



# **Community Healing Project : Final evaluation report**



# Community Healing Project

## Final evaluation report

December 2023

## Blueprint



Funded by the  
Government  
of Canada





# Introducing the Community Healing Project

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## **The Community Healing Project (CHP)**

CHP is a program that supports youth impacted by community violence in neighbourhoods across Toronto through mental health literacy and peer support.

Youth 'Peer Healers' participate in Peer Support Training and share what they learn with other youth in their own communities by designing and delivering workshops.

CHP alumni can apply to CHP staff positions, including Peer Mentor, Senior Peer Mentor and Quadrant Coordinator, to provide mentorship to Peer Healers and assist with workshops. This laddering approach creates a unique opportunity for youth to pursue both a personal and professional development path.

CHP is delivered by the City of Toronto in partnership with Stella's Place, 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. The CHP evaluation was led by Blueprint ADE.

## **The origins of CHP**

CHP was created to provide supports to young people in Toronto who were impacted by community violence exposure and experiencing symptoms of PTSD. CHP also responded to a gap in mental health services in Toronto and Canada— young people from racialized and lower income communities impacted by violence did not see mental health services as being inclusive of their experiences or the challenges they were facing, staffed by people they could relate to, culturally relevant or welcoming of them or their communities.



## **What is unique about CHP?**

### **PEER-BASED**

Based on the concept that a person's life challenges uniquely position them to support the healing of others, and that individuals are more likely to be receptive of support from someone with shared lived experience.

### **HEALING-CENTRED**

Provides honoraria and wraparound supports to allow participants to address their needs, participate in training and engage in a healing journey.

### **CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE AND RESPONSIVE**

Designed for young people from racialized, under-resourced communities, embeds culturally appropriate education and programmatic approaches and adapts to meet emerging needs.

### **BY COMMUNITY, FOR COMMUNITY**

Engages young people from specific communities and trains them to support other young people from their own communities, in partnership with local agencies, thereby investing in skills and supports within each community.

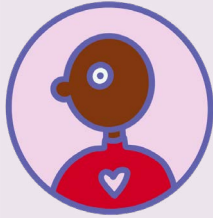
### **LADDERING APPROACH**

Provides multiple opportunities for participants to build on what they learn and access paid employment.

**“One of the reasons I became involved in mental health is I didn’t see my story represented. [...] Me being a kid at 16 years old, therapy was strongly encouraged, but for me it didn’t make sense because what I was dealing with was racism, identity, how do I reconcile with the fact that I’m always in danger by virtue of my skin colour.”**

***- CHP staff***

## CHP participants and partners



### PEER HEALERS

Youth impacted by community violence exposure recruited to join a CHP cohort.



### YOUTH WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

Youth who attend the workshops delivered by Peer Healers.



### PEER MENTORS

Alumni hired by Stella's Place to support Peer Healers in training and workshop delivery.



### CITY OF TORONTO

Supports all partners to deliver CHP.



### QUADRANT COORDINATORS

Hired by Quadrant Agencies to coordinate and do outreach for community workshops (originally this role was combined with the Peer Mentor role and called 'Youth Peer Mentor Coordinator' or YPMC).



### QUADRANT AGENCIES

Agencies in four quadrants of Toronto that each supervise a Coordinator and support community engagement and workshop delivery.



### STELLA'S PLACE

Designs and delivers Peer Support Training Program to Peer Healers and leads overall management of CHP.

## The CHP program model

### **PEER SUPPORT TRAINING PROGRAM**

*12 WEEKS*

Stella's Place delivers Peer Support Training to Peer Healers (with support from Peer Mentors).

### **GRADUATION AND WORKSHOP PLANNING**

Peer Healers develop their community workshops with guidance from Stella's Place, Peer Mentors, and Quadrant Coordinators.

### **COMMUNITY WORKSHOP DELIVERY**

*12 WEEKS*

Quadrant Coordinators coordinate workshops in each community. Peer Healers deliver workshops to youth participants, with support from Peer Mentors. Peer Healers join a bi-weekly 'community of practice'.

