

The Community Healing Project

Using a peer-led model, the Community Healing Project (CHP) supports the development of mental health literacy for youth impacted by community violence. Funded by the Government of Canada's National Crime Prevention Strategy, the program is delivered by the City of Toronto and Stella's Place in partnership with the Agincourt Community Services Association, Jane and Finch Family Centre, The Neighbourhood Group (formerly St. Stephen's Community House), and Yorktown Family Services. This report includes findings from Year 2 of a 5-year evaluation (2018 - 2023) led by Blueprint.

Peer Support Training provided by Stella's Place engages youth from across the city to participate. Once they graduate as Peer Healers, they go on to lead workshops to support youth within their communities.

Year 2 by the numbers

Trained:

26

Peer Healers

26

Youth Frontline workers

Hired to support planning and delivery:

4

Peer Mentors
(former Peer healers)

4

Quadrant Coordinators

Reached through two summer and fall community workshop series:

180

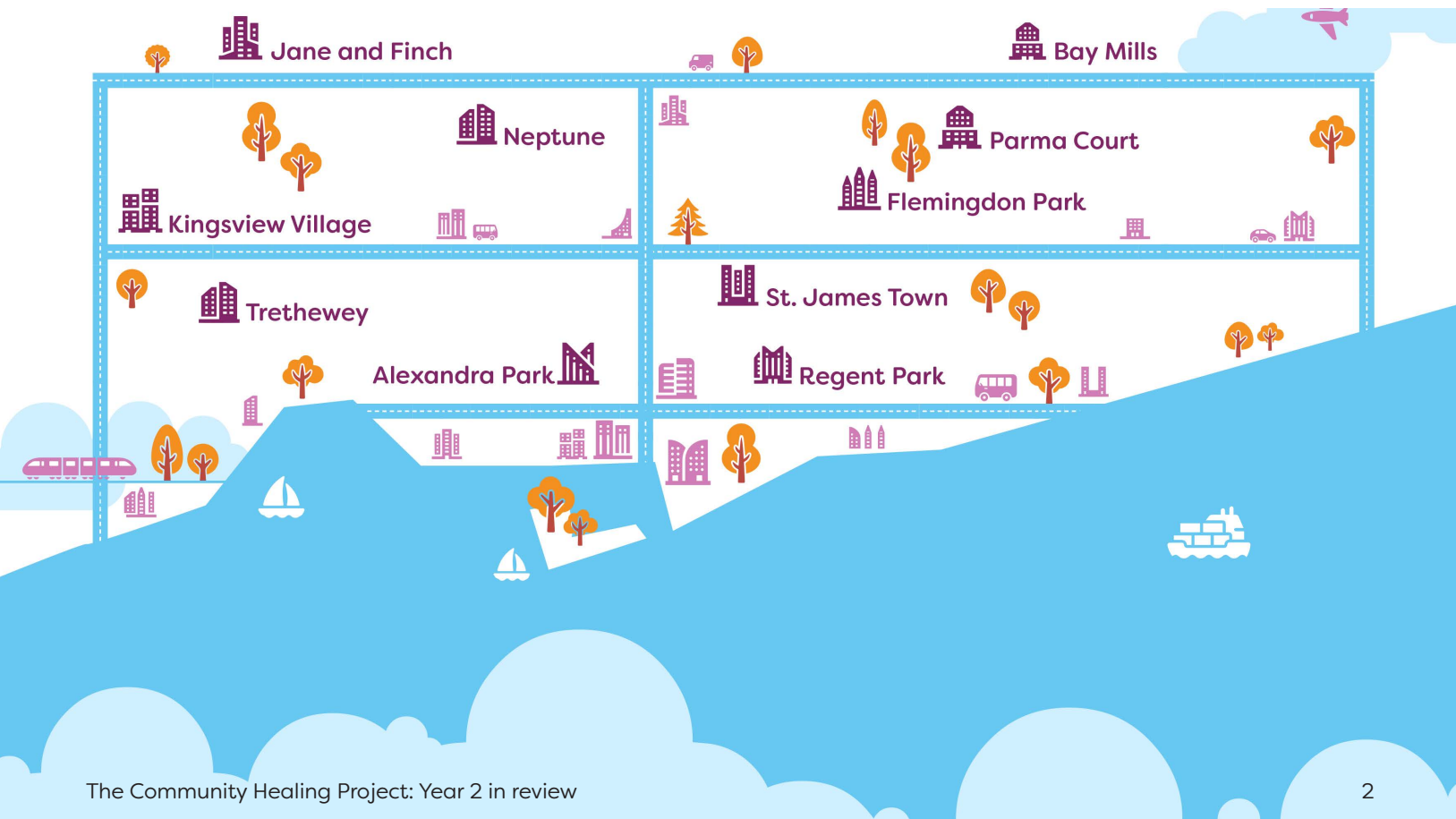
Youth participants

Completed a special workshop series:

9

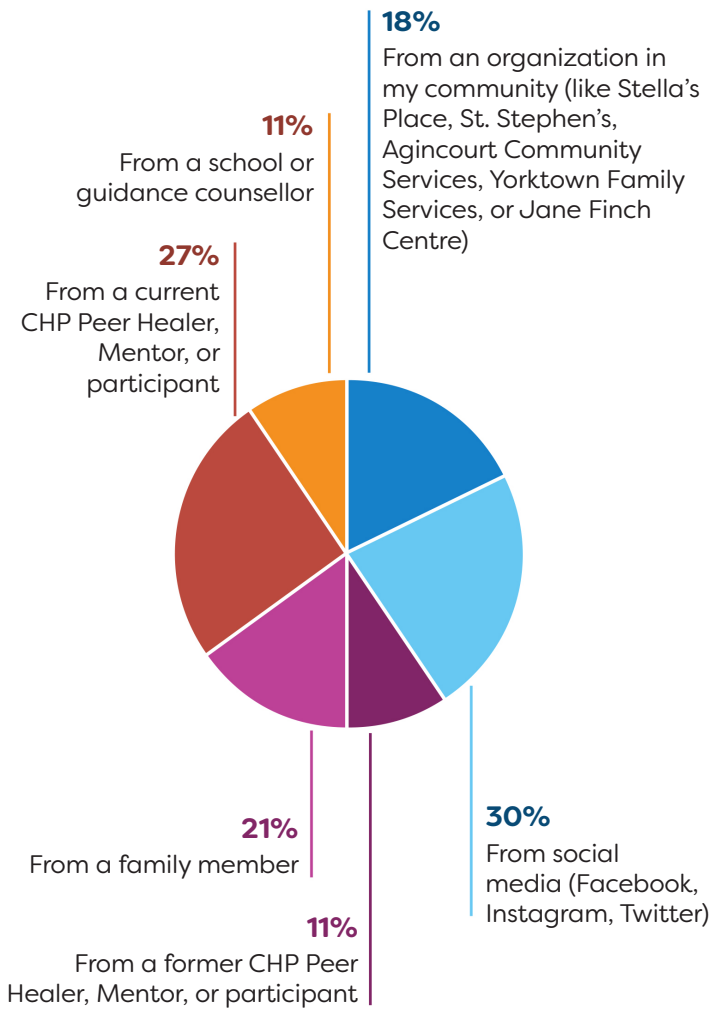
Parents & caregivers of children and youth

10 Communities Engaged



Getting the word out

CHP is centred in community. Ninety-one youth workshop participants were asked to share how they heard about the workshop:

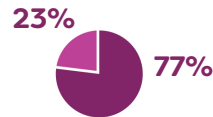


CHP participants in Year 2

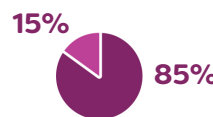
A sample of Peer Healers (those who received the training and then delivered the model) responded to the surveys.

