

Calgary Youth Employment Initiative Formative Evaluation Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

January 2020 – March 2022

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For the Collaborative Funders' Table
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The work of the CYEI and its partners is based in the traditional territories of the Blackfoot Confederacy (Siksika, Kainai, Piikani), the Tsuut'ina, the Îyâxe Nakoda Nations, the Métis Nation (Region 3), and all people who make their homes in the Treaty 7 region of Southern Alberta.

Background

In 2017, the Collaborative Funders' Table (CFT) moved into a second phase¹ (CFT 2.0) and launched another collaborative funding initiative. CFT 2.0 focuses on the interface between 'supply' (youth and youth serving agencies) and 'demand' (employers). The desired impact is to improve employment outcomes among Opportunity Youth² in Calgary and contribute to the broader field of knowledge about effective youth employment strategies and programs in Calgary and beyond. The CFT 2.0 is comprised of several components which together are called the **Calgary Youth Employment Initiative (CYEI)**:

- Funding for four pilot projects designed to test and refine approaches to Opportunity Youth employment programming and build employer capacity to recruit and retain Opportunity Youth in their workforce
- Convening a learning cohort among the implementing agencies
- Developing learning products and supporting other research to strengthen capacity in the broader field
- Continuing to develop and test approaches to collaborative funding

This formative evaluation report provides a summary of findings from developmental and formative evaluation processes that have been underway to support the CFT since January 2020.

The CYEI Pilots

The CYEI is funding four pilot projects that emerged from prototypes developed during the Youth Employment Lab.

The **Pop-Up Pilot** began in January 2020 and is being implemented by the Calgary Youth Employment Centre (YEC). Operations were suspended from April to October 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Throughout 2021, the YEC team worked to be nimble in adapting to the ever-changing pandemic context. It was extremely challenging to create rapport and sustain engagement with young people. Many were feeling hopeless and experiencing the mental health challenges associated with Covid-19. To address some of these challenges, the Pop-up Employment Counsellor began to work with other City of Calgary staff to connect with youth and families in communities where there is a higher proportion of Opportunity Youth. The Counsellor attended community association meetings in these communities and presented on YEC services and supports; they connected with different youth serving and community-based organizations and the Counsellor shared their contact information as well as information about YEC; they partnered with Calgary Housing Tenant Liaisons and worked with them to meet with youth and families in various Calgary Housing complexes. These innovative efforts in early 2021 enabled many initial connections with youth and natural supports but did not result in much follow through by youth or direct connections with the YEC and employment support services there.

When it became evident that most youth who connected with the Pop-Up Counsellor in community were not taking the next step to engage with YEC, the Counsellor began to test the idea of providing outreach employment counselling to youth in their communities.

At the same time, the Pop-Up Counsellor began to work with YEC Community Relations Liaisons in specific communities to engage with employers located in the same communities where the Counsellor was engaging youth. Most youth want to work close to home and many employers want to support youth in their own neighbourhoods.

¹ CFT 1.0 (2014-2017) focused on augmenting out-of-school programming for vulnerable youth and building funder capacity to pool and collectively fund smaller pilot projects. CFT 2.0 builds on this work.

² Opportunity Youth are defined as those people aged between 18 and 29 who are not in school, training or currently employed. Opportunity Youth face barriers to employment such as poverty, unstable housing, or past interactions with the justice system.

This new strategy of providing youth with employment counselling *and* potential job opportunities in their community is leading to increased engagement among youth and their natural supports, and more sustained follow-through with the employment counselling and employment readiness skills.

The Pop-Up Pilot has generated several important lessons:

- Family, peers and other natural supports are an important referral source for harder-to-reach youth who tend not to be connected to youth serving organizations
- Collaborating with Calgary Housing Tenant Liaisons and Community Social Workers is an important mechanism to increase contact with youth and their natural supports in specific communities
- Despite assumptions about young people and their heavy reliance on tech and social media, in-person connections with the Employment Counsellor tend to lead to more sustained engagement with youth
- Youth are more likely to engage with employment counselling supports if this includes being presented with an actual job opportunity

To address these challenges and build on the lessons from above, the team developed and is testing the provision of mobile, outreach employment counselling.

