



# A BRAND NEW LENS FOR BRIGHT NEW FUTURES

EVA'S STRATEGIC PATH TO ENDING  
YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

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*Image by Charlotte, youth at Eva's*

## ACKNOWLEDGING INDIGENOUS TERRITORY

At the core of the work we do, we are striving for justice for the young people we work with. We cannot do justice without being an active participant in reconciliation with indigenous people whose land we occupy. We have much to do on that journey, but we must start with an acknowledgment of the sacred land on which our organization and its facilities stand. It has been a site of human activity for 15,000 years. This land is the territory of the Huron-Wendat and Petun First Nations, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. The territory was the subject of the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement between the Iroquois Confederacy and Confederacy of the Ojibwe and allied nations to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes.

Today, the meeting place of Toronto is still home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work in the community, on this territory. We are also mindful of broken covenants and the need to strive to make right with all our relations.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Eva's has seen much transition over the past few years, including a new Executive Director and a new location for Eva's Phoenix transitional housing and employment training facility. **Now we are ready to embark on a new chapter!**

Our strengths include providing low-barrier, secular, safe spaces for all homeless youth needing a place to go. We have a wonderful new transitional housing space where we support youth to stay for a year and work toward their employment and educational goals.

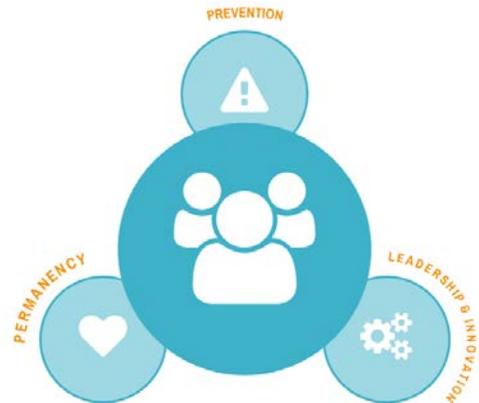
We offer harm reduction programming, family counselling, and a social enterprise where young people can learn about graphic communications and print production in a supported business environment. All of this provides a solid foundation for us to build on.

**We really want to “up our game” in preventing youth from coming to shelters in the first place.** If they do come to our shelters, we want to try and get them back home as quickly as possible. Where that isn't possible, Eva's wants to expand their family networks so they have a better safety net for the future. The key to this prevention approach is the enhancement of our Family Reconnect programming as well as working toward changing the systems that serve as pipelines to youth homelessness.

**We want to enhance support for young people in their search for permanent homes.** We've been so busy trying to identify affordable, safe places for youth to live that it has been difficult to take the time to make sure their housing really “sticks”. But we know it sticks better when youth mental and physical health is addressed and when youth truly feel like they're a connected member in a community. Housing also sticks when youth have jobs where they feel their contributions matter, access to schooling that ignites their passion to learn, and the skills they need to live independently. So, in addition to expanding housing options, Eva's will take a very relationship-based, “it-takes-a-community” approach. We will create teams of professional and natural supports to ensure young people have a cheering squad they can fall back on as they go through the stages of adolescent development.

**Eva's will return to being an incubator for innovations to end youth homelessness.** We will push ourselves to learn from and listen to young people about what works for them, and we will share our learnings with the youth-serving sector.