### **OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADVANCEMENT**

Peer Healers may apply for a Peer Mentor or Quadrant Coordinator position to support the program in the next year or apply to Community PEERS.

### **COMMUNITY PEERS**

Led by the City of Toronto, Community PEERS is a network of CHP alumni who can access professional development training, work placements, and paid 'service requests' from community members and organizations for services including offering peer support, facilitating community debriefs or workshops, and providing training to frontline staff.







# CHP across the City of Toronto

## By the numbers

250

Peer Healers  
engaged

33

Unique communities  
reached (10 per cohort)

9,717

Youth Workshop  
participants engaged  
(approximately)



## CHP's evolution 2019 – 2023

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### Jan – Dec 2019

- ⦿ 53 Peer Healers are trained through two cohorts and deliver workshops in 10 communities
- ⦿ 5 Youth Peer Mentor Coordinators (YPMCs) are hired and support the program as staff

### Jan – Dec 2020

- ⦿ 54 Peer Healers are trained through two cohorts and deliver workshops in 10 communities, including one cohort specifically for youth frontline workers
- ⦿ YPMC role is split in two – 4 Peer Mentors are hired by Stella's Place to support Peer Healers, and 4 Quadrant Coordinators are hired, one by each Quadrant Agency to coordinate workshop delivery
- ⦿ A Case Manager is hired to support Peer Healers
- ⦿ An additional workshop series is offered for parents and caregivers
- ⦿ Onset of COVID-19 – Cohort 2 moves to virtual delivery and facilitates workshops through Zoom and Instagram

## **Jan – Dec 2021**

- ⦿ 53 Peer Healers are trained through two cohorts and deliver workshops in 10 communities
- ⦿ 4 Peer Mentors and 4 Quadrant Coordinators support the program, and through a newly created position, 1 Senior Peer Mentor position supports the team of Peer Mentors
- ⦿ Programming continues to be delivered virtually, with some in-person beginning to take place towards the end of the year
- ⦿ CHP holds an Alumni Summit

## **Jan 2022**

## **Feb 2023**

- ⦿ 51 Peer Healers are trained through two cohorts and deliver workshops in 10 communities
- ⦿ 4 Peer Mentors, 4 Quadrant Coordinators, and 1 Senior Peer Mentor support the program
- ⦿ The program returns to in-person
- ⦿ One alumni creates a CHP documentary, which is shown in a series of screenings
- ⦿ CHP holds an Alumni Retreat

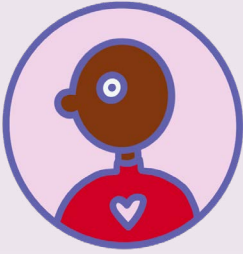
## **Jan – Dec 2023**

- ⦿ 39 Peer Healers are trained through two cohorts and deliver workshops in 10 communities
- ⦿ 4 Peer Mentors, 4 Quadrant Coordinators, and 1 Senior Peer Mentor support the program
- ⦿ CHP holds final alumni and staff events









## About Peer Healers

### Peer Healer eligibility

CHP engaged Peer Healers who are 16-29 years old, who live in and are connected to one of the identified communities that are facing the highest relative rates of violence, and who have lived experience of community violence.

CHP staff also looked for applicants who have passion or motivation to help others, understand the connection between community violence and mental health, have commitment to community, and show some skills in organization, ability to take initiative, interpersonal comfort and active listening.

### What Peer Healers are facing

We heard through our interviews that some Peer Healers had previously or were presently experiencing incarceration, human trafficking, substance use challenges, high school incompleteness, death of close relative or friend, income insecurity and/or challenges balancing supporting children with other school or work commitments. Our baseline survey found that:

- Approximately 25% said their financial situation makes it hard to find and keep a job
- Approximately 20% of Peer Healers had a current living arrangement that is unstable, unsafe, and/or stressful
- 42-51% of respondents had symptoms of anxiety, depression, and/or trauma

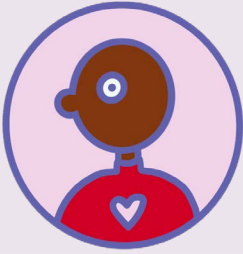
### CHP Peer Healers

**Most (88%) Peer Healers were in their 20s**, with a few 16-19-year-olds and 30+ year-olds also participating.

**A majority (63%) of Peer Healers were male**, with 34% identifying as female and 3% as genderqueer/gender non-conforming.