The **Calgary Employer Forum** is being implemented by Trellis and is designed to bring together employers and youth serving agencies to build Calgary-based employer capacity to hire and retain Opportunity Youth. The CEF pilot got underway in late 2019 and held its first meeting in January 2020. During the first year the Forum was coordinated by staff from a CFT member and was developed in collaboration with Trellis. The first two forum meetings were held in person before moving to an online format in May 2020. Meetings have stayed online since then, enabling the pilot to continue with operations uninterrupted. A steering committee was created that is comprised of the coordinator, an employer, staff from the YEC and Trellis. The steering committee identifies topics for each meeting and invites expert guests to present to employer attendees and support discussion.

Employer engagement is a challenge in any effort to bridge the gap between supply and demand in youth employment. It was flagged in the early days of CFT 2.0 and it has persisted. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated this by putting enormous strain on employers and HR professionals everywhere. Despite this, the CEF has convened 14 meetings and developed several resources since its inception. Developing, launching and governing the Calgary Employer Forum has generated many lessons:

- Employers are hard to engage consistently. Many are keen to participate but juggling competing pressures
- Online meetings are convenient and easier to attend but are not ideal for networking and relationship-building
- Connecting one-to-one with employers to understand more about what they want and need may help to increase engagement
- The [CEF website](#) has been an important part of the CEF and has helped to build awareness of Opportunity Youth as a talent pool, and share resources and tools to work with this population more effectively

To build on these lessons and address some of the challenges, the CEF wants to test a new approach to employer engagement and capacity building by hosting a ½ day symposium in 2022. If this first event is

a success, the CEF intends to host this event twice per year going forward and continue to develop and share resources through newsletters and on the website.

re:Vision is being implemented by Miskanawah was designed as part of the Youth Employment Lab (YEL) to be an innovative and comprehensive way to connect and support Indigenous youth and potential employers through a series of culturally supportive events and a unique hiring fair. On-going restrictions on gatherings because of the pandemic meant that the re:Vision team had to rethink methods to build cultural safety among employers and to connect Indigenous youth to employers. The team developed training content for employers that could be delivered virtually and has been enabling one-to-one connections between youth and employers instead of hosting a larger fair.

The re:Vision team has had to be creative and nimble in dealing with the challenges created by the pandemic. As with the other pilots, this creativity has led to new strategies that are showing promise. Lessons learned so far include:

- One-to-one engagement with employers and youth (an adaptation to abide by Covid restrictions) has created better and more sustainable relationships with employers and youth
- Creating a safe space to learn has been key to the effectiveness of the employer training sessions
- The youth employment lab helped stakeholders to begin to understand barriers to employment experienced by Indigenous youth. re:Vision's work engaging these youth and developing the training has deepened this understanding. Indigenous youth are unique in that they continue to experience racism in day-to-day life, and many come to employment situations without the same opportunities as non-Indigenous youth

Miskanawah will host an Oral Truthing ceremony with the CFT in June 2022. This ceremony is an important part of an Indigenous approach to evaluation and creates an opportunity for reporting in the oral tradition.

The **Peer Mentorship Pilot** is being implemented by NPower Canada and is designed to develop peer mentors who provide support to NPower trainees during their training and into employment. NPower Canada has also partnered with Miskanawah to design and implement the Indigenous Tech Pathways (ITP) program that helps to prepare Indigenous applicants for the NPower programming. This "boot camp" is delivered by the Indigenous Peer Mentor and other NPower staff and is meant to increase the applicants' readiness for NPower programming. Although the pilot is still in its early days, several lessons have been learned:

- Peer mentorship, and Indigenous peer mentorship in particular, is showing promise as a way to improve engagement with Opportunity Youth, including Indigenous youth. Peer mentors provide a safe and supportive environment through which participants can express concerns and receive guidance that is responsive to participants' needs
- Bringing Indigenous youth together with Indigenous alumni of the NPower program provides opportunities for engagement, it helps Indigenous young people see themselves as professionals in the IT sector and helps NPower Canada to understand more about the kinds of supports that Indigenous youth need to be successful in the digital workforce
- There are many factors that get in the way of Indigenous youth participation in IT employment programs, including:

- Admission into NPower Canada training programs requires a high school diploma. Lower than average high school graduation rates among Indigenous youth means many do not qualify for the programming
- Many Indigenous youth need an immediate employment income and cannot afford to cover their living expenses for the duration of the 15-week free training program
- Mental health issues among youth connected to NPower Canada programming also get in the way of a participant’s ability to effectively engage with the training material

In 2022, NPower Canada Calgary and Miskanawah have collaborated to expand the leadership role that Miskanawah will take in the facilitation of the ITP program, using this as an opportunity for Miskanawah to offer their support and services to Indigenous enrollees and thus strengthen the ITP program for future cohorts.

