied. Youth in particular have difficulty even getting in the door, knowing how to enter a strange setting or respond to uncomfortable questions. The issue of stigma attached to homelessness is also a factor. If a youth has trouble getting to psychological assessment sessions or is reluctant to go for all four sessions, staff may accompany the clients and/or even attend the session itself.

"But to get them to keep going is up to them. They say they are going to go, and then they don't go. I had a youth who took six months to get his assessment done because he would get lost on his way on the subway or he would get distracted by other things".

The significance of this aspect of the Family Reconnect program cannot be underestimated, as young people may face innumerable barriers in accessing the services they need, because of their youthful age and lack of experience

*"I think accompaniment is really important partly because the youth and or family have anxiety and reluctance sometimes to go to services, certainly we see that on the side of youth in terms of how to walk in the door, how to go to a strange setting where I don't know anybody, you know how I am going to respond to uncomfortable questions so we do a fair amount of accompaniment. No question about stigma. There is stigma attached to homelessness."*

Family Reconnect Counselor

or confidence, not having proper ID and because of the discrimination they may experience in trying to get access to services on their own.

## 4.6 Outcomes: Understanding the Impact of Family Reconnect

In this report, we have established the importance of engaging families as part of the solution to youth homelessness. The Family Reconnect program was established to help and support young people and their families, in order to improve relationships, address important challenges, and provide the necessary support (either directly, or facilitating access to external resources) for mental health challenges.

At the end of the day, the work of Family Reconnect revolves around addressing relationships between young people and their families. The route to addressing these relationships may involve a broad range of other issues. As we have seen, the work of Family Reconnect is complex, and the needs of clients are varied. This means that there is no easy or straightforward means of defining success. As related by a Family Intervention counselor:

"Well one big success for a youth who was living in the shelter would be to either move home or move into the community with ongoing family support. I think for me the benchmarks are about the relationship. They could have a better relationship with themselves, or with who ever they decided is family. If we are doing individual work, have they resolved some of the trauma and issues in their past so they can move forward and continue to

succeed. Are they in employment? Are they able to be in employment? If they are not, do we have them in the community with the appropriate support? Are they going to maintain staying at home or staying in the community? If they are not going to maintain staying at home, how are we going to help them transition out of the shelter? And just a general sense of the youth and the family feeling that they are in better control of the choices in their life and not calling me every 15 minutes to make sure they made the right decision.” (Family Reconnect counselor)

While the concept underpinning the Family Reconnect program is clearly solid, what do we know about the effectiveness of the interventions? In conducting this research, we draw on a range of data to identify the outcomes of the Family Reconnect program. Our discussion of outcomes is organized into three main areas: a) family relations, b) socio-economic conditions, and c) mental health.

## Relations with Family

In Table 5, below, we outline some of the key program outcomes in terms of the relations young people have with family members. It is important to note that even when young people are homeless, the vast majority (69%) continue to have some kind of active involvement with family. One of the key successes of the program is that 62% of participants became more actively involved with family members during their involvement in the program, and 14.5% reconciled a damaged relationship with a family member. These improved relations may have been a result of either individual counseling, where young people were encouraged and supported in their efforts to engage family members, or through family counseling involving family members. It should be noted, this is truer of females than males. This perhaps makes sense, for if one recalls data from Table 2, conflict with family members was much more likely to be a key assessment for young females.

Table 5

Outcomes: Relations with Family by Gender and Age						
	TOTAL	By GENDER		By AGE		
		Male	Female	15-17	18-20	21-25
Active involvement with family while in program	69.0%	62.3%	74.7%	67.4%	68.2%	74.1%
Involvement with specific family members changed from non-active to active	62.8%	58.2%	66.7%	59.6%	63.2%	71.4%
Reconciled relationship with one or more family member	14.5%	13.3%	15.4%	14.9%	13.3%	17.9%
Moved back with family	16.9%	18.7%	15.4%	19.1%	18.1%	14.3%
Received useful diagnosis	28.3%	28.0%	28.6%	12.8%	39.8%	32.1%

N = 169

*“it’s really about talking with the parents about it and making sure they understand what schizophrenia is and what their options are. What will happen when they are on medication, side effects and , what the impacts are. We really work hard to find a long term community support whether it be a day program, a parent support group/program so they have some place to go to talk about it with other parents.”* Family Reconnect Counselor

A key outcome of Family Reconnect work is that 17% of young people participating in the program actually moved back with their family, with males slightly more likely than females to make this move.

Finally, a key outcome was that young people – and in many cases, their families – received useful diagnoses. As we have argued, the lack of identification or diagnosis of mental health issues or learning disabilities may underlie family conflict and contribute to the young person’s pathways to the streets. For many parents, the benefits of such a diagnosis are understood, and may lead to a shift in how they think about their child. A benefit of Family Reconnect is that for those families who cannot afford to pay for specific services or assessments, the agency will try to arrange funding.

A diagnosis does not always ensure an easy road forward. At times, it is the parent who cannot or will not accept a diagnosis, therefore the job for Family Intervention counselors is to help family members come to terms with the cause of their child’s disability or mental illness. In many cases, the issue is not as simple as a diagnosis, but rather is compounded by addictions and other issues

An important thing to consider regarding the outcomes of this program is that reuniting with family may not be desirable. This kind of resolution may be important in helping young people – and their families – move forward with their lives. Those for whom family reconciliation was not an option, spoke of learning to accept that living with family was impossible although maintaining relationships or contact with siblings, parents or extended family continues. According to one: “I know I can never live with them again, but I have a close relationship with my sisters now and I speak to my mom once a week and that’s cool.” Another stated that “the staff here helped me deal with my anger and resentment of them and now I can move on and have a better attitude in my relationships in the future. I’m learning to be patient with people”. While moving back home is not an outcome, the improved understandings that allow people to move forward with their lives is.

## Socio-Economic Factors

There are other important outcomes to the work of the Family Reconnect program. One of the important indicators of success is young people moving out of the shelter system, with the necessary supports. The Family Reconnect team has kept statistics on the number of clients they have worked intensively with who have subsequently experienced improvements in housing status. In 2009, for instance, 27 young people moved back home with their families, 11 moved into their own housing, 7 moved into supportive/transitional housing, and 10 were able to reconcile conflicts prior to leaving home. While the role of Family Reconnect support is in some cases difficult to disentangle from other factors that may have contributed to helping young people move out of homelessness, these outcomes are nevertheless important, and in many ways highlight the ‘cost effectiveness’ of a Family Reconnect program.

In Table 6, below, we explore the impact of program involvement on a range of issues, including housing status, employment and financial situation, self-care and living skills, social relationships, and ability to navigate systems. In these cases, we use ‘scaled responses’, to assess whether during their involvement in the program, their situation improved, worsened or stayed the same.

This data demonstrates a broad range of improvements in life skills and living circumstances of Family Reconnect clients. Perhaps the key outcome is that for over 40% of program participants, their housing situation improved. For some young people, this may mean moving back with family (Table 5), but for the majority, it means moving into housing and living independently, albeit in some cases with support from family.

Table 6

<b>Outcomes: Socio-Economic Factors by Gender and Age</b>							
	TOTAL	By GENDER		By AGE			
		Male	Female	15-17	18-20	21-25	
<b>Housing Situation (n-107)</b>							
Worsened	2.5%	4.1%	1.1%	.0%	3.7%	7.4%	
No change	19.0%	20.3%	18.0%	17.0%	17.3%	22.2%	
Improved	41.7%	44.6%	39.3%	38.3%	46.9%	44.4%	
<b>Employment (n-95)</b>							
Worsened	1.9%	2.7%	1.1%	2.2%	2.5%	.0%	
No change	37.3%	31.5%	42.0%	43.5%	36.3%	25.9%	
Improved	14.9%	16.4%	13.6%	13.0%	15.0%	14.8%	
<b>Financial Management (n-95)</b>							
Worsened	1.2%	1.4%	1.1%	2.2%	1.2%	.0%	
No change	35.2%	27.0%	42.0%	39.1%	33.3%	29.6%	
Improved	16.0%	20.3%	12.5%	15.2%	17.3%	14.8%	
<b>Self care and living skills (n-95)</b>							
Worsened	3.1%	2.7%	3.4%	4.3%	3.7%	.0%	
No change	26.5%	25.7%	27.3%	30.4%	25.9%	14.8%	
Improved	27.8%	27.0%	28.4%	26.1%	25.9%	37.0%	
<b>Social skills and relationships (n-120)</b>							
Worsened	4.3%	5.4%	3.4%	4.3%	6.2%	.0%	
No change	33.3%	33.8%	33.0%	41.3%	33.3%	25.9%	
Improved	18.5%	14.9%	21.6%	15.2%	16.0%	22.2%	
<b>Navigating Systems (n-95)</b>							
Worsened	2.5%	4.1%	1.1%	2.2%	3.7%	.0%	
No change	39.5%	35.1%	43.2%	37.0%	39.5%	37.0%	
Improved	9.9%	8.1%	11.4%	17.4%	6.2%	7.4%	

N = 169 Non-responses excluded<sup>10</sup>

The improvement in housing, and the more modest improvement in financial situation (16% improved) may also be connected to the fact that a significant percentage of program participants developed stronger self-care and living

skills (29%), social skills (18.5%) and an enhanced ability to navigate systems (10%). These improvements were slightly more likely to be demonstrated amongst female participants.

10. Of the young people evaluated, most had experienced some kind of change in one or more areas. It is important to note, however, that for any given variable (housing, financial management, etc.) there was no scoring for over one third of the clients, as staff did not feel they could assess this. For this reason, the numbers for any variable do not add up to 100%. We chose to exclude the non-responses only to make the table easier to read.

In a program such as Family Reconnect, one cannot underestimate the importance of improvements in social relations, life skills and living circumstances. For many clients, the key work may be to help them develop these skills through instrumental counseling. Given the youthful age of the clients involved, these kinds of supports are crucial to adolescent development. Housed youth are more likely to develop these skills and knowledge from significant adults in their lives. For young people who are homeless, the ability to develop these skills is perhaps best served by the longer term engagement in counseling.

What results from improvements to social and life skills are also important to note. Key research from the United States (Thompson, Safyer and Pollio, 2001) highlights the fact that for young people who have more deep rooted and problematic relations with parents, improving life skills and living circumstances may be a necessary precursor to helping young people engage with their families, or otherwise move on with their lives.

