

LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC

Supporting Opportunity Youth
During COVID-19 and Beyond



CALGARY YOUTH EMPLOYMENT INITIATIVE



Opportunity Youth are people between the ages of 18 and 29 who are not engaged in school, training, or the labour force. Many have experienced challenging circumstances in their lives that keep them disconnected from employment opportunities, including poverty, homelessness, racism, childhood trauma, and addictions.

Young people have been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, with unemployment rates for youth aged 16 to 24 rising well above rates for other age groups.¹ For Opportunity Youth, the situation has been even more difficult. Opportunity Youth are more likely to:

Seek jobs in sectors

that have been disproportionately impacted by public health measures related to the pandemic (e.g., restaurants, hotels, local retail),

Have existing mental health issues

that are exacerbated by stress and isolation,

Have been economically vulnerable

before the pandemic even began.²

Practitioners who work with Opportunity Youth have had to adapt quickly to meet these challenges within the new world of lockdowns and social distancing. How do you address isolation when you're limited to online interactions? How do you support employment when many of the industries that have proven a good fit for Opportunity Youth have had to cut back on hiring and/or hours? How do you connect with young people if they don't have access to Wi-Fi? These are just a few of the challenges that youth-serving practitioners have been creatively working to manage in the COVID environment.

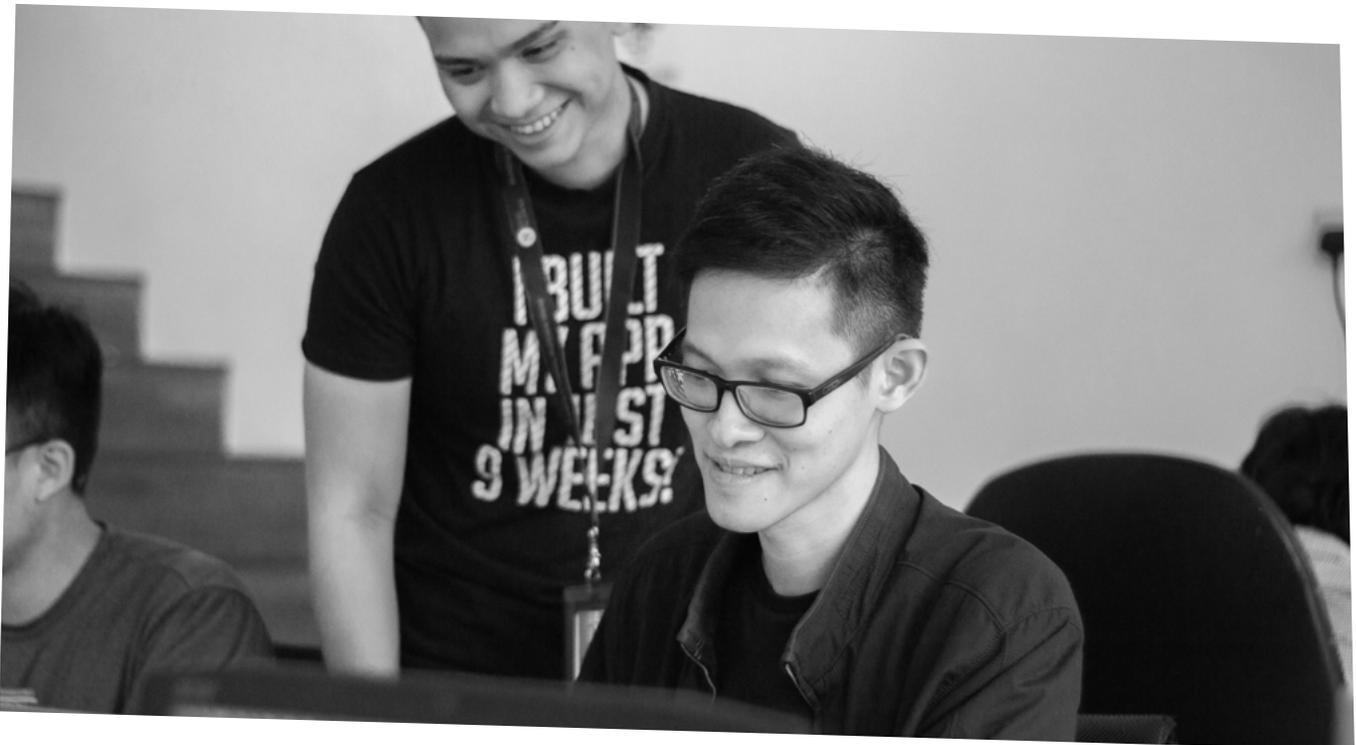
¹ “[U]nemployment rates among youth aged 16 to 24 remain higher than among older groups - and particularly those in low income families.” OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19): Youth and COVID-19: Response, recovery and resilience. 11 June 2020. Available at: bit.ly/3cH3HpP

² OECD. OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19): Youth and COVID-19: Response, recovery and resilience. 11 June 2020. Available at: bit.ly/3qXVqTs

In January 2021, we asked representatives from youth-serving agencies to share how they adapted their services to accommodate the new reality.* This learning brief outlines some of the key ideas that emerged from that conversation, as well as some additional ideas culled from a brief scan of related research and online resources. While COVID public health measures may soon ease, many of the lessons learned through the pandemic are applicable in a post-pandemic environment, including those related to outreach, supporting mental wellness, identifying new employment opportunities, and preparing young people to work in an employment environment that is becoming increasingly technology based.