CYEI Field Building

The CFT members are committed to sharing what’s being learned through the CYEI pilots to strengthen other efforts related to Opportunity Youth employment programming and engaging employers. To this end, the CFT is supporting a field building component that, to date, has produced seven learning briefs and launched the [Calgary Youth Employment Initiative \(CYEI\) webpage](#).

Each of the learning briefs combines research in a particular area with information gathered from professionals involved in the CYEI. They are developed with a specific audience in mind. All briefs are designed and laid out in a consistent manner creating a “soft brand” for the CYEI. Learning briefs³ that have been developed and distributed so far include:

1. *Engaging Indigenous Peoples: Lessons for Funding and Program Design*
2. *Lessons from the Pandemic: Supporting Opportunity Youth During COVID-19 and Beyond*
3. *Customized Hiring Events: A Guide to Engaging Opportunity Youth*
4. *Untapped Talent: Exploring the Benefits of Opportunity Youth for Employers*
5. *Supporting Youth in Their Employment Journey: A Guide for Youth-Serving Practitioners*
6. *Funding and Convening a Social Innovation Lab: Lessons from Calgary’s Collaborative Funders’ Table*
7. *Bridging the Gap: A Guide to Supporting Employers to Hire and Retain Opportunity Youth*

Collaborative Funding

The Collaborative Funders’ Table is now in its eighth year and second phase. What began as an idea among leaders at Burns Memorial Fund (BMF), the City of Calgary and the United Way of Calgary and Area, has grown to include a diverse range of partners that pool resources to support innovative work related to vulnerable youth. The CFT 2.0 is building on progress and learning from phase one, generating new outcomes and surfacing new lessons related to collaborative funding to support innovation.

Lessons include:

- Existing relationships from the first phase made the CFT more innovative and risk tolerant
- Strong administrative support continued to be essential
- Developmental evaluation continued to be important to support problem solving and course correction and to help the CFT to make strategic decisions

³ These documents can be found at <https://burnsfund.com/calgary-youth-employment-initiative/>

- Covid-19 challenged relationships at the table, but existing trust helped mitigate this. Although members were distracted and unable to consistently engage, most felt that existing trust in the other members meant they were confident that good decisions continued to be made

Other CFT-Related Initiatives

Members of the CFT are also supporting other research related to youth employment in Alberta. These initiatives are helping to inform decisions and planning by the CFT as well as building the field in Alberta. Since the beginning of phase two, CFT members have supported:

- research into opportunities and challenges to strengthen policy related to Opportunity Youth employment;
- development of a service delivery model to support soft skills development for Opportunity Youth; and,
- an environmental scan of employment platforms in Alberta.

Next Steps for the CYEI

The CFT will continue to fund the four pilot projects through 2022-2023. The Table will make decisions and develop strategies to support the sustainability of those pilots that are showing promise and that would benefit from longer-term program funding. The CFT will also consider different strategies to share lessons and support knowledge translation more effectively across the youth employment sector in Canada. This may include a larger symposium or smaller sessions with specific stakeholders. Most current members of the CFT are keen to engage in a third phase. The group will conduct research and engage in dialogue to make decisions about where they can have the greatest impact with their collaborative investment and supports beyond 2023.

Much has been learned and achieved so far in this collaborative effort. The CFT members and the implementing agencies should be commended for their tenacity and their willingness to be creative, take risks, learn, adapt and push conventional ways of thinking and working. The pandemic has been difficult for everyone, creating unique challenges and opportunities to try new things. The next year will be essential to support on-going evaluation and consider sustainability options for the pilots and explore new opportunities to continue to work together to learn and support social change.