

The Calgary Youth Employment Initiative Formative Evaluation Report January 2020 – March 2022

Prepared by: Melissa Innes
Prepared for: the Collaborative Funders' Table
May 2022

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.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	ii
1.0 Introduction	1
2.0 Purpose of this report	1
3.0 Methods	1
4.0 CYEI Pilot Projects	3
4.1 The Pop-Up Pilot – the City of Calgary Youth Employment Centre (YEC)	3
4.2 The Calgary Employer Forum – Trellis	7
4.3 re:Vision - Miskanawah	10
4.4 Calgary Peer Mentorship Pilot Program – NPower Canada	13
5.0 Field Building: Products and Lessons	17
5.1 Outcomes to date.....	17
5.2 Lessons	18
6.0 The CYEI Learning Cohort	19
7.0 Collaborative Funding	20
7.1 Outcomes – the Collaborative Funding Process.....	21
7.2 Lessons	23
8.0 Other CFT-related Initiatives	25
8.1 Improving Opportunity Youth Employment in Alberta – Strategic Opportunities for Action	25
8.2 Soft Skills Development for Opportunity Youth – Proposed Service Delivery Model	25
8.3 Employment Platforms in Alberta – Environmental Scan	26
9.0 Things to Consider Going Forward	28
9.1 The Pilot Projects.....	28
9.2 Field Building	29
9.3 Other CFT-related Initiatives	30
9.4 Collaborative Funding	30
10. Conclusion	33

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.

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.

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.

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:

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

- 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
- 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.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In 2017, the Collaborative Funders' Table (CFT) moved into a second phase⁴ (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 Youth⁵ 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

The members of the CFT include Burns Memorial Fund, the Calgary Foundation, the City of Calgary, JPMorgan Chase Foundation, the RBC Foundation, the United Way of Calgary and Area, and two anonymous donors. The pilot implementation partners are Miskanawah, NPower Canada, Trellis and the City of Calgary Youth Employment Centre.

2.0 PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

This report is intended to provide a summary of findings from developmental and formative evaluation processes that have been underway to support the CFT since January 2020. It includes an overview of CFT-funded pilots, the field building activities, the learning cohort, the collaborative funding approach and other CFT-related initiatives. It documents preliminary progress towards outcomes and lessons for each component before describing several considerations for the CFT as its members think about the future.

3.0 METHODS

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.

The report has been prepared by the CYEI developmental evaluator using information from multiple sources. These include:

- Interviews with CFT members (n=9)
- Focus group with staff from CFT funded pilot projects (# of participants = 8)
- Review of all pilot project reports submitted to the CFT (2020 and 2021)
- Review of field building products and processes
- Review of previous developmental evaluation updates presented to the CFT (October 2020, March 2021, October 2021)
- Developmental evaluation notes from meetings with the pilot teams
- Observational notes from pilot project activities (e.g., employer forum meetings, re:Vision training sessions with employers)

Notes from the interviews and focus groups were analyzed and organized into themes. Findings from the developmental evaluation notes and observational data were added to these themes. Outcome reporting and lessons from the pilot projects were summarized and compared, where possible, to targets.

4.0 CYEI PILOT PROJECTS

These have been unique and challenging times. The pilot projects have been required to suspend, adapt and significantly redesign their programming over the course of the past two years. Despite this, much has been learned and some are gaining traction and making good progress. Below is a high-level summary of developments, progress, lessons and next steps for each of the CFT-funded pilot projects. The emphasis here is on learning and next steps. All pilot projects submitted reports to the CFT providing greater detail on activities and outcomes and meeting the accountability requirements in their contracts.

4.1 THE POP-UP PILOT – THE CITY OF CALGARY YOUTH EMPLOYMENT CENTRE (YEC)

The Pop-Up pilot was developed based on a prototype from the Youth Employment Lab (YEL)⁶. It was designed to test strategies to find and engage Opportunity Youth in community who are not connected to existing youth serving organizations and supports. The idea was to support the YEC to create a series of “pop-up” events, providing opportunities to learn about and engage with YEC employment services in places where young people tend to gather (community centres, sports fields and courts, youth-oriented events, etc.). The pilot is staffed by a YEC employment counsellor and supported by other YEC staff and communications.

The pilot began in January 2020 with the establishment of a pop-up employment counsellor position and support from other YEC staff and communications. It was able to build simple infrastructure (tents, bi-fold set-up, images, procure swag for participants, register for events) for and host several “pop-up” youth employment events before the first Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020. These included setting up booths at youth-oriented events such as the Calgary Comic and Entertainment Expo (“Comic Con”), the Genesis Centre, basketball tournaments and other community events. During this time, the team engaged 195 youth in community, referring them to on-site employment counselling services provided at the YEC.

The YEC suspended activities and put the pilot project on hold in April 2020, with the CFT granting a no-cost six-month extension to their three-year contract. In October 2020, the team relaunched the project and began to explore the effectiveness of *virtual* pop-up events, where young people could connect with the Pop-up Employment Counsellor at other virtual events, share contact information and then connect over time (via text and email) to explore their skills and interests, receive coaching on job search and interview skills and explore job opportunities. This approach was effective with some youth. However, many youth shared contact information and then never followed up and/or did not respond to efforts by the Employment Counsellor to engage.

⁶ The CFT 2.0 convened a social innovation lab from May – December 2018 to research, design and test several prototypes related to Opportunity Youth employment. See this link for more information on the lab https://burnsfund.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Calgary-Youth-Employment-Lab_-_Developmental-Evaluation-Report_October-2019.pdf

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.

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.

4.1.1 OUTCOMES TO DATE

In addition to developing, adapting, testing and refining several different methods to find and engage hard-to-reach Opportunity Youth, since relaunching in October 2020, the YEC Pop-Up pilot has achieved the following results in relation to Opportunity Youth employment. Please see table 1 below with a summary of this progress⁷.

<i>Table 1: The YEC Pop-Up Pilot – Summary of Results to December 2021</i>	
Natural Supports Aware of and Connected to YEC	More than 500
Opportunity Youth aware of YEC supports and services	More than 500
Opportunity Youth Registered with YEC and receiving employment counselling supports	77
Opportunity Youth that have achieved employment	16

The YEC will submit a second annual report at the end of July 2022, which will provide CFT with a more recent update on developments and progress.