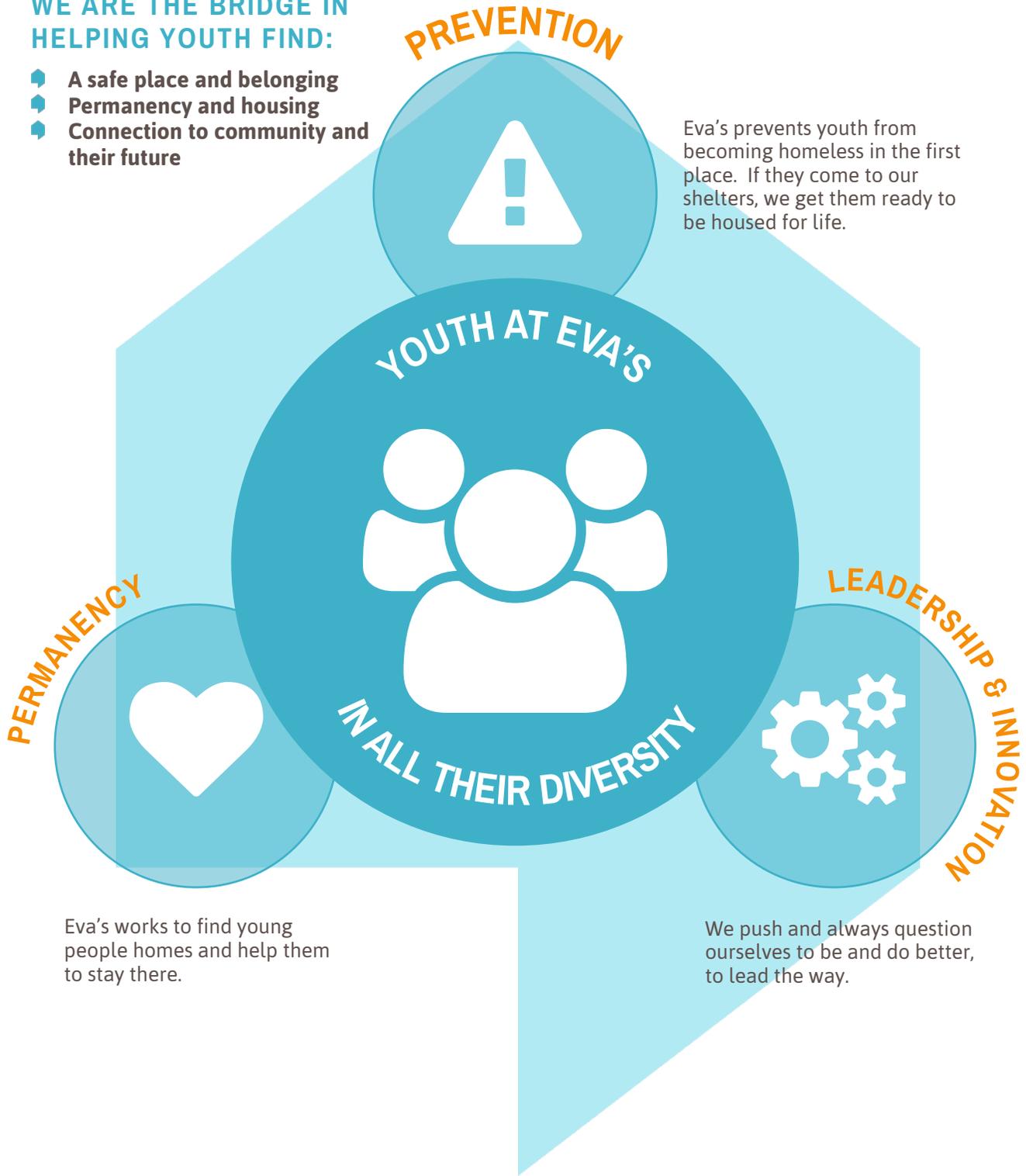
But we can't do this alone. Eva's needs a whole community of support to ensure the young people we serve can truly thrive. We will seek out and welcome strong partnerships in this journey to end youth homelessness in Toronto and beyond.



# EVA'S PRIORITY AREAS

## WE ARE THE BRIDGE IN HELPING YOUTH FIND:

- ◆ A safe place and belonging
- ◆ Permanency and housing
- ◆ Connection to community and their future





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## EVA'S STRATEGIC PATH TO ENDING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

### INTRODUCTION

**EVA'S INITIATIVES FOR HOMELESS YOUTH** is an award-winning organization that provides shelter, transitional housing, and programming to help homeless and at-risk youth reach their potential to lead productive, self-sufficient, and healthy lives.

123 youth aged 16 to 24 find shelter and support in our facilities every night. Eva's gives youth the tools to transition out of homelessness permanently. We collaborate and innovate to end youth homelessness.

### WHO WE SERVE

In every area of service, Eva's centres our efforts on youth who face highest risk of homelessness and marginalization and have least access to relevant, appropriate services. These young people include LBGTTIQ2S and gender minority youth, Indigenous youth, Black youth, youth exiting child protection systems, newcomer youth, youth with brain-based disabilities, and youth struggling with mental health issues. By attending to the needs of youth who are least served and supported, we will improve services for all young people experiencing homelessness.

### OUR PRINCIPLES

Eva's holds onto key principles that help us achieve our goals. But living them day-to-day takes a lot of conscious and challenging effort. It means we have to put resources and effort into sharpening our skills, knowledge, policies, and practices.