**The majority (82%) of Peer Healers were born in Canada**, with 17% sharing that they were born elsewhere.

**The majority (69%) of Peer Healers identified as Black**. 11% identified as South Asian or Indo-Caribbean and 9% identified as mixed race or more than one race. A few Peer Healers identified as Arab, Middle Eastern or West Asian, East Asian, Filipino, Hispanic or Latin American and White European.



## The support to fully participate

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CHP was designed to provide a range of supports that help peer healers address their needs and fully participate in training.

Supports included:

- An honorarium for their time spent in training and delivering workshops
- Access to a case manager and counselling, free of charge and without waitlists
- Food provided during training
- Access to childcare
- Groceries support during COVID
- Additional life stabilization supports provided by the CHP Case Manager (e.g., hygiene products, work items, clothing)

“There are different services and things that we can also access: [...] counsellors and social workers, or job help and stuff like that. Like it’s 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.”

*–Alumni*

“Aside from counselling support, I have been able to seek housing and family support. 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.”

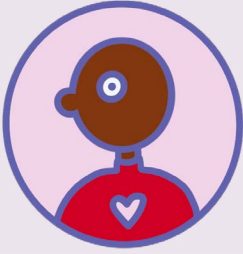
*–Peer Mentor, 2021*

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

*–Alumni*

CHP’s case manager shared that he helped participants build confidence, develop life skills, build relationships, create a resume and cover letter to apply for jobs, access housing and financial supports and help them see that they are more than their trauma.





## Building a community of healers

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### Developing a strong sense of community

In CHP, peer healers met others with similar experiences as them and built a strong community—this was affirming and supported healing.

“It was like meeting my tribe, it was like meeting my actual real family people who actually understood it could see me for me and hear my story, and we could actually connect in so many ways.”

—Alumni

CHP “built a lot of connections, it helped us all go on to do what we were doing at the time. You know, we’re not alone. The connections were spectacular.”

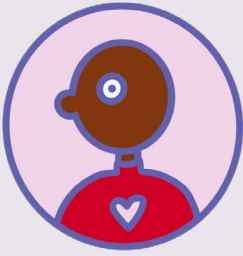
—Peer Mentor, 2021

### Connecting across neighbourhoods

CHP brought together peer healers from different neighbourhoods. For some, this was shocking because in another context it would mean violence. But by spending time together, peer healers found they had similarities, which dispelled their assumptions about other neighbourhoods.

“We’re so in our community, we are used to seeing gangs. And people don’t cross turfs. It was nice to see that people from different communities were able to come together and still be humble and peaceful in the same environment...just having individuals from each environment to even just go back home [and say], ‘Oh well, a couple of people from this this area are not so bad.’ It’s a way [to] spread the word or knowledge or peace.”

—Alumni



# A space within the mental health field

## Finding representation in the mental health space

Some peer healers shared that in other mental health training spaces they were often the only racialized individual, and limited content reflected their experience, which was discouraging and isolating. CHP filled this gap.

“I was in school for [mental health] before I joined CHP, but I was close to dropping out of school because [...] I didn’t see a lot of people that looked like me, so I also didn’t see the point. I was like, what am I doing here? This place is not for me. [CHP] just taught me that mental health doesn’t have to look one way.”

–Alumni

“A lot of courses [I’m doing now] like psychotherapy downtown are primarily very, very white and I’m one of the only two People of Colour in that class. [...] There are so many people in the communities that we have to help that are Black and brown, so it goes to show like the work that we’re doing, it really is meaningful because even though I’m one of two, my work is going to be helping hundreds.”