## Health

In assessing health-related outcomes of the Family Reconnect program, we looked at three key areas: physical health, mental health and addictions (Table 7 below). The first variable, physical health, did not show a dramatic improvement overall, though males and young street youth showed the greatest improvement. Young females were more likely to show a decline in health, but this shift is not statistically significant. Given that Family Reconnect does not explicitly deal with physical health issues, but does so implicitly (through the focus on housing, life skills, addictions, etc.), the ability of staff to properly assess change in this areas is perhaps limited.

In terms of addictions, there is little evidence of dramatic change amongst this population, and it appears that the situation deteriorated for as many young people as it improved. It should be noted that not all homeless youth have addictions issues, and so changes would not be noted. Overall, however, the lack of a general and dramatic improvement in this area raises questions about the significance of addictions counseling and treatment as part of the family reconnection strategy. More research on this correlation is needed.

Table 7

Outcomes: Health by Gender and Age						
	TOTAL	By GENDER		By AGE		
		Male	Female	15-17	18-20	21-25
<b>Physical health</b>						
Worsened	4.9%	4.1%	5.7%	6.5%	6.2%	.0%
No change	39.5%	37.8%	40.9%	39.1%	37.0%	40.7%
Improved	3.7%	5.4%	2.3%	8.7%	1.2%	3.7%
<b>Mental health</b>						
Worsened	6.2%	5.4%	6.8%	6.5%	7.4%	.0%
No change	25.3%	24.3%	26.1%	30.4%	19.8%	25.9%
Improved	17.3%	17.6%	17.0%	17.4%	17.3%	18.5%
<b>Addictions</b>						
Worsened	4.3%	4.1%	4.5%	6.5%	4.9%	.0%
No change	27.2%	23.0%	30.7%	34.8%	23.5%	18.5%
Improved	3.7%	5.4%	2.3%	2.2%	3.7%	7.4%

N = 169

The greatest improvement in health is in the area of mental health, and this is true of all age groups, and males and females, with an average of 17.3% showing improvement. The nature of such improvements will vary from person to person. Many young people who are homeless suffer from depression, others from trauma. Counseling and support can help alleviate these problems, and give young people the skills to cope. Improvement in life skills, and in socio-economic circumstances can have an effect on mental health as well.

For those who experience more serious mental illnesses, the support of Family Reconnect can be instrumental. In addition to counseling and therapy, an important piece of the work is properly identifying and diagnosing mental health problems, so that appropriate treatments and interventions can follow. The important work of Family Reconnect in providing advocacy services, referrals and accompanying young people to what might be scary and intimidating mental health and service provider visits, plays a big role here. Helping young people access appropriate therapy is key as well. Finally, but not insignificantly, a key part of the recovery process for young people is helping their families gain greater understanding of their child's mental health problem or illness. Greater understanding often leads families to develop new and more appropriate ways of supporting their children themselves.

## 4.7 Why Prevention? The Cost Effectiveness of the Family Reconnect Program

Is the prevention focus of Family Reconnect cost effective? There is certainly ample evidence from across Canada that indicates that keeping people who are homeless in emergency services (i.e. shelter system) is expensive, and that it is much cheaper to prevent homelessness and / or provide people with the opportunity to move out of homelessness through supportive and affordable housing, than it is to let them slide into homelessness (Laird, 2007; Eberle, 2001; Halifax, 2006; Shapcott, 2007; Pomeroy, 2006; 2008).

As Pomeroy has argued, the cost of homelessness does not only accrue for our emergency shelters and drop-ins. When people become homeless they are more likely to use expensive health

services due to compromised health, addictions and mental health challenges, and/or end up in jail. Drawing from City of Toronto numbers, Shapcott compares the average monthly cost of housing people who are homeless in a Shelter bed (\$1,932); provincial jail (\$4,333); and hospital bed (\$10,900) to show that social housing is a much cheaper option (\$199.92). (Shapcott, 2007)

It is estimated that roughly 65,000 young people are homeless or living in homeless shelters throughout the country at one time or another during a given year. In Toronto, it is estimated that 1,700 youth are on the streets on any given night, at least half of whom are staying in emergency shelters. Because of policies that criminalize homelessness (Safe Streets Act, 2000), many young people who are homeless end up in jail, or receive numerous tickets that they cannot pay (and non-payment can lead to jail time) (Gaetz & O'Grady, 2010). Previous research has shown that in Toronto, the average length of time youth spend living homeless is over five years (O'Grady and Gaetz, 2009).

The cost of keeping a single youth in the shelter system in Toronto is approximately \$20,664<sup>11</sup> a year, and this does not include the costs of day programs, health, mental health and addictions supports, or the cost of policing.

The Family Reconnect Program (FRP) operates on a yearly budget of \$228,888.00. In 2010 FRP supported the return home or move to independent or supportive housing with family support of 25 youth, and in addition prevented 7 youth from experiencing homelessness. If Family Reconnect only served these 32 youth in a year (and of course they serve and support many more) the cost per youth is \$7,125.

If these 32 young people were prevented from using shelter services for a single year, the savings to the system would be \$661,248.

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

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11. The per-diem rate in the city of Toronto is approximately \$57.40 per night, \$1722.00 per month, for an annual average total of: \$20,664.

## 4.8 Conclusion

What is clear in assessing the impacts of the Family Reconnect Program is the complexity of factors involved in youth homelessness. The presenting issues of street youth most often involve a combination of mental health, developmental, addictions, abuse and/or other factors. What these issues all have in common, however, is their genesis as family issues. While the reasons a youth leaves home vary widely, a key finding of this research indicates that they often want to establish or re-establish some kind of connection with some or all of their family members. This may involve occasional and limited contact, reuniting with family and moving back home

or simply coming to terms with why they left and moving forward with their lives. Families too who have children living on the streets, are often at a loss or ill equipped to reconnect with their children, to better understand and support them, and to access appropriate resources, not just for their children but for themselves when experiencing, for example, poverty, family breakdown, illness or abuse. While there are no happily ever after stories, there is sufficient evidence of healing, greater understanding and reconciliation to make a very strong case for the vital importance of programs like Family Reconnect.

# 5 Establishing a Family Reconnect Program

## 5.1 Introduction

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 new ways of thinking about solutions to youth homelessness.

One of the challenges of working in the homelessness sector is that of transferability and replication, on the one hand, and of 'scaling up', on the other. Transferability means taking the essential elements of a strong program, and adapting it to a new local context and environment. Scaling up means taking a successful program and expanding its scale, scope and reach within a region or across regions. Our goal in writing this section is to assist those who wish to start a family reconnect program, or who are interested in scalable systems level approaches.

To be truly transferrable, one needs to understand the key elements that make the program successful. This means not only drawing on what makes the current program work, but through evaluation, identifying aspects of the current model that could be improved.

In this section, we offer insights into the key elements that make a family reconnection program successful. In the first section, we identify key challenges of the Family Reconnect program as a way of highlighting both areas of improvement and consideration for those seeking to replicate the program. In the next section, we draw from our research and evaluation of Family Reconnect in order to identify the essential elements of an effective agency based program.

However, the review of Family Reconnect perhaps points to something more ambitious; a new way of thinking about our response to youth homelessness in Canada. It is possible to

imagine a response that focuses more on prevention and rapid re-housing. Here, a 'scaled up' version of Family Reconnect – one that builds preventive strategies into schools, that focuses on family mediation and early intervention – could provide young people who are homeless (or at risk) with opportunities to rebuild relations with families and thus remain at home or if that is not possible, to move into independent living in a safe and planned way.

In the last section, we explore how Family Reconnect can be approached at a 'systems' level; that is, how a more strategic and expansive program that focuses largely on prevention can be designed and implemented to impact on the lives of young people at a regional level. Here, we draw on effective program models from Australia and the UK.

## 5.2 Challenges faced by Eva's Family Reconnect program

As with all programs, the Eva's Family Reconnect faces challenges. Some of these are internal, having to do with the operations of the program and its fits within the broader structure of Eva's initiatives. On the other hand, some of the challenges are from without, having to do with how homelessness services – and those services targeting young people – are organized and delivered. It is worth exploring these challenges, both as a way of identifying areas of improvement for Eva's, but also to highlight key learnings for those interested in replicating and modifying this program. The challenges of Family Reconnect discussed here fall into several categories that together highlight the broader need for a coordinated systems approach to youth homelessness.

### Sector Challenges

Perhaps the biggest challenge faced by the Family Reconnect program comes from the homelessness sector itself. The

first big challenge presented by the sector is the lack of 'buy-in' for family reconnection. As discussed in section 2, the Canadian response to youth homelessness does not prioritize reconnecting homeless youth with their families and communities. The focus is rather on the provision of emergency services and at best, helping young people move towards some kind of self sufficiency. Unfortunately, this notion of self-sufficiency does not place a high priority on the role of the family.

*"... there really isn't a real buy in for programs like this other than they like the concept. They like the concept, everybody likes the concept, because it is helping youth go home, youth who are homeless. Who can knock that? It just sounds great, you are getting kids off the street, reuniting families, and everybody probably has this Leave it to Beaver concept for what it is like when these kids go home, which is not usually the case."*

Clinical Consultant, 2010

As the Family Reconnect program clearly demonstrates, family continues to be important in the lives of many if not most youth even after they become homeless, and many need and desire assistance with reconnection. Family Reconnect Program staff express considerable frustration with the reticence of the sector to acknowledge the potential benefits of reconnecting with family. There is a pervasive reluctance on the part of many who work in the sector to acknowledge the importance of family in young people's lives. Family conflict, abuse or breakdown, often cited as a main cause of youth homelessness, is used as justification for severing ties with family and the move to become self sufficient. To some degree, this is understandable, as many young people encountered in the sector are indeed fleeing family violence. At the same time, it perhaps goes without saying that many youth are in a poor frame of mind when they enter the shelter system, and reconnecting with family may not seem to be viable or desirable at the time. This may mean that neither young people nor agency staff place priority on exploring the potential for reconnecting with family. Nevertheless, it is in fact this time of first contact with homeless youth that the opportunities to engage with family are so important, and why the full range of street youth serving agencies must be part of an effective referral system.

The second major sector-related challenge is the lack of

coordination and integration of services. While some cities in Canada are developing coordinated responses and community plans, this is not the case in Toronto. It is also true that outside of cities such as Calgary, few communities have focused or strategic responses to youth homelessness. This means that sector-wide preventive approaches that might highlight family mediation and connection are absent. It also means that within the youth serving homelessness sector, services are not coordinated, information systems are not in place to support information sharing, and sector wide intake and referral systems are not available.