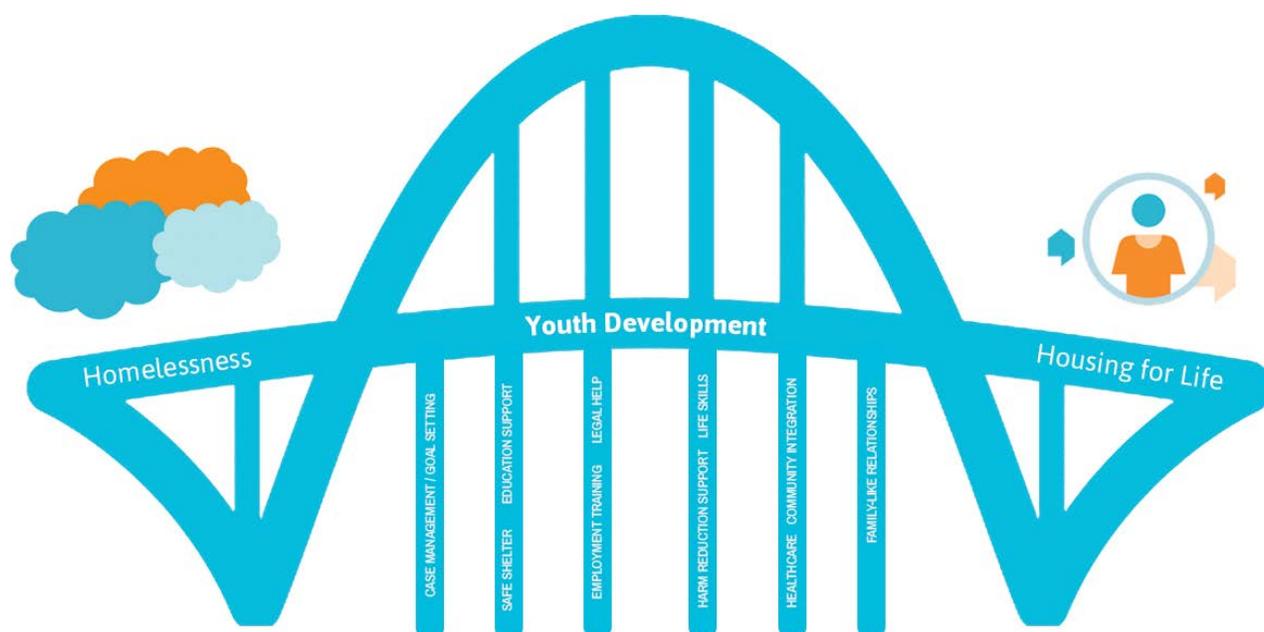
Young people become homeless for a whole host of systemic reasons, not because they did anything wrong. Child protection institutions, the legacy of residential schools, poverty and underemployment, the penal system, immigration laws, and other social factors work together to create a pipeline into youth homelessness. But we believe young people have a fundamental human right to be housed and safe.

Eva's job is to create a "bridge": a safe, nurturing, supportive, temporary environment where we can, as quickly as possible, move young people into a place that feels like home.

Because young people are at a unique stage in human growth and development, we know our bridge has to be strong and create space for young people to do the things we ask all youth to do. Youth need to be supported to:

- learn who they are
- discover what they are good at
- determine education, employment, and general life goals
- build a sense of esteem and, in parallel, a network of people they can turn to for help, support, love, and celebration
- identify the communities they're a part of and give back to them
- build basic life skills and personal values, habits, and beliefs

In essence, we ensure young people can stay stably housed, which involves being there for them in many of the ways a caregiver would be.



As we build the bridge for youth, Eva's will employ best practice approaches, including:

- acknowledgement of Indigenous Traditional Territories and actively working on reconciliation
- equity, inclusion, diversity, and justice-doing where we prioritize marginalized populations
- a rights-based approach to homelessness
- holding young people at the centre of all of our work, amplifying their voice and engagement in our work and in the community
- taking risks based on feedback received from youth on what they need
- taking a positive youth development and a holistic approach to the work
- resiliency-focused, trauma-informed, relationship-based, and strengths-based practice
- embracing our leadership as a learning organization with reflective practice
- working collaboratively with community partners, volunteers, donors and funders
- being accountable to youth, communities, and ourselves by measuring our impact

## DEFINITION OF HOMELESSNESS

Youth-serving organizations have worked hard to define and distinguish youth homelessness as separate and distinct from adult homelessness. With the support of the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, the sector has endorsed the following definition.