–Alumni

## Countering mental health stigma

CHP allowed participants to see that caring for mental health is for everyone. It addressed mental health stigma, fostered comfort in speaking about mental health, and opened the door to supports for those who previously would never have considered it.

“When people hear ‘mental health’ we always think of people wrapped up in white sheets and in a room, especially when you grow up Caribbean or African. [When I first heard about CHP] I said ‘No, I’m not doing that, I don’t want to work with ‘mad’ people.’”

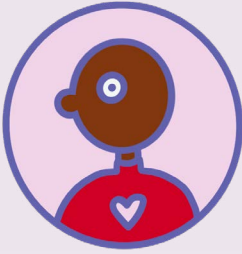
–Alumni

“None of my homies try to talk about mental health. Like, it’s a joke.”

–Alumni

“[There’s] a huge stigma around mental health. When we hear the word ‘mental health’ or think about therapy, we immediately consider the stigma. We think of a white room with a little couch, and now you have to tell somebody about all your problems and this is terrifying. [CHP] helps [show] what contributes to mental health issues is usually normal day-to-day things and issues that people face in their lives.”

–Alumni



## Advancing along a healing journey

### Learning mental health language and coping skills

Training allowed peer healers to put language to their experiences and learn skills to help process and cope with challenges they were facing.

“When I was going into CHP, I had my own traumas I never really got to address. [... CHP] allowed me to find ways to soothe myself when feeling triggered, while realizing that just as much as we need to care for others, we need to care for ourselves. It allowed me to heal through learning such skills.”

–Alumni

“[Healers were] really grappling with things they don’t think about often. Participants were using language or taking on some of the ideas from the program but also reflecting on things about themselves that make them who they are. It shows a clear mark of emotional growth, seeing them grow, sitting with heavy emotions.”

–CHP staff

### Advancing along a personal healing journey

Many peer healers shared that the knowledge, skills and community they gained led to improved relationships, personal growth and healing.

“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.”

–Alumni

“My experience with CHP probably changed my relationship with people around me. I [learned to] be more understanding and that I have an impact on the people around me, like taking the skills such as speaking and understanding what others are going through.”

–Alumni

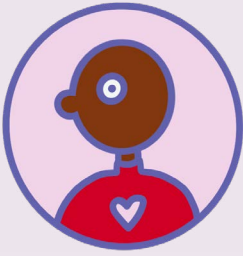
Before CHP “I would just avoid my own mental health. [CHP] made me figure out who I wanted to become and that’s when I started to become more interested in mental health. And that’s when I started to better myself with communicating my own problems and figuring out my triggers and figuring out what I can do to help myself with that.”

–Alumni

“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.”

–Alumni





## Supporting their peers through community workshops

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### A fulfilling experience to help others like themselves

Many peer healers shared that delivering workshops was fulfilling, demonstrating that their struggles could also be their strengths.

“I tell the youth, anything you tell me I won’t be shocked because I’ve heard it all. Creating that comfort for youth to share their experiences because we’re taught in projects or the ‘hood that, if you’ve got a problem, keep it to yourself or go handle it. [...] We don’t talk about mental health, a lot of times that’s brushed under the rug.”

–Alumni

“I’m always going to resonate with the youth that we serve because at one point I understood their concerns. For me, my way of coping through tough topics was being very upfront and honest [and] saying, ‘yeah, this is something that I’m still working on. [...] I was born and raised [here], I’m still going through this’.”

–Alumni

“[CHP] is very effective because it [includes] workshops and facilitation that are led by people, not [in the mental health] profession but through lived experience first and foremost, [who know] what they’ve been through and [have] willingness to work amongst other people who look like them, who have been through similar issues.”

–Alumni

### Building new skills

Delivering workshops meant being faced with unexpected situations, ages, personalities and crises, and needing to adapt on the spot. It allowed peer healers to gain skills and confidence facilitating and taught them how to be open, adapt to circumstances that arise and adjust accordingly.

“When we’re facilitating workshops, you kind of have to be a lot more flexible and open. [...] I think the best thing I learned was that you have to be kind of free flowing and flexible, and understand that, you know, not everything’s going to go according to plan.”

