

WHAT WE NEED: PREVENTION OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

FINAL REPORT



greater victoria
coalition to end
homelessness

hope has found a home



Contents

- PROJECT OVERVIEW..... 4
- HISTORY OF GREATER VICTORIA COALITION TO END HOMELESSNESS’ YOUTH-LED WORK..... 4
- PARTICIPATORY PROCESS USED TO DEVELOP PROJECT 6
 - Idea Generation 6
 - Writing the Grant..... 6
- PROJECT ROLES AND LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE 8
 - Laddering to Success..... 8
 - Examples of Laddering to Success 9
- PROJECT OUTCOME AREAS AND DESCRIPTION 10
 - Weekly Cooking Group 10
 - Monthly Education Forum 10
 - RentSmart Course 10
- SUMMARY OF WORK 12
- COOKING GROUP 12
 - Planning the Cooking Group Program 12
 - One-Time Planning..... 12
 - Weekly Planning..... 13
 - Effect of Cooking Group on Program Facilitators 15
 - Key Learnings 15
 - COVID-19 and Cooking Group..... 16
 - Effect on Team Members..... 16
 - Deliverable Pivot: Cookbook..... 16
 - Participant Experience 17
 - Pre-COVID-19 Pandemic (During Cooking Group Activity) 17
 - During COVID-19 Pandemic 17
- RENTSMART CERTIFICATE COURSE..... 19
 - Participant Experience 19
 - Certificate Course #1..... 19
 - Moving Forward 19
 - Key Learnings 20
- MONTHLY EDUCATION FORUM..... 21

Data 21

Key Learnings 21

TEAM DEVELOPMENT 23

 OUTCOMES 23

 Trainings and Development 23

Appendix 24

 Financial Report 24

THANK YOU 24

FROM YOUTH PEER FACILITATORS 25

PROJECT OVERVIEW

HISTORY OF GREATER VICTORIA COALITION TO END HOMELESSNESS' YOUTH-LED WORK

The Greater Victoria Youth Task Force (YTF) was struck in the Fall of 2017 by Mayor Lisa Helps. This was in response to the local 2016 PiT Count report that identified 48.3% of adult chronic homelessness began prior to age 24. National homelessness research and evidence indicates that 41% of chronic adult homelessness began prior to age 16.

This Task Force was established to respond to youth homelessness in the capital region through the development of strategies and collaboration. While creation of the YTF was required to illuminate and work towards solving this collective social issue, the cohort was missing one key demographic in its membership: youth with lived and living experience of homelessness.

This realization was magnified during several youth homelessness-based focus groups the Youth Engagement Coordinator, Emily Jackson, had conducted at the time. Youth participants indicated a need for a platform to voice their ideas and have ongoing conversations and to collaborate than a one-time focus group. The identified the biggest gap: youth voice in decision-making.

The identification of the gap led to the creation of the Youth Educating and Advocating about Homelessness (YEAH) group, consisting of 5 members with lived experience of homelessness between the ages of 16-24. This group was not created with any predetermined direction other than to stand as a sounding board for ideas, problems, whatever the youth wanted to address. The group was without a name until about 3-4 meeting in, when the true purpose of the group was fully realized by the members. Education and Advocacy were the main actions members wanted to take, and the philosophy was to do that within an inclusive, non-hierarchical framework, with opportunities for skill-development and laddering to success built in.

The YEAH team began their group work through a project called IDENTIFYING GAPS: POLICE CONFLICT FROM THE VOICE OF YOUTH EDUCATING AND ADVOCATING ABOUT HOMELESSNESS (YEAH). The project's objective was to raise awareness about the relationship between youth and police, create healthy rehabilitation of that relationship through police/youth engagement, and voice recommendations from the community of youth. This project is a perfect example of the philosophy from which the YEAH group works, the idea that their work is defined by the community at large. The YEAH group interviewed 56 youth who submitted anonymous stories of both police conflict and positive examples of police practice. After the report was finished, recommendations were taken from the data and the YEAH group had a successful meeting with Chief Del Manak, who was extremely receptive to the work. This report also led to the development of a Police/Youth Symposium, which is still in the planning stage.

Since then, the YEAH group has also worked on a Case Study regarding the Agreements with Young Adults (AYA) program and the barriers it has to accessibility, which led to a meeting with the Deputy Minister of Strategic Initiatives to present the report, and shortly after, many of the recommendations were adopted. While the YEAH group played a part in that development, the changes to the program were due to a large collaborative effort across BC.

Additionally, the YEAH group worked on a world-wide project regarding the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child research through the University of Victoria.

While these projects were impactful equally to the YEAH group's collective sense of self and the benefit to community, they all had one thing in common: none were activity based or program based. None provided the opportunity to connect with youth experiencing homelessness, at-risk of homelessness, or newly housed on a consistent basis. The YEAH group wanted to start in a new direction: direct engagement, advocacy on a one-to-one basis. This is how the foundation was built for the opportunity to apply for the Participatory Budgeting Grant.