4.1.2 LESSONS

The YEC's experiences adapting the pop-up approach to engaging hard-to-reach youth during the pandemic has generated several important lessons. These are relevant for the pilot going forward and for others working to engage and support this unique population of youth. These include:

- 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. The Employment Counsellor implementing the pilot found they had better success engaging youth when the Counsellor also engaged the youths' natural supports. Connecting with a sister or a parent and then with the youth often led to better and more sustained engagement with the youth
- 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. The other City staff are already known and trusted by families, which lends credibility to the Pop-up Employment Counsellor and helps to forge new relationships
- 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

⁷ Please see interim and annual reports submitted by the YEC for a more fulsome discussion of progress towards outcomes.

sustained engagement with youth and better follow-through in terms of building pre-employment skills and job searching

- As the pandemic progressed, and continued isolation and uncertainty about the future intensified, young people who had shown interest in employment and building their skills disengaged. This disengagement by youth was experienced across the CYEI pilots and has only shown signs of easing since early 2022
- The Pop-Up pilot was originally premised on the idea that the pop-up events and other engagement activities would *raise awareness of, and interest in,* YEC among hard-to-reach youth. These youth would then connect with standard YEC supports and services through existing channels (drop-in appointments with Employment Counsellors at YEC). However, many youth who connected with the Pop-up Employment Counsellor and were referred to YEC did not take the next steps to register with YEC and connect with employment counselling. They would engage with the Pop-up Counsellor in the community but not successfully connect with employment supports offered at the YEC. The Pop-up Counsellor also found that unless presented with an actual job opportunity, youth and their natural supports were less likely to engage with the Pop-up Counsellor.

To address these challenges and build on the lessons from above, the team developed and is testing the provision of mobile, outreach employment counselling. This means that the Employment Counsellor can provide employment counselling supports (coaching, job search, resume writing, interview skills) to youth in their community. The youth does not have to connect with the YEC main site to access these services. To date, these efforts have been city-wide making it hard for the team to make an impact in any specific community.

4.1.3 NEXT STEPS

The YEC Pop-up Pilot currently has CFT funding to support implementation until December 2023. Based on learning to date, the YEC is proposing to pilot a place-based approach to mobile outreach employment counselling. The pilot team will focus on six communities⁸ with a higher-than-average proportion of Opportunity Youth who are also not connected to youth serving agencies. Some of these communities share community associations and other resources, they have active community Facebook and other social media pages and working in these communities will create additional opportunities to develop the relationship with the Calgary Housing Company and Tenant Liaisons.

Beginning May 1, the Pop-Up Employment Counsellor will focus his efforts on these six communities to test the outreach approach and related strategies over a 12-month period. The YEC will gather data related to:

- Number of Opportunity Youth and natural supports engaged
- Number of Opportunity Youth registered with YEC and receiving employment counselling (remotely and on-site)
- Number of employers engaged, and employment opportunities identified

⁸ Proposed communities of focus include: Edgemont, MacEwan and Berkley in the Northeast and Mahogany, Seton and Cranston in the South East.

- Number of interviews with Opportunity Youth connected to the pilot
- Numbers of Opportunity Youth who gain employment

This focused testing of the most promising strategies that have emerged over the past 18 months will enable the YEC to determine if mobile outreach employment counselling, combined with community-based pop-up employment events and engagement of community-based employers results in increased employment skills and employment among Opportunity Youth in these communities. If the strategies generate promising outcomes, the YEC will be well-positioned to build a case to sustain and scale the approach in other communities. The YEC is currently finalizing plans for this 12-month pilot and will seek approval to begin in early May from YEC leadership.

4.2 THE CALGARY EMPLOYER FORUM – TRELIS

The Calgary Employer Forum (CEF) pilot was designed to bring together employers and youth serving agencies to build Calgary-based employer capacity to hire and retain Opportunity Youth. The idea was to create a forum that is informed by the perspectives of employers, youth serving agencies and youth that can support employers to adapt hiring, on-boarding and retention practices to become more inclusive of Opportunity Youth and facilitate more successful employment outcomes.

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.

The coordination function of the Forum was transferred to Trellis in 2021. It included a 0.5 FTE position and has been held by the half-time HireUp⁹ Coordinator. There has been turnover in the position and the coordinator role was vacant from May-September 2021.

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. There has been extensive turnover in roles and the opening and closing of society meant businesses were either frantically hiring people or laying them off. All of this combined to make it especially difficult for the CEF to achieve consistent and sustained connection among employers to the Forum. Despite this, the CEF has convened 14 meetings and developed several resources since its inception. Below is a summary of results to December 2021.

⁹ HireUp is a Trellis initiative that connects employers to Opportunity Youth and pre and post employment supports. <https://www.gohireup.ca/>

4.2.1 OUTCOMES TO DATE

<i>Table 2: The Calgary Employer Forum – Summary of Results to December 2021</i>	
Established the Forum and Engaged Employers	13 employers (2020) 17 employers (2021) ¹⁰
Hosted Forum Meetings	7 meetings (2020) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 26 participants representing 18 unique employers • average of 7 participants/session (max 12; min 4) 7 meetings (2021) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 22 participants representing 16 unique employers • average of 5.8 participants/sessions (max 10; min 0)
Establish Forum Website	Established in 2020 Resources and relevant links 4,094 website views in 2021
Develop Employer Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tip Sheet - How to Write a Youth Friendly Job Posting • Tip Sheet -How to Engage and Select Youth Candidates • Information Sheet: Mental Health Resources • Information Sheet: Connecting to the Indigenous Community • Infographic: Meeting Guide • Infographic: Opportunity Youth

¹⁰ Employers who attended one or more meetings in 2021 included Amazon, Concorde Group, Calgary Stampede, Home Depot, Adroit Digital Marketing, Calgary Zoo, Last Spike Brewery, Telus Spark Science, Canadian Brewhouse, Lammle’s Western Wear, ULS Landscaping, Fjallraven, Lush, Men in Kilts

4.2.2 LESSONS

Developing, launching and governing the Calgary Employer Forum has generated many lessons for the steering committee. These include:

Engaging Employers

- Employers are hard to engage consistently. Many are keen to participate but juggling competing pressures. Employers would frequently confirm their participation but be unable to join the session at the last minute
- Those that do engage with the Forum are committed to hiring Opportunity Youth and appreciate the resources and supports
- Online meetings are convenient and easier to attend but are not ideal for networking and relationship-building. The steering committee has tried different ways to create space for informal networking during the online sessions, but this is challenging. Bringing people together again in person is planned for 2022/23
- It has been challenging to find the balance between keeping expectations of employer participation low and creating a sense of belonging and ownership in the process. The CEF has struggled to find this balance, not wanting to ask too much of busy employers but then not establishing sufficient connection to understand what kinds of presentations and resources would be most valuable to the employers
- Connecting one-to-one with employers to understand more about what they want and need may help to increase engagement and is something the Coordinator tries to do
- Participation in the sessions has diminished since the Fall of 2021. There were no participants in the September meeting; four in November; two in February 2022; none in March 2022. The Steering Committee has decided to discontinue the monthly CEF sessions and is exploring alternative mechanisms to engage and build capacity among employers (see Next Steps below)

Governance

- The steering committee is comprised mostly of youth serving agencies – there is currently one employer on the committee who is not connected to employment in Calgary. The committee would like to change this composition but has been unable to engage an employer participant at this level
- A representative from Community Futures Treaty 7 joined the steering committee in 2022 and has been able to share their successful experiences engaging employers. The CEF may be able to build some of these strategies into their plans for 2022-23

Maintaining the Website

- The 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
- CEF would like to post shorter “tip sheets” and guidelines on the site and will work with the developmental evaluator to take relevant content from the learning briefs to create resources for the forum website

- CEF ensured that the website had online discussion board capability, but this feature has not yet been introduced to employers participating in Forum meetings. Thinking through how best to use this feature to support further engagement and networking among employers is part of CEF plans for 2022

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 in 2022.