–Alumni

## Facing new challenges

Moving from training to workshop delivery meant expectations changed from taking time to learn and work on self improvement to having to be accountable to others, delivering a program with details and timelines and supporting others who may be significant challenges. For some peer healers, this was hard, and led to some not showing up to workshops and conflict between co-facilitators.

“[When workshops start] that’s where a disconnect happens—they forget about themselves in that process.”

—CHP case manager

“When [Peer Healers] don’t show up, there was weeks where we kind of had to just chill or had to, like, make something up on the fly.”

—Peer Mentor

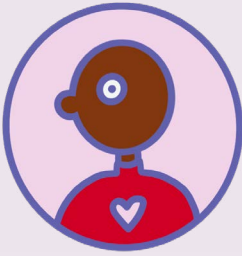
Situations would sometimes arise that were beyond what peer healers were able to support, such as a young person disclosing a serious issue or a crisis situation.

“You get trained in dealing with how to manage stress or manage coping and all that great stuff, but you don’t get the tools to deal with seeing somebody be shot in front of you or dealing with walking into a community that literally was just taped and had blood splatter on the floor. You don’t get trained per say about how to deal with kids who are coming to you with direct concerns because you don’t know necessarily how to deal with it professionally and how to deal with it personally.”

—Alumni

“We always talk about being kind to ourselves while also being kind to the communities that we serve and stuff, but there’s always a thin line between taking care of yourself and knowing what more you can do for your own community.”

—Alumni



## Developing work-related skills, experience, and confidence

### Professional skills, experience and confidence

Peer healers shared that CHP led them to gain work-related skills and experience.

“Personally, CHP has helped me to build on my facilitation skills and helped build my resume. I am confident in the skills and experiences to facilitate any conversations.”

–Alumni

“The program helped me understand how to communicate with people having mental health issues.”

–Alumni

“Having the opportunity to be in a leadership position and support other groups of people has been a game-changer for me to gain management and supervisory skills that I can leverage in other roles.”

–Alumni

“At the beginning I didn’t like speaking at all. So [CHP] got me comfortable in speaking, talking in workshops with youth and it prepared me to be comfortable and speaking in front of anybody now. So like looking back, it actually helped me with different skills like that.”

–Alumni

It provided inspiration, confidence and awareness of different career paths.

“Meeting different people and people having connections to different careers and experiences, shaped my mind into thinking broadly about what my career paths are.”

–Alumni

“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.”

–YPMC 2019

“Social work wasn’t even on my radar at first. Someone heard me facilitating and said ‘Yo we need your voice, we don’t have a lot of Black social workers, and we need more of us to do this work.’ The health care system, the mental health resources, they just aren’t built for us. I have a client I’m working with right now who is telling me ‘You can’t leave me. You get it, I don’t have to explain.’ I think that this is my calling, my purpose.”

–Alumni

One Quadrant agency shared that six of eight recent hires were CHP alumni.



## Skill development and employment as reported in surveys

### COMPARED TO BEFORE TRAINING:

- ⦿ 72% of responses indicated improved communication skills as a result of completing the training
- ⦿ 81% of the responses indicated overall more confident resolving conflict after training
- ⦿ 91% of responses indicated an increase in confidence with navigating a mental health challenge (whether their own or of a peer) as a result of completing the training

### THREE MONTHS AFTER FINISHING CHP:

- ⦿ 35% of respondents reported that they were working in a job related to youth, community work, or peer support in the social services sector, compared to 21% who said they were at baseline
- ⦿ 22% of respondents said they were working on their business, initiative, or social enterprise related to peer support or in the social services sector, compared to 7% who said they were at baseline

**“CHP gave opportunity to remember that we are people who have gone through the struggles of life. But we have a voice and we have experiences that can bring so much to our further life and to others. And so that was really inspiring for me.”**

***– Peer Healer Alumni***

**“Don’t shun the world, shun worldliness  
and what we fear most, loneliness,  
if everything got taken away, just that know  
you will never be less.”**