PARTICIPATORY PROCESS USED TO DEVELOP PROJECT

Idea Generation

The process used to develop this project greatly aligned with the Participatory Budgeting grant structure. While most Participatory Action projects become participatory after the grant has been submitted, project structure developed, and funding received, this project differed from the status quo by adopting a truly participatory, equitable process from the project commencement.

While the project was coordinated by the 5 members of the Youth Educating and Advocating about Homelessness (YEAH) group, the work they did, including project deliverables, outcomes, and activities were achieved democratically by approximately 40 youth in Centennial Square. Youth experiencing homelessness in Centennial Square were asked what projects and activities would support their pathway to success; the term 'success' being defined by the individuals (stability, housing, life skills, healthy relationships, better mental health, etc.) This engagement strategy resulted in an informal focus group, where different ideas were cast, and participants could apply feedback to the ideas. In order to compensate for those who were not comfortable with speaking out in a public setting, writing tools were also available to submit ideas. Once finished, the YEAH group members clearly outlined how the feedback would be used, what type of grant was being applied for, and answered any questions members had. These questions ranged from 'how much money are you applying for?' to 'How will we be able to stay connected with the process?' One of the foundational principles of the YEAH group is transparency, so the team put emphasis on the fact that no question was too in-depth, too off-topic, or out of participant's scope or understanding. The team's familiarity with youth stigmatization through past experiences of being told 'you won't understand' and more egregious acts of stigma has coloured their perspective on 'inclusive' work greatly. These lived experiences led to a fruitful focus group in which the participants indicated feeling substantially better than before coming, that they felt 'heard, listened to, and understood.'

The YEAH group collected the focus group feedback and synthesized the ideas based on number of community votes, and/or positive feedback. The process consisted of vetting ideas and weighing them against cost, resources, community benefit, and group feedback. This session took approximately 12 hours. At the end of the sessions, 4 ideas were established. The YEAH group brought the findings to the Centennial Square community to ensure the chosen activities reflected the ideas the community generated. After receiving approval from the community, the grant-writing stage ensued.

Writing the Grant

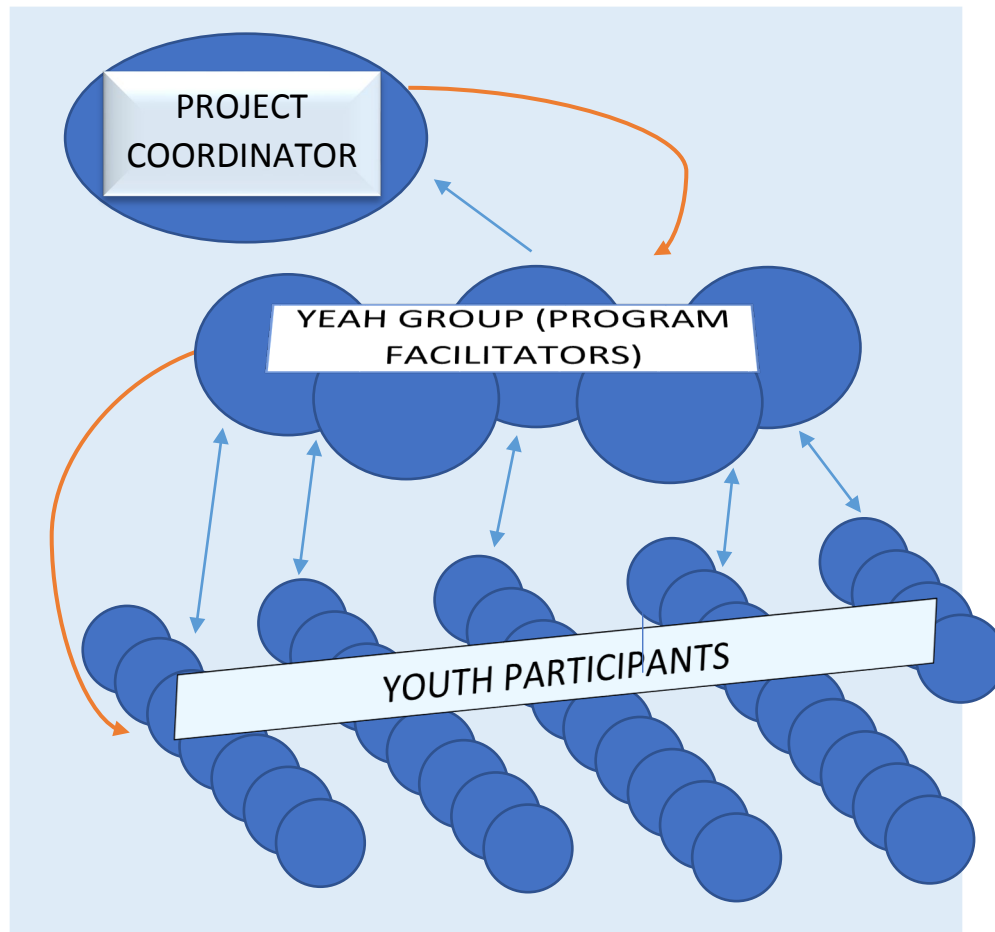
The grant-writing process was participatory in nature, with each YEAH member infusing their area of expertise. For example, one YEAH member indicated they enjoyed math, resulting in developing the 'Budget' section with the Project Coordinator. YEAH, is gifted with excellent writers; each section of the grant was informed by their expertise.