4.2.3 NEXT STEPS

The Calgary Employer Forum had a surplus of funds from year one and was granted permission to extend the pilot for a third year. The CFT is supporting the CEF pilot until December 2022. In March 2022, considering the decline in attendance and on-going challenges related to employer engagement, the CEF steering committee made the decision to develop and test a new approach.

The CEF will host a half-day event for employers on June 21, 2022. The idea is to host two sessions (one on supporting Indigenous Youth in the workforce and another on creating safe and inviting workplaces for youth who identify as LGBTQ+) with lunch and opportunities for networking. CEF will invite all current forum members as well as others through the steering committee networks.

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. If the event does not meet expectations, the steering committee will regroup to consider other mechanisms to increase employer engagement.

4.3 RE:VISION - MISKANAWAH

re:Vision was designed as part of the 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. The pilot was meant to begin in January 2020 to include outreach and employment coaching to Indigenous youth; capacity building and awareness raising among employers; an Indigenous youth hiring event; and follow-up support for both youth and employers once a youth is hired.

The Covid-19 lock-downs made pilot start-up impossible. Miskanawah put the process on hold until October 2020 and requested a no-cost 6-month extension to their 3-year contract with CFT. A full-time coordinator was hired and fulfills the dual role of engaging and supporting youth and engaging and building capacity among employers.

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 host an Indigenous youth hiring fair. 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. Progress that's been made since October 2020 is captured in the table below.

4.3.1 OUTCOMES TO DATE

<i>Table 3: re:Vision – Summary of Results to December 2021</i>		
Youth-related Progress	Youth engaged with re:Vision Referral sources include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • YEC • Trellis • Diamond Willow • Peer and self 	24 youth
	Youth receiving employment coaching and other supports Including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health and other basic needs supports • Resume writing, job search and interview skills 	17 youth
	Youth connected one-to-one with employers	13 youth
	Youth interviewing for employment	11 youth
	Youth hired and sustaining employment, receiving follow-up support	8 youth
Employer-related Progress	Indigenous awareness training developed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 hour online workshop developed • 3 educational videos • Content delivery support from an Elder 	Training modules developed, tested and refined
	Training sessions delivered. Content includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to Indigenous culture • History of residential schools and their impact • Racism and stereotypes • Guidelines for creating space for mutual success 	4 sessions
	Employers with increased capacity to create cultural safety in the workplace – participated in training	11 businesses 33 professionals
	Employers hiring Indigenous youth	6 businesses

4.3.2 LESSONS

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. Below is a summary of lessons learned so far by Miskanawah. The team will continue to build on this learning to strengthen their strategies over the next year.

- 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. By using this approach, youth and employers have been able to build strong, trusting relationships with program staff. This strategy also allows staff to support job placement in a timelier manner, rather than each youth having to wait for a scheduled event to meet with employers. This change to the approach was supported and approved by the CFT and is now permanent
- Connections to YEC and the Employer Forum, through the learning cohort, have helped re:Vision to connect with both youth and employers. YEC has referred several youth who are looking for cultural supports and employment and three Employer Forum members have taken the re:Vision training and gone on to hire Indigenous youth
- Creating a safe space to learn has been key to the effectiveness of the employer training sessions. The Miskanawah team facilitates the sessions in a way that helps participants feel comfortable to share their lack of experience with Indigenous culture and to ask questions and discuss sensitive issues related to colonialism and racism. The team has learned that delivering the training to groups no bigger than 8 participants has been important in the online format
- Several employers have expressed interest in the re:Vision training but have not yet been able to attend. There is evidence of broader commitment to reconciliation among employers and interest in learning about Indigenous culture and hiring Indigenous youth
- 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. Addressing these barriers and creating spaces where Indigenous young people are respected, valued and feel a sense of belonging is going to take time, resources and a commitment to significant personal and organizational change among employers

4.3.3 NEXT STEPS

Miskanawah has support from the CFT to continue to implement the re:Vision pilot until June 2023. In early 2022, the team began delivering an Indigenous Leadership Training program to youth interested in re:Vision. This program consists of eight sessions and is being delivered in

collaboration with the University of Calgary and Diamond Willow Lodge¹¹. The sessions integrate Indigenous teaching with content to develop financial literacy, leadership and other networking skills. The program also creates an opportunity for peer-to-peer supports, connecting youth who have received supports from re:Vision with youth who have not yet engaged. This programming will augment the individualized supports that will continue to be provided by the re:Vision Coordinator and is hoped to engage more youth in re:Vision programming overall. With restrictions lifting and employment opportunities growing, re:Vision aims to engage 20-25 new Indigenous youth before the summer.

The team also intends to increase the frequency of the employer training workshops. Historically these workshops have been held quarterly, but now that the sessions have been refined and the supportive videos have been re-produced in high quality¹², the team will offer the training workshop every eight weeks to employers that show interest in hiring youth who are connected to re:Vision. The team hopes to be able to host these sessions in-person beginning in May '22 and believes that being able to be in ceremony with an Elder will make these training workshops more impactful for employers.

Miskanawah will also host an Oral Truthing ceremony with the CFT in June 2022. The CFT and Miskanawah agreed to use an Indigenous approach to evaluation as part of the piloting process. These efforts have been constrained by Covid-19 and restrictions related to social gatherings. This ceremony is an important part of this approach and creates an opportunity for reporting in the oral tradition. The ceremony will include youth participants, employers, re:Vision staff, Elders and members from the CFT. They will share stories of their experiences with the pilot programming and reassert their commitments to work together in “A Good Way”.¹³

4.4 CALGARY PEER MENTORSHIP PILOT PROGRAM – NPOWER CANADA

NPower Canada submitted a proposal to the CFT in 2020 requesting support to extend its Ontario-based Peer Mentorship program to Calgary. CFT approved a grant to support this program to run from January 2021 to December 2022. It 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

¹¹ Diamond Willow Lodge is a drop-in space hosted by Miskanawah for 12–29-year-olds. It offers a range of different programs as well as a safe and culturally oriented place for youth to hang-out. The Lodge has been an important referral partner for re:Vision.