## Referrals and Intake

Intake is a key component of a service like Family Reconnect. Clients must know about the program, and be able to access it in a smooth, seamless and timely way. Currently, Family Reconnect staff rely heavily on referrals by front line shelter staff, who inform the FRP team of interested youth and/or those who could potentially benefit from youth and/or family counseling. Other sources of client intake include referrals from external agencies, including child services, community agencies, hospitals or health facilities and in some cases agencies outside of Toronto. Family Reconnect staff occasionally liaise with Toronto Police Services who also refer youth and /or families to the program.

However, there is currently no comprehensive intake process for the program, and it operates to a large degree on an ad-hoc basis. Most agency referrals come from within the Eva's Place shelter, and yet even here there does not appear to be a systematic approach to identifying and referring youth to the program.

An effective intake and referral system would require Eva's Initiatives and other street youth serving agencies to: a) foster and promote the notion that reconnection with family is a possibility and desirable outcome for at least a portion of their client population (this needs to be supported by leadership, and understood by all staff); b) be aware of the Family Reconnect service, its programs, and how to access it; c) work with an effective system of communication that ensures correct information is gathered and flowed to Family Reconnect in a timely way. In other words, intake for Family Reconnect must be 'hard wired' into the intake work of other agencies. Special attention should be paid to identifying the

needs of young people who are either new to the streets, and those who are particularly young.

An ideal sector-wide intake system would ensure that every young person who engages homeless services is assessed, made aware of Family Reconnect, and where appropriate, referred to the service.

## Communications and Outreach

An inefficient intake process is to some degree rooted in key challenges related to communication and outreach, and to the above mentioned lack of acceptance of family reconnection within the youth homelessness sector. Part of the problem relates to organizational capacity. That is, there are limited staff resources dedicated to communication, thus outreach efforts are sporadic, communication materials are weak, and effective information systems are not in place. Relying on a networking process largely characterized by personal and incidental connections prohibits effective and consistent communication and coordination. The lack of a comprehensive outreach and communication strategy hampers the ability of the program to effectively provide the kinds of services and resources youth and families need. A more robust and coordinated communications and outreach strategy will not only get the word about the program out, but will also build in measures to coordinate information sharing with other street youth serving agencies. Moreover, a successful outreach strategy will then ensure that a broad range of agencies and services have clear information about the program.

## Location and Access

One major challenge for Eva's Family Reconnect program is its isolated location, which contributes both to access problems for clients, and more broadly to the lack of profile and engagement FRP has in the sector. Eva's is situated in a light industrial area in the northeast end of the city, which places significant limitations on its accessibility. Transportation is a challenge (both in terms of cost and distance), for young people who are reticent to access a new service and / or address the issues that family reconnection entails. This distance can become formidable. Moreover, the service is housed in the shelter itself which, as the experiences of clients demonstrates, can present barriers for young people and families who wish to access the program. For example, interviews with youth revealed strong

reluctance to access the program due to negative experiences at the shelter, or not wanting to be in a shelter environment altogether. Furthermore, if youth are in the process of moving forward with their lives, constantly returning to a location that reconnects them with street life can be problematic. While FRP staff do meet in family homes, this places greater strain on staff who spend more time traveling and less time providing services on site. Due to a poorly funded staffing model, FRP staff are required to undertake their own duties, in addition to serving on shelter committees, participating in shelter events and covering for shelter staff during crises and when short-staffed.

## A stretched mandate

Because of inherent weaknesses in our response to youth homelessness, Eva's Family Reconnect program is burdened with a broad and perhaps unmanageable mandate for a such small program. The street youth sector in Toronto and elsewhere is in many ways the stopgap for the weaknesses of other sectors (mental health, addictions, corrections, education, child welfare), and staff at street youth serving agencies are expected to do much with minimal resources, training and expertise. The Family Reconnect program has been charged with doing preventive work – at risk youth remain in the home –, as well as work with more chronically homeless youth, in addition to work with family members. Each of these tasks can and should require a broader strategic approach. In addition to the above, the Family Reconnect program takes on the added task of dealing with young people with serious mental health issues. Because mental health supports are minimal in the street youth sector, the Family Reconnect team (which has trained counselors, therapists and clinical consultants) becomes the default support when agency staff make mental health referrals.

While Eva's current staff configuration allows Family Reconnect to work with this stretched mandate, the capacity of the program to take on family reconnection work (either in terms of prevention or with chronically homeless youth) is severely compromised.

## Case management

Case management and counseling is central to any Family Reconnect program. Counseling, however is only part of the

work, as FRP staff are also responsible for ensuring that young people and families get access to services and supports in the community. One of the challenges faced by the Family Reconnect program is moving clients from ongoing therapy and support provided by staff, to community supports.

This case management challenge is a result of both the difficulties in identifying appropriate community supports, but also reflects a longer standing approach to counseling and therapy within the program. According to FRP's clinical consultant, the most effective therapeutic method for working with street involved youth is Brief Therapy. Brief Therapy is a solution-based approach to psychotherapy that focuses on a specific issue or problem allowing the client to work towards an effective response or intervention. Strategic approaches, such as Brief Therapy, are less concerned with how problems emerge, and are more focused on developing realistic solutions. People are assisted in moving forward by addressing the factors that sustain the current problem and prevent change. It is considered "brief" because the length of the intervention is largely dependent upon the work involved in dealing with a specific issue. For instance, the therapy may only last one or two sessions, if the issue is quickly resolved. In other cases, however, progress through counseling may take time, because many homeless youth are profoundly alienated, have difficulty forming attachments, and lack trust. The movement away from long term relationship therapy to goal focused, brief therapy is not consistently reflected in the counseling strategies of Family Reconnect counselors. While traditional long-term therapy has its benefits, particularly in dealing with complex cases, it can also produce client dependency thereby placing pressure on the program's already limited counseling resources. Brief counseling is a preferred approach to working with clients, and those who need longer term or ongoing counseling and support should eventually be transitioned to external resources, to ensure that limited counseling resources are directed at youth in immediate need. If the Family Reconnect program was to experience increased traffic due to improved communications and outreach, it is questionable whether the service would have the capacity to do this work without shifting decisively to a case management model that stresses brief counseling.

## Data Management

Programs that offer a case-management approach (such as Eva's Family Reconnect) require an effective data management system. FRP does not have one in place. Their existing system has evolved over the years mainly in response to the changing output requirements of funders. This has made the collection of data inconsistent, undermined the motivation of staff to enter data, and impaired the ability of the program to compile and analyse data in order to continually assess and improve services. A more robust data management system should be tied to an improved intake system and support effective case management.

### Organizational capacity, staff roles and responsibilities

If the challenges identified above are addressed, the result will be improved service to clients, and increased access to the program. This raises questions of organizational capacity within Evas to support a more productive Family Reconnect program. The current staffing model is built around the strong counseling skills of the three team members. While the Manager of the program is responsible for all operational aspects, by necessity, she commits a considerable amount of time to counseling clients. This is largely a product of the manager's extensive counseling experience and commitment to clients, and at the same time, the limited counseling resources available in the program (not to mention, the startlingly inadequate level of therapeutic counseling support across the youth homelessness sector).

This program, like many small programs in the homelessness sector, does not have the capacity to adequately address systems needs, including communications, data management and systems planning. Enhanced access to the program will not only put more pressure on the counseling staff, it will require a higher level of organizational support to ensure that key tasks related to communications, data management and outreach are achieved. Increased support for the manager to engage in broader organizational tasks will be needed, and / or such systems needs will have to be dealt with by staff elsewhere in the organization.

### 5.3 Setting Up an Agency Based Family Reconnect Program

In considering the replication of any program, one must identify key elements of a program that can be modified or made to work in a new location. There are basic elements that contribute to the establishment of a successful agency-based program that focuses on reconnecting young people with families. One must have a clear vision and purpose, built upon a system of values and principles that align with that purpose. A program model should be developed that addresses a clear need. A committed, trained and supported staff will help ensure that clients receive the supports that they need. Accessibility is important, in that barriers must be reduced for client involvement. That is, everything from the location of the service, to the antidiscrimination framework adopted, to the hiring of staff all contribute to ensuring that the service is responsive to diverse client needs. To achieve all of this, of course, the program must be appropriately funded to do the work it sets out to do.

When a family reconnection program makes a real difference in the lives of young people and families, and the communities from which they emerge, we know it is a success. Eva's Initiatives Family Reconnect program does indeed make such an impact on young lives, and is a model that can not only be adapted elsewhere, but should be a part of any effective response to youth homelessness. The key elements of Eva's Family Reconnect program have been discussed in detail throughout this report, including the approach to counseling and therapy, the use of clinical consultants and testing, and the importance of referrals and accompaniment services. This information provides a basic understanding of how the program works, what the focus of the work is and what some of the potential outcomes are.

In this section, we outline the essential elements of a successful Family Reconnect program at an agency level. The following framework for transferability is intended to provide an agency with the tools and information needed to establish a family reconnect program.

#### A) The Goal of a family reconnect program

The goal of a family reconnect program is to prevent youth homelessness, to rapidly rehouse those who become homeless, and to secure stable housing for youth who have been homeless over a long period of time. The guiding principle of this program is the protection of homeless and at risk youth.

There are different ways of achieving this, which may result in distinctive service delivery models at the program level, or a more focused or specific emphasis of support.

Family reconnect programs can also focus on prevention and early intervention. That is, the service orientation works with young people and their families before the young person becomes homeless (prevention), and/or works with young people when they first become homeless to rapidly re-house them (early intervention) either by finding a way to help them return home, or help them get the housing and supports they need. It is our view that early intervention, prevention and rapid re-housing should be key priorities of street youth serving agencies, the homelessness sector, child welfare and social services, education, corrections, and health care.

On the other hand, services can be oriented towards helping young people who have been homeless for a longer period of time, and/or are more entrenched in street youth culture. The work of a family reconnect program is to help youth connect with family, resolve family conflict and ultimately move the youth off the streets – either back home or into a community setting, with appropriate and necessary supports. This kind of work is also important, but may require a different orientation to service delivery and supports.

Eva's Family Reconnect program blends this broad range of services – prevention, rapid re-housing, and work with long-term homeless youth. Most significant is the centrality of counseling and therapy – particular family counseling rooted in family systems theory. Instrumental counseling that helps young people deal with a broad range of developmental issues, (how to access housing and employment, manage finances, improve social relationships, navigate systems, deal with mental health challenges, etc.) is also important. Accurate and appropriate clinical assessments (mental health, addictions, and learning disabilities) can help young people and their families understand, respond to, and come to terms with the underlying causes of family conflict.

This is a broad mandate for any agency-based program, and to be successful it must be well integrated into a web of services and supports that include street youth serving agencies, but must necessarily extend beyond into health care, education, child welfare, addictions and corrections services.