Furthermore, writing the grant became an opportunity for professional development. The team had no prior experience writing a grant. An unforeseen benefit of this project was the increased confidence in writing and editing the leadership team experienced during this stage. In fact, the team shared an immense amount of positive feedback with regard to the grant-writing stage of the project. The YEAH group would like to thank the City of Victoria for creating an accessible, youth-friendly grant process, as this offered a great learning experience for the team. that did not feel too daunting or exclusionary. This experience is remembered by the team as being an empowering stage of the work.



PROJECT ROLES AND LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE

One of the founding principles of the YEAH group is equal opportunity and autonomy, across all levels and structures of leadership. For that reason, no hierarchical structure exists within this project. All levels of leadership are intertwined and collaborated across the spectrum.



Laddering to Success

The purpose of the Project Coordinator is to support and mentor the YEAH Group/Youth Peer Facilitators, who in turn support, mentor, and facilitate activities with the Youth Participants. In that construct, there is a leadership structure, yet the pathway travels both directions. For example, when a Youth Participant shows interest in facilitation and feels ready, they can adopt greater responsibility and become trained in facilitation. Likewise, when a member of the YEAH group felt they had enough experience and training, they would request to coordinate an area of the work independently, at which point the Project Coordinator can withdraw responsibility and experience being a Participant in their activity. The YEAH group refers to this framework as Laddering to Success.

The Laddering to Success framework is also used due to its flexibility and accessibility. If a team member were to lose their housing or a family member fell ill, they can become a 'Participant' again and allow for someone else to try becoming a Youth Peer Facilitator. Occasionally, when participants successfully find housing, they feel that they have enough energy to focus on a new interest and therefore increase accountability again, which is why this model is tailored to youth's needs.

Examples of Laddering to Success

Emily Jackson

The Project Coordinator, Emily Jackson, is the first person to demonstrate the effectiveness of this model and incorporate it into practice. As a youth with lived experience who had just graduated high school, Emily did not have a formal education at secondary school and was working as a Research Assistant at Community Social Planning Council. She began her professional development with the GVCEH through attending the first Youth Task Force meeting and found that in addition to being the only youth attendee, she was the only person with lived experience of homelessness and addiction. A brief time later, she was recognized for her addition to the Task Force and offered Part-Time Employment through the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness as a Youth Engagement Coordinator. Approximately 1 year later, she was offered Full-Time Employment and promoted to Prevention of Youth Homelessness Coordinator.

Catt Whittaker

Catt Whittaker is a YEAH group member who has worked with the GVCEH for 2 years. Catt started her engagement with the GVCEH as a Youth Participant attending a focus group the Project Coordinator conducted. She consistently attended focus groups and engagements hosted by the GVCEH until a position with the YEAH group opened in March 2019. Since then, she has been promoted from YEAH member to Youth Engagement Team Member. She continues to work with the GVCEH to this day and had experience hosting both the Cooking Group and Monthly Education Forum.

Brandon Dennis

Brandon Dennis was one of the original members of the YEAH group. Brandon has experienced homelessness, grief, and loss while working with the GVCEH. Through it all, he kept working in whatever capacity he could. Brandon has experienced noticeable shifts in his mental health, skill development, empowerment, and sense of belonging through working at the GVCEH.

He began working at the GVCEH in September 2018. Initially, he was a quiet, unsure of himself, and cautious to present new ideas. Above that, he had a timid voice and only felt comfortable speaking in soft tones. Only 6 months later was presenting ideas confidently and loudly in front of GVCEH Steering Committee meetings. Soon after, he had a powerful piece of his writing read by a GVCEH Board Director at the Annual General Meeting.

This project has supported his professional development, too. Brandon hosted the Cooking Group program and facilitated the initial project engagement at Centennial Square. Additionally, he pitched the idea for the pivot from the Cooking Group and has increased his skills immensely as an excellent writer and storyteller. His newfound sense of empowerment and belonging has encouraged him to try other skills, too, like fashion design, painting, and poetry.