“Youth homelessness” refers to the situation and experience of young people between the ages of 13 and 24 who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers, but do not have the means or ability to acquire a stable, safe or consistent residence.<sup>1</sup>

This definition acknowledges the developmental needs of youth and points to the urgency of ending their homelessness from a human rights perspective. It incorporates the idea that all young people are our children and, thus, have additional claims to our caring support.

Although this definition of youth homelessness is a useful starting place, it lacks depth to address the multifaceted experience of homelessness and housing instability faced by many young people and their communities. With the consultation of Indigenous scholars, community members, knowledge keepers, and Elders, Jesse A. Thistle (2017) recently developed an Indigenous definition of homelessness, addressing the “human condition that describes First Nations, Métis and Inuit individuals, families or communities lacking stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means or ability to acquire such housing” (p. 6). It addresses homelessness through Indigenous worldviews, situating it in experiences of colonialism and subsequent cultural, spiritual, emotional, and physical consequences in the lives of individuals and communities. Importantly, it demonstrates that Indigenous homelessness is not simply a lack of a residence. It is “being disconnected from the holistic web of ‘All My Relations’”; that is, “an Indigenous worldview common in First Nations, Métis and Inuit societies that sees all things in existence as interconnected” (p. 13).<sup>2</sup>

This definition is powerfully revealing and Eva’s will attend to it and apply it to inform our approaches. Its encompassing relevance to young peoples’ experiences of homelessness cannot be overstated, primarily with respect to Indigenous youth, who are overrepresented amongst homeless youth in Canada, but to other youth as well. At the very least, Jesse Thistle’s work demonstrates that shelter provision alone is not enough to help homeless youth find true belonging, community, and home, and organizations like Eva’s must challenge ourselves to better support young people in all their diversity.

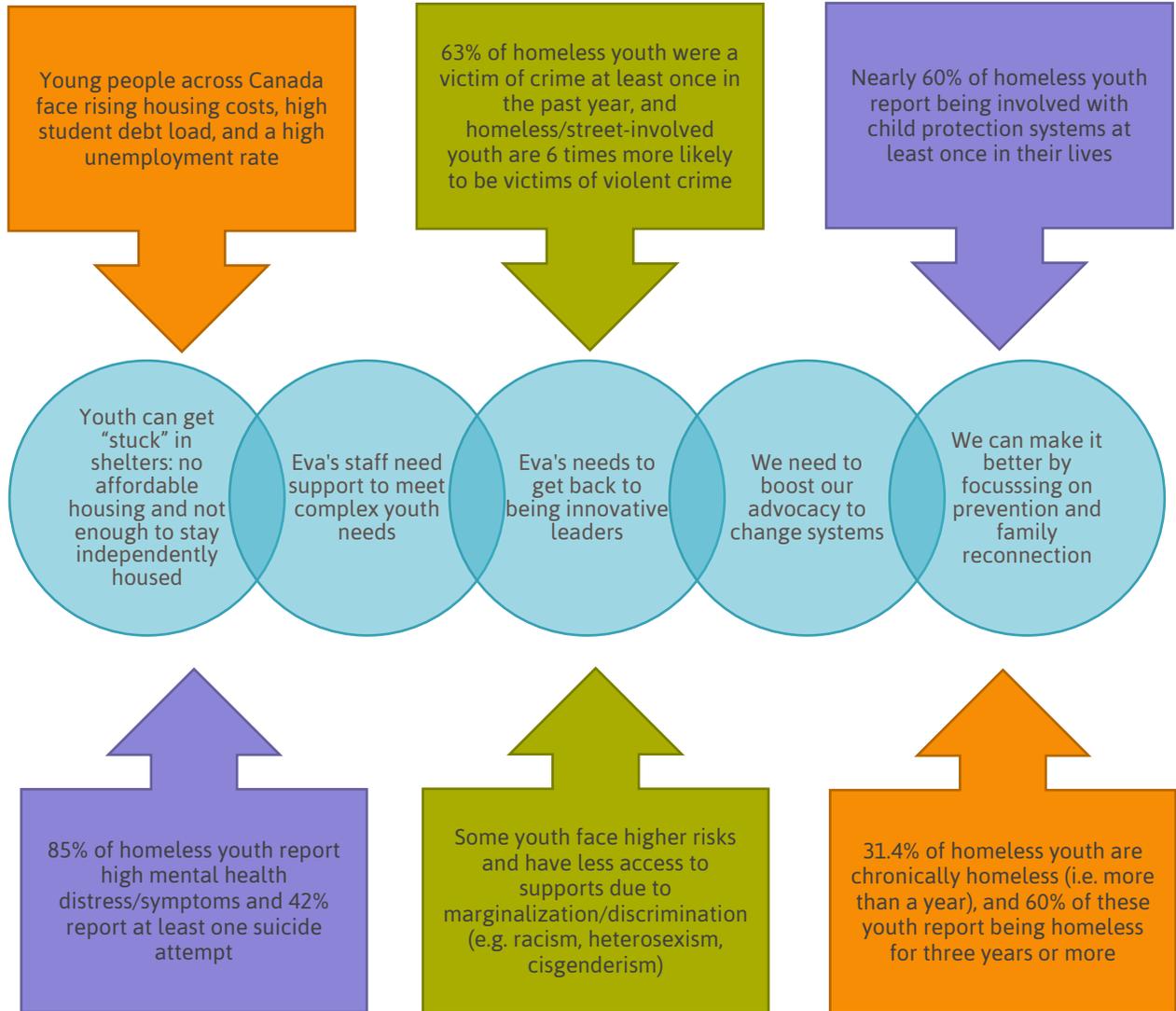
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<sup>1</sup> Canadian Observatory on Homelessness. (2016). Canadian Definition of Youth Homelessness. Homeless Hub: [www.homelesshub.ca/youthhomelessdefinition](http://www.homelesshub.ca/youthhomelessdefinition)