¹² The CFT provided a small grant to enable Miskanawah to hire a professional videographer to re-create the videos. The first round of videos were created by the team using an iPhone and although filled with meaningful content, the production quality diminished the experience.

¹³ Mino-pimatisiwin (A Good Way) in Cree means to honor spirit and tradition. More broadly it is the process of doing something with integrity and embodying the seven sacred teachings – Love, Honesty, Wisdom, Truth, Respect, Courage and Humility.

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 CFT is only supporting the Peer Mentor positions in Calgary, NPower Canada is reporting on broader outcomes associated with its Calgary Program. Below is a summary of progress from the first year of implementation.

4.4.1 OUTCOMES TO DATE

<i>Table 3: Peer Mentorship NPower Canada Summary of Results January to December 2021</i>	
Engage Opportunity Youth in tech training and the peer mentorship program	252 youth enrolled in the Calgary workforce development program and connected to a mentor
OY complete skills training and earn industry certification	214 youth (85% of those enrolled) completed training and are certified
Hire three peer mentors One in 2021; two in 2022	Two peer mentors hired and trained in 2021 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One of these peer mentors (who is Indigenous) was recently promoted to a Program Coordinator role with NPower. This is a full-time salaried position
Engage Indigenous Youth in NPower Canada’s IT training programs	Six Indigenous youth enrolled in the training program
Indigenous youth complete training and earn industry certification	Three Indigenous youth completed training and are certified
Opportunity Youth secure employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More than 80% of OY enrolled in the May and September 2021 cohorts have secured employment or are in post-secondary • 2/3 Indigenous youth that completed training in 2021 are employed or in post-secondary
Prepare two learning briefs (one in 2021 and one in 2022)	Peer Mentorship Evaluation Learning Brief (submitted to CFT in February 2022)

4.4.2 LESSONS

Implementing the Peer Mentorship Program and furthering relationships with Miskanawah and other Indigenous serving organizations has generated several lessons for NPower Canada. These lessons have relevance for NPower Canada's Ontario and BC-based programming and for others engaged in workforce development with Indigenous young people.

- 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. The Indigenous Peer Mentor plays an important role in helping Indigenous participants navigate the program and ensure they are primed for success by working one-to-one with participants to help them overcome challenges around self-esteem, technical concepts, and time management
- 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
- NPower Canada was unable to meet the targets for Indigenous youth participation set out in its proposal¹⁴. Several reasons were identified:
 - The pandemic limited operations of Indigenous serving agencies that refer to NPower. Many of these organizations were closed or operating remotely, and thus have less contact with young people
 - 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. NPower Canada Calgary has begun referring applicants who have not yet obtained a high school diploma to the Aboriginal Futures' high school completion program. In return, Aboriginal Futures refers their graduates to NPower Canada, resulting in three referrals to date
 - Many Indigenous youth need an immediate employment income and cannot afford to cover their living expenses for the duration of the 15-week training program. To address this barrier, NPower Canada is connecting applicants to a program being offered by Aboriginal Futures to provide a living allowance stipend to community members who qualify. However, at present, the application for the living allowance can take four to six weeks to process. If applicants have not learned they are receiving the living allowance prior to program enrollment, they may choose not to enroll. The Calgary team has started to work with Aboriginal Futures to fast track the application process for NPower applicants so that these applicants know the status of their living allowance application prior to enrollment deadlines

¹⁴ NPower had six Indigenous youth participate in its tech training programs in 2021. Its target for that year was 15.

- 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 an effort to help address some of these issues the peer mentor in Calgary has created “conversation circles” which are informal, online gatherings where youth participants can disclose mental health challenges. The circles have been an important tool to help program delivery teams identify participants who are struggling with mental health or emotional issues and connect them to the referrals and supports that they need. In August 2021, NPower Canada Calgary also created a Mental Health Specialist position. This Specialist provides referral and follow-up support to individual participants as well as delivering mental health-focused workshops to NPower Canada program participants

4.4.3 NEXT STEPS

NPower Canada Calgary’s January to May 2022 cohort is underway. There is only one Indigenous participant currently participating but there are four Indigenous youth enrolled in the May – July 2022 cohort. Due to the low number of Indigenous applicants so far this year, 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.

Recognizing the success of its partnerships with Miskanawah and Aboriginal Futures, NPower Canada’s Calgary team aims to cultivate relationships with more Indigenous community partners and program champions, including youth, service providers, Elders, and Traditional Knowledge Keepers, to support the further development of culturally relevant programming.

NPower Canada is also in the process of actioning a new plan developed to bolster Indigenous youth engagement and strengthen the organization’s relationships with Indigenous organizations and communities across Canada. This plan, the *Indigenous Focus Action and Implementation Plan*, was designed in consultation with Accenture¹⁵ and Indigenous community partners after NPower Canada was awarded a pro bono consulting grant. This plan involves a multi-channel, cross-team approach to strengthening NPower Canada’s engagement with Indigenous youth and organizations across all stages of its workforce development plan, including recruitment, program delivery, job placement services, and wraparound support and community engagement, over three implementation phases.

¹⁵ Accenture is a multi-national company that provides technology support to businesses worldwide.

5.0 FIELD BUILDING: PRODUCTS AND LESSONS

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) webpage¹⁶.

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 briefs¹⁷ that have been developed and distributed so far include:

8. *Engaging Indigenous Peoples: Lessons for Funding and Program Design*
9. *Lessons from the Pandemic: Supporting Opportunity Youth During COVID-19 and Beyond*
10. *Customized Hiring Events: A Guide to Engaging Opportunity Youth*
11. *Untapped Talent: Exploring the Benefits of Opportunity Youth for Employers*
12. *Supporting Youth in Their Employment Journey: A Guide for Youth-Serving Practitioners*
13. *Funding and Convening a Social Innovation Lab: Lessons from Calgary's Collaborative Funders' Table*
14. *Bridging the Gap: A Guide to Supporting Employers to Hire and Retain Opportunity Youth*

The CFT decided on a simple distribution strategy, whereby the documents are posted on the CYEI webpage, shared with CFT members and the pilot project agencies, and then distributed by them to appropriate people in their networks (those they believe would be interested in the material).

5.1 OUTCOMES TO DATE

In 2021, the webpage had 554 visits and CFT members reported sharing learning briefs with more than 100 unique organizations including foundations, employers, government agencies, educational institutions, research firms and community-based professionals.

Assessing the effectiveness of these products to “build the field” is difficult. Some of the documents have been reposted on other resource websites and newsletters (e.g., the Philanthropic Foundations of Canada newsletter and the Calgary Employer Forum website). Informal feedback from CFT members and the pilot agencies suggest the materials are being positively received and used by different partners across Canada. However, with the current distribution and feedback strategy it is impossible to know the extent to which the content is being read or influencing practice.