**- Ayoub Farah**



## About youth workshop participants

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### Who are CHP youth workshop participants

- Approximately 9,717 participants were reached.
- The largest group (41%) of workshop participants were 15 or younger, with several 16-to-19-year-olds (21%) and 20-24-year-olds (24%). A few 25-29-year-olds (12%) and 30+ year-olds (3%) also participated.
- Youth workshop participants were almost evenly split between female (48%) and male (45%), with 3% identifying as gender non-binary and 3% identifying as trans female.
- The largest number of youth workshop participants (43%) identified as Black, with 34% identifying as South Asian or Indo-Caribbean (34%). Some identified as Arab, Middle Eastern or West Asian, East Asian, First Nations, Inuit or Métis, Southeast Asian, White or more than one/mixed race.

### Satisfaction

- 95% of youth workshop participants shared that they were satisfied with their experience in the workshops.
- 41% shared that they had already recommended the workshops to someone and 54% shared that they were likely to.
- Across all years, youth workshop participants had minimal recommendations for improvement, with a few respondents suggesting more activities, more sessions and longer sessions and a few recommending more engagement or participation.



## A safe space to connect, share and find support

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### Engagement and belonging

CHP workshops provided participants with a safe space and opportunity to engage with people who understand their experiences, which allowed them to engage, begin to share and discover common experiences.

Dear future me, “You learned that community is not just a place, but a feeling of belonging and connection and friendship. I learned that by reaching out and building relationships with others, I can create a sense of community wherever I go.”

*–Youth workshop participant*

“It gives you a safe space to talk about your feelings. [Allowing] kids in areas that don’t have a lot a chance to just come to a certain space where you know they’re given an opportunity to talk about mental health, talk about their emotions, which, I guarantee you they don’t do a school or do at home.”

*–Peer Mentor*

### Supports and services

Through CHP workshops, peer healers were able to provide tangible support to youth and their families.

“We helped families with groceries, clothing, just gave them a break, families can drop off their kids and know they are safe.”

*–CHP staff*

“This is still the best project I’ve ever come across my life, you know? For sure 100% I’m not going to deny that. We made some actual relationships with a lot of kids and a lot of families that a lot of programs didn’t.”

*–Peer Mentor*

“There was a youth that was taken out of his home...[He came to a community workshop and] the Healers made sure he was okay in terms of finding him a place to stay, tokens, food, but also sharing where other projects were happening and giving him something to do, a place to go.”

*–Quadrant Agency staff*





## Gaining skills for healing and leadership

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### Mental health literacy and coping skills gains

Youth workshop participants shared that they learned more about the importance of mental health and mental health coping skills.

I learned “Strategies to deal with stress during the COVID-19 pandemic.”

–Youth workshop participant

I learned “The importance of speaking to others when you need help.”

–Youth workshop participant

“Now that I have completed this workshop I feel like I could control my emotions better. [...] I feel like this program is amazing and I feel like everyone should take this program.”

–Youth workshop participant

I learned “how to cope with grief in a positive way and how important it is to take care of your mental health.”

–Youth workshop participant

Dear future me, “You learned the importance of empathy and understanding different perspectives. Everyone goes through different things so I would tell my future self to always try to see things from other people’s point of view and to treat others with kindness and respect.”

–Youth workshop participant

## Leadership, healing, re-engagement

Some participants shared that the workshops were transformative for them.

“Through CHP, I’ve changed a lot. Through COVID I wasn’t in a good place, I need[ed] motivation more in my everyday life. I’m really grateful. Learning about death and grief hit me hard, telling me self-care and coping is important. I feel like I will be a better person going forward because I didn’t care about my mental health before.”

*–Youth workshop participant*

Some participants also went on to use what they learned to be leaders in their community and re-engaged with CHP.

“I’m definitely seeing a change within participants and even some of the things they’re doing within community to give back. Even being mentors to other youth in the community because they participated in the project. I had someone do a girls self-esteem workshop after participating in CHP.”