Here's what we learned:

- Peer Healers (youth who received the training and then delivered the program) are between the ages of 20 -28 years and most are around 24 years old



Peer healers in the sample identified as **women (77%)** and **men (23%)**



Most (85%) Peer Healers identify as having some **African and Caribbean ethnicity**, and a few (15%) identify as **Hispanic, East/Southeast, or East Asian, and Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit, Metis)**

- Many have at least a high school diploma or GED, and **38% were enrolled in an education program** while participating in CHP
- Youth participants varied in age between 10 and 29 years old. Most (59%) were between 16 and 29 and the remaining youth (38%) were under 16 years old.
- At the end of training, all Peer Healers surveyed said they now felt better equipped to advocate for themselves and their peers/community members.
- When surveyed after program completion, one out of every three participants had already recommended CHP to others.

“It was very inspiring to be in a space where **everyone was so open**”

— Peer Healer

“... their [CHP] community leadership is one of the best I've ever seen, and I've been through a lot of people. **They are supportive**”

— Peer Healer

2020 was a challenging year for all participants and partners involved in CHP

Many of the communities in which the project operates were hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many communities also continued to experience loss and trauma as a result of community violence and systemic violence. The need for healing and mental health supports was greater than ever and the CHP team had to quickly adapt and learn to support communities in new ways.

January

- **Year 2 of CHP begins!** CHP welcomes a new cohort of 26 Peer Healers to start in-person Peer Support Training. Around the same time, a group of 4 Peer Mentors join to support with program delivery.

This is the first year for the role of Peer Mentor; previously, it was a joint role called YPMC (Youth Peer Mentor Coordinator). Following feedback from Year 1 of CHP, the role was separated into two distinct roles: Peer Mentor and Quadrant Coordinator.

CHP introduces new case manager role

March

Ontario falls into a sudden state of emergency following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. **The CHP team rapidly transitions to virtual delivery** to continue to provide Peer Support Training.

May

- **Peer Healers complete the training** and start to plan to deliver Community workshops online.

June

Peer Healers, Peer Mentors, and Quadrant Coordinators adapt to a whole new way of working in community, and the transition was not without its challenges.

- A 9-week **Community Workshop series** is virtually launched for youth in 10 communities across the city. **Peer Healers leverage online platforms like Zoom and Instagram** to help them to reach others in the community.

July

- ▲ A new training cohort was launched for **Youth Frontline Workers**.

The adapted Peer Support Training program was designed to support frontline staff, youth workers, and community volunteers in strengthening their mental health literacy and support skills.

October

- ◎ A new series of workshops designed to **support parents & caregivers of youth** within CHP communities is launched.

- Another series of **Community Workshops** is launched for youth participants.

December

Peer Healers complete Community Workshops, having reached up to **180 youth participants** throughout the year. Peer Healers graduate from CHP, and the Peer Mentors, Quadrant Coordinators, and CHP Staff start to prepare for the year ahead.

● Peer Support training

■ Community workshops

▲ Youth Frontline Workers training

◎ Parents and Caregivers

Mental Health and Healing

Peer Healers

Peer Healers said that the training and discussions around mental health and trauma helped them not only understand the signs of trauma in their own lives, but provided the language to help articulate what youth in their community were experiencing.

- At the start of training, almost **two-thirds of the incoming Peer Healers (65% or 15 out of 23 respondents)** indicated that they had **experienced and were affected by trauma**, and 56% said that they were experiencing challenges related to their mental health
- Half of the Peer Healers who completed surveys both at the start and end of training indicated **improvements in their trauma-related symptoms and feelings related to anxiety and depression**
- Peer Healers reported a **greater willingness to be vulnerable**, open up to their fellow Peer Healers from different communities, and create a space to heal and navigate their own emotions
- An end-of-training survey was completed by 13 Peer Healers in May. Here's what they learned:



All (13 out of 13) Peer Healers said that they were better able to navigate mental health supports and cope with their own mental health.

Youth participants

Youth workshop participants also reported gaining mental health resources, knowledge, and awareness through CHP community workshops and indicated an improvement in their abilities to navigate a mental health challenge. From a survey completed by ninety-one youth workshop participants, we heard:



In particular, the workshops provided participants with the tools and resources to speak about trauma, self-care, coping, and stress.