¹⁶ See <https://burnsfund.com/calgary-youth-employment-initiative/>

¹⁷ These documents can be found at <https://burnsfund.com/calgary-youth-employment-initiative/>

5.2 LESSONS

The main lessons from the CFT's early efforts at field building include:

- The learning briefs have been well received by the CFT members and pilot partners. Those who were able to distribute them to stakeholders got positive feedback about the utility and relevance of the material being produced
- Users described the briefs as having the right balance of research, anecdotes, practical experiences and resources
- The Engaging Indigenous Peoples brief has relevance for building the capacity of funders to engage with other equity seeking groups – the principles of engagement set out in this brief are transferrable
- Briefs specific to youth serving agencies and youth employment intermediaries are being shared but may be too long to be taken up by non-profit professionals

"I'll send the entire document to my managers and team leads but I would not expect frontline staff to read the whole thing. We need to take the main points and turn them into tip sheets." (CYEI agency leader)

- The briefs most relevant to employers are unlikely to be getting much uptake among this group because the relationships between employers and the CFT members and the CYEI implementing agencies are limited
- Developing a strategic marketing plan and targeted distribution is challenging because the CFT is documenting learning across diverse subject areas (engaging Indigenous people, customized hiring fairs, supporting employers) that is relevant to a wide range of stakeholder groups (funders, employers and HR professionals, intermediaries and youth serving agencies)
- The emails from the developmental evaluator that described the resources, appropriate audiences and a link to the CYEI page sometimes got lost among competing priorities for CFT members

"I think they are really good, but I've not been able to share them. The emails get lost in my inbox." (CFT Member)

"Any effective learning and development strategy involves more than just clicking forward on an email." (CFT Member)

6.0 THE CYEI LEARNING COHORT

Another element of the initiative being supported by the CFT is a learning cohort¹⁸ among professionals involved in the implementation of the CYEI pilots. These gatherings bring together staff from NPower Canada Calgary, the YEC, Miskanawah and Trellis and are facilitated by the developmental evaluator. Five sessions have been convened since the pilot projects began in 2020. Discussion topics have included:

- Intersections and opportunities for collaboration across the pilots (October 2020)
- Opportunity Youth and Covid: Lessons so far (January 2021)
- Working with Opportunity Youth (June 2021)
- Engaging Employers (October 2021)
- Consolidating CYEI learning so far (March 2022)

Feedback from the early sessions communicated that the participants appreciated the content and facilitation but wanted to have less structured sessions with more time to share emerging challenges and explore ways to work together. The learning cohort has not produced specific or tangible outcomes aside from collaboration between the organizations (most notably between NPower Canada and Miskanawah, and Miskanawah and the YEC). These collaborations have led to the development of important new initiatives such as the Indigenous Tech Program, elements of the NPower peer mentorship process and cross referrals between agencies. The cohort sessions have also been invaluable in the development of the field building products, enabling the field building team to draw heavily on the experiences of the CFT pilots to augment existing research in the preparation of the briefs.

“The sessions have created a different way for us to see and learn about each other’s work. We may not be collaborating on a specific project, but we have this new kind of relationship between the agencies.” (CYEI Implementing Partner)

The developmental evaluator plans to host two more sessions before the end of this phase of CYEI, working with the teams to identify pertinent topics to guide the discussion.

¹⁸ The learning cohort has been designed based on the principles of a community of practice, where colleagues grappling with similar challenges come together to jointly problem solve, share insights and resources and celebrate successes.

7.0 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. Phase One (2014-2017) included the development of a collaborative investment framework and funding to projects designed to augment and expand upon Calgary Afterschool Programming.

At the end of the first phase, the CFT partners began to explore vulnerable youth and employment as a strategic investment focus. CFT 2.0 began in 2017 when the group commissioned some foundational research¹⁹ and decided to use a social innovation lab as an approach to designing and testing prototype solutions to this complex issue. The lab generated four promising prototypes, three of which went on to be pilots funded by the CFT.

The CFT 2.0 grew in membership²⁰ and continues to have administrative support from Burns Memorial Fund. Some members of the table were deeply involved in the youth employment lab, and all took part in the review and approval of the pilot projects. The table met quarterly between June 2018 and October 2021 with meetings moving to an online format in May 2020. As the administrator and chair of the CFT, BMF takes on the following responsibilities on behalf of CFT members:

- Manages funds contributed by the CFT partners
- Engages in and manages the contracts with the organizations implementing the pilots
- Conducts site visits each year
- Organizes and chairs the CFT meetings, setting the agenda and recording the minutes
- Manages the contract with the Developmental Evaluator
- Prepares reports for the funding partners

The CFT 2.0 is building on progress and learning from phase one,²¹ generating new outcomes and surfacing new lessons related to collaborative funding to support innovation.

¹⁹ See Copper, Merrill. (2018) *Improving Employment Outcomes for Vulnerable Youth* https://burnsfund.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Calgarys-Vulnerable-NEET-Youth_-June-2018.pdf

²⁰ An anonymous donor joined in the table in 2018 and JPMorgan Chase Foundation joined in 2020. Other members are the Calgary Foundation, the United Way of Calgary and Area, Burns Memorial Fund, the RBC Foundation, the City of Calgary, and another anonymous donor.

²¹ These lessons are captured in the annual learning reports that were prepared in April 2016 and 2017.

7.1 OUTCOMES – THE COLLABORATIVE FUNDING PROCESS

Members of the CFT described a range of different outcomes emerging as a result of CFT 2.0. These include:

Better intelligence and networking – the CFT members bring individual intelligence to the table helping the group to make better collective decisions and helping individual members to understand more broadly what is happening across various sectors. Members bring different areas of expertise to the group which has strengthened the process overall.

More effective use of philanthropic funds – The smaller investment made by each partner is being leveraged with others. This was especially important during the Covid pandemic when funder and agency capacity was so stretched. The CFT was able to launch four innovative pilots, commission several research projects and support the development of a range of learning products, all while managing a unique and unpredictable social and economic context.

Broader and more strategic funding – In this second phase, the CFT did extensive work to understand more about the issue they were trying to address. They commissioned research into youth employment, hosted a sense-making workshop and convened the Youth Employment Lab before investing in specific pilots. The pilots are engaging diverse stakeholders and the learning products have the potential to strengthen practice across the field.

“[CFT] 2.0 is so much bigger and more strategic than 1.0. We’ve commissioned research, leveraged other partners, the lab, additional funding to existing programs and the four new pilots. We’ve gone so much deeper into this specific area. We are learning more about the complexity of these issues.” (CFT Member)

Increased capacity to innovative and be adaptive – Being part of the CFT has oriented members to a different way of working with funded partners. The lab and the development and adaptations to the pilots has been a co-creative process – decisions have been made jointly with the agencies and the Table has listened when the agencies suggest new strategies.