*–Quadrant Agency staff*

“I’ve seen young people who have come in as a participant, and then become Healers, and now PEERS, and even Coordinators. I’ve seen participants seeing the value of the project and wanting to stay with it.”

*–Quadrant Agency staff*

# Why it's important to have a program like CHP

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We asked CHP participants and staff why they think it is important to have a program like CHP. Here's what they shared.

## **CHP responded to the limited availability of opportunities, programs and spaces for racialized individuals from lower income, under-resourced and higher violence communities.**

It's literally the only program I've ever heard of that helps Black and marginalized young people learn about mental health. And it gives us jobs and it gives us trainings, and it certifies us. It celebrates us by having the graduation. It gives us an opportunity in a world where there's barely opportunities for us. And it's something that's very important in our community."

*—Peer Mentor*

## **CHP demonstrated that there is an important link between mental health and impact of community violence.**

Many Peer Healers shared that CHP helped them understand what they were experiencing, apply the skills they learned and make important changes in their lives towards better relationships, employment and healing.

"[In CHP] you're learning how to use your living experience for something good instead of just having all that anger and resentment going on in the world and spreading that. You're using all of that pain and you're using it to try your best to be the change and help the world change so that the world is a little bit of a better place."

*—Peer Mentor*

## **CHP enabled young people to see—and use—their struggles as their strengths and open doors to economic opportunities.**

"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."

*—Youth Peer Mentor Coordinator (YPMC)*

## **CHP filled a gap in the mental health sector.**

Even though there are major mental health needs in communities that are underserved, low income and experience high rates of community violence, very few mental health practitioners have lived experience of being from or having close ties to these communities.

“Growing up in the inner city and going to school for mental health, living and having these conversations at home are two separate things. I’d be at school and be talking about mental health, counseling, and all these things which is great but then I’d go home and be dealing with things like friends dying... It was almost like code-switch. CHP put them together for me... When you see all these Black and brown people in these spaces, it’s just reinforcing, it motivates you to keep going.”

–Alumni

## **CHP’s peer-based, trauma-informed approach was considered unique, responsive and forward-thinking in the youth programming space.**

“It’s one of the most worthwhile programs, forward thinking when it comes to the peer-to-peer approach. Having a program that is geared to dealing with issues of violence that isn’t pathologizing youth but understanding their experiences at a young age is important.”

–CHP staff





**“Throughout the Community Healing Project, I have been exposed to a wealth of knowledge and understanding about mental health, and this learning journey has undeniably had a profound impact on my life. Prior to this experience, I had a limited understanding of the challenges individuals with mental health issues face, and the importance of community support in their healing process. However, as I delved deeper into this topic, I have grown more compassionate, empathetic, and educated about mental health, leading to a transformative change in my perspective and actions.**

**One of the fundamental ways this project has changed my life is by shattering the stigmas surrounding mental health. I have realized that mental illness is not a personal weakness or failure but a human experience that can affect anyone, regardless of age, gender, background, or socioeconomic status. Understanding this has allowed me to abandon the judgment and misconceptions I once held, and replace them with empathy and a desire to advocate for those living with mental health conditions. I have come to appreciate the importance of creating safe spaces where individuals can openly discuss their struggles without fear of stigma, and have actively sought to be a supportive presence in the lives of those around me.**

**Finally, this process of learning about mental health in the community healing project has fostered personal growth and self-reflection. I have become more attuned to my own mental well-being, recognizing the importance of self-care and seeking support when needed. Understanding the complex nature of mental health has enabled me to break down stereotypes within myself, opening up conversations about my own struggles and creating an environment where vulnerability is welcomed.**

**In conclusion, the Community Healing Project has, without a doubt, changed my life. It has transformed my perspective on mental health, shattered stigmas, and ignited a passion within me to promote understanding and support for those living with mental health conditions. Through this journey, I have gained empathy, knowledge, and a newfound sense of purpose to be an advocate and ally in the mental health community.”**

***- Khalil Dorival***

# Take-aways:

## What other youth healing programs can learn from CHP

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Over the past 5 years, delivering and evaluating CHP has led to a stronger understanding of how to effectively support healing among youth impacted by community violence. The insights generated from CHP present an opportunity for program designers, managers and evaluators of similar programs to draw on learnings, strengthen their approaches and more effectively support young people to heal.

