



YOUTH  
SERVICES  
SYSTEM  
REVIEW

EXAMEN DU  
SYSTÈME DES  
SERVICES À LA  
JEUNESSE

## Executive Summary

The Youth Services System Review (YSSR) is a review of the current continuum of Ontario services addressing substance use that are available to youth (age 12-24). The YSSR project was funded under Health Canada's Drug Treatment Funding Program (DTFP). The project aims to describe the landscape of service available to youth and identify gaps and opportunities for collaboration to enhance services and build a system to better meet the needs of youth. Given the current interest by government and other system stakeholders in responding to unmet youth needs, the information gathered from multiple perspectives, and the resulting recommendations, have the potential to inform long term system change to better meet the needs of youth.

### Background

Substance use is very common among Ontario youth, with rates increasing through secondary school and into emerging adulthood. Although experimenting with substances is common for youth, problematic substance use is associated with difficulties in a number of domains. Youth substance use concerns are often complicated by co-occurring mental health concerns; concurrent mental health and substance use concerns are associated with increased risk for particularly severe outcomes.

A range of Ontario services address youths' substance use concerns including services funded by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care, Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, and other funding sources. Historically, youth substance use treatment services were modeled on adult services and offered to youth within adult settings. However, the needs of youth are different from the needs of adults, underscoring the need for developmentally-informed, youth-oriented services. Developmentally, adolescence (age 12-18) and emerging adulthood (age 18-25) are challenging periods of transition and change. Youths' socio-emotional needs and vulnerability to abuse and other traumas are typically greater than those of adults. Youth with complex needs or situations are often involved in multiple sectors including mental health, child welfare, youth justice, and other sectors in addition to education and health.

Information about youth service needs and evidence about what can be helpful is growing, yet youth and families continue to experience challenges in access to a cohesive system of evidence-informed services responsive to the diverse needs of youth across the province. This review is intended to inform continuing efforts to move toward this goal. The framework of the this review prioritized 1) youth focus, as youth input is crucial to inform system change, 2) hearing many voices, including family members/supporters of youth, service providers, and other stakeholders, 3) health equity approach, attending to population-specific needs and social contexts, and 4) a multi-sectoral perspective, including education, child welfare, youth justice, mental health, and other sectors in addition to substance use/addictions.

## What we did

An advisory body, consisting of multiple networks that meet around issues related to substance use and/or mental health services, provided consultation and feedback throughout the project. Based on feedback during the consultation phase, questions were developed for focus groups, surveys and interviews. We asked all stakeholders to identify strengths and weaknesses of the youth services system and make suggestions for system improvement.

Information was gathered from more than 300 youth and 300 service providers, family members, and other stakeholders. This included 17 focus groups with 186 youth, 10 interviews with service providers, and 447 stakeholder surveys, both online and paper. Qualitative analysis approaches including grounded theory and content analysis were used to analyze the data.

## What we learned

Youth, family members/supporters of youth, service providers and other stakeholders identified several strengths and weaknesses in the youth services system and made suggestions for system enhancement. When asked what is working well, many stakeholders identified specific services and service providers doing excellent work in meeting youth needs. Recent improvements in the system were also noted including identifying promising models of service delivery that could be more widely implemented. In addition to these strengths, concerns were raised in a number of areas.

**1. Access:** All stakeholders identified insufficient access to service as a significant concern and area for improvement. Stakeholders reported:

- Shortages of available services; current levels are not sufficient to meet the needs of youth.
- Regional gaps in Northern communities - particularly remote and fly-in communities, in rural areas, and in Eastern Ontario.
- Limited awareness of available services and difficulties locating services contribute to problems with access. In addition, concerns with confidentiality discourage youth from asking for help in locating services. Youth and others advocated direct advertising of services.
- Wait times are a significant barrier and risk missing opportunities for intervention. Wait times are problematic before youth engage with services and between service components.
- Transportation, location, cost (for private services), and hours of operation (i.e., lack of evening and late night services) are additional barriers to access.
- Opportunities to improve the service system by enhancing coordination and collaboration between and within service sectors.
- Schools are an important point of access for many youth that should be more broadly utilized with external service providers (i.e., not school personnel). Additional services need to reach youth who are not in school.

**2. Service Components:** The need for specific types of services was also an important point highlighted by service providers, families, youth and other stakeholders, who reported:

- A range of services to meet the needs of youth with varying levels of intensity (i.e., continuum of care) to address differences in severity of substance use problems and concerns needs to be provided.
- Early identification and early intervention before concerns become severe are crucial and should be strengthened.
- Gaps in withdrawal management and residential treatment are a problem. Age exclusions and service outside of youths' communities, which remove youth from their support systems, are barriers.
- Education and awareness related to substance use, which is important to reduce stigma, has improved, but continued work is needed.