“We’ve really appreciated the way we’ve been invited to work with the Table. We can share what’s working and what isn’t and when we suggest changes to our approach these are welcomed and supported. It feels more like a partnership.” (CYEI Implementing Agency)

Support for sense-making, then prototyping, piloting and scaling ideas as way to address complex social issues is also being taken up by member organizations in other investment areas. Members are seeing the value of trying new things in a small way to minimize risk but to also support innovation.

“It doesn’t all need to be rigid evidenced-based, best practice. We need room for new ways of thinking and approaching challenges. I feel like CFT has helped to normalize this.” (CFT Member)

Deeper commitment to Indigenous communities and organizational equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) – Some members described how participation in the CFT and the social innovation lab has prompted them to engage in other efforts to examine their organizational structures and processes. These members are conducting racial equity audits, supporting staff

to take part in Indigenous awareness training, collecting more race-based data, surfacing biases in organizational procedures, changing funding processes to accommodate oral traditions and creating more inclusive processes. Some members are moving towards more trust-based philanthropy²², reducing application and reporting requirements and creating more equitable relationships with their implementing partners.

The work with the CFT has helped us to really understand how to centre the voices of the people we want to impact. We thought we were doing that before but the lab [youth employment lab] and the work with the Elders group really showed us how to do that. (CFT member)

These changes were not the result of the CFT alone but are also influenced by the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, residential school atrocities, the Black Lives Matter movement and growing global recognition of the importance of greater equity and diversity.

Applying new skills in other contexts – CFT members describe taking what they are learning about collaboration, working with funded partners, engaging with Indigenous groups and supporting innovation to other jurisdictions, funding partnerships and parts of their own organizations. The skills and lessons being developed with this collaborative are being applied elsewhere, changing the way the funders work in substantive ways.

“We’ve taken what we’ve learned with CFT and applied it in our other shops and with our work on other collaboratives”. (CFT Member)

“We’ll take everything we’ve learned here with us to Saskatchewan.” (CFT Member)

Collaborating more with others – Experiences with the CFT have paved the way for other collaborative and pooled funding efforts among funders in Alberta. In the interviews, most of the members described at least one other collaboration that they were involved with, and some described how the success of the CFT has made it easier for them to build the case for collaborative funding among their boards.

“Our board strategy group met last month, and they were openly talking about how we could do more to collaboratively fund with others.” (CFT Member)

²² Trust-Based Philanthropy is “an approach to giving that addresses the inherent power imbalances between funders, nonprofits, and the communities they serve. At its core, trust-based philanthropy is about redistributing power—systemically, organizationally, and interpersonally—in service of a healthier and more equitable nonprofit sector. On a practical level, this includes multi-year unrestricted funding, streamlined applications and reporting, and a commitment to building relationships based on transparency, dialogue, and mutual learning.” <https://www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org/>

7.2 LESSONS

There were several important lessons from the CFT 1.0 that have been documented elsewhere and won't be repeated here²³. New learning related to the collaborative process from this second phase is set out below.

Existing relationships from the first phase made the CFT more innovative and risk tolerant. Most members knew each other and had worked together since 2015. The group trusts Burns Memorial Fund. Governance and fund management processes were in place. Interviewees felt this groundwork and pre-existing trust created an environment where members of the Table were willing to venture into the unknown with the YEL and then fund the pilots.

Strong administrative support continued to be essential. In the interviews, CFT members attribute much of the success of CFT 2.0 to the administrative support provided by the Burns Memorial Fund.

“Burns has navigated the administrator role beautifully – provided all the support we need as well as leadership along the way.” (CFT Member)

One drawback of BMF being the point of contact for all things CFT related is that the CYEI implementing partners feel they have only been able to forge a relationship with that one funder and do not feel connected to the others. The CFT could explore different opportunities for the agencies to connect with all its members.

“I feel like we [the implementing agency] are dealing with Burns. I don't see the other funders and we'd like to get to know them better”. (CYEI Implementing Agency)

Developmental Evaluation – The CFT engaged the same developmental evaluator for CFT 2.0. They documented the process and learning associated with the social innovation lab and supported the development of the pilots. The developmental evaluator provides on-going support to each of the pilot teams and facilitates the learning cohort. CFT members describe this role as important in this phase because it helps maintain an overall commitment to innovation and learning and is instrumental in helping the pilots to course correct and document learning that is emerging.

Covid weakened relationships at the table. Meeting online and less frequently since the summer of 2021 has weakened the connections between CFT members and undermined some of the dynamism in the group.

“The pandemic really impacted my ability to engage with the Table. I was juggling too many other priorities and was unable to connect with group and contribute to the discussion as I had in the past.” (CFT Member)

²³ For a summary of these lessons please see: <https://burnsfund.com/research-publications/the-experience-of-the-collaborative-funders-table-a-learning-brief/>

It also made it harder for new members to understand the overall intent and purpose of the Table and processes that had already been established. More could have been done to onboard new members and to nurture relationships between meetings. As restrictions lift and people feel more comfortable coming together, BMF, as the administrator, may need to exert extra effort to reconnect the group. In-person meetings focused on strategies for the future are likely to mobilize interest and ideas.

But... trust mitigated this challenge. 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.

“I never felt like it was a challenge because of the trust I had in the table and because of the trust I felt we had as a group through version 1 and the work through version 2. I fully trust that the people at the table will make good decisions and so I knew I didn’t need to be there, because I had that trust in the other members.” (CFT Member)

Learning to innovate – The work with the pilots has helped the members of the CFT to learn what it really means to innovate; to understand that pilots are about trying things and learning, and that they do not always achieve exactly what they set out to achieve. This is important for the non-profit sector where funders have historically expected agencies to implement programs and achieve the results in accordance with some predetermined plan.

“As a funding community we need to learn how to implement pilots – to recognize that they are about learning. R&D is new to the non-profit sector and we as funders have expected agencies to implement a perfect program, we’ve been so risk adverse. In the for-profit [sector] you figure out what doesn’t work to figure out what does. We need to learn from this.” (CFT Member)

The CFT is still a secret, is this what members want? The CFT started quietly and continues to “fly under the radar”. Members of the Table agreed to the creation of the *Calgary Youth Employment Initiative* as a ‘soft brand’ for the learning products that have been developed and shared through the field building. Beyond this, the CFT has no formal brand and is not well known outside smaller grantmaking circles. As the group thinks about the future, it needs to decide if it wants to continue quietly or engage in some sort of branding and communications process to increase public awareness of the work.

“My teams, who are out in community, don’t know CFT. They’ve not heard of us, and the agencies don’t know about us. Do we want to be known and if we do, what is it that we want to be known for?” (CFT Member)

8.0 OTHER CFT-RELATED INITIATIVES

Members of the CFT are also supporting other research related to youth employment in Alberta. A summary of these initiatives is included in this report because these may influence how the CFT decides to proceed in the future.