<sup>2</sup> Jesse A. Thistle. (2017). *Indigenous Definition of Homelessness in Canada*. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

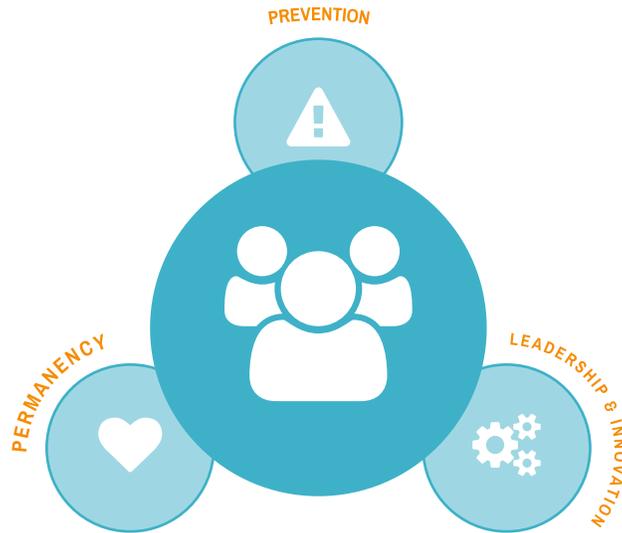
## HOW WE DEVELOPED THIS PLAN: VOICES AND RESEARCH

The themes set out in this plan came from staff, youth, board members, and community partners, drawing on Canadian research about youth homelessness and emerging best practices. These voices and research<sup>3</sup> include the following.



<sup>3</sup> Stephen Gaetz, Bill O’Grady, Sean Kidd & Kaitlin Schwan. (2016). *Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey*. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

# EVA'S PRIORITY AREAS



Like many organizations in our sector, Eva's ultimate goal is to end youth homelessness. This goal drove our founder Eva Smith to advocate so passionately for the opening of Eva's Place in 1994, and it continues to light a fire in us. We know it's ambitious, but we believe it's worthwhile and absolutely achievable! Imagine the brilliant futures young people would have ahead of them if their chance of becoming homeless went down to zero! Just imagine how strong and wonderful our communities would be. How could we not get excited about living in a world like that? Here's what Eva's will do to get closer to our ultimate goal.

## I. PREVENTION

⚠️ Eva's prevents youth from becoming homeless in the first place.

It's simple: preventing homelessness leads to vastly better outcomes for youth. The longer young people are homeless and the more episodes of homelessness they experience, the harder it is for them to get housed and stable in a community and the greater the negative impacts on their health and well-being.