PROJECT OUTCOME AREAS AND DESCRIPTION

Weekly Cooking Group

Youth Peers with lived experience of homelessness facilitate a cooking group program with up to 10 at-risk youth, newly housed youth, or youth experiencing homelessness. Each session highlights solutions to problems at-risk youth face, as indicated by youth in Centennial Square during the Project Development Focus Group. These areas include:

- How to cook on a budget,
- How to cook with only canned food,
- Quick meals
- All sessions include a health and affordability lens.

Peer support is an essential goal of this activity. The secondary outcome to this activity beyond enriching youth's life skills with food is for at-risk youth to build relationships with peer supporters. The Peer Support and Mentorship framework utilized in facilitating the Cooking Group supports healthy role modeling. These relationships can promote feelings of belonging, which in an initial focus group for this project youth participants identified is a key influencer on stability.

Monthly Education Forum

Youth Peers with lived experience of homelessness plan and facilitate events for at-risk youth, newly housed youth, or youth experiencing homelessness. These sessions support youth to access education, attain employment, housing, and stability.

Each month, a different topic is highlighted, with each month's focus topic an idea brought forward by youth from during initial project engagement such as:

- Learning your rights
- Sexual consent training
- Harm reduction
- How to create a resume
- Apply for and secure housing.
- File taxes
- Create and maintain a budget, etc.

RentSmart Course

Youth Peers with lived experience of homelessness become certified as RentSmart educators, furthering their resume, workforce training, and sense of empowerment.

The Youth Peers facilitate RentSmart Certificate Courses once a quarter for at-risk youth, newly housed youth, or youth experiencing homelessness. The course supports participants to apply for housing, provides education on housing resources, maintaining tenancy, and fostering property owner relations. Graduates receive a certificate of completion and a housing reference on behalf of Ready to Rent, which is something local property managers have identified as being a supporting factor in accepting first-time youth renters.

SUMMARY OF WORK

COOKING GROUP

The Cooking Group program was designed as a mentorship/life skills fusion, in which youth participants would gain cooking skills in areas specific to the challenges youth face, such as working with canned food one would find in a food bank, working with a minimal budget, and dealing with lesser amounts of time able to be allocated for cooking.

The impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic and subsequent public restrictions caused inability to hold group activities. Long durations of quarantine 'lock-down' led to a pivot of the direction of the program, while still upholding the intended community benefit and reflecting the original idea generated by the Project Development Focus Group. This pivot is known as a Cookbook/Lifestyle book for newly housed youth, but also targeted for youth at-risk, and youth experiencing homelessness.

The program began on October 21, 2019, and in its originally intended design, was held for 17 sessions. Each session hosted between 3-10 youth, with an average weekly number of 6 participants were fed throughout the duration of the program.

Planning the Cooking Group Program

Each Cooking Group was planned and facilitated by 2-3 Program Facilitators, each between the ages of 17 – 24. The Program Facilitators are youth with lived experience of homelessness who also serve as members of the YEAH group. The Program Facilitators implemented the original idea for the program generated by the Project Development Focus Group and planned the cost, time constraint, and specific recipes to align with the intended purpose. This planning included:

One-Time Planning

1. Find a location to facilitate the Cooking Group.

This step in the planning phase was initially difficult for the Program Facilitators. This is because the pros and cons of a potential location had to be weighed by accessibility versus safety. For example, the team debated the benefit of using the Downtown Community Centre as a location. Some members felt the location was the best option because of its proximity to Centennial Square and other downtown resources, while others felt that its proximity to Pandora Avenue and the predatory people and pervasiveness of drug use negated any benefit. After informally engaging with potential participants for their consideration, it was decided that the Downtown Community Centre would be the best option. Thankfully, the Downtown Community Centre was happy to partner with our project, had space for our team, and from that point on, each cooking group was held from 5:00 – 7:00 PM each Wednesday.

2. Invite youth participants.

This was the most important stage of the planning phase. The Program Facilitators created a Cooking Group poster after receiving a lesson in graphic design/formatting from the Communications Coordinator on the Greater Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness team. This was a valuable investment in the Program Facilitators capacity, as each Facilitator felt their strength in design increase and proceeded to create many posters and info sheets for the various activities. Program Facilitators would then travel downtown hanging up posters in various businesses and resource centres.

If too few participants arrived for the Cooking Group (under 10 participants) the Program Facilitators would travel to Centennial Square and inform any of the youth spending time there that space was still available. This proved to be the most effective tactic to ensure participants arrived. The team believes this is because it is difficult for youth experiencing homelessness to plan ahead and make appointments for future dates, when the present day can feel so overwhelming. For this population of youth, life circumstance can drastically change from day to day, making it difficult to remember to attend a group featured in a poster they saw days ago.

It has been noted by Youth Participants that a couple of days on the street can often feel like a month living in a home, so while it may be understandable for people with stability to recall information from a poster, it can be easier to forget as a young person dealing with substantial life circumstances.

Weekly Planning

1. Create recipes, often with food from a food bank such as canned food, flour and pancake mix, random assortments of fruits and vegetables, etc.