8.1 IMPROVING OPPORTUNITY YOUTH EMPLOYMENT IN ALBERTA – STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

To date, the CFT has focused on supporting program-level innovation at the supply and demand nexus to strengthen employment outcomes among Opportunity Youth. To understand more about opportunities and challenges at the policy level, members of the CFT and others commissioned PolicyWise to conduct research. This project generated three main deliverables:

- A *full research report* that presents a set of strategic policy opportunities designed to enhance and improve employment outcomes for OY in Alberta. These opportunities are directed at federal and provincial levels of government. There are also key roles for other stakeholders, including employers, non-profit organizations and youth
- A *Call-to-Action document* directed towards policymakers, youth-serving agencies and funders that sets out targets related to advocacy, leadership and collaboration, and assessment and monitoring to support Opportunity Youth Employment in Alberta
- A *tip sheet for employers* to influence policy and funding for Opportunity Youth in Alberta

The full report contains valuable data about Opportunity Youth in Alberta as well as gaps in policy and government supported initiatives. The report also includes a table describing strategic policy opportunities in three areas.

The CFT reviewed these materials at a meeting in October 2021 and did not, at that time, identify a funding opportunity to collectively pursue. Since then, PolicyWise submitted a proposal to the GOA Civil Society Fund for a project to support, strengthen, and expand industry-civil society collaboration on youth employment across Alberta, and create a provincial strategy. The intent was to create a cross-sector network of employers and civil society organizations to enable further collaboration to improve employment outcomes for youth and to develop a provincial youth employment strategy. This proposal was not successful and PolicyWise did not receive funding for the project.

8.2 SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FOR OPPORTUNITY YOUTH – PROPOSED SERVICE DELIVERY MODEL

Members of the CFT commissioned the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC), to create an evidence-based practice guide to working with youth to develop soft skills through employment support and training. The term “soft skills” describes a range of skills related to emotional intelligence, inter- and intra-personal abilities, and personal traits or attributes favourably associated with career development. The report includes a preliminary employment service delivery model informed by the latest evidence on the value of soft skills

in the modern economy, including a focus group discussion with youth and interviews with service providers and agency staff. It also highlights strategies, tactics, and promising practices that youth participants and agency staff said they found effective in soft skills training.

The practice guide²⁴ is intended to be used by different providers working with youth such as employers, employment support programs, and other innovative training programs so that they can more effectively build soft skills development into their programming to ensure that young people facing barriers to employment have the skills they need to be successful in the 21st century workforce. The guide includes six guiding principles and several strategies to strengthen the capacity of service providers to work with Opportunity Youth.

The service delivery model and the full report have been posted to the CYEI webpage, on the SRDC website and have been shared with stakeholders across Canada.

8.3 EMPLOYMENT PLATFORMS IN ALBERTA – ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

Members of the CFT were asked to support the expansion of a youth employment platform²⁵ in Calgary and before supporting such a request wanted to understand more about existing platforms. CFT engaged a youth intern from the RBC Foundation to conduct this research with coaching support from the CFT developmental evaluator. The intern completed a review of resources and conducted interviews with stakeholders supporting employment platforms in Calgary and other places in Canada. The findings from this scan suggest that there is a gap in Calgary in terms of a specialized, online platform that connects a broad base of Opportunity Youth to local employers and employment opportunities. HireUp²⁶ is the only such platform currently providing this service in Calgary. It mostly supports youth connected to Trellis and Home Depot is the primary employer. Careers NextGen²⁷ is an industry-led platform that serves high school and post-secondary students and employers in the energy sector, agriculture, forestry and trades. Careers NextGen connects with over 300 high schools and all post secondary institutions in the province, has 800 employer partners and a team of 32 professionals²⁸ who support youth and employers to work together. It is an extensive and sophisticated platform that places 1500 young people in internships every year. They are currently upgrading their platform and aim to increase the number of internships to 6000 by 2026.

²⁴ Find the full report and the service delivery model at <https://burnsfund.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/SEL-Service-Delivery-Model-Report-FINAL.pdf>

²⁵ An employment platform is defined in this context as any place (virtual or live) where employers can post job opportunities and young people can apply for them.

²⁶ <https://www.gohireup.ca/>

²⁷ <https://www.careersnextgen.ca/>

²⁸ Careers NextGen supports students and employers with a team of professionals that includes student engagement coordinators (4), employer engagement coordinators (3), career coaches (1), program coordinators (24) and extensive IT support.

The employment platform research completed for CFT revealed that employers and youth want personalized, relationship-based supports that include pre-employment as well as on-going coaching and supports to help manage issues as these arise and increase retention levels. They would like a locally focused platform that draws on youth applicants from youth serving and intermediary organizations across Calgary (possibly Alberta) and that includes supports to pre-screen and match appropriate youth applicants to jobs. There is a gap for this type of augmented platform in the Calgary context, but further research is required to understand more about what it would take to create and sustain an effective platform for Opportunity Youth and to identify the partners who should be involved.

9.0 THINGS TO CONSIDER GOING FORWARD

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic much has been achieved with support from the CFT since early 2020. The CFT members now have an opportunity to reflect on progress and make decisions about what should happen next with each of the main components of the CYEI. The sections below set out considerations intended to help CFT members to discuss and collectively map out the way forward over the next 18 months and beyond.

9.1 THE PILOT PROJECTS

The currently funded pilots have different end dates. The NPower and Calgary Employer Forum (Trellis) contracts end in December 2022. The Miskanawah contract ends in June 2023, and the YEC contract ends in December 2023. Despite delayed starts and suspended activities the pilots are showing promise in terms of developing and testing new ways to engage youth and employers to improve employment outcomes among Opportunity Youth.

As part of planning in the near-term the CFT may want to consider utilizing the current surplus funds²⁹ to extend the NPower, Calgary Employer Forum and Miskanawah pilots to the end of December 2023. This would synchronize the end dates of the four pilots potentially simplifying final reporting and sustainability planning with the implementing agencies.

In terms of longer-term sustainability of the pilots there are several options:

1. The CFT could consider funding the current pilots (or at least some of them) for another two years (2024-2026). The Covid-19 pandemic created enormous challenges for the pilots, and most are just beginning to gain traction. Consistent funding could enable the implementing agencies to test their approaches under more stable conditions and understand more about effective strategies to support Opportunity Youth and employers.

“We started some things from nothing and built them up. It would be a waste of our investment if we left them without any supports.” (CFT Member)

2. Individual funders could agree to provide on-going support for the implementation of the pilots.
3. CFT members could provide support to the implementing agencies to build their funding raising capabilities and find other sources of sustainable funding and/or wind down their activities and supports over time.

²⁹ Burns Memorial Fund is currently holding approximately \$105,000 of unallocated CFT funds. The table had agreed to wait to see what emerged from the PolicyWise research before making a decision about how to allocate these funds.

