



Youth Engagement

Wellington-Guelph Integrated Youth Services Network Evaluation Report: A Summary

In 2021, **The Grove** in Wellington County-Guelph formally became one of 14 Youth Wellness Hub Ontario (YWHO) sites located across the province. Three years earlier, a group of community organizations had formed an Integrated Youth Services Network (IYSN) to better meet the needs of local young people. In 2020, the IYSN commissioned Homewood Research Institute to conduct a [developmental evaluation](#) of the project, providing key insights into the implementation process. Part of a series of knowledge products summarizing the lessons learned through the evaluation, this document outlines the experiences of those involved in the IYSN's youth and family engagement efforts. It's intended to serve as a guide to support the planning of a YWHO site.

Advice for new hubs:

Engage youth throughout the process, in all phases of brainstorming and operations

"Having youth even sit in on meetings with contractors or developers, actual people who are putting the centre together ... that would be taking it one step further."

Initial Engagement and Participation

Many youth first became involved with the IYSN after hearing about it through a network partner like the University of Guelph, Rotary Club of Guelph, and CMHA Youth Talk. Other channels that led youth to the hub included family members and online postings for volunteers.

Responsibilities for those participating in the Youth and Family Engagement Working Groups include monthly meetings to engage in brainstorming and provide feedback on youth-friendly spaces and what services are needed. Some youth helped develop training programs for Youth Ambassadors, created inventories of existing programs currently offered at other hubs, or acted as youth representatives elsewhere within the IYSN.

Advice for new hubs:

Ensure youth and families are representative of the communities served

"Guelph is a pretty white community ... having things specific to different cultures ... there are definitely challenges in that regard. Becoming more aware is something that I want to see from the community and those services. Being inclusive."

Personal Motivation for Involvement

Youth were motivated to provide a youth perspective to help change things for the better and ensure the IYSN was accessible and inclusive. For those interested in mental health and wellness, participating in the Youth Engagement Working Group was also an opportunity to get experience in the sector.

Participants became involved out of a passion for youth mental health, either through firsthand experience accessing services or supporting others to do so, and a desire to build connection with others who share this goal. In the context of COVID-19, some participants were isolated and appreciated the opportunity to access a social outlet.

Members of the Family Engagement Working Group were invested in ensuring the hub was providing the necessary supports for family members of youth accessing services. In particular, they wanted to help ensure services were available to accommodate families who struggle to communicate with each other in adaptive ways.

"I've been searching for and had been searching for areas ... to receive help ... to learn how to grow together, to communicate, to be able to listen ... Every avenue I went to when [my kids] were younger was so difficult. So, it's definitely something our community needs."

Participating in Working Groups

With everything online during the pandemic, creating engaging meeting formats can be challenging. The Youth Engagement Working Group meetings used tools like Mentimeter and Kahoot to create interactive experiences and maintain a more relaxed, conversational atmosphere.

Topics of Discussion:

Agenda items focused on how to keep the hubs accessible, what recreational activities should be offered (e.g., yoga, nature hikes, cooking sessions, financial workshops), how the space should be designed (e.g., furniture, lighting, designated areas for playing games, studying, tutoring etc.), required equipment (e.g., stable Wi-Fi, kitchen, board games, video games, cooking supplies), and the creation of resources (e.g. peer training manual and allyship guide).

"There were instances where we've heard about the locations of the hubs and instantly me and a few other youth were like, 'that might not be super accessible.'"

Family Engagement Working Group meetings focused on addressing equity issues within service provision, with attention to accessibility challenges and stigma within small communities. Family members organized a survey to better understand the needs of community, tailoring service delivery according to what local families wanted.

Advice for new hubs:

Provide incentives like food, gift cards, volunteer hours

It helps recruit new members and keeps them engaged by creating the sense that their time and input is valued.

Advice for new hubs:

Identify and work with community champions

Find ways to connect with the mental health advocates and champions who already exist in the community, like teachers, to raise awareness of the hub and the Youth/Family Engagement Working Groups.

Advice for new hubs:

Create bigger presence on social media (i.e., Instagram, Tik Tok) for youth outreach

"It's really important that you find youth where they are and not assume that they will find you."

"Instagram would be your top place to go for things like that. Or even creating a TikTok page to show the hubs and stuff like that. You know, that's where social media is going now."



Satisfaction with Opportunities for Input

When surveyed, youth participants selected 4.45/5 on average, meaning they were “very satisfied” to “extremely satisfied” with the level of input they were able to provide. Specifically, youth were unanimous in feeling that they were heard and valued for their unique opinions and perspectives. Some were unsure about whether their input had contributed to concrete changes.

“The facilitators are very engaged ... anyone can be like ‘Yeah, that’s a great idea,’ you know, and then not do nothing with it. I’ve seen it happen and it’s very frustrating. But I’ve seen my feedback [to the IYSN] implemented and that’s like THE KEY thing in feeling valued.”

“This [Youth Engagement] Working Group does a great job of hearing us ... doing different strategies of how to ask the different questions and keeping it anonymous.”

“It has really been an amazing experience. I feel like I have made a difference, as corny as that sounds. They have been so great. They have really taken what we’ve said into consideration.”



Advice for new hubs:

Continue facilitating engaging and effective meetings with youth

Set the right tone to make youth feel comfortable. Keep groups small, listen well, help people engage with each other, and set up opportunities for youth to provide anonymous feedback.

Youth Confidence in Representation

When asked whether they felt the group was representative of the hub’s potential service users, youth participants identified a need for more diversity of experiences, backgrounds, and ages. They acknowledged that younger youth and those with more mental health challenges might find it harder to participate in meetings.

“I just don’t know if it’s as representative of the Guelph-Wellington kind of community... maybe like newcomers in the working group, different cultures, BIPOC community members... more younger youth.”

“When I go to the meetings, I see a lot more older youth. So, I feel like it’s targeted more towards them... I am satisfied, but like, it’s not like I have much to say.”

“I’m imagining the youth that really need the support of IYSN probably don’t have the mental space to attend all these meetings, or have a schedule as organized as the frequent attendees.”

Comparatively, family members were “extremely confident” about the group’s representativeness, pointing out the presence of parents with children of a variety of ages.

Advice for new hubs:

Utilize youth ambassadors to get the word out, do outreach activities at local schools and involve school boards

“Our youth representation is a lot older, or at least the people that I was working with. It was like 17 and up. To be able to connect with those high school, middle school range... I think it’s really important to connect with the school boards.”

“The only one I could think of would be to try and recruit from schools... maybe even just making sure there’s flyers for the IYSN up in guidance counsellor offices.”

Lu, S., Varatharajan, T., Costello, J., & Rush, B. (2021). *Integrated Youth Services Network: Developmental evaluation final report*. Homewood Research Institute. https://hriresearch.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/2021/11/The-Grove-Evaluation-Final-Report_-1.pdf

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