



**2018 Pre-Budget Consultation Submission**

# **Wisdom2Action**

**Children and Youth in Challenging Contexts**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since December 2011, the Children and Youth in Challenging Contexts (CYCC) Network has been working to improve mental health and well-being for the most vulnerable young people in Canada and around the world. Our goal is to improve services and outcomes for young people with complex needs by finding ways to engage community-based children's services providers in the knowledge-to-action cycle (knowledge mobilization – KMb). Though this sector offers diverse programs to a wide array of vulnerable children (e.g., shelters for homeless youth, suicide prevention programs, culturally relevant interventions to prevent gang violence, programs to demobilize child soldiers, mental health treatment following sexual assault, etc.) there are no existing models of KMb designed specifically for the contexts in which these organizations offer services (e.g., poorly resourced community service settings with less formal organizational structures). The result has been service providers who pay little attention to evidence-based practices and the research produced by the academics who study the populations they serve.

The CYCC Network is changing the youth serving sector by engaging community-based service providers in activities that help them to discover best and promising practices and adapt these to their service settings. In just a few years, we have brought together a dynamic, integrated, and sustainable community of:

- 207 Network Members, which include:
  - 78 academics from 34 universities,
  - 111 community service providers,
  - 16 members from different levels of government, and 2 from the private sector.

Our Network Members are found in:

- every province and territory in Canada,
- and across the world in 20 other countries.

Children and youth growing up in challenging contexts, both in Canada and overseas, face common threats to their mental health, ranging from individual problems like depression, to family-based experiences of domestic violence and child abuse, social exclusion because of poverty or political violence, and even broader social stigma because of perceived differences.

These children's experiences may appear to be very different, but they share a remarkably common set of challenges and a shortlist of mental health problems such as trauma, depression, and violence. For children on the margins of our society, their problems are most often addressed by community-based programs that reach out to these young people where they live. Large formal service systems are still required, but across Canada and around the world community-based children's services make it much easier for young people to access the help they need.

This sector, though, has *not* been extensively involved with knowledge mobilization, in part because of their hesitation towards evidence-based practices developed in contexts different than the ones where they deliver services, and because they have few resources to participate as either knowledge users or knowledge producers. The CYCC Network understands that community-based services (and the academics concerned with the young people these services help) will only participate in KMb activities when these activities are tailored to the particular needs of under-resourced service providers in community settings.

## COMMUNITY DRIVEN RESULTS

We do not focus on schools or hospitals where there is already a well-developed KMB culture. We have instead focused on the service providers on the margins, with limited funding and little conventional evidence that what they do works (e.g., there are few randomized control trials on programs in this sector and therefore no possibility of conducting systematic reviews to assess efficacy). The added value of the Network can be illustrated through the following example in Nunavut.

Inuit youth in Canada struggle with rates of suicide 11 times the national average and high incidences of substance abuse and exposure to domestic violence (Health Canada, 2006). The organizations that support young people face enormous challenges because of the distance between communities, a lack of mental health infrastructure, and difficulty accessing professional development.

Despite a clear and rapidly growing need for better youth services, those working in remote communities struggle to find the support and knowledge they need.

In 2014, the CYCC Network partnered with the Nunavut government's Departments of Child and Family Services, Justice (Crime Prevention), and Mental Health Services, as well as local community-based non-governmental service providers, to host a two-day Wisdom2Action (W2A) workshop that facilitated the exchange between Northerners of best and promising practices to address youth mental health challenges.

Sixty service providers, nurses, psychologists, government officials and young people travelled from across the territory to Iqaluit both to share their work and hear from service leaders and academics about programs that could inform local solutions in remote communities. Follow-up interviews with participants told us that for many this was their first experience sharing their program ideas in the territory. Connections were made between service providers and academic supports. For example, the territory's only paediatrician developed strategic partnerships with community services for parents and mental health professionals that is leading to development of a Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder assessment clinic. Likewise, the Arctic Child and Youth Foundation met government officials who, after hearing about their work, joined the organization's Advisory Council and are working together to establish a child and youth advocacy centre to provide an evidence-based approach to the investigation and treatment of child sexual abuse.

Most noteworthy, however, has been the community of practice that grew out of their time together. Mental health workers who arrived from remote communities such as Arviat and Rankin Inlet established a network using teleconferences to stay connected and share program ideas across the territory.

## GATHERING THE EVIDENCE

One of our most significant contributions to furthering research about what works to support vulnerable young people was our support to the development of the Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition. The CYCC Network's early leadership on a #YoungRefugees Wisdom2Action event and community of practice helped leverage foundational funding from the Treasury Board Secretariat of Canada, SSHRC, and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada that enabled the Coalition to coalesce and secure a

\$2.5 million SSHRC Partnership Grant, confirmed on April 3, 2017. This will allow the activities of the #YoungRefugees community of practices to continue over the next five years and help Canada better understand the service needs of young refugees.