## B) Mission and Values

A clear mission and underlying values are key to effective program development and delivery. The mission statement declares what a program is committed to achieving, while the underlying values are the beliefs and principles that support the mission statement. In shaping the **mission** of a family reconnection program, one might consider including the following elements, which are deemed as central to Eva's Family Reconnect program:

- Recognition of the fundamental importance of families in the lives of most if not all young people.
- Commitment to work with youth who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless to re-engage with their families and communities and move them off the streets.
- Understanding that obtaining – and maintaining – stable housing and family connections may require ongoing supports.
- Commitment to assessment, counseling, and access to appropriate services and supports will improve relationships and strengthen the life skills of at-risk youth enabling them to return home where possible or move into the community ideally with family support.

Key **values** that we consider central to an effective family reconnection program include the following:

- Families can and do play an important role in young people's lives. This is true of many if not most street youth.
- For many street youth, the solution to their homelessness requires that attention be paid not only to their individual struggles but also those facing family members.
- Access to counseling that is oriented towards reconciling family relationships, building life skills, obtaining life goals, engaging in activities, and involvement in community, is important in helping street youth move forward with their lives.
- Effective counseling and casework should be client-centred and driven, and focus on a whole-person approach. That is, strengths and assets

should be built upon, and solutions should be integrated into a range of issues and challenges identified by the youth.

- Family reconnection most successfully operates from an anti-discriminatory framework. The program should be accessible to all young people who are – or are at risk of becoming – homeless. The service delivery model must be sensitive to and accommodating of differences based on gender, sexual orientation, ethno-cultural, and religious backgrounds.

## C) Service Components

Drawing from what we have learned from Eva's Family Reconnect, we have identified a range of service components that we feel are worth considering in setting up a family reconnection program. Of course, it is important to consider the significance of context; that in a given city or town, the range of services and supports that exist external to an agency will shape how and in what way the components of the service itself are configured.

### i) Intake and referrals

An effective intake system is key to accessibility and to ensuring that the correct services and resources get to the right people. For an agency based family reconnection program to be successful, it should ideally have a rigorous and robust intake system that enables staff to:

- a) identify and direct appropriate clients to the program (this involves both internal and external referrals)
- b) quickly assess the needs of the young person
- c) develop an appropriate work plan that may involve a short term intervention, or longer term counseling and support.

Such an intake process requires a well thought out, implemented and accessible data management system, so that key information can be identified at the beginning. This allows for the tracking of progress throughout the casework, and allows for an evaluation of outcomes (in the following section, the Common Assessment Framework in the UK is presented, which may provide a good model).

Of course, intake for family reconnection cannot easily occur if the program is not accessible. A key challenge for any family reconnection program is getting word out so that that young people and families know about, understand and have access to the service. This access may be brokered and facilitated by intermediary agencies.

As discussed throughout this report, there are a number of ways clients may come into contact with a family reconnect program, including family members, intermediary agencies or institutions (such as the police, hospitals, schools) or through self-referral. However, the biggest source of referrals is likely to be other street youth serving agencies. These agencies must play a pivotal role in the referral and intake process. To fulfill this role, street youth serving referral agencies must be ready to embrace the notion that for many young people, family *continues to be important* in their lives even after they become homeless, and many need and desire assistance in reconnecting. Implementation of an effective referral system must begin with buy-in from partner agencies and include leadership from the host organizations.

Most street youth serving agencies engage in some sort of intake process for their own purposes. In shelters settings, the process is often formal, with a list of set questions. In other contexts, such as drop-ins, initial contact may be quite informal, in order to facilitate the building of relationships that are necessary for the work to succeed. Part of the intake and referral process for family reconnect necessarily requires that other agencies, both within and outside the street youth sector, develop policies and procedures into their own intake process for identifying young people for whom the support of a family reconnection program would be beneficial.

### **Communications and Outreach**

The success of an agency-based family reconnection program necessarily relies on a very effective and robust communication and outreach strategy. That is, in order to nurture an effective system of referrals, agencies and services outside of the homelessness sector need to have a clear understanding of the mandate of the program, the scope of possible work, and a referral process that includes the necessary information required by program staff to make an appropriate assessment. People cannot make referrals if they are not aware of a service's existence.

Key to any communications strategy is having effective systems in place that allow potential client information to flow to the program in a timely way. Clear and well articulated materials, a strong web presence, resources and tools to assist in the development of a referral system, and ongoing outreach and engagement by family reconnect staff are important. In contexts similar to Toronto, where the infrastructure to respond to youth homelessness is fragmented, poorly integrated and without a strong and established practice of working collaboratively, this becomes particularly important.

### **Procedures to help family members reconnect**

We began this report with a story about a parent who wished to make contact with their homeless child. This is not an altogether unusual story. However, in Toronto, there is no formal system that facilitates this process, and this in fact undermines opportunities for young people and families to re-establish relationships. Because of concerns for the privacy and protection of the young people involved, direct access to youth is generally not facilitated by agencies offering shelter and refuge. Nevertheless, this passive approach does not amount to a system, and certainly does not meet the needs of many young people and their families.

In any jurisdiction where there is a family reconnection program, a policy should be adopted whereby all youth serving homeless agencies when are approached by family members, forward that info to the family reconnect program. FRP can then work with the family and young person in question to assess whether direct contact is feasible or advisable, and where possible, begin efforts at family mediation. Information about how to contact street youth should be standardized and communicated effectively to parents (and other intermediary service providers, such as 'help lines'). Furthermore the procedure for referrals should be consistent, rigorous and tracked.

### **ii) Program Accessibility**

Accessibility to a Family Reconnect program can be thought of in several senses. For one, accessibility refers to physical access to the service – Do young people know about it? Can they get to the service? Do they feel safe using the service? Accessibility also refers to social exclusion – that is, for young people who are multiply oppressed by gender, racism, sexual orientation or addictions, for instance, access and engagement are of primary importance.

Service location is important, and can play a dominant role in youth engagement, and/or continued involvement in the program (Slesnick & Prestopnik, 2009). For example, if the the location of the program can potentially trigger past traumatic events, or cause a youth to cross paths with someone they know, the likelihood of program completion for that youth would significantly decrease. Ease in getting to and from a session is also important. If attending programming or counseling sessions becomes a daunting task (due to financial constraints or physical barriers) that provides more stress than promise, many youth will not see it through. Slesnick and Prestopnik (2009), in their work on youth and addictions services, further emphasize the importance of location. Their study found that youth were more likely to complete a program if given the opportunity to have home visits or attend sessions in a more accessible location.

There are several ways to address such access problems. First, a family reconnection program should, where possible, be located centrally and be easily accessible by public transportation and / or on foot. Such a location would make the service more visible and accessible to young people, and also increase opportunities to build stronger relations with other agencies in the area.

Another approach to accessibility is to base the family reconnection program on an outreach model. That is, services should be, where possible, located *where* street youth are. Depending on the configuration of street youth services in a given jurisdiction, the services of a family reconnect program could be offered on a part-time basis at a number of agencies. This builds relations with agencies, makes the service more visible and accessible to young people, and takes the service to more marginalized communities where street youth may be reluctant to engage with a broad range of agencies.

#### **Anti-discriminatory framework**

Access must also be considered in relation to the specific needs of sub-populations that are further oppressed by racism, sexism and homophobia. The street youth population is not homogeneous. Young women face different challenges than young men. Racism and discrimination continue to be a problem, and in many centres across Canada, aboriginal youth and /or black youth are overrepresented amongst the street youth population. Young people who are sexual minorities are often stigmatized by their peers, and in some cases by the

agencies they turn to for assistance. Homophobia at home (and/or in their community) may have been a contributing factor leading to their homelessness.

Addressing the needs of marginalized populations is an ongoing challenge, but one that is well worth it given the benefits. For a family reconnect program to be truly accessible, such differences must be embraced through an anti-discriminatory framework that stresses equity. Staff must be well trained, and there must be an on-going and continuous commitment to equity.

The needs of marginalized populations can be addressed in a number of ways. For instance, an effort can be made to hire staff that more broadly reflect the street youth population. Service delivery models can also specifically target certain populations with special needs. In Australia, for instance, some of their Family Reconnect programs are run by and for Aboriginal peoples, and there is no reason that such a model could not be applied here. Solutions to physical accessibility issues can also help address the needs of marginalized sub-populations. Using outreach to take the service to agencies serving young women, Aboriginal youth, or those involved in street-based sex work, for instance, reduces barriers to access. Given the degree to which issues of diversity play a contributing role in youth homelessness, cultural sensitivity should be a central feature of the work of family reconnect teams. This may be particularly important in the case of clients who come from families with diverse ethno-cultural and religious backgrounds where counseling is either misunderstood, rejected or frowned upon.

#### **Hours of operation**

Finally accessibility has to be considered in terms of hours of operation. While all service delivery models are constrained by resources, and counseling-based programs tend to be organized around regular office hours (and this may work for the vast majority of clients), certain considerations need to be taken into account to meet the needs of family reconnect clients. Family crisis and conflict is not planned, and the need for young people and family members to contact family reconnect programs ideally cannot be constrained by the time of day. The need to ensure that an effective referral system is in place (operated through a shelter or through an existing help line) that allows staff members to answer and/or address many concerns over the phone, while still having the option to

contact a Family Reconnect counselor directly in an emergency situation, is crucial.

In jurisdictions where help lines are available, information about the family reconnect program should be integrated allowing youth to make contact and ask for help 24/7. However, it is important to note that implementing this kind of help-line-service would further stress the importance and need for thorough staff training with regards to the program's operations and goals and objectives.

### iii) Case Management and Counseling

#### Case Management

Family Reconnect programs are most effective when adopting a case management approach. This means not only engaging young people and their families in counseling, but also helping people access the services and supports they need, in the communities in which they live. Establishing connections in the many communities that young people come from is a challenge for an agency-based program. Working effectively with partners is thus a necessity.

#### Counseling and therapy

One could argue that the key strength of Eva's Family Reconnect program is the counseling and therapy provided to clients. The client-centered approach they have adopted works because it is flexible and responsive to the variable and changing needs and situations of young people and their families. In order to integrate therapy into a case management model, the 'brief therapy' approach is recommended.

As can be seen from a discussion of the casework of Eva's Family Reconnect, the orientation of counseling with clients includes instrumental counseling, therapy and family counseling. **Instrumental counseling** is key, as young people must be assisted in developing the skills and capacity to manage their way in the world. This is true for any adolescent, whether housed or not. Individual counseling and **therapy** is important for many clients as well, and the course of this therapy is shaped by their needs.