The Program Facilitators adopted many tactics to ensure the ingredients in the recipes matched what youth were most likely to find at a food bank/afford on their own. For example, the Program Facilitators scheduled a tour of the Mustard Seed Food Bank to assess what kind of food they were offering on a day-to-day basis versus occasionally available ingredients. These findings informed the recipe planning.

Additionally, the Program Facilitators tested recipes at their prospective homes to ensure they were both easy and accessible for Youth Participants to follow.

Program Facilitators also had a variety of diet restrictions from time to time, such as no dairy, vegetarian, keto diet, etc., which supported recipes being adjusted to suit the needs of all Youth Participants.

2. Document recipes to provide hand-outs to participants.

After a recipe was created, the Project Coordinator worked with the recipe creator to turn the instructions into an accessible recipe card. These cards were printed off and made available to Youth Participants.

3. Create a grocery shopping list.

The Program Facilitators would decide on a recipe for the week's group and create a shopping list with a cost estimate. Considering the needs of newly housed and at-risk youth on a budget, the Program Facilitators began to create recipes using items that were on sale in local grocery stores. The Program Facilitators began using the App 'Flip' to assess weekly deals on ingredients used in the recipes. Because the Cooking Groups were held each Wednesday, these deals were beneficial to share with the Youth Participants, as most local, cost effective grocery stores such as Save On Foods renew their deals each Wednesday. With this in mind, Youth Participants were informed that they had one week to visit the grocery store to receive savings/coupons on the ingredients used during that night's Cooking Group recipe.

In addition to budgeting how many ingredients were needed, the Program Facilitators also ensured to purchase extra ingredients. At the end of each cooking group, the Youth Participants entered a raffle, wherein two participants would win a \$10 gift card to Save on Foods, and one participant would win a bag of groceries with the ingredients to replicate the week's meal at home.

4. Grocery shop with the Project Coordinator

The Program Facilitators would shop at the grocery store with the Project Coordinator in advance of the Cooking Group.

Once the Cooking Group began, the Program Facilitators would begin by introducing themselves and providing a safe space for Participants to get to know one another. After the space felt more comfortable to the Participants, the Program Facilitators would start the cooking process. The Program Facilitators would ask if the Participants could help prep food (measure spices, arrange the ingredients, chop vegetables). The Participants were not permitted to chop vegetables during their first visit until being shown by a Program Facilitator and monitored while in use. Youth Participants cooked alongside the Program Facilitators. Youth who were not as confident with cooking observed, and it was during these occasions when youth would connect the most with the Program Facilitators, fostering a Peer Support relationship.

It has been identified by the youth community previously that building trust, open community and sharing stories is much easier when one can do something with their hands. Both from past focus groups and the Leadership Team's personal experience, it was found that Peer Support while doing art or cooking is more effective than Peer Support sitting across from each other, similar to a counselling session. The Program Facilitators noted the latter can feel triggering, the sense of a more institutionalized, clinical process feels more like 'doctor/patient' than 'peer to peer.' The main benefit of the Cooking Group was not just what the name implies, but also a sense of healthy role-modeling, Peer Connection, and feeling seen, heard, and understood. Since the Cooking Group stopped happening due to COVID, the Program Facilitators and Project Coordinator keep in touch with youth who attended the group sessions, which has led to Program Facilitators supporting past Youth Participants with accessing services and supports. In one example, a past Youth Participant ran into one of the Program Facilitators on the street during the COVID-19 pandemic. They had expressed concern with losing their I. D's, and because they were underage, needed to apply for a new I.D. through the Ministry of Children and Family Development office. Because this occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, the office was closed. The youth did not have a phone or means of communication and could not call to book an appointment. The

Program Facilitator was able to meet this Participant's needs using a collaborative problem-solving discussion, and within a week the Participant was able to meet their social worker.

Effect of Cooking Group on Program Facilitators

As previously expressed, the planning stages of the Cooking Group Program was a time-intensive activity. The majority of this time-intensive work was carried by the Program Facilitators, all of whom had recent experience of homelessness, and were relatively new to housing themselves. This program proved to be an immensely rewarding, yet challenging process, and each member recalls growing in that period of time, in part due to the affect the sense of increased responsibility, routine and stability had on their personal life skills development and mental health. For this reason, the unintended outcome of this program was the skill-strengthening, sense of empowerment and responsibility, and increase in stability felt by the Youth Peer Facilitators. The program was intended to have a sole benefit to the Youth Participants, but in practice, equally benefited the Youth Program Facilitators, as indicated by each Facilitator and their journey through the work.