“I think we need to recognize that nothing is sustainable in the non-profit sector. We can’t expect government to take up programs that are showing promise. If we think [pilots] are successful, then we should keep funding them collectively or individually. We shouldn’t drop good programs because they are no longer new and exciting.” (CFT Member)

“Our sector is pilot rich, sustainability poor. We need to change this.” (CFT Member)

The Table will need to carefully assess the outcomes of each pilot before the end of the current funding term to decide what needs to happen next in each case. It will be important to remember that these are pilots and that not all may be worth pursuing further. In some cases, the CFT may learn more about what doesn’t work than what does.

9.2 FIELD BUILDING

Most of the feedback related to the learning briefs was positive. However, several challenges related to the field building process were identified. There is consensus that more needs to be done to share the learning and new practice with the right people in the right format to actually “build the field”. The CFT could consider the following strategies to strengthen this process:

- Host a gathering of stakeholders connected to Opportunity Youth and employment and support the pilot agencies to showcase lessons and innovative practice
- Reach out to specific groups who may be interested in specific CYEI learning products and offer to present to them. This could include industry groups, Philanthropic Foundations of Canada, other grantmaking collaboratives, youth serving groups and employment intermediaries
- Renew CFT member commitment to sharing the documents within their networks
- Support pilot agencies to present the materials to their peers at conferences and other gatherings across the country

“We [as funders] have a role in creating space for the agencies to share what they are learning with their peers. It is not our place to share these practices, we need to help them to share with others what they’ve learned and developed through this process.” (CFT Member)

- Develop tip sheets and other shorter, easier to consume products
- Develop materials and host webinars with specific stakeholder groups

There are two additional areas that the developmental evaluator plans to document in learning briefs before the end of this phase:

- Supporting Indigenous Opportunity Youth and employers: Lessons from Miskanawah/re:Vision
- Mobile Employment Counselling: Lessons from YEC

To capitalize on the investment that's been made in the field building work, the CFT will want to decide how best to strengthen the sharing and distribution process.

9.3 OTHER CFT-RELATED INITIATIVES

In terms of the other initiatives supported by the CFT and/or some of its members, the CFT could:

- Revisit the “strategic policy opportunities” identified in the PolicyWise report (pg.4) and consider exploring one of these system-level initiatives further. Areas that generated some interest among members of the CFT at the October 2022 meeting included:
 - talking to Momentum about the development of a youth employment policy framework
 - connecting with the Ministry of Labour to co-fund an initiative to build capacity to engage and retain Opportunity Youth among employers
 - funding a government relations expert to work with youth-serving organizations to build a case for Opportunity Youth
 - hosting a gathering in 2022 related to a broader youth employment strategy – bring cross-sector stakeholders together to talk about promising practices, the needs of Opportunity Youth, and share the lessons from the CYEI. This event could be co-hosted by the Business Council of Alberta and Calgary Chamber of Commerce
- Review and consider sharing the *Employers Tip Sheet* developed by PolicyWise with the Calgary Employer Forum and other employer networks in the province
- Review findings from the *Employment Platform Environmental Scan* and decide if a feasibility study for an Opportunity Youth-focused employment platform is an interesting CFT investment opportunity

9.4 COLLABORATIVE FUNDING

In terms of working together as a collaborative, there are short-term and longer-term considerations. In the short term (FY 2022), the CFT may want to consider:

- Meeting more frequently and in-person to reconnect and think strategically about the future
- Hosting another sense-making workshop to celebrate what's been achieved through the CYEI, share what's been learned and explore with stakeholders what should happen next
- Creating a more public presence through a branding process and launch or continuing to work quietly
- Adding new members to the table and deciding who these might be

Beyond 2023, current CFT members will need to decide if they want to continue to fund initiatives together as a Table. Most members expressed their interest in continued

involvement but will only make final decisions on this once specific funding priorities are identified.

Several members are encouraging the group to take the time now to collectively reflect on what's been learned and make careful decisions about what's next.

"We have an opportunity now to pause and reflect on what we've learned. We could think about the CFT as a foundation itself and get really strategic about what we want to fund together." (CFT member)

"We need to decide what we want to be. Do we want to continue to fund good work at the program level? Do we want to fund experimental work with industry and government? Do we want to work at the systems level?" (CFT member)

Investment ideas for the future shared during the interviews include:

Continued funding for the current pilots – Support the agencies to consolidate what they've learned so far and refine their approaches and then continue to implement for another few years.

"We need to acknowledge that the first two years of this initiative have not been optimal because of Covid. We don't know yet what is worth scaling and we have established an amazing foundation to explore the questions related to Opportunity Youth and employment further. I don't think we should walk away from this investment." (CFT member)

Employment and Indigenous Youth – A related area of interest is exploring further investment in Indigenous youth employment. This could build on the work being done by Miskanawah and NPower or could focus on a new initiative.

Post-Covid Youth – Re-engage youth, possibly in another social innovation lab, to explore issues and challenges that are important to them now. The world has significantly changed, and youth may have very different ideas about what is important and where they need support. This area could leverage the City of Calgary's participation in Innovation Training with the Bloomberg Centre for Public Innovation³⁰. The City has decided to focus this training on youth and economic resilience and could help to inform the CFT strategies going forward.

Build in the work by PolicyWise to explore investment opportunities at the systems level – Revisit the options laid out in the report to further explore funding opportunities.

Workforce development with industry – getting employers to the table has been an on-going challenge. The CFT could bring together Chambers of Commerce, unions, trades association and government representatives to explore options to support workforce development with harder to employ populations.

Build on the momentum related to EDI in the private sector – Hiring and retaining Opportunity Youth has the potential to enable bigger industry partners to make progress on their

³⁰ The City of Calgary has been selected by the Bloomberg Center for Public Innovation at John Hopkins University to participate in its 2022 Innovation Training program. <https://newsroom.calgary.ca/city-of-calgary-selected-for-2022-innovation-training-from-bloomberg-center-for-public-innovation/>

commitments to increased EDI in the workforce. The CFT could leverage these commitments by communicating the case for Opportunity Youth as a diverse and untapped pool of talent.

Mental health among Opportunity Youth – CFT members cited the extensive evidence that there is a mental health epidemic among young people and growing need for these kinds of supports. Some expressed concerns that there are likely other funders who are better positioned to fund initiatives in this area.

Two-track process – some members suggested that CFT could create a two-track system – continue to support the pilots that are showing promise and branch out into something new related to youth. This could be at the policy/systems level or providing support for another lab in a new area of interest.

10. CONCLUSION

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.

“For all the challenges we’ve faced over the last two years, we’ve achieved some pretty remarkable things – for us [the funders] and for the funded agencies. So much value has been created and I am excited to see where we decide to go next.” (CFT Member)