

The Community Healing Project (CHP) is a peer-based approach to addressing the impact of exposure to violence on youth and their communities.

It brings together the City of Toronto, Stella's Place, CHP alumni (who act as Youth Peer Mentor Coordinators, or YPMCs), and partners from across the city – Agincourt Community Services Association, Jane and Finch Family Centre, St. Stephen's Community House at The Neighbourhood Group, and Yorktown Family Services – to train and empower Peer Healers to

deliver workshops to youth, many of them from communities who have experienced direct or indirect exposure to community violence.

CHP is grounded in the belief that peers – individuals with lived experience – can connect with youth in ways that community organizations and clinicians cannot, and that effective healing must

be community-based and community-driven. It is collaborative, responsive to the needs of communities and youth, and prioritizes the well-being of participants and partners. CHP also encourages Peer Healers to consider their lived experience and the skills they learn in the program as part of an employment path, and to build on these skills in relevant work opportunities after the program.

## CHP Year 1 Evaluation

The City of Toronto partnered with Blueprint to evaluate the five-year Community Healing Project. In the first year of the evaluation, Blueprint spoke with five YPMCs, five Peer Healers, and staff from all partner agencies to understand their experiences with CHP and how they think it can be improved in Year 2. The evaluation team also collected written feedback from 71 youth who joined workshops in their communities. Blueprint is grateful to everyone who generously shared their time and insights and who made the evaluation possible.

#### What we found

#### Participants see CHP as a rare and transformative opportunity in their lives.

- Peer Healers gained unique skills, experience, and insights, and were able to reach and connect with youth in ways that community organizations and non-peer staff cannot.
- Many of the Peer Healers that we spoke with shared that their time in CHP helped them see the value and relevance of their lived experience in building a career that they're passionate about. They described how CHP helped spark career ambitions in the youth work or social services sectors, and helped them build work-related skills.
- While few of the YPMCs came into CHP with the goal of building a career in the mental health or youth sectors, all said that their role as a YPMC led to clearer and stronger ambitions to build on their experience and pursue a related career.

 Several Peer Healers and YPMCs have continued to stay involved with the City, Stella's Place, and Quadrant Lead organizations, including some who have found full-time work with these organizations.

#### As an ambitious, complex program, CHP requires a high level of coordination and relationship-building, which take time.

- To meaningfully engage youth across Toronto, support learning, healing, and professional development, and work with community partners to ensure local relevance and application, CHP relies on strong and active collaboration across a broad range of partners and participants.
- This takes time and resources to develop, and there is an opportunity to build on Year 1 to



# Understanding the experiences of Peer Healers

As part of the evaluation, Blueprint worked individually with five Peer Healers to map out their journeys in the program – from when they first heard about it to their graduation. Peer Healers chose emojis to represent how they were feeling at different stages of the experience, and the most common ones are included below. Here's what we heard.

## Peer Healers' pathway

Learning about the program

Starting the program

Doing Peer Support Training Delivering workshops to youth and sharing learnings through a Community of Practice

Graduating from CHP

Reflecting on the experience

#### What we heard

Peer Healers
were excited to
hear about CHP,
which seemed
like a unique
opportunity
that fit their own
experience and
interests. As they
applied, they were
both excited and
nervous about
whether they would
be picked.

As Peer Healers began to meet each other, some were excited to meet others who shared their passion for helping people, while others took their time to observe before engaging with the group.

The majority of Peer Healers spoke very highly of the Peer Support Training. Many saw it as a transformative experience, leading them to process challenging events in their past and learn new skills. Many also had suggestions for additional topics and other improvements.

The majority of Peer Healers were excited to begin delivering workshops and share their experience with other youth, but occasionally, working with a co-facilitator was a challenge. The stress of planning and delivering workshops, attending Community of Practice meetings, and managing commitments outside of CHP led to some inter-personal challenges, which many found hard.

Many Peer Healers shared that they left CHP feeling empowered to pursue meaningful work and continue their personal healing.

Many Peer Healers found their experience with CHP to be transformative, and were surprised at the amount of growth they had undergone. Many also appreciated its contribution to advancing their employment path.





"The training opens you up a lot. It will be a flush of learnings that you probably have never experienced before, and you're in a group of people who are very supportive."