Key Learnings

1. This program unveiled an ongoing issue for youth at-risk in Victoria = accessibility versus safety. This program helped shine a light on the fact that most youth-specific activities and resources being located downtown is a detriment to their recovery from the 'street-life.' It has been indicated by participants that it is difficult to remain free from substance use when one must pass the areas of downtown, they previously obtained substances from and interact with those they used substances with. The flipside, however, is that youth find it difficult to afford a bus passes and any other transportation needed to regularly attend meetings elsewhere. It has been identified by Participants that the City of Victoria Bus Pass program for youth under 19 is a tremendous success in supporting their ability to travel to resources outside of the Downtown core. This service has had an immense effect on that community. The recommendation is to extend the age limit so that youth 24 and under can also benefit from this great program.
2. This program also helped to identify the fact that youth find outreach, peer support, counselling, etc. more successful when the interaction feels less clinical, and as casual as possible. Participants report they enjoy sharing an activity like cooking, art, etc. with the supporter as a trust-building and bonding exercise. The distraction of being occupied with your hands allows more freedom with your thoughts and voice.
3. A learning for the team is the importance of choosing the right audience. The team found that the posters were not getting word out to youth who were newly housed adequately, which meant that most of the seats were being filled by youth from Centennial Square. While the program still had benefit to the youth in Centennial Square (such as having a meal and leftovers to take with you, receiving ongoing Peer Support, etc.) it did not allow for the maximum benefit of the program. This is because if a youth in Centennial Square one the 'ingredient' prize, they were unable to put them to use without a kitchen. These unintended moments would further reinforce their experience of homelessness and sense of being 'less than.' Additionally, the youth residing in Centennial Square were not able to use the recipes cards handed out. The participants would take them regardless in hopes they can use them once they are accepted into housing but would later inform the team, they

lost the cards. It was difficult for youth participants without a home to keep track of the pieces of paper. A solution to this issue was offering to keep their recipe cards and any other papers they do not want to lose on file for them at the office, but this did not change the root of the issue, not being able to have a home. The Project Team had planned to do direct engagement with local youth housing sites and had made arrangements to first attend the Pandora Youth Apartments to do an in-person introduction to the program and Cooking Group activity. Unfortunately, as this step was in planning, the COVID-19 pandemic began, and the team was unable to test this tactic.

4. The team found that drop in programming is more successful than scheduled for those experiencing homelessness, as it is difficult to plan ahead when your life circumstances change often.

COVID-19 and Cooking Group

Effect on Team Members

When COVID-19 was first announced, it upheaved everyone's life. Most people can say with certainty that COVID-19 affected one or more aspects of their lives. This is increased and more evident in youth with lived experience or current experiences of homelessness.

The effect of COVID-19 on the Program Facilitators collective mental health was immediate and obvious. The inability to meet as a group, connect with youth, and continue to work consistent hours was detrimental to the initial increase of stability and empowerment the Facilitators felt during the initial stages of the project. The skill-strengthening, increase in sense of empowerment and responsibility, and stability felt by the Facilitators were at risk due to the setback COVID-19 had on their confidence and empowerment.

More than just a place of working collaboration, the GVCEH and this project acted as a lifeline for the Program Facilitators; a place of connection and belonging. The Facilitators could only imagine that what they were feeling was doubly felt by the youth participants who attended the cooking groups.

During the initial stages of COVID-19, the Project Coordinator held Peer Support meetings with each of the Program Facilitators to get a sense of how COVID-19 was affecting them. The Project Coordinator also met with each member to set up the Zoom Communication App on their devices so the group could stay in touch. This approach was not successful as some of the team members lost their phones from time to time or did not have consistent access to Wi-Fi. Moreover, youth indicated virtual meetings just did not feel the same.

The COVID-19 was especially problematic for the Program Facilitators income. All 4 regular Program Facilitators had come to rely on the project income. Being unclear on the duration of the pandemic had a collective impact on the team's mental health.

Deliverable Pivot: Cookbook

Once the team realized that COVID-19 would not likely end by the project due date, the Project Coordinator met with Program Facilitators to discuss the direction of the project. During these discussions, a Program Facilitator, Brandon, pitched an idea that would adapt the project in a way that would ensure the project benefit to youth in Victoria would still be reflected: the creation of a cookbook written by the Program Facilitators.

The Cookbook has been written by two Program Facilitators, Brandon Dennis, and Julia Greco. The book has three sections, all developed by the Program Facilitators based on what information they would have wanted to know when they were experiencing homelessness to better support their path to success. For example, Julia recently got into composting and recycling and found it was challenging to learn what you can recycle/compost and what is prohibited. She found that this is a gap in education many youths with experience of homelessness face, so that is a section of the book she wanted to lead.