### Program design

A program's ability to facilitate deep engagement with content, among participants, and with leaders is an important enabler of success, and a culturally relevant approach is key to enabling deep engagement. This could include engaging staff with shared lived experience as participants, providing culturally appropriate food, using culturally responsive education and engagement methods and facilitating conversations about culture and identity.

The peer model works well to support engagement and healing, especially for those who have not been reached by other programs or institutions, but the right supports must be in place for it to work well. Because of their shared lived experience, peers should have access to supports to manage the risk of becoming re-traumatized.

Providing employment opportunities for program graduates helps open up career paths for those who may not have traditional credentials such as post-secondary education.

Providing honoraria is key to attracting the target population to the program; wraparound supports are key to retaining them. Many individuals from equity deserving groups are not able to participate in an unpaid opportunity. Many also face significant life challenges, and providing food, transportation, case management and childcare support can go a long way in supporting their ability to participate fully.



## **Program management**

The sustainability of community-based programs relies on sufficient investment in program staff. Staff burnout and turnover can compromise the ability of a program to achieve its goals.

## **Measuring success**

Healing takes time. Mental health symptom improvement are unlikely to be seen after 12 weeks of training; openness to engaging with mental health, knowledge of coping skills and coping skill application are more appropriate ways of measuring improvement from a program of this level of intensity, duration and target population.



## CHP's next chapter

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As CHP's funding from the Government of Canada's National Crime Prevention Strategy comes to an end in December 2023, the future of the program is unclear. Regardless of what its next chapter looks like, CHP has left a remarkable legacy through its alumni network who are sharing their views on the needs of their neighbourhood on CBC Radio, creating and screening documentaries, supporting their communities by creating and managing grassroots groups, having their poetry displayed on the TTC, caring for their families and developing thriving relationships, pursuing various forms of learning, training, or education, continuing their healing journeys, continuing to offer peer support services to Toronto communities through the Community PEERS program and many other pursuits.

## Thank you!

Thank you to all those who participated in the CHP evaluation including Peer Healers, youth workshop participants, YPMCs, Peer Mentors and Quadrant Coordinators, and staff from the City of Toronto, Stella's Place, and Quadrant Agencies. The evaluation could not have been done with your support and collaboration. Thank you to two CHP alumni—Neima Hussein and Kadiatu Barrie—who led focus groups for their peers and worked with Blueprint to analyze findings and create this report. Their work, input and guidance was invaluable! And thank you to those who helped develop this report: Ayoub Farah whose photos are included, Khalil Dorival and Ayoub Farah who contributed the reflection and poem, and Moe Pramanick, the report designer.

## Connect with the CHP team

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## ABOUT THE EVALUATION

Blueprint was engaged in 2018 to lead the five-year evaluation of the Community Healing Project. We took a collaborative approach, working with program staff to design the evaluation and data collection tools, review findings and adapt program components and evaluation activities based on learnings. We used mixed methods, including:

- ⦿ Longitudinal analysis of Peer Healer surveys done at four points per cohort (baseline, end of training, end of workshops, 3-months post program) for years 2, 3 and 4 (41 Peer Healer responses included in longitudinal analysis)
- ⦿ A survey and evaluation activity (led by Peer Healers) with youth workshop participants after each workshop series (296 youth engaged)
- ⦿ Interviews and focus groups with Peer Healers in years 1 and 2, alumni-led focus groups for all CHP alumni in year 5 (34 Peer Healers engaged)
- ⦿ Interviews and focus groups with Peer Mentors and Quadrant Coordinators in all years (18 Peer Mentors (and YPMCs), 10 Quadrant Coordinators engaged)
- ⦿ Interviews with City of Toronto, Stella's Place and Quadrant Agency staff in years 1 and 5 (10 staff engaged)

## ABOUT BLUEPRINT

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.

