



## The Community Healing Project: Year 3 in Review

# Healing ourselves through healing others

### The Community Healing Project

The Community Healing Project (CHP) is a program that centres peer support to foster the development of mental health literacy and healing among youth impacted by community violence in the City of Toronto. Youth who complete the program become Peer Healers by engaging in Peer Support Training and leading workshops for other youth in their own communities. CHP alumni also have the opportunity to apply to CHP staff positions, including Peer Mentor, Senior Peer Mentor, and Quadrant Coordinator positions, in which they provide mentorship to Peer Healers and assist with workshops. This laddering approach creates a unique opportunity for youth to pursue both a career – and a personal development – path.

CHP is delivered by the City of Toronto and Stella’s Place in partnership with the Agincourt Community Services Association, Jane Finch Community & Family Centre, the Neighbourhood Group (formerly St. Stephen’s Community House), and Yorktown Family Services, with funding from the Government of Canada’s National Crime Prevention Strategy. This report presents findings from Year 3 of a 5-year evaluation (2018 – 2023) led by Blueprint.

Funded by the Government of Canada



# What's new for CHP this year

Learnings from previous CHP evaluations led to a few new program components:

- **Improving wraparound supports:** With the introduction of a Case Manager in Year 2, CHP continues to enhance the case management component for Peer Healers, Peer Mentors, and Youth Workshop Participants. A Senior Peer Mentor was also introduced to provide Peer Mentors with additional administrative and advisory support.
- **Getting back into the community:** As CHP shifted to virtual delivery for a second year due to COVID-19, Peer Mentors, Peer Healers, and CHP staff became more skilled and familiar with using virtual platforms for outreach and workshop delivery. As communities across Toronto started to reopen, CHP staff took advantage of all opportunities to re-engage youth in person through community events.
- **Writing a heartfelt letter to self:** Blueprint introduced a participatory evaluation activity where Youth Workshop Participants wrote a letter of advice to their past and future selves as they reflected on what they had learned throughout the workshops. This was built into the workshops to better engage Youth Workshop Participants both in CHP and in its evaluation.

## Year 3 by the numbers

**200**  
youth participants  
reached through  
community  
workshop series

**51**  
Peer  
Healers  
trained

**37**  
Peer Healers  
delivered  
Community  
Workshops

**1**  
Senior  
Peer  
Mentor

**4**  
Peer  
Mentors

**4**  
Quadrant  
Coordinators

To support training and workshops,  
CHP hired:

10 communities engaged:



## Peer Healers

Based on 35 Peer Healer survey responses:

**62%** identified as women

**35%** identified as men

**3%** identified as genderqueer/gender non-conforming

Peer Healers were between the ages of 18 and 29, with an average age of 22

The majority of Peer Healers identified as **Black**:

**40%**  
identified as  
African-Canadian

**34%**  
African-Canadian

**26%**  
East African

**3%**  
West African

Peer Healers also identified as:<sup>1</sup>

**9%**  
South Asian

**9%**  
Hispanic or Latin  
American

**6%**  
Middle Eastern  
or Arabic

**6%**  
Indo-Caribbean

**3%**  
White European

**6%**  
another  
racial identity

**90%**

of Peer Healers were Satisfied or Very Satisfied with the Peer Support Training.

At the time of survey, 54% of Peer Healers had already recommended the program to someone.

## Youth workshop participants

Youth who participated in community workshops represented a diversity of ages, genders, and races.<sup>2</sup>

**33%**  
ages 16 or younger

**24%**  
between ages 17-20

**39%**  
between ages 20-24

**4%**  
between ages 25-29

**60%** identified as women/girl

**29%** identified as man/boy

**4%** identified as trans

44% identified as South Asian or Indo-Caribbean, 29% as Black

Feedback from workshop participants was overwhelmingly positive:

**97%**

were Somewhat Satisfied or Very Satisfied with the workshops. At the time of survey, **49%** of participants had already recommended the program to a friend or family, and **47%** were very likely to do so.

<sup>1</sup> Note that percentages do not add up to 100 because respondents could select multiple options.

<sup>2</sup> Findings are based on 67 survey responses. Note that percentages do not add up to 100 because a portion of participants preferred not to share this information.

# What we heard from the CHP community

## Healing in a time of COVID-19 restrictions

Despite taking place during evolving COVID-19 restrictions, members of the CHP community shared that they were able to advance along their healing journey.

### Youth workshop participants

Youth workshop participants shared that participating in CHP workshops enabled them to build a positive mentality towards self-acceptance and optimism to overcome obstacles. They expressed the importance of prioritizing their own wellbeing and came up with their own self-care strategies.

"I would like to tell my future self to not stress too much. There are ways to destress and [be] mindful of my health both physically and mentally, like listening to music, playing sports, doing art"

- youth workshop participant

"I wish I would have told myself that putting your mental health first should have always been a priority"

- youth workshop participant

The most helpful thing that I learned in the workshop was how to cope with stress because stress is not a foreign topic and it's something that I deal with on a regular basis."

- youth workshop participant

"I wish I told my former self before the program that I should take the time to care for my mental health and practise self-care, as it is equally as important as my physical health."

- youth workshop participant

"Instead of burying your fears and hiding from your stress find healthy ways of tackling them just like you've learned."

- youth workshop participant

Youth workshop participants also found the **courage to face fears and obstacles through the trust they built with their peer community**, knowing that it is okay to ask for help and that they are not alone. 91% (61 out of 67) youth workshop participants reported that they were more knowledgeable and aware of mental health supports in their communities and 88% felt more confident knowing what to do when things aren't going well.

### "I want to tell my future self that ... "

"... you are not alone. You always have support from your peers and others. You always have support from individuals like the ones at CHP."