Sections of the Cookbook:

1. Emotional Support and Challenges Youth Face
 - a. Personal essays written by Brandon Dennis on dealing with loss, grief, end of relationships, sadness and more.
 - b. Information on diverse types of support to heal trauma.
 - c. What is a healthy relationship and how do you know it is unhealthy?
2. Recipes
 - a. A compilation of all the recipes used in the weekly Cooking Groups and more, including breakfast, lunch, dinner, and dessert.
 - b. Gardening Tips and Tricks
 - i. How to grow from the land
 - ii. How to grow vegetables from kitchen scraps
 - iii. How plants can support mental health
 - iv. How to live off vegetable plants to avoid purchasing grocery store produce again!
 - v. Composting and recycling and the effect on the environment.
3. Life Skills Tips, Tricks, and Resources
 - a. How to file your taxes
 - b. Tips to acing an interview.
 - c. How to build a resume

Participant Experience

Pre-COVID-19 Pandemic (During Cooking Group Activity)

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Cooking Group was held 17 times and served 92 participants (each group averaged 3-9 members.) However, due to the consistent number of repeat attendees, it is difficult to assess how many from the 92 participants are unique individuals. For example, during each group, the team could expect 3-4 repeat participants.

During COVID-19 Pandemic

During the pandemic, we did not interact with any participants due to the provincial restrictions. The biggest benefit to youth during the Pandemic was the benefit to the Program Facilitators. Through the pandemic, they have been able to receive continuous income, and further their life-skills, sense of belonging and personal empowerment.

Brandon, the Program Facilitator who created the Cookbook pivot, began writing the Lifestyle section of the book. From assessing Brandon's drafts, start to finish, it is clear how much he has grown as a writer

in that time. He has gained an immense number of skills in using literary techniques, devices, and articulating his points more clearly. Brandon has shared that this increase in writing skills would not have happened, had it not been for this book. He clarifies it further by saying if he was not part for this engagement to explore his creative side, he would have not had time to do it otherwise. This is because many young people do 1-3 jobs in order to make a basic living income, and if he had not been offered this opportunity, he would have been forced to work other jobs, which wouldn't have made possible so much time to write. One of the key learnings from the Cookbook pivot is how the investment into peoples' creative side, passions, and underdeveloped skills can often become great sources of pride for the participants.

RENTSMART CERTIFICATE COURSE

The RentSmart Certificate course is available through this Project to youth ages 16-24. The course takes 12 hours consisting of 6 modules (Financial Literacy, Knowing your Rights,) to complete over 2-4 meetings. At the end of the course, participants are provided a Certificate of Completion and housing reference. As the RentSmart course gains more public awareness, property owners have more commonly been requesting youth tenants to take the course and have reported placing more trust in youth applicants who have completed the course.

This course is especially important to this project because during the Project Development Focus Group, participants indicated the most critical area for them to understanding is tenancy.

Additionally, this entire Outcome Area was led entirely by the Project Coordinator and Julian, a Youth Program Facilitator.

Participant Experience

Certificate Course #1

The first certificate course was held in December of 2019. The course was attended by three participants. 6 youth signed up for the course, but only 3 participants were able to consistently attend. Each participant was female-identifying and between the age of 17 – 21.

All participants completed a participant survey upon receiving their certificate. The participants indicated through the survey that the course increased their knowledge of tenancy in several areas. The survey allowed participants to specifically indicate areas that were most beneficial to their learning, which are noted below:

- “Knowing your rights, especially how many rights we as tenants have”
- “Easy tips to plan your budget”
- “How to make a housing application stronger”

All three participants reported satisfaction with the course in the following ways:

1. The Educator was welcoming and engaging: 3/3
2. The Educator was knowledgeable about housing: 3/3
3. This course was:
 - Very useful: 2/3
 - Somewhat useful: 1/3
 - Not very useful: 0/3
 - Not useful at all: 0/3

Moving Forward

COVID-19 impacted the team’s ability to facilitate more courses during the pandemic. As a result of informal engagement over phone/text with past program participants, all found it difficult or impossible to take the RentSmart course via teleconference. Most cited difficulty with technology and inability to access WIFI.

In February 2021, GVCEH began operating The Lighthouse, a transitional youth housing facility. This facility is open to youth experiencing homelessness facing high barriers to housing. One of the goals of this housing facility is to equip residents with the life skills necessary to transition to permanent housing successfully, including tenancy support. This grant will have an ongoing impact in community due to the investment in the Program Coordinator becoming a certified trainer. The Program Coordinator will continue to offer 1:1 RentSmart Certificate Courses to each new resident that is admitted to the program. The Lighthouse Team are currently discussing the possibility of facilitating a drop-in RentSmart Certificate Course to youth in community once COVID-19 restrictions reduce.

Key Learnings

The team believes the lack of people completing the first certificate course is due to barrier in attendance. The RentSmart Certificate Course takes 12 hours to complete, which is a large commitment for youth who are in school and work, which can lead to missing key lessons. Unfortunately, participants cannot receive the certificate and housing reference unless they attend each lesson. A learning from this program is to tailor various resources and supports to meet the unique needs of the youth population. Working 1:1 with participants may support youth to access the course on their terms, aiding in meeting the 12-hour requirement.