We will apply a preventative lens to all of our work to improve our responses. Prevention includes several dimensions: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Our primary prevention efforts will focus on changing systems that create youth homelessness. Our secondary prevention work will centre on supporting young people at risk of becoming homeless. Our tertiary efforts will focus on getting youth back home quickly when they come to our shelters or getting them permanently housed so they do not return to the shelter system (read the "Permanency" section below).

When we met this goal, young people will tell us, "Things were rough at home, but Eva's helped stop things from falling apart."

## STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

### FAMILY RECONNECTION

Because repairing “family” relationships is the most effective way to prevent young people from leaving home, and it is the most effective way to get young people re-housed and keep them there. We will expand our Family Reconnect services.

- Tension between youth and family is a normal part of development, but stressors such as poverty and housing instability can exacerbate and turn conflict into family breakdown. We will do more to reduce the number of young people leaving home and/or rapidly rehouse them when they come to our shelters.
- **Family Reconnect** counselling must be available to every young person in our facilities to help them return home or help them gain family-like connections as their active support. We must especially prioritize serving the most marginalized families and communities.
- We recognize that parents/guardians need opportunities to understand what their youth are going through, especially where it pertains to mental health and substance use. We will partner with relevant community services and organizations to ensure that **parents, guardians, and families get the support** they need for these difficult issues.
- Schools are a critical place to connect with youth and families before youth become homeless. We will **formalize partnerships with schools** near our facilities, increasing their capacity to assess and prevent youth homelessness, and evaluate the impact of these partnerships toward preventing homelessness.

### ADVOCACY

Because ending youth homelessness is not something Eva’s can do on our own, we need to address systems that contribute to youth homelessness and help them make positive changes.

- We will build our **active participation** on tables with a mandate to improve exits from the foster care system, the health care system, and the justice system.
- We will partner to **support the work of agencies** addressing systemic poverty/income equality, food security, childcare, racism, homophobia and transphobia, and childhood mental health.

## II. PERMANENCY

♥ We find young people homes and help them to stay there.

Too often, young people cycle in and out of shelters and don’t remain housed in the long run. Each time young people lose housing, their risk of future homelessness and other harms only increase.

It’s no wonder that youth often identify the importance of stability in a place that feels like home. The Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks refers to this as “physical permanency”. It includes access to safe, affordable, and sometimes, supportive or transitional housing. Research shows that successful strategies to keep young people housed include other kinds of permanency too. In addition to factors such as suitable employment, wages, and life skills, there is strong emerging evidence about the power of positive relationships to enhance young people’s resiliency. These

When we met this goal, young people will tell us, “I feel like I belong and I have a real community that I’m an important part of. I am loved.”

relationships constitute “relational permanency”, which includes solid community support, friends to check in on you, and a natural network of people who are like family to you.

## STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

### STABLE AND TRANSITIONAL HOUSING OPTIONS

Because many young people are ready to leave shelters but aren't quite ready to live independently and cannot find affordable places where they can stay for longer than a year.

- ◆ We will expand **housing options** for youth by exploring innovative approaches beyond market rental units, and we will develop an innovative expansion plan.

### RELATIONSHIP-FOCUSED RESPONSE

Because youth resiliency is built through strong relationships of all kinds. We know this is critical and often overlooked in maintaining housing for youth.

- ◆ Relationship-based and strength-based approaches are highly effective in helping youth get ready for a stable future. We will develop a **relationship-prioritized service delivery plan** to ensure our workers can spend sufficient time developing strong rapport with young people and can access the workplace support and clinical supervision they need to help youth build their lives in their communities.
- ◆ Youth resiliency is sustained when young people have strong, healthy relationships. Emerging research shows that this is as important as stable housing and employment options. We will build partnerships to create active **mentorship** supports and expand our **peer support** programming, including peer buddies to provide mutual support when moving into the community. We will create opportunities for youth to spend time and build healthy bonds with supportive adults and peers.

### WRAP-AROUND SUPPORT

Because we know that young people need education, employment, life skills, emotional and physical health, and peer and mentor support “wrapped around” them in order to get ready for permanent housing.