Working with families will of course be a key feature of any family reconnection program. The approach to **family counseling** adopted by the Family Reconnect staff is rooted in family systems theory, and this seems to be an effective

way of working with young people and their families. This may involve some degree of **family mediation**, so such skills are important to have within the staff team. The goal is to help family members develop a better understanding of their relationships, how to negotiate and interact in beneficial ways, and ideally how to develop supportive, long-term relationships within the family.

### iv) Mental health and disability assessments and referrals

Given the significance of mental health issues that underlay family conflict, it is important that any family reconnect program be well resourced to support both youth and their families in this area. This includes skills in **counseling and therapy** (discussed above). It is also highly recommended that a family reconnect program employ, or have access to a **clinical consultant** to support the work of the team. Within Eva's Family Reconnect program, the role of the clinical consultant is to meet with both the program Supervisor and the Family Intervention counselors on a monthly basis, to provide case specific consultations, and guidance to promote professional growth and development, as well as advice on program direction. Case specific consultation involves direction for staff in those cases that prove to be challenging and require clinical assistance or consultation. The clinical consultant also aids in identifying priorities and needs for the professional development of staff.

Also important is to have access to **psychological and psychiatric assessments**. All counselor recommendations that include a suspected mental health diagnosis must be confirmed by a psychiatrist. Only a psychologist and/or a psychiatrist can make an official mental health, developmental or learning disability diagnosis. Such diagnoses are also often pivotal in changing the way in which family members relate to each other. The significance of this work for Eva's Family Reconnect program has been highlighted in Section 5.

### vi) Data gathering and evaluation

Data gathering and evaluation are important to effective program delivery, and to continuous improvement. Effective data management occurs at several levels. For instance, there should be sector-wide data management systems in place so that individuals can be tracked, and case management

improved. Within the Family Reconnect program, an augmented data management system should be in place allowing staff to more effectively track their work with clients. This includes careful attention to initial assessment, capturing the work that is done, and building in an assessment of outputs and outcomes. An effort should also be made to track the progress of clients for at least a year after they have left the program, in order to assess how they – and their families are doing. For data management to be effective, staff members have to see the value of collecting and entering data. Thus, a system that clearly contributes and compliments staff work should be instituted. The data management system should allow the organization to aggregate data and assess the effectiveness of the program, and contribute to its continuous improvement. In other words, careful data collection can be part of an ongoing effort to evaluate the program.

Some good examples of data management systems that are tied to program evaluation and continuous improvement have been developed specifically for the homelessness sector. In the United Kingdom, for instance, the Outcomes Star has been used to great effect in working with homeless clients, and allows staff and clients to work together to monitor progress achieved through counseling. The Outcomes Star data can then be aggregated by the organization – and more broadly, by the sector – in order to analyse service delivery and improve programs.

## 5.4 A ‘Systems Approach’ to Family Reconnection

The effectiveness, and underlying logic of the Family Reconnect program suggest that a more ambitious application of the basic tenets of the program can be applied more broadly at a ‘systems level’. That is, in contrast to developing an agency-based program or response, it is possible to approach the issue from a more integrated systems level, bringing together a range of services and approaches that work across the street youth sector, and ideally, engage with programs, services and institutions ‘upstream’ (that is, before the young person becomes homeless). Scaling up family reunification programming can thus be seen as a key preventive approach to youth homelessness. There are several key features to an integrated, systems level approach to family reconnection.

To be effective, systems level approaches require strong institutional support by all levels of government, ensuring that family reconnection programming is widely available across jurisdictions and is not dependent on support from individual organizations that deem these programs as necessary or appropriate. In other words, young people should have access to such interventions wherever they live.

A systems response also requires that programming work across institutional and jurisdictional boundaries. An effective family reconnection program will require collaboration between education, child welfare services, the mental health sector, housing, settlement and corrections for instance. In many ways, youth homelessness (and by extension, family reconnection) is a ‘fusion policy’ issue that necessarily requires an integrated, cross-jurisdictional response.

Key to an effective systems level response is a focus on prevention, which requires efficient strategies to identify young people at risk. This once again suggests the need for an integrated jurisdictional approach with strong communication links, so that appropriate and timely interventions can take place. Also – and this is key – an intervention program such as family reconnect must be widely available - and in some ways targeted – to young people who are below the age of 16. The homelessness sector in Canada is largely reactive, and is designed to serve young people who are 16 and older. A more effective approach would identify and begin preventive work with young people who are below that age threshold.

Systems level approaches therefore focus heavily on prevention. This does not mean that emergency services such as shelters and day programs are not necessary. Rather, these services remain essential for helping young people when: a) there is a total breakdown in family relations, and new arrangements are not in place, b) young people have no home to return to (that is, there is no stable family in the picture) and c) when young people - and their families for that matter – could benefit from temporary separation or ‘time out’. However, the orientation of such emergency services would shift with an integrated systems approach. In this case, emergency services are tasked with helping young people to reengage with family if possible, and / or assist their move into alternative housing with necessary supports attached, as quickly as possible. Stays in shelters would be short, and young people’s return to community would be case managed.

Two key examples of effective and integrated systems level approaches come from the United Kingdom, and Australia.

### **Australia: ‘Reconnect Program’ for Young People At Risk of Homelessness**

Australia’s “Reconnect Program” is operated by the Australian government’s Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. The Reconnect Program is an Australian Government Initiative that has been in operation since 1999. The program is a national early intervention initiative designed to reduce youth homelessness by reconnecting both homeless youth and youth who are at risk of becoming homeless with their families, schools, and communities. The program is a classic example of a systems level approach in that it is widely available across the country, and it 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<sup>12</sup>.

While funded by the central government, it nevertheless operates through a network of community based early intervention services with the goal of assisting youth in stabilizing their current living situations, as well as improving 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 Australia’s Reconnect program includes:

“a focus on responding quickly when a young person or family is referred; a ‘toolbox’ of approaches that include counseling, 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-centred orientation, and a holistic approach to service delivery. The success of the program requires working collaboratively with key agencies and institutions. They stress good linkages with service providers as crucial. Like Canada, the Australian population is diverse, and includes a large Aboriginal population. The Reconnect program therefore stresses the importance of equitable and culturally appropriate service delivery. As part of this strategy, they strive to employ staff from backgrounds representative of the populations they serve in order to more easily engage with the diversity of Reconnect clients.

A key feature and strength of the Australian model is how the notion of ‘reconnection’ is conceived. In striving to help young people stabilize their living situation, the goal is to not simply work on family relationships in isolation, but rather, to improve the young person’s level of engagement with training, school and the local community. In fact, whereas in Canada the response to homelessness largely ignores education as significant in the lives of homeless youth, in Australia, it is central. While they do recognize that many homeless youth have negative school experiences, they also see schools as key to the identification of young people who are at risk, and thus have an important role to play in keeping young people connected to their community and in helping them successfully move into adulthood. They argue that: “An integrated national strategy for early intervention for early childhood, middle childhood and youth would draw attention to the inter-relationship of schools with family and community rather than regarding schools purely as vehicles for pedagogy.” (Australian Government, 2003:8)

Several years ago the Australian government undertook an extensive evaluation to assess and analyze program strategies and outcomes in order to determine whether the Reconnect programs were effective in accomplishing what they were designed to accomplish<sup>13</sup>. Importantly, they wanted to find

12. For more details, go to the Reconnect program website: <http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/housing/proserv/homelessness/reconnect/Pages/default.aspx>

13. Australian Government, 2003; RPR Consulting, 2003; Evans & Shaver, 2001)

out whether positive outcomes were sustained over time. They were also interested in understanding whether – and how – the program strengthened the community’s ability to deliver early intervention to at-risk youth. Finally, they evaluated the effectiveness of the program’s management (Australian Government, 2003; RPR Consulting, 2003).

The evaluation identified 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

The evaluation also pointed to the success of the program in building community capacity for early intervention in youth homelessness. In other words, the program itself has had a significant impact at a systems level and is testament to the need for, and success of, such systems level approaches. Key conclusions were that Reconnect services:

- are highly effective, relative to their small size, in increasing community infrastructure for early intervention;
- build capacity through collaborative approaches and by strengthening service networks;
- build capacity by assisting other organizations to have a greater focus on effective early intervention;
- build capacity over time where adequate resources and stable management are available;
- can be highly effective models for achieving participation by Indigenous communities in approaches that support early intervention;

The program design allows for flexibility, and as a result

variation exists across Reconnect programs. Furthermore, community characteristics and local infrastructure can have an impact on the ability of Reconnect services to build community capacity. The factors that underlie the most successful Reconnect programs appear to be: “a clear understanding of and commitment to the Reconnect model; teamwork; and leadership (Australian Government, 2003:11)”.

The Australian Reconnect program is an excellent example of a systems approach to family reconnection and youth homelessness prevention. The Reconnect program begins with an understanding that youth’s personal and family problems are not mutually exclusive, nor are they isolated and disconnected from all other aspects of their lives. In turn, the program aims to break the cycle of homelessness by applying a holistic approach, providing many services including counseling, group work, mediation and practical support to the whole family, as well as providing services to target individual needs of clients including, specific cultural services and mental health services (Australian Government, 2009). Finally, the program rests on the notion that at a systems level, community capacity must be built so that homelessness prevention becomes the work of a broad range of institutions, services and programs – as well as the community – and not simply the responsibility of the homelessness sector.

### **United Kingdom: Prevention and Family Mediation**

In the UK, the response to homelessness is significantly different than Canada’s in that it is a strategic and integrated approach, and designed to work as a system rather than as a collection of independent community-based responses. Following a national policy push in 2003, the number of homeless in the UK fell by 40% in two and a half years. This reduction was not traced to rising employment or an expanded affordable housing stock, but rather, to the effectiveness of prevention and early intervention strategies (Pawson, Davidson & Netto, 2007). For homeless youth, perhaps the most notable development has been the establishment of the National Youth Homelessness Scheme, first announced in 2006 as a national strategy to ‘tackle and prevent homelessness’. The overarching goal was to have the national government, local governments and community-based service providers work with young people and their families to prevent homelessness and help youth transition to adulthood in a sustainable, safe way.

The key here is the focus on **prevention**, and there is much we can learn from this orientation (Pawson, 2007; Pawson et al., 2006; 2007). The UK approach to preventing youth homelessness begins with the recognition that remaining at home may not be an option for all young people, particularly for those who experience abuse. However, for most youth, their life chances generally improve the longer they stay with their families, and the more 'planned' their transition is to living independently.