- Long term prevention strategies that support families and communities before substance use issues develop are crucial and need to be more broadly implemented.
- Enhanced cross-sectoral collaboration involving schools, primary care and other sectors has the potential to reach youth more readily and increase capacity for coordinated responses to youth needs.
- Services addressing both mental health and substance use, including services for concurrent disorders, and services targeting more serious mental health concerns in conjunction with substance use problems need to be more widely available.
- Peer support and mentorship in youth substance use services play a key role in youth recovery and could be used more.
- Services for family members and others supporting youth with substance use issues are important and could be enhanced.

**3. Service Delivery Models and Service Attributes:** How services are designed and delivered was another important area of emphasis. Stakeholders told us:

- Developmentally-informed approaches are needed in youth-specific and adult services.
- Transitions from youth to adult services need to be easier and more coordinated.
- Age restrictions reduce access and may not correspond to the developmental needs of youth.
- Service fragmentation including problems with coordination and wait times between service components magnify risk of loss of treatment gains and can demoralize youth.
- Services need to be evidence-informed and delivered by service providers with sufficient expertise.
- Other aspects of services that stakeholders felt were important and could be more widely implemented included
  - harm reduction approaches
  - respect for confidentiality
  - efficient intake procedures
  - services that are effective in meeting youths' needs.

**4. Service Provider Attributes:** Several stakeholders underscored the crucial role that service providers play.

- Service provider/agency staff qualities are important in supporting youths' initial involvement with services. Specific individuals can play key roles in youths' willingness to engage with services as well as in their recovery.
- Because of the vulnerable position of youth seeking services, interactions with staff that are less than positive can become barriers, discouraging youth from further engagement.
- Service providers characteristics most frequently identified as important were:
  - perceived as caring; system limitations can give youth the impression of lack of caring
  - inspiring trust by expressing nonjudgmental attitudes and maintaining confidentiality
  - relatable, possibly with experience of substance use concerns, but generally able to understand youths' social contexts and expression.

**5. Health Equity and Social Determinants of Health:** Stakeholders also emphasized the need for services to meet the needs of diverse youth, attending to health equity and the impact of social determinants of health. Concerns included:

- Insufficient access to Aboriginal-led and Aboriginal-focused services, services addressing the needs of newcomer youth and their families, LGBTQ\*-competent services, and gender-specific services, particularly in Northern, remote and rural regions.

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\* LGBTQ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other sexual or gender minorities

- Gaps in services for youth with learning disabilities and other neurodevelopmental disabilities.
- Gaps in services for Francophone, deaf or hearing impaired youth, and youth speaking languages other than English and French, particularly outside of urban centres.
- Youth involved with the child welfare system, the justice system, and street-involved or homeless youth are often more in need of services but have greater barriers to accessing them.
- Gaps are often more severe outside of larger urban centres.
- Services that address social determinants of health, such as housing, education and employment, support youth in making changes in their lives and increase youths' ability to engage in services.

**6. Youth Factors:** Youth provided important information on the priorities and concerns they bring to the service system:

- Relationships are crucial to youth and impact youths' willingness to engage with services.
- Fear is a barrier to accessing services. Stigma related to substance use and to seeking services contributes to youths' fear that they will be treated judgmentally.
- Services that acknowledge youths' life circumstances and underlying factors related to their substance use are important for some youth to feel supported and understood and to address underlying issues.
- Flexible programs that allow youth to make decisions about their lives, including harm reduction approaches allowing youth to choose their treatment goals, and programs that leave room for youth to make mistakes are preferred.
- Incentives are important to encourage youth to engage with services and to reduce their substance use by supporting their connection with activities that are alternatives to using substances.

### **Summary of Recommendations:**

The report includes 32 specific recommendations informed by the issues identified and suggestions made by youth, service providers, family/supporters and other stakeholders.

Overall, stakeholders identified an urgent need for collaborative approaches to provide an accessible, developmentally-informed continuum of care, staffed by a competent, well-trained, engaging, caring workforce, implementing evidence-informed practices, to meet the diverse needs of youth from a range of backgrounds and experiences.

Barriers to accessing services need to be addressed, including regional gaps in services, limited awareness of available services and how to access them, age limits restricting eligibility, practical barriers including lack of transportation and hours of operation, and long wait times that discourage access and disrupt treatment.

Service delivery models for transition-aged youth need particular attention. A multifaceted approach is needed including collaboration with the adult service system to build capacity to offer developmentally informed services, increased flexibility related to age limits and increased availability of services specifically targeted to transition-aged youth.

Youth need to have as much choice as possible, considering their needs, and be actively engaged in determining their treatment involvement and goals.

The needs of families (and others in a support role) must also be considered and addressed with responsive services available individually and in conjunction with their youth.

Attention to diversity and the social determinants of health are integral; enhanced support for culturally informed population-specific approaches, including Aboriginal-led, culturally appropriate services, and services meeting the particular needs of specific populations of youth and youth with diverse experiences such as involvement with the youth justice system or child welfare system and/or homeless youth.

### **We want to hear from you!**

Thank you to everyone who gave input on how the service system could improve to address youth substance use concerns. We welcome your feedback on our project and report. Visit our website at [yssr.org](http://yssr.org) to see the full report and tell us what you think. Let's work together to build a better system of care!

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