- ◆ We will do more to break the cycle of repeated youth homelessness due to mental health struggles, substance use, and trauma. Every youth at Eva's will have access to responsive, holistic, and culturally-honouring **mental health** services that takes a broad view of healing.
- ◆ Education is a basic human right and key to breaking the cycle of poverty and preventing youth homelessness. Every young person at Eva's will have **access to creative, flexible education** services so they will, at a minimum, leave Eva's with a high school diploma or its equivalency.
- ◆ Meaningful employment helps young people have the funds to stay housed and helps build a sense of community connection and contribution. Every youth at Eva's will have access to **employment** training in promising fields, and Eva's will create partnerships to make it easier for youth to find great jobs.
- ◆ Skill development is key to building young people's capacity to be successful in the community, build their confidence, and develop relationships with peers and healthy adults. All **skill development** opportunities will be delivered with this in mind and will be responsive to young people's stated needs.

- ◆ We do not have to be “the expert” in all areas, and Eva’s cannot alone provide all services and supports youth experiencing homelessness need. We will **partner** with like-minded organizations to enhance our specialties and reduce redundancies in creating an **integrated system of support**. We will also apply a lens of strengthened personal relationships to examine and improve our education, employment, and life skills programs.

### III. LEADERSHIP AND INNOVATION

- ◆ **We push and always question ourselves to be and do better, to lead the way.**

So many factors impact the lives of homeless youth. The national survey on youth homelessness demonstrates how a vast array of systems, policies, practices, institutions, experiences of discrimination and marginalization, and individual factors converge to increase a young person’s risk of homelessness and affect their access to relevant and helpful services. The analysis is complex and takes constant reflection, critique, and collaboration with young people and youth-serving partners.

When we met this goal, young people will tell us, “This place is amazing and it’s clear that staff really love working here. I get to travel and help share what Eva’s does to make a difference!”

Eva’s has a responsibility to be exceptional and adaptive in our responses. Good research informs us and we’re always learning from young people and keeping researchers on their toes.

The organization has already proven its willingness to take risks to do the right thing. For example, we opened a harm reduction shelter, Eva’s Satellite, before it was considered an acceptable option for homeless youth. We also created transitional housing for youth by listening to the needs of young people. By venturing into new areas, we’ve discovered great solutions. Eva’s needs to keep going forward in that vein, pushing ourselves to be a leader.

#### STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

##### ◆ PUTTING YOUTH AT THE CENTRE

Because youth engagement and leadership has enormous benefits for young people and for the success of our program designs.

- ◆ Youth are in the best position to know what programs and supports work best for them. We will put **young people at the heart** of our decision-making and action. This includes working directly with youth to set our programming and program enhancement agendas and supporting youth to create and manage youth leadership and volunteer teams. It also includes youth-adult partnership projects such as action and advocacy teams.
- ◆ Putting youth at the centre means supporting our staff to be exceptional in the delivery of service. We will develop a three-year **employee care plan** that acknowledges their critical role in this work; supports their growth and leadership; ensures they are adequately compensated, supported and supervised; and encourages them to contribute to our renewed vision.

##### ◆ HEALTHY RESOURCES

Because non-profit organizations can only achieve excellence if they are healthy and resilient.

- ◆ Our staff are our most valuable asset. We will prioritize their training and wellness through a multi-year **employee care and capacity-building plan**.

- ◆ Organizational **resourcing** creates a solid foundation that allows us to focus on our mission. We will aim to further diversify our revenue streams, build meaningful relationships with donors and funders, and make better use of volunteer resources to ensure our organization’s resiliency.

## ▶▶ LEADERSHIP

Because we have the privilege of being a sector leader, we need to take responsibility for sharing our learning.

- ◆ **Harm reduction** shelters/services for young people are still rare. Our leadership in this area compels us to continue to be innovative and effective with this approach, pushing our thinking and response to young people who need this service. We will collaborate with others in the sector to build capacity and expand harm reduction options for youth experiencing homelessness.
- ◆ **Prevention and the Family Reconnect Programs** are still innovative approaches in Canada, and we will continue to provide information to help other organizations set up their own versions of these approaches in their communities.
- ◆ **Eva’s Print Shop** is one of the oldest social enterprises in Canada and is going through a re-visioning process that will bring it in line with the ever-evolving graphic communications and print production industry. We will continue to utilize and grow the print shop as both an opportunity for young people to get hands-on employment experience and an opportunity for us to generate revenue for other parts of the organization.
- ◆ **Equity and inclusion** are critical, and we must go beyond expected legislative requirements. We will develop a strong roadmap to infuse excellent anti-oppressive, justice-building practices into our work.
- ◆ **Practice learning and sharing** is something Eva’s has prided ourselves on. This is why we birthed the National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness, a coalition of national agencies working to end youth homelessness and now independently housed under A Way Home Canada. We will continue to be an engaged member at these tables, leading the way on making the shifts we need to end homelessness for youth in Canada.