" ... I can always reach out for support when in need of support, and that there [are] always people out there that are willing to help you."

" ... I can always reach out for support when in need of support, and that there [are] always people out there that are willing to help you."

"... there are resources out there in order to help what ever you're going through. Also it okay to feel whatever your feeling and you're not alone."

"... [you can] make an effort to do better, CHP team is always there to support even when you feel like you aren't able to get through a situation. They are always there to help. "

"Be yourself. You're accepted here. And be human, it's a family here ."



## Peer Healers and alumni

CHP brought together community members to **lift each other up no matter where they were in their healing journey**. We heard that regardless of how someone is involved with CHP – as a workshop participant, Peer Healer, Peer Mentor, or Quadrant Coordinator – individuals **continue to learn, grow, and heal from engaging with the CHP community**.

"Through CHP, I have been able to believe in myself more, build self-love, my confidence and knowledge around issues. Now, I can share relevant resources with people who need assistance."

- Peer Mentor

"I really enjoyed the atmosphere of the sessions, this made it really easy for me to learn heavy topics, get to know other Healers in my community and not only stay true to my core values but expand of them even deeper."

- Peer Healer

"CHP is a unique program that I have not seen other organizations do before. It has been a life-changing experience that has built both my professional, personal, and social life skills."

- Peer Mentor

Many Peer Healers agreed that they advanced along their healing journey by improving skills in a wide range of areas, including:

89%

Navigating mental health supports

80%

Active listening, peer engagement and boundary setting

79%

Communication

Mental health coping skills

92%

Ability to advocate for themselves and their peers

86%

Conflict resolution

71%

Many Peer Healers **also valued CHP's new case management component** in their CHP journey. Many accessed case management support to address various needs, so they have more capacity to show up as Peer Healers and/or Mentors. These experiences highlight the importance of **"healing" from a wholistic approach that cares for the unique and intersectional barriers** that individuals face outside their engagement with CHP.

"I took advantage of the counselling support which helped me overcome life issues I was going through. The counselling session was really helpful."

- Peer Healer

"Aside from counselling support, I have been able to seek housing and family support. There is a lot of support that can be attained from CHP. During my time as a Healer, I was able to get grocery support. The support that CHP provides help break a lot of barriers for people who may not have been able to join CHP because of those barriers."

- Peer Mentor

## Drawing on peer support and mental health skills to support a career path

CHP's unique laddering hiring model not only allows youth to **build career-oriented skills**, but also **promotes a community of practice** among Peer Healer alumni working as Peer Mentors or Quadrant Coordinators.

Moreover, Peer Healers felt that CHP provided **clear pathways to progress professionally** throughout and beyond their journey with CHP.

"There is an opportunity for growth with CHP, including growing in the job positions and getting connected to PEERs and other organizations. There are also great network[ing] opportunities with CHP."

- Peer Healer

"I feel like I am climbing the ladder with CHP with every position I take, so I would like to have the skills to support others."

- Peer Mentor

"Everyone is passing on the baton, so the knowledge stays among the team and is transferred. What would have been a disconnect would have been hiring someone who has not been in the program before because they will not know what is going on, how the team operates. They would have to be updated on everything. I think that process of hiring role after role helps strengthen our skills as a team."

- Peer Mentor

CHP's model of hiring program alumni into staff roles **facilitates knowledge sharing and a strong sense of peer support** across cohorts. Peer Healers value the knowledge, community, and support from Peer Mentors who have a first-hand understanding of what it is like to participate in CHP. This form of **peer support as a way to achieve mutual growth and healing** is a core part of CHP.

"The Senior Peer Mentor provided us with knowledge, tips and tools that helped me in my journey as a Peer Mentor and most of these resources shared by Senior Peer Mentors are not provided in the training sessions. For example: giving us tips on research tools, topics to work on with the Peer Healers, when to remind Peer Healers about due dates, when and where to meet them, and how to set boundaries and have a work-life balance."

- Peer Mentor

## CHP in a broader ecosystem

While Peer Healers, CHP staff, and young people in communities shared numerous ways in which CHP has led to positive changes in their lives, they also echoed a common and critical theme: that **CHP operates amongst systems that don't always value lived experiences and peer support**. Healers and staff emphasized how emotionally and mentally challenging peer and community-based work can be and the increasing demand for mental health supports and healing in communities (compounded by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic). They spoke of grappling with burnout, turnover, and access to sustainable, meaningful employment opportunities in the social services sector. As we move forward, the CHP team acknowledges the importance of recognizing and advocating for peer support and new ways of thinking community-driven mental health services – both within and far beyond the CHP community that has formed.

## Looking ahead

As CHP moves into its fourth year, the program team will focus on the following five key areas:

- **The sustainability of CHP beyond the end of Public Safety Canada funding, so that the program can continue to reach youth across Toronto**
- **Producing a documentary (led by a CHP alumni) to enable the CHP story to be told to a broad audience**
- **Engaging a CHP advisory committee to help shape the program and its future**
- **Continuing to engage CHP alumni through retreats and other activities**
- **Ongoing delivery of the program, including recruiting Peer Healers, Peer Mentors, and Quadrant Coordinators, delivering of Peer Support Training, and delivering of community workshops**

## Connect with the Community Healing Project team!

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# Blueprint

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Blueprint was founded on the simple idea that evidence is a powerful tool for change. We work with policymakers and practitioners to create and use evidence to solve complex policy and program challenges. Our vision is a social policy ecosystem where evidence is used to improve lives, build better systems and policies and drive social change. Our team brings together a multidisciplinary group of professionals with diverse capabilities in policy research, data analysis, design, evaluation, implementation and knowledge mobilization.