“There were a lot of traumas that I was going through that I thought I got over, and **there were some tools that CHP gave me that really helped.**”

– Peer Healer



“There are different services and things that we can also access. They have access to counsellors and social workers, or job help and stuff like that. Like its beyond, ‘okay you are here to get the workshop to the youth and then boom you’re done’...it’s very family oriented and it’s very fun...**there is just so much within the program**, and it’s greatly appreciated.”

– Peer Healer



Finding new ways to build community

The onset of the pandemic and transition to virtual delivery led to fatigue and burn-out for those involved with the program. In response, Peer Mentors regularly worked outside of their roles and responsibilities to provide extra support to Peer Healers.

While the COVID-19 pandemic made it more challenging to reach and connect with youth who might benefit from CHP, Peer Mentors and Quadrant Coordinators worked together to find new ways of building partnerships and collaborating with community organizations. The introduction of a full-time case manager, who provided additional support to participants in the program by connecting them to other community services, alleviated some of the added challenges experienced by Peer Mentors.

Despite these challenges, youth [or participants] who completed the Peer Support Training indicated in the end-of-training survey that they were largely satisfied with their experiences in CHP:



92%

All (100%) of the Peer Healers stated that they **enjoyed the training** and 92% felt **included and heard** during the sessions.

Youth community workshop participants were also **largely satisfied** with their experiences:

- Half of those who responded to the survey said that **they attended at least 5 out of 9 workshop sessions**.
- **58% shared that they were likely to recommend the program to others**, and an additional 33% had already done so!



“It’s not like I could go out door to door, which I’m used to...**technology has become a barrier** [to joining community workshops]”

– Peer Healer



“When something wasn’t working on Zoom and we had to go to Instagram, **we experimented and we saw how that worked**. We were quick on our toes to see how we can best serve the community.”

– Quadrant Coordinator



Looking ahead:

What is changing as we go into Year 3?

1. CHP continues to extend its reach to more communities without access to mental health supports for young people

This year, CHP is delivered in: **Parma Court, Flemingdon Park, Tretheway, St. James Town, Alexandra Park, Scarborough Village, Rexdale, Falstaff, Jane & Sheppard/Chalkfarm, and The Esplanade**, working with community organizations like **Agincourt Community Services Association, The Neighborhood Group, Jane Finch Centre, and Yorktown Family Services.**

2. CHP continues to deliver Peer Support Training and offer community workshops to youth across the city

Going digital - Training and workshops will continue to be delivered virtually using platforms like Instagram and Zoom to connect with youth. CHP is thinking more creatively about how to reach the most vulnerable youth in the city, particularly in response to feedback from Peer Healers that outreach and online engagement was a challenge.

Maintain connections - CHP is exploring different ways to remain closely connected to youth, despite going digital:

- working closely with quadrant agencies to reach youth within their networks
- joining community safety tables and connecting with other agencies
- safely host pop-up shops within communities, to get the word out about the program

Support mental health - CHP is continuing to provide additional mental health and system navigation support to folks in the program.

3. CHP offers opportunities for growth

CHP offered Peer Healers opportunities to continue their engagement with the program – including through the Peer Mentor role which saw four former Peer Healers employed to support the next generation of Peer Healers during their training and workshop delivery. Peer Mentors shared that the role helped them to clarify their career goals.

Several Peer Mentors shared that CHP inspired them to explore career and academic interests related to community work, child and youth work, the criminal justice system, and mental health.

More Peer Healers will have the opportunity to remain engaged with CHP through the Peer Mentor role. **This year, one returning Senior Peer Mentor was brought on to provide additional support to the Peer Mentors and Quadrant Coordinators**

4. CHP expands engagement in the evaluation process

CHP is integrating new approaches to the evaluation, including engaging Peer Healers and Mentors in leading workshop-based activities for feedback from youth participants. Participants will have more opportunities to reflect on how their participation in CHP is supporting them on their mental health journey.

“one of the main reasons why I even joined CHP was to gain an understanding and knowledge of how certain people are able to access the resources that are available in the City to help others...and I’m still here just soaking up information, getting different connections, and finding out where is what for the people who need it.”

– Peer Mentor