## 💡 INNOVATION AND LEARNING

Because Canada is still learning about how to effectively end youth homelessness, we must keep innovating, learning, and sharing our knowledge with others.

- ◆ Eva’s has historically been an innovator in the youth homelessness sector. We will continue this legacy by developing **an innovation framework**, evaluating where technology can enhance our effectiveness. We will apply a learning lens to everything we do to enhance what we do well and identify areas for improvement.
- ◆ Our sector has yet to develop a set of clear outcomes for youth that all agencies can use to measure their effectiveness. We will initiate a **framework of outcomes** that like-minded organizations can use, pilot testing it ourselves. Once refined, we will apply it in our future planning and constantly measure ourselves against desired outcomes.

## 🔗 COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIP

Because we know we can’t end youth homelessness alone, and we are better when everyone brings their best skills to the table.

- ◆ Our ability to end youth homelessness is strongest when we work with all types of partners and all levels of **government**. We will work with municipal, provincial, and federal agencies to strengthen our impact and push toward a future free of youth homelessness, and we will continue sharing our learnings and learn from others in open **collaboration**.
- ◆ We will invest in our community and youth **volunteers** to better engage them in our work and as ambassadors.
- ◆ We will partner more closely and strengthen our relationships with **funders and donors**, marrying ideas on how we can better address youth homelessness.

## INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

As mentioned above in the “Innovation and Learning” section, our sector has yet to develop a clear set of outcomes for youth experiencing homelessness. A project is underway to refine our outcome measures and align them with pre-existing frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals. This will serve as a critical focus for us in the coming years.



When we innovate and measure our impact well, young people will tell us, “Eva’s has a real positive impact in my life and in the lives of others like me. I know I’ll get the help I need there.”

## CRITICAL READING TO INFORM THIS PLAN

A. Abramovich and Jama Shelton. 2017. *Where Am I Going to Go? Intersectional Approaches to Ending LGBTQ2S Youth Homelessness in Canada & the U.S.* Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness.

Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks. 2010. *Belonging 4 Ever: Creating Permanency for Youth in and from Care.* New Westminster: Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks.

J. Thistle. 2017. *Indigenous Definition of Homelessness in Canada.* Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

S. Gaetz, B. O'Grady, S. Kidd, and Kaitlin Schwan. 2016. *Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey.* Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness; A Way Home Canada; National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness.

Toronto Foundation. 2016. *Toronto's Vital Signs Report 2016.* Toronto: Toronto Foundation.

## OUR VISIONARY FOUNDER, EVA SMITH

Eva Maud Smith (1923-1993) was a woman of action. In 1956 at the age of 33, she immigrated to Canada from Jamaica as a domestic worker. She became a Toronto community leader and school outreach worker.

Eva's heart was drawn to our city's young people. She wanted to help them grow up healthy and happy and get a great education, but she realized that the experience of homelessness had become a barrier for some. Eva shed light on hidden youth homelessness, showing decision-makers the scope of the problem and rallying supporters to do something about it. She demonstrated that adult shelters were missing the specialized supports youth needed to avoid chronic homelessness in the long term. It's through Eva Smith's trailblazing work that Eva's Place, our first emergency shelter and the first youth-focused shelter in North York, Toronto was opened in 1994. A few years later, Eva's Satellite, Canada's only harm reduction shelter for youth, opened to provide specialized supports for youth challenged by addictions and mental health. And after that, Eva's Phoenix was launched to provide youth transitional housing and the skills they need to find and maintain housing and employment in the long run.

Eva Smith did not see the fulfillment of her dream. She passed away in 1993, a few months before we opened our first shelter. But her spirit will forever live on in our name and in the work we do. Today, Eva's serves hundreds of young people and their families every year, offering a unique combination of safe shelter and housing, street outreach, counselling, training, and life skills programs. We support them to build productive, self-sufficient, and healthy lives. We're also known for taking bold risks and sharing best practices to prevent, reduce, and end youth homelessness.





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