The pandemic has changed the way we work, ushering in a “digital transformation” and increasing the number of work-from-home opportunities. For this reason, some of the technology-related issues that emerged for Opportunity Youth during the pandemic are likely to remain once public health measures have been lifted.



* We connected with agencies involved in the Calgary Youth Employment Initiative. These included Miskanawah, NPower Canada, Trellis, the Youth Employment Centre.

What challenges did opportunity youth experience during the pandemic?

Over the past year, Opportunity Youth have experienced challenges related to:



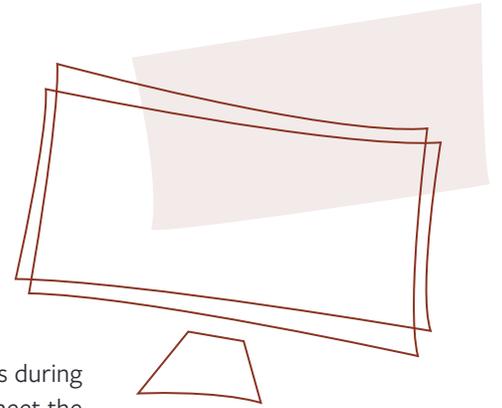
Virtual interactions

Changes in the labour market

Mental health

These challenges can be exacerbated by issues that pre-date the pandemic, including trauma, homelessness, racism, and economic vulnerability.

Challenges related to virtual interactions



Many of us have developed a new appreciation for in-person interactions and supports during the pandemic. Virtual interactions are a welcome contingency plan, but they do not meet the human need for connection in quite the same way that face-to-face interactions do.³ They also create a number of additional challenges for Opportunity Youth, including:

Limited or no access to Wi-Fi and/or devices that would allow them to search for jobs and access virtual supports.

“Opportunity Youth sometimes have lack of access to wi-fi, and this has really affected them in particular because they’re not able to access online job listings or attend virtual networking events or workshops with employers – so they’re missing a lot of those opportunities right now.”

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“Many Indigenous youth have no access to technology at all, and some have no access to Wi-Fi. And even when they do, they might not have control over it. I gave a laptop to a youth and her dad lost it two days after I gave it to her. So what happens? Do you give them another one? The answer is yes – but that looks bad at a Western [funding] table.”

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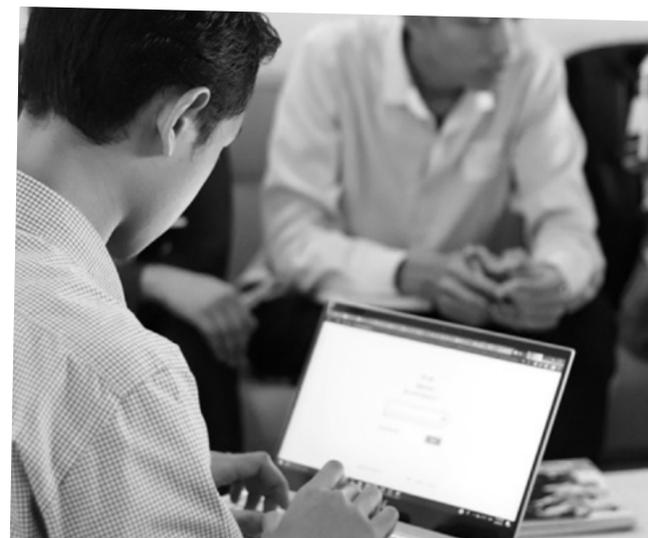
Lack of experience, confidence, or comfort with online interactions.

“We’ve found that there’s a reluctance for people to come online – a shyness...”

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“Being online, you have to have more confidence than you do in person – because you’re showing your whole world – your background.”

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³ Pinker Susan. (2015). The Village Effect: How Face-to-Face Contact Can Make Us Healthier and Happier Vintage Canada (Reprint edition).



No space within their living situation that provides for quiet, uninterrupted learning or work engagements. (For example, they may have children or multiple roommates or family members living with them.)

For some, there's just no quiet space to work at home.... Some of our youth are using closets or bathrooms to work in. They have no proper desk space..."

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"For a lot of Indigenous youth, the idea of working remotely in a multi-family or multi-generational home is really challenging. You can tell your grandma that you are working but [she'll interrupt you anyway]."

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Reluctance to be on camera because they are embarrassed about their living situation.

"We had one guy coming on camera from a mattress on the floor in a room he shared with other people. How do we work with them to feel more comfortable... and help them to understand that no one will judge them?"

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“ I had one youth who lives with a large, multi-generational family tell me ‘The only place I can work is in the bathroom because I can pull the [shower] curtain.’”

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Lack of in-person connections and supports.