The key point of a preventive approach is that young people and their families "need to be able make informed decisions about whether to live apart and, if they need it, to have access to appropriate resources and skilled support if homelessness is to be prevented" (NYHS website: [www.communities.gov.uk/youthhomelessness/prevention/](http://www.communities.gov.uk/youthhomelessness/prevention/)).

"Key elements of 'what works' include flexible and client-centred 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)

Again, reflecting the 'partnership' approach of the UK strategy, local governments are expected to develop interventions to be delivered in collaboration with key partners including Children's Services, the youth service, the not-for-profit sector, and importantly, schools. This collaborative, cross-sectoral approach is seen as necessary in supporting young people and their families to prevent homelessness. Key elements of a preventive strategy include:

#### A) Advice, Assessment and Early Intervention

Getting timely information and supports to young people and their families is crucial. This includes services to develop

### Case Study: Single Point Access to Information

#### St. Basil's "Young Person's Hub"

<http://www.stbasils.org.uk/Contactus/>

The Young Person's Hub is a single point access service based in "The Link", St. Basil's City Centre Advice and Referral service. Young people access the service through a 24 your Youthline, through email, or they can go to the centre itself. Appointments are required. Once there, young people are assessed and matched with a service that is geared to their particular support needs.

#### Specialist Assessment - Swansea's BAYS project<sup>14</sup>

The BAYS – a partnership between the City and County of Swansea Council (Housing and Social Services departments) and Barnardo's – conducts the assessments of all homeless 16–21 year olds without dependent children in Swansea. Given that all homeless 16 and 17 year olds are deemed to be children in need under childcare legislation in Swansea, they receive a joint social work and housing assessment (conducted by a social worker).

Young people aged 18–21 are assessed by specialist seconded workers from Housing Options who have detailed knowledge of the legislation pertaining to, and services available for, young people, as well as the training to relate to this particular age group. The BAYS also offers advice and support (including provision of a Young Person's Adviser) to all care leavers aged 16 to 21, a supported lodgings scheme, and is developing more comprehensive links with schools, in their efforts to prevent youth homelessness.

14. The notes for this case study have been copied directly from the following report (p61):

Quilgars, D., Johnsen, S., Pleace, N. (2008) Youth Homelessness in the UK A decade of progress? Joseph Rowntree Foundation

resilience, raise young people's awareness of their rights and services that provide advice and direction about where to get help. The UK has pioneered a **"Single Point Access information and assessment"** for young people who can access the service either directly or via the phone or internet. As a system, it relies on a good assessment system (such as the Common Assessment Framework, described below), and a strong organization linked to services both internal and external to the homelessness sector. As both a 'triage' service and a clearinghouse, a single point access service ensures consistency of assessment, a reduction in duplication, and an enhanced and effective evaluation of the appropriateness of services.

Once a young person becomes homeless, or is identified as being at risk of homelessness, they are not simply unleashed into the emergency services sector. Rather, an intervention process is initiated, where intake and assessment is performed, risks are identified, and plans are put into place. In conducting an intervention, they adopt a strong case management approach to working with young people, to get them the supports they need either in the homelessness sector, or in mainstream services. This integrated approach means that youth become not so much 'clients' of agencies, but of the sector. They are therefore supported from the moment they are identified, right through to the solution stage, and then after they have either returned home, or moved into a place of their own. The intervention is intended to help young people and their families move quickly to some sort of effective solution, so as to not languish for long periods of time in emergency services<sup>15</sup>.

Central to this approach is the use of a **"Common Assessment Framework"** (CAF), which is a shared assessment system promoted by governments in the UK. The goal of the framework is to: "help practitioners working with children, young people and families to assess children and young people's additional needs for earlier, and more effective services, and develop a common understanding of those needs and how to work together to meet them." (CWDC, 2009:6) The idea is that everyone who works with young people should know about the CAF and how to deliver it.

The CAF builds upon a larger government policy document called "Every Child Matters – Children and Young People's Plan". The CAF consists of:

- a pre-assessment checklist to help decide who would benefit from a common assessment
- a process to enable practitioners in the children and young people's workforce to undertake a common assessment and then act on the result
- a standard form to record the assessment
- a delivery plan and review form

Assessment services may be developed and delivered by local governments, but there is an understanding that partnerships with not-for-profit services are often the best route, as they likely have the expertise, legitimacy and hence the best track record with youth. Organizations that have experience and credibility in their work with young people who are homeless, and which has strong knowledge and relationships with other local providers, are therefore recommended.

That being said, there are challenges with the CAF, as in some jurisdictions, there has been reluctance to take a Lead Professional role because of capacity and resource issues (Smith & Duckett, 2010: 16). On the other hand, they suggest that evaluations in some areas demonstrate positive service outcomes, including an improvement in "multi agency working, information sharing and (a reduction in" referral rates to local authorities" (Smith & Duckett, 2010: 17)

An interesting innovation in the early intervention strategy in the UK, is the use of **"respite"** or **"time out" housing**. Respite housing is understood as temporary accommodation for young people who, because of a conflict or crisis, are suddenly homeless. But rather than have them move into homelessness shelters, they are provided temporary accommodation with intensive intervention supports, including family mediation where appropriate. It is, in a sense, a 'time out' or 'cooling off' space, where young people and their families can work on repairing relations to enable them to return home. If returning is not an option, they are provided with accommodation while they work out longer term housing support. This strategy is considered most appropriate for those 16 or 17 years old.

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15. It should be noted that unlike Canada, when a youth in the UK is officially designated as homeless (and cannot return home) they have a statutory right to housing.

## Case Study: Respite Programs

### **Nightstop**

<http://www.depaulnightstopuk.org/what-we-do/>

Nightstop offers temporary emergency accommodation through volunteer hosts, and is coordinated by DePaul, UK. There are 48 local night stop services that coordinate over 700 hosts, offer 6000 bed nights a year. Young people stay anywhere from a couple of nights to a few weeks. Hosts are given night clothes and hygiene supplies for young people. Young people are provided with a meal at night and breakfast. After the first night stay, a case worker affiliated with the agency that referred them does an assessment and helps them work on their plans. A lot of night stops also offer longer term supportive accommodation, and teach skills for independent living such as cooking budgeting, if in the end returning home is no longer feasible.

In order to ensure the safety and effectiveness of a volunteer based program, there is what Smith and Duckett (2010) refer to as 'robust recruitment and placement procedures'. Host families are trained and supported, and the program operates with an established Quality Standards Assessment programme in place.

### **St. Basil's "Time Out" project**

The St. Basil's program is part of a larger national "Crash Pad" initiative. They make use of one of their housing units to provide young people with a place to stay, usually for a period of two weeks. During that time, they get ten hours of weekly support and engage in family mediation. They report a very high rate of returning home at the end of two weeks.

"Our focus is to assist young people who present with crisis housing need as a result of family conflict an opportunity to spend some time away from the family home – a period of two weeks to not only learn life skills and independent living skills but also to engage in mediation with their parents or caregiver which is very much focused on them returning home in a planned and safe way. After the two weeks stay with us, ultimately our goal is for them to return home, but if not it is to ensure that they have thought through planning the process of moving out of the family home." (Marsha Blake, Prevention Services manager)<sup>16</sup>

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16. From the DVD: "Homeless Youth – Early intervention in the UK" Directed by Yvonne Deutschman, Produced by Dr. Joan Smith Cities Institute, London Metropolitan University. CSEYHP project,

A note of caution: if assessment and advice is not done in a sensitive way it can be experienced negatively by young people. They may find the process intimidating and cumbersome, the advice not all together helpful, and some may feel that they lack the personal capacity to act on the advice. An evaluation by Quilgars et al. (2008) found that:

“Young people often had difficulty understanding the terminology used, lacked the resources and skills necessary to pursue the course of action advised by housing officers, or felt that the legitimacy of their request for help was held in doubt because of their age”.  
(Quilgars, et al., 2008:63)

## B) Family Mediation

A key focus of early intervention in the UK is family mediation. Approximately two thirds of local authorities in the UK have homelessness action plans that include family mediation (HQNS, 2004). While government funds family mediation, it is typically delivered by community agencies in the not-for-profit sector. In the Family Mediation guide published by the organization “Shelter” in the UK, they define mediation as “a ... process for resolving disagreements in which an impartial third party (the mediator) helps people in dispute to find a mutually acceptable resolution’ (Shelter, 2004). There is no single approach to Family Mediation, with the structure and mode of service delivery varying considerably from one place to the next: “most services were outsourced, but some were provided in house by councils; many were tightly integrated with housing options interviews, others accepted referrals from external agencies; some were dependent on willing engagement of all parties, others not” (Quilgars et al., 2008:68). Often, the intervention begins through contacts made in schools. It is a secondary prevention strategy that targets young people who are deemed to be at risk, as well as those who are in crisis and have actually become homeless. In the former case, the goal is to help resolve problems and family conflicts so that the young person in question does not wind up being homeless. For youth who are already homeless, the aim is to help them potentially reunite with their families so they can move home, or into other accommodations, if that makes more sense and there are concerns regarding safety. This is also a program that works upstream, so to speak, with Family Mediation being implemented primarily to prevent

young people from becoming homeless in the first place.

Young people aged 16 years can legally leave home, whereas those under 16 are under the care of local authority children’s services. Mediation with family must in these cases be conducted with the knowledge of local authority children’s services and the consent of the parent. For young people in the 16-18 age group, family mediation is more likely to take place during or after a crisis occurs, when young people come to an agency serving homeless youth.

Resources to support family mediation are also available. Smith and Duckett have developed a toolkit, within which they outline some of the key steps in family mediation for those under 16. It is important to note that while those over 16 are legally able to leave home, those aged 16-17 are still the responsibility of Children’s Services. Evaluations of these programs have also been conducted which show that the rates at which young people who engage in the program return home vary widely, from between 38 and 96% (Pawson, 2007). These variations underscore the need for caution in how these programs are implemented. Thus, for example, If those who deliver mediation services have a vested interest in the outcome – ie. that the young person *should* return home – this can skew the results, and potentially send the young person back into an unhealthy or dangerous situation. Having quotas for the percentage of ‘returns’ expected, or housing workers reserving ‘housing options’ for those they deem more deserving, can lead to problematic results.

Nevertheless, there is strong evidence to suggest that the UK model of family mediation is an effective approach to reconciling relationships for a significant percentage of young people at risk of homelessness. An evaluation of the program by Quilgars et al. (2008) identified several key considerations to making such programming successful.