"I learned that when I am on the same level with the youth and using my experiences, they better understand the topic." "I feel like this could lead me to where I want to go in the future. I want to build community centres, do collective action things." "I'm trying to balance my life because I feel like [CHP] made me see that everyone needs this. We have to make it easy for everyone to go and get it." "[CHP has been] a huge lesson to me. Is this program going to divert me from [destructive behaviours]? As of right now I can say that yes, it has."



"Even if the patterns and behaviours are still there, the way we process, cope, assess, interact and reflect after is very different. Huge growth in a six month turn-around time."

## Understanding the experiences of Youth Peer Mentor Coordinators (YPMCs)

As part of the evaluation, Blueprint worked individually with five Youth Peer Mentor Coordinators (YPMCs), all of whom were former Peer Healers, to map out their journey in the role, from when they first heard about the opportunity to its end a year later. YPMCs chose emojis to represent how they were feeling at different stages of the experience, and the most common ones are included below. Here's what we heard.

## YPMCs' pathway

Learning about the position

Starting a new job with a CHP partner agency (Quadrant Lead) Assisting with Peer Support Training Overseeing community workshop delivery and supporting the Community of Practice

Position contract ends

Reflecting on the experience

#### What we heard

YPMCs were very interested to hear about the position and continue their involvement with CHP.

Once work began and each YPMC was placed at a Quadrant Lead organization, navigating the new role felt overwhelming for many YPMCs. For some, their experience as a former Peer Healer made supporting the new cohort easy, but the administrative and financial tasks were new and challenging. Once processes and systems were set up, things were easier.

YPMCs found supporting the Peer Support Training was one of the best parts of the position, as they could directly relate to the training and new cohort, having previously been a Peer Healer themselves.

Once workshop delivery started, many YPMCs found supporting Peer Healers fulfilling, but for some, the workshop outreach and logistical coordination tasks with Quadrant Lead organizations was new and more difficult. Coordinating these tasks as well as supporting the Community of Practice, each at a different location, was a challenge. YPMCs shared that once they set up systems, processes, and schedules, balancing everything was much easier.

Many YPMCs shared that they learned important work-related skills, and gained clarity about the kind of work they would like to do in the future from their experience as a YPMC.

Some YPMCs reflected that the position was a rare opportunity for those with limited formal professional experience and with barriers to employment to gain professional experience and enter a career trajectory.





"You want to continue to [learn]... now I have this curiosity or this interest, and you're constantly like, what else is there? What other workshops are there on this? What other communities can I have these

conversations in?"

"I find myself doing [peer mentor work] in all aspects of my life... supporting friends, supporting strangers... I'm seeing how I'm bringing it into different spaces I go into, different conversations I have. And now I'm thinking about [this kind of work] as a potential future [career]."

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"CHP has taught me a lot about how to administer programs, connect with agencies. YPMC role taught me what it looks like partnering with other people, dealing with funders." "If the role didn't allow people like myself without all the qualifications to have the role, I wouldn't be where I am today. I wouldn't have this opportunity to be excelling in a career world."

## CHP Year 2: Looking Forward

The City of Toronto, Stella's Place, and partner agencies have already started to incorporate feedback from participants and partners into the second year of the project.

- The Peer Support Training Program has been extended to 14 sessions, and includes an additional conflict resolution module, an extended module on diversity and identity, and greater emphasis on communication
- There is a new application process for Peer Healers who wish to deliver community workshops, with additional training
- A Case Manager has been hired to support Peer Healers
- Four new counsellors are now available to provide up to five counselling sessions - at no

cost and with no waitlist - to Peer Healers and workshop participants on a referred or selfreferred basis

 The YPMC position has been split into two roles: Youth Coordinators working closely with each of the four partner agencies and Youth Mentors who will continue to coach and support Peer Healers

The City of Toronto and Stella's Place also recognize that the need for the Community Healing Project is greater than ever with the COVID-19 pandemic. They are actively working with Peer Healers, Youth Mentors, and Youth Coordinators to respond to the needs of Toronto youth, deliver online workshops, and bring together communities virtually.

# We want to hear from you!

To learn more about the evaluation and share your feedback, contact:

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