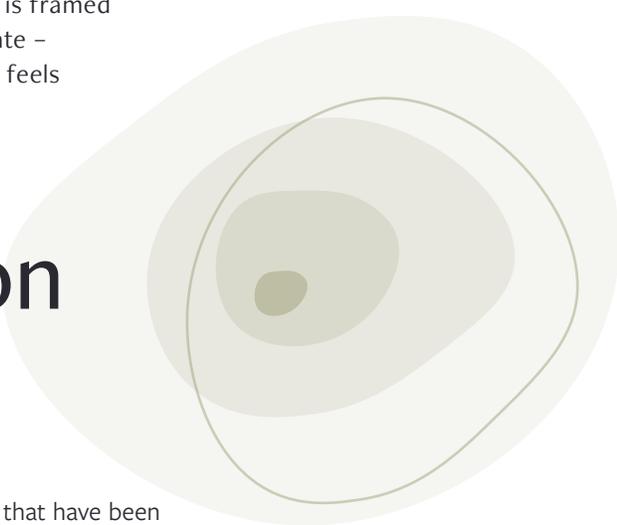
“A lot of Opportunity Youth benefit from in-person, one-to-one support. With everything moving to virtual space, it’s been hard...”

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“For Indigenous communities, it is really important to have that in-person connection. Ceremonies are framed that way, meeting new people is framed that way. Technology is something completely new to try to navigate – especially when you’re trying to maintain the essence of culture. It feels unnatural...”

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Increased competition and fewer jobs



Many of the jobs that Opportunity Youth typically pursue are within industries that have been severely impacted by the pandemic – including restaurants, hotels, entertainment (movie theatres), and in-person retail. Seasonal work has also been impacted – including, summer camps, festivals, and events like the Calgary Stampede. Furthermore, many young people are employed in customer-facing jobs which do not easily translate into work-from-home situations. It’s not surprising, then, that the youth unemployment rate is considerably higher than the rate for older adults. In Calgary, for example, the unemployment rate among youth aged 15-24 is 21.9% – almost double the average unemployment rate (11.3%) and considerably higher than Canada’s rate (9.2%).⁴

“Job losses are not the only way the COVID-19 crisis has impacted employment. In addition to those who are now out of work, the number of people who were employed but worked less than half their usual hours because of the pandemic increased by 2.5 million from February to April [2020]....Losses continued to be more rapid in jobs with less security and poorer pay....Declines were sharper for employees earning less than two-thirds of the median hourly wage of \$25.04 (-38.1 per cent) and those paid by the hour (-25.1 per cent).

Statistics Canada said this is consistent with job declines observed in accommodation and food services, and wholesale and retail trade, which tend to be more precarious and lower paying.”

CBC NEWS. CANADA LOST NEARLY 2 MILLION JOBS IN APRIL AMID COVID-19 CRISIS: STATISTICS CANADA. [BIT.LY/2PIDVTW](https://www.cbc.com/news/canada-2020-04-20)

⁴ Wyllie, K. Scruggs, E. Calgary Economic Region. Labour Market Review: October 2020. November 6, 2020. Available at: bit.ly/3w7dgab

“Our employer partners, whenever they have an open position available, they get such high volume of applicants now – so it’s taking so long to sort through applications which is causing a delay in how they can put those young people through or even if they’d think of putting them through.”

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“With reduced hours of business, that translates into reduced hours for employees. So employers are still hiring, but they may be only hiring part time or only one person whereas they would have hired more pre-COVID.”

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The youth service providers we spoke with pointed out that higher unemployment rates are creating a bigger talent pool for jobs; for this reason, Opportunity Youth are now competing against adults who have more experience.

“With so many layoffs [among] the adult population, the talent pool becomes much larger. Adults who wouldn’t normally apply for these positions [have] been laid off for so long, so now they’re applying. So, Opportunity Youth are competing not only against peers, but also against adults with ten plus years experience.”

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Mental health issues

Findings from multiple sources show that, compared to other age groups, young adults (18-29) have experienced higher levels of stress, anxiety, and loneliness during the pandemic. The service providers we spoke with have observed this as well:

“For a lot of our more vulnerable Opportunity Youth, the pandemic has exacerbated mental health issues and anxiety.”

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“COVID adds to mental health issues. It’s hard to be motivated to feel good about the future – you can’t downplay that. In our culture, we go to ceremony and meet with Elders to try to work through those issues and even that’s taken away. It’s hard when you’re really struggling with something and the way you would typically help yourself is also not available. We’ve tried to do that virtually, but it’s not the same.”

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The impact of COVID on mental health is all the more concerning because of the limitations the pandemic has created for service provision. According to a recent Canadian survey, the crisis has triggered “substantial restrictions in service delivery” (both mental health and addictions), despite increases in demand.⁶ The need to transition to virtual services creates further issues related to “lack of human connection and inequitable access.”⁷

“The majority of providers” in a Canadian survey “noted substantial restrictions in service delivery at their respective places of work. A small but notable number responded that their agency/organization had completely shut down and was offering no mental health (18%) or substance use (12%) supports. Half of respondents reported that all of their services were being delivered off-site.”