- The program must be broadly accessible. It must be widely available and people must know about it.
- Family Mediation works best when integrated into a broad range of networked services.
- The program must be voluntary, not forced. This is important because many young people – and their families – consider their disputes to be

private. Said one young person: “Your problems are personal, you don’t want people sat there. You’d think they were judging you really.” (Quilgars et al., 2008:67).

- The goal of the program cannot only be that people return home. This is not possible for all young people, nor necessarily desirable, if people are living in or fleeing homes with high levels of abuse.
- “Time out” or respite accommodation should be available. Several districts in London provide a safe space for young people to undergo what is described as a ‘cooling off’ period (up to eight weeks). During that period, they undergo a support needs assessment, and family mediation is made available.
- There is a need for longer-term follow up and evaluation of the results of the intervention.

One of the challenges of Family Mediation – and for that matter, Eva’s Family Reconnect – is knowing whether the service has a long term impact on strengthened family relations, or if mediating a crisis simply forestalls an inevitable rupture in the family. Furthermore, it is argued that a sensitive (as opposed to ‘outputs driven’) approach is desirable, because young people are often wary of family mediation services. Quilgars et al. remark that:

“Their caution was founded on a range of factors, most commonly: perceived awkwardness of involving third parties in personal disputes; fear that their parents would resent the intervention and react very negatively (potentially violently); fear that parents would manipulate the mediator or young person; and concern that engaging with the service might restrict their entitlement to other services (particularly housing)” (Quilgars, et al., 2008:67).

## Case Study: UK Family Mediation

### St. Basil’s – Birmingham

<http://www.stbasils.org.uk/Accommodation/Services+and+support/Prevention+services/Family+Mediation>

St. Basils offers a range of preventive programs, including a 24 hr “Single Point of Access” toll free phone line, that receives 10,000 calls a year, web-based resources for young people and also provide advice and referrals from an office in the city centre. They interview up to 2000 young people annually who are seeking accommodation because they are homeless or intend to leave home. All of these services are important for family mediation, because they are visible points of entry for young people, and become a place where assessments and referrals (potentially for Family Mediation) take place.

The Family Mediation staff team works directly with young people aged 16-25 who are referred to them by agencies, such as Childrens’ Services and youth agencies. Increasingly they are working with young people under 16. The goal is to resolve family disputes, or find suitable accommodation for young people who are leaving home. Staff describe their priorities as, first, giving young people a voice, second, helping them focus on achieving a positive outcome, and third preventing youth homelessness through helping to resolve family conflicts so they can stay at home, or plan their move in a safe way.

**Alone in London.** London, UK

<http://www.aloneinlondon.org/services/mediation,1671,LA.html>

Alone in London's motto is: "Supporting youth, preventing homelessness". They offer family mediation in a safe and confidential environment and take a client-centred approach. The purpose of the mediation is to empower young people and their families (parents/guardians) by "giving them the control to make informed choices and jointly decide acceptable outcomes".

Staff operate with an understanding that not all issues can be resolved, and that some households will continue to place young people in harm's way. In these cases, young people may leave, or be asked to leave home. Even in these cases, the goal is to offer support so that relationships with some family members can be maintained, while helping young people move forward to obtain accommodation and income in realistic and sustainable ways.

"By the time I get referrals generally it's a complex case, so you would get young people and parents suffering a long term depression, anxiety, self esteem issues, which are also impacted by drug and alcohol abuse. And that impacts on conflict because people are just that much more tired, they are much more frustrated and generally finding life difficult. We have separate one to one sessions if the young person is homeless or at risk of being homeless and we also have one to one sessions with parents separately and it enables people to have a space where they are able to think about what has happened. They can stand back and say "actually, well, its gone too far" and very often it doesn't get to the process of mediation".

(Amanda Sighn, Family Mental Health Mediator)<sup>17</sup>

### C) Working in Schools

As is the case in Australia, much of the preventive work occurs in schools. This is an important consideration, because this is where young people spend much of their time, and this is where one can access young people under the age of 16 who may be at risk. It is also important that schools exist in every community, and in many cases are important community hubs with high levels of parental engagement.

Work in schools is often delivered by not-for-profit agencies, who are usually the same agencies that deliver family mediation services. The rationale for this is: "if we can make a difference to

young people's attitudes and circumstances at a young age, there is a greater chance of them not becoming homeless." (NYHS website: [www.communities.gov.uk/youthhomelessness/prevention/schools/](http://www.communities.gov.uk/youthhomelessness/prevention/schools/)). There are several aspects to this work.

First is the focus on education, with the intention to increase young people's understanding of homelessness, to help them to identify and address situations where they may be at risk of homelessness, and provide them with information about services and supports for when they are in crisis. Second, supports in

17. From the DVD: "**Homeless Youth – Early intervention in the UK**" Directed by Yvonne Deutschman, Produced by Dr. Joan Smith Cities Institute, London Metropolitan University. CSEYHP project,

schools empower youth through personal development. This means helping them develop more effective problem solving and conflict resolution skills. In some cases, the programs also provide support for families and parenting skills. Third, the presence of agencies in schools helps them become key points of contact for young people and / or teachers who suspect that something may be wrong. In their review of prevention programs in the UK, Quilgars et al. (2008) demonstrated how such programmes 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 school.” (Quilgars et al, 2008)

Furthermore, the authors argue that programs that have a peer-educator component are well received and highly effective.

### Case Study: Prevention in Schools

#### **Case Study: Alone in London.** – Schools Work project

<http://www.aloneinlondon.org/services/schools-work-project,1666,LA.html>

The Schools Work project is aimed at young people (aged 11 to 18), in order to help them understand and address conflict issues, whether they are occurring at home or at school. The aim of the project is to: a) Prevent family breakdown and youth homelessness, b) Provide crisis intervention, c) Allow young people to be listened to, and d) Ensure that long-term support is available.

“The schools we work in are in inner London boroughs, the age we groups we work with is aged 11 to 18 years old. The types of areas we focus on are in lower socio-economic backgrounds so the young people will be often coming in from local estates. . . . They experience not only family conflicts but conflicts within their local communities, so for example they might be involved in local gangs, other issues they might face is that they can’t speak English as a first language, there will be cultural problems between the peers themselves such as bullying or racism is quite a thing between the cultural groups as well. The sessions we do in the school are on “What is homelessness? What are the causes? And with that we do conflict resolution skills so we give them something concrete to learn about and take away with them, so the resolution isn’t just about family conflict but also peer conflict which would include things like listening skills, managing your anger a little bit better, communication blockers and things like that. At the end of the session we leave them an open forum for them to self refer, should they wish to.” (Aneesha Dawoojee. Family Mediation & Schools Work Manager)<sup>18</sup>

18. From the DVD: “Homeless Youth – Early intervention in the UK” Directed by Yvonne Deutschman, Produced by Dr. Joan Smith Cities Institute, London Metropolitan University. CSEYHP project,

## 5.5 Conclusion

Families are not incidental to the lives of young people who are homeless. While many young people are fleeing highly conflictual – and in many cases, unsafe – family situations, families can and do have a role to play in preventing, and responding to youth homelessness. The success of Eva’s Family Reconnect program is testament to this. This program, and others across the country that focus on working with the families of young people who are homeless (or who are at risk) are excellent examples of creative responses to youth homelessness. However, in most cases, these kinds of efforts are small scale, and dependent upon the strong commitment of an individual agency or staff.

Family Reconnect programs should not be considered peripheral or incidental to our response to youth homelessness. In fact, they should be well integrated into our whole approach to dealing with young people and families in crisis.

The goal of most street youth serving agencies is to help young people become self-sufficient and move on with their lives. A family reconnection focus would contribute to this in two ways. First, it would shift some of the work to prevention, to ensure that young people do not become homeless in the first place. There is considerable research that demonstrates that the longer young people stay on the streets, the more intractable their lifestyle becomes, the greater dangers they face (in terms of violence, addictions, mental health challenges

and abuse), and the greater challenges they will encounter in moving forward with their lives. Everything possible should be done to prevent youth homelessness, and to help young people stay in their communities with supports or with their families (if possible).

Second, when we think about helping homeless youth become self sufficient, we need to consider that self- sufficiency does not mean absolute independence or isolation. For the vast majority of adults, becoming self sufficient necessarily involves a web of supports within the community. This includes friends, co-workers, but also family. Self sufficiency and family reconnection are therefore not mutually exclusive. Ultimately, the safety and well-being of homeless youth whether reunited with family or not, is paramount.

In this chapter, we have provided a framework for replicating the Family Reconnect program. We have also suggested a more ambitious possibility – that the basic tenets of Family Reconnect be integrated into a more systems-based response to youth homelessness. There is a need for such programming, and a shift in orientation within the sector so that family reconnection becomes part of our standard response to youth homelessness. There is much that we already know about making family reconnection work, and how it can contribute to the improvement of young lives. What is necessary is a commitment to putting such plans into action.

# 6

## Conclusion and Recommendations

### Conclusion

Youth homelessness is inextricably connected to challenges experienced within families. The research on youth homelessness consistently shows that between 60 and 70% of young people are fleeing households where they experienced physical, sexual and / or emotional abuse. Many have been through the child welfare system because of family problems, whether this is parental abuse, neglect or addictions. For some, foster care and group homes did not provide the necessary support. Yet for many young people who become homeless, family still matters.

Because of this, programs such as Family Reconnect should be essential features of our response to youth homelessness. While many young people become homeless because of profoundly problematic – and in some cases, highly destructive – relations with family members (particularly parents), family continues to be important in the lives of many street youth. That family conflict is typically an underlying factor in youth homelessness does not mean that all family relations are defined in terms of

abuse (physical, sexual, and emotional), or that even in such situations, there are not redeemable relationships with other family members; relationships that can support young people on their path to adulthood. The program's

acknowledgement of the importance of family will appeal to all individuals along the political spectrum. Preventing youth from entering the shelter system is both a socially responsible and an economically beneficial response to youth homelessness.

Eva's Family Reconnect program offers an excellent and important example of how the principles of family

*"There is an education component that needs to happen in both the shelter system and broadly in the homeless sector, but I know from my mental health experience that kids that come from the most horrendous family backgrounds and situations, and abusive situations, and ended up in residential treatment for years still yearn for their family".*

(Clinical Consultant for Family Reconnect, 2010)

reconnection can be applied at the program level. Family Reconnect succeeds in improving the lives of young people. This is done by addressing damaged family relations, through individual counseling and support, through counseling and mediation with family members, and through group work processes that help young people learn from their peers. The Family Reconnect program also highlights the importance of support for young people – and their families – in dealing with mental health issues and learning disabilities. These challenges often underlie problematic family relations, and a better understanding of these challenges – often assisted by timely clinical assessments – often helps young people and their families figure out how to move forward from what seemed to be an impasse.