In addition to academic articles and presentations, the CYCC Network is gathering research and practice evidence and bringing it to diverse settings. We were invited to serve as an advisor to UNICEF Canada in developing a Wellbeing Index for Canada's children. We presented our knowledge synthesis reports at professional development settings such as the national Canadian Mental Health Association conference and the Canadian Knowledge Mobilization Forum.

## CONTEXTUALIZING THE EVIDENCE

Our model of community knowledge sharing, called Wisdom2Action, continues to be a sought-after method for convening stakeholders in the youth sector.

The CYCC Network staff and Youth Advisory Committee (YAC) developed and hosted Wisdom2Action: From Trauma to Resilience on March 24, 2017 in Ottawa. In partnership with leading academics, government agencies, national organizations, and service providers, it focused on sexual violence. We also partnered with the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse for Wisdom2Action: Substance Use on March 27, 2017 in Halifax. The Wisdom2Action model was a driver behind the development of a Youth Engagement Workshop for the Public Health Agency of Canada and Health Canada delivered on February 22, 2017 in Ottawa.

The Wisdom2Action model is gaining momentum nationally. We are also leading, along with Children First Canada, a National Summit for Children to create a national Children's Charter for Canada in November 2017.

The CYCC is increasingly sought out to provide input into policy development processes in Canada and in September 2016 were invited by the Taskforce on the Legalization of Cannabis to participate at the National Youth Roundtable. They discussed the challenges faced by vulnerable young people in interacting with the criminal justice system and the compounding and circular relationship between mental health and incarceration.

In October 2016, Ms. Lachance and Alicia Raimundo, Youth Advisory Committee CoChair, were invited to appear before the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women on the issue of violence against women and girls, with a particular focus on cyberviolence.

Scientific Director Dr. Michael Ungar continues to be in demand across Canada and around the world by fellow academics, educators, health care providers, child welfare authorities, and community-based organizations to share what we are learning from research, practice, policy, and good local examples of best and promising practices in the children's services sector.

## FACILITATING THE UPTAKE OF BEST AND PROMISING PRACTICES

The CYCC Network has been able to capitalize on its new decentralized structure with regional hubs. The online, national, bilingual KMB and Evaluation Toolkit was launched and further expanded over the course of the year. In response to repeated expressions of interest about the Wisdom2Action model, we created a bilingual W2A guide that is accessible in the Toolkit. We also increased the French content in the Toolkit.

The next step was the launch of a mentoring program. Two of the CYCC Network Hubs – the Qaujigiartiit Health Research Centre in Nunavut and the Centre de liaison et prévention psychosociale in Quebec – began the mentoring program by providing support for knowledge mobilization to existing partner organizations with whom they had ongoing relationships but wanted to expand through the CYCC Network model.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT OF CANADA

### **1) Measure best practices**

The Government of Canada can and should encourage and expect departments and agencies, and affiliates to measure and evaluate their programs and services delivered to youth. Both quantitative and qualitative data collection are needed to explore the program inputs, program activities, and program outputs. Knowing what works best for children and youth should never be just an opinion.

### **2) Empower youth**

The Prime Minister's Youth Advisory Committee is a good start to incorporate the perspectives of children and youth into policy and program development. However, more can be done. In every aspect of government services and programs, the question of how an action serves and benefits the child must be asked and measured. Youth will be empowered when they are involved in leading the services and programs from which they benefit.

### **3) Embrace Knowledge Mobilization**

Throughout all aspects of government, including staff and the infrastructure in which they work, people and systems must be knowledge ready. In other words, at the foundation of government business, the means to share, develop and evaluate knowledge must be achievable. Provide adequate resourcing, a supportive leadership team and lifelong learning environment that applauds knowledge sharing.

### **4) Incorporate youth engagement principles across government**

Youth engagement is a best practice for supporting the positive mental health and well-being of young people. It is an effective strategy to promote resiliency. Youth engagement is an ongoing process that demands time and space. The needs of youth and the community constantly change and government must be willing and able to change with the environments and situations where youth find themselves.

## **5) Align government language with Indigenous language and culture**

Working towards reconciliation, the Government of Canada must acknowledge the essential role indigenous language and culture have in the lives of Indigenous Peoples. Revising language use across government demonstrates an understanding of and willingness to respectfully work with and serve indigenous youth.

## **CONCLUSION**

The CYCC Network is leading collaboration and knowledge mobilization efforts in Canada and around the world. Sharing what works for children and youth is at the core of our mandate.

Our work as a network of youth serving organizations and individuals is advancing a national conversation about evidence-informed practice in a service sector that has been reluctant to participate. Evaluation of the Network shows it is having an impact on services, making better services available to our end-users, the young people themselves.

Best practices support youth being involved in organizational decision-making processes and at all levels of program development, planning, implementation and evaluation.

Children and youth in challenging contexts are better served when they are given opportunities to influence their care plans. They need their federal government to lead the way in youth engagement and empowerment.