MONTHLY EDUCATION FORUM

The Monthly Education Forum is an event comprised of learnings selected from youth participants in Centennial Square. The topics chosen for the Forums were derived from the Project Development Focus Group, while some are a response to developing community needs. Examples of the Monthly Education topics include First Aid Training, Healthy Relationships, Budgeting, etc.

The Monthly Education Forum started with consistent attendance in Centennial Square in order to build relationships with the Program Facilitators. Before the COVID-19 lockdown, three of these meetings took place, and youth began to foster Peer Support relationships with the Program Facilitators. Program Facilitators supported their access to various programs, including supporting youth to find shelters, job support, and outreach.

When the COVID-19 shutdown began, the program had to be paused before the first Monthly Education Program could start. The team had been deep in the planning phase of the first forum and had scheduled a date and booked a guest speaker to facilitate a conversation about mental health and healthy relationships. The team felt disappointed, and as a result, some of the project budget was used on Peer Support for the Program Facilitators. This kept the Program Facilitator's spirit's high despite the pandemic and isolation. Program Facilitators have noted the pandemic would have impacted them much more had it not been for the value of Peer Support and the effect that had on their mental health, sense of emotional support, and belonging. Through this pivot, the team found the impact of the Peer Support did in fact deliver on the proposed outcomes of the project, with the only adaptation being that the deliverables were a result of their development as opposed to the program participants.

When the GVCEH began operation of the Lighthouse, a transitional youth housing facility, the team found that the Monthly Education Forum was able to begin again, with considerable changes in order to uphold the COVID-19 restrictions. 6 more Monthly Education Forums were held before the end of the project, and the team found that the drop-in format worked best. Topics like mental health supports, healthy relationship building, resume workshops and budgeting was explored.

Data

Over the course of the Monthly Education Forum program, the team supported 24 individuals.

- 12 through engagement at Centennial Square
- 12 through Lighthouse Monthly Education Forum support

Key Learnings

- There was a difficulty in getting consistent number of attendees at one time, which is why drop-in style worked best. The team really prioritizes Peer Support as a method of 'breaking the ice'. Initially, it seemed that meetings/engagements with no purpose seemed redundant, but overtime, it was clear the 'no pressure' meetings were integral to the relationship building process which supported consistent attendance to following Monthly Education Forums.

- Participants reported preference of drop-in programming with no set outcome and schedule, allowing life skills support to happen organically through one-on-one connection, than the tight schedule/no room for casual engagement/lots of activities method of facilitating.

TEAM DEVELOPMENT

OUTCOMES

Trainings and Development

All Program Facilitators received:

- First Aid Training
- Naloxone Training
- Managing Hostile Interactions
- Defining Boundaries
- Peer Support throughout the duration of the project

Due to the implications of COVID-19, the Program Facilitators felt concerned at the prospect of losing their source of income due to inability to host in-person activities. The experience with a global pandemic proved to be an immense challenge for the team's collective mental health and strength.

When the outcome of the project was unclear at the commencement of the pandemic, one of our team members, Brandon, suggested the team pivot from in-person Cooking Group to creating a Cookbook/Lifestyle book. This idea was adopted and saved the team from the prospect of losing their income.

The impact of ongoing Peer Support for the Program Facilitators throughout the pandemic also had a strong impact on their mental health, emotional support, and belonging, all three being key indicators for the project deliverables. This prevented feelings of loss and despair, despite one Program Facilitator losing their housing during the pandemic, and all other members feeling loss of community connection. The Peer Support helped both the Program Facilitators and Program Coordinator get through the pandemic, and during these Peer Support meetings, life skills were strengthened, too. For example, one of the Program Facilitators learned about housing rights, how to apply for housing, and how to keep good communication with the property manager. Another Program Facilitator learned about self-care and positive/negative relationships and how to navigate them.

This unexpected pivot in the project surprisingly led to the deliverables of the grant being met: strengthening life skills, increasing independence and personal growth, and fostering a sense of emotional support, community, and belonging.

Appendix

Financial Report

PB VICTORIA GRANT - YOUTH "What We Need"	PROJECT TOTAL	BUDGET
City of Victoria	27,520.00	27,520
First West Credit Union	3,000.00	-
IN KIND - GVCEH, Cool Aid, RentSmart	8,165.23	7,500
REVENUE	38,685.23	35,020
Project/Program Equipment & Supplies	6,846.06	5,200
Coordinator/Facilitators Costs	15,398.33	14,720
Consultants/Professional fees	-	2,100
Honourariums/Bursaries	8,940.84	7,500
IN KIND - rent, admin, kitchen	7,500.00	5,500
EXPENSE	38,685.23	35,020.00
NET	-	-

THANK YOU

😊 Emily

😊 Lou

😊 Brandon

😊 Julian

😊 Julia

😊 Troy

😊 Catt

FROM YOUTH PEER
FACILITATORS