The outcomes of involvement in Family Reconnect are clear. Many young people report improved relations with family. Many move back home, or into housing with the supports they need. At the end of the day, a better understanding of what led to family conflict and youth homelessness – whether or not young people are eventually able to move home – helps young people move forward with their lives.

We also know that Family Reconnect makes economic sense. 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. By preventing youth homelessness, and helping those who are homeless move quickly into housing (either at home or independent living), both short term and long term savings accrue. There is no doubt about the effectiveness of Family Reconnect. In 2009, the cost of helping 32 young people 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 cost would be well over \$600,000.

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

In writing this report, we believe that Family Reconnect points to something more significant; the possibility of transforming of the way we respond to youth homelessness in Canada. In both Australia and the United Kingdom, the response to youth homelessness focuses on prevention and rapid re-housing. This orientation is becoming more and more popular in the

United States, as well.

Preventive models that incorporate family mediation and reconnection, unfortunately are not a standard feature of the response to youth homelessness in Canada. More often, our response to youth homelessness is to assume that relations with family are irrevocably damaged, and the orientation of work with young people is to help them move towards independence – an independence where family does not play a significant role.

The success of Eva's Family Reconnect program demonstrates that family matters! In helping prevent youth homelessness, and /or support homeless youth in moving forward in their lives, we need to do more to resolve the family conflicts at the root of youth homelessness. Focusing on family – with an emphasis on early intervention - can help young people stay at home, or move out in a safe and planned way.

The recommendations that follow have been formulated with this in mind.

## 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.

The conditions that create youth homelessness are not identical to those that cause homelessness for adults. It is no longer acceptable that the response to youth homelessness continue to be modeled on the adult system, with the focus being on self sufficiency. As family can and should be important in the lives of many, if not most street youth, a strategic response to youth homelessness should be developed that emphasizes prevention and quick transitions out of homelessness, in addition to emergency services. The HPS should also require that all designated communities develop a similar strategy, and that sufficient funds be put in place to operationalize such plans.

### 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.

Provincial governments are key players in the delivery of services that have an impact on youth homelessness including health, housing, education, employment, child welfare services and corrections and justice. A proactive strategy to prevent youth homelessness could be modeled on the examples from Australia and the UK; models that place family mediation, school-based prevention, and extraordinary efforts to keep young people in their communities as a top priority. This suggests that it is possible to develop a strategic response to youth homelessness that is comprehensive and works across government departments and ministries. A strategy to end youth homelessness will not be successful if the burden of dealing with youth homelessness falls on a chronically underfunded sector serving the homeless.

#### 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.

Under current laws, many young people who have been receiving care and support from Children's Aid societies either leave care, 'age out' of the system, or are otherwise unable to continue accessing support. It is recommended that provincial laws be changed to ensure that:

- If you are in the care of a society before 16, you can continue to have support until you are 21 or otherwise living independently.
- If you voluntarily leave the care of CAS before turning 18, you will be entitled to re-enter care up to the age of 21.
- Young people aged 16 or 17 should be able to access the support and services of a society voluntarily even though they cannot be apprehended.

#### 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.

For people who become homeless at a young age, the consequences are long lasting. Working in concert with the homeless youth sector and the Provincial Child Advocate, an inter-ministerial agency would bring together key players from child welfare and community services, housing, health, corrections and education in order to address the problem

of early youth homelessness. Again, the UK and Australia provide excellent examples of client based preventive programs that attempt to identify young people at risk, and provide them with the supports they (and their families) need to remain at home, or provide them with alternative living arrangements (with supports) in their communities.

As part of a strategy to reduce the number of youth who become homeless at an early age, it is recommended that research be conducted to better understand the systemic conditions that cause youth to flee group homes.

Ministry of Health funding for comprehensive services to youth with mental health, concurrent and dual diagnosis, is recommended.

### **3. Municipal Government(s)**

#### **3.1 Municipal governments, in creating their strategy to end youth homelessness, should incorporate family reconnection as a central tenet.**

Municipal governments such as the City of Toronto must take a more strategic approach to addressing youth homelessness. Central to any effective strategy is an emphasis on preventive programs. Incorporation of family reconnection programming can become a central feature of such a preventive strategy, helping young people at risk of homelessness, and enabling those new to the street as well as those more entrenched in homelessness to reengage families as a strategy for moving off the streets, and moving forward with their lives.

#### **3.2 The City of Toronto should expand the current Family Reconnect program as part of a new focus on prevention.**

The current Family Reconnect program is small, difficult to access and has limited resources. Because family reconnection can play a central role in preventing youth homelessness, and helping homeless youth move on with their lives, the City should expand the service with the following key modifications:

- One stream of activity should focus on preventing young people from becoming homeless in the first place. This would involve working with school boards, child welfare services and others to develop a robust system to support youth before they find themselves on the streets.
- Another stream should focus on working with young people who are homeless. This service must be made more widely available to the broader sector of street youth serving agencies. The city should either set up several locations for the family reconnect program, or develop an outreach based model.

#### **3.3 Municipal governments should require that all street youth serving agencies adopt a family reconnection orientation as part of a preventive strategy.**

While Family Reconnect works well as an agency-based program, it is felt that the benefits of this approach are best accrued when it is scaled up as a systems-level response, and part of every agency's mandate. This does not mean that each agency should necessarily have its own family reconnection team, or that all street youth should be expected to reconnect with family. Rather, the orientation of services should shift from the provision of emergency services, to the consideration that young people may be supported in reconnecting with family. This could be achieved by:

- Ensuring that all street youth serving agencies have efficient processes for referring young people to Family Reconnect. This means staff must be made aware of the service, and trained on the referral process.

- Mandating that all agencies adopt an intake process that identifies young people who are new to the street and have them assessed by a Family Intervention counselor within 48 hours.
- Requiring that all street youth agencies who are contacted by parents or guardians refer such persons to Family Intervention counselors. The number one focus will remain on ensuring the safety and confidentiality of the young person, and the determination of how to proceed will be made in consultation with them.
- All street youth serving agencies should be required to inform all clients on an ongoing basis of the Family Reconnect program, and young people should be supported in accessing it.

### **3.4 Municipal governments should adopt a rapid rehousing strategy for young people who are new to the street.**

Rapid rehousing, a term used in the United States works aggressively to move people who become homeless into some kind of housing (independent living, supported accommodation) as soon as possible. The benefits of this approach is clear, and there are ample models to work from in the United States, Australia and the UK.

All young people who show up in homeless shelters or day centres, as well as those encountered through outreach, should be assessed with the objective being to determine the cause of homelessness, the possibility of family mediation and a return home, or the need to identify and secure safe and supported housing. This recommendation should be accompanied by a common assessment form (following the UK model), a centralized data management system, and a commitment to a case management orientation. The goal for any young person entering the shelter system is that they return home or be rehoused within three weeks.

### **3.5 Municipal governments should provide ‘time out’ or respite shelter that is separate from the regular shelter system.**

Respite housing is temporary accommodation for young people who have become homeless due to an emergent crisis or conflict in their home, a practice that has proven to be very effective in the UK. Such housing, which is accompanied by family mediation, becomes a ‘time out’ or breathing space, where young people can work on repairing family relations sufficiently so that they can return home. Conversely, if they cannot return home, respite accommodation provides them with accommodation while they work out longer term housing support.

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## APPENDIX A

### Family Mediation in Canada

Family mediation services in Canada exist at two levels. First, there are family mediation supports that exist outside of the homelessness sector. It should be noted that there is a strong tradition of family mediation in Canada, and a number of resources to support it. For instance, the Province of Ontario offers family mediation through the office of the Attorney General, as well as the Ontario Association for Family Mediation. Second, there are those services that are built in to the homelessness sector. Family mediation is not a standard practice or expectation within the homelessness sector in Canada, so where it does exist, it is as an agency-based program rather than as part of a systems-level response to youth homelessness. Some examples of Family Mediation programs in the homelessness sector include:

### Youth Resource Centre British Columbia

<http://www.yrc.ca/services.html> [info@yrc.ca](mailto:info@yrc.ca) Abbotsford British Columbia

Rapid Response is a 6 week intensive program for families with children ages 0 - 18 years to reduce the family's crisis or conflict in the home. Participation in this program is by referral only from the Ministry of Children & Family Development (MCFD). For more information call: 604.859.7681 Ext. 303 or 604.870.4972

### Woods Homes Calgary

<http://www.woodshomes.ca/index.php?page=community-resource-team>

The Community Resource Team (CRT) of Woods Homes Calgary is a 24/7 telephone and mobile support service. Each of our team of professionals represents the psychology, social work, marriage and family therapy disciplines, and provides service to all individuals and families. The Community Resource Team (CRT) was developed in 1987, as a means to provide immediate crisis intervention services – by telephone - to families at risk of breaking down.

These services were originally geared to young people and their families who had been involved with Wood's Homes Stabilization program. At first, CRT provided follow-up services for families involved in this program. CRT became the means through which families and other young people access other programs within Wood's Homes. CRT service components include:

- crisis counselling via telephone
- home visits, school visits, hospital visits
- risk assessments and education through workshops, keynote presentations, community resource fairs
- practicum student placement

### McMan Youth and Family (Lethbridge)

The Shelter Outreach Worker provides "Common Ground" Parent/Teen Mediation, one to one support and success coaching for youth and families in order to prevent youth homelessness. When a community youth does access the shelter, McMan staff work collaboratively with all stakeholders to help transition the youth back home or to a stable living arrangement and provides follow-up support to ensure the placement is maintained. Telephone #: (403) 328-2488

Fax#: (403) 328-2645

Email: [lethbridge@mcman.ca](mailto:lethbridge@mcman.ca)

## **Phoenix Prevention Program Halifax**

<http://www.phoenixyouth.ca/programs/prevention>

“the Phoenix Prevention Program promotes a sense of confidence, competence, and connectedness in youth and their families, factors which are well known to contribute to positive development. Particular emphasis is placed on facilitating the healthy engagement and connection of youth with significant adults at home, at school, and in the community.”

The Phoenix Prevention Program has two linked components:

1. Clinical Therapy
2. Community Development

## **Reconnect (Kelowna)**

Reconnect is a program of the Okanagan Boys and Girls Clubs that provides outreach, support, referral, mediation and advocacy for high-risk youth that are homeless or at-risk of homelessness, aged 13 to 18 years. Kelowna Reconnect has two outreach counselors that work out of the Downtown Youth Centre. Telephone #: (250) 868-8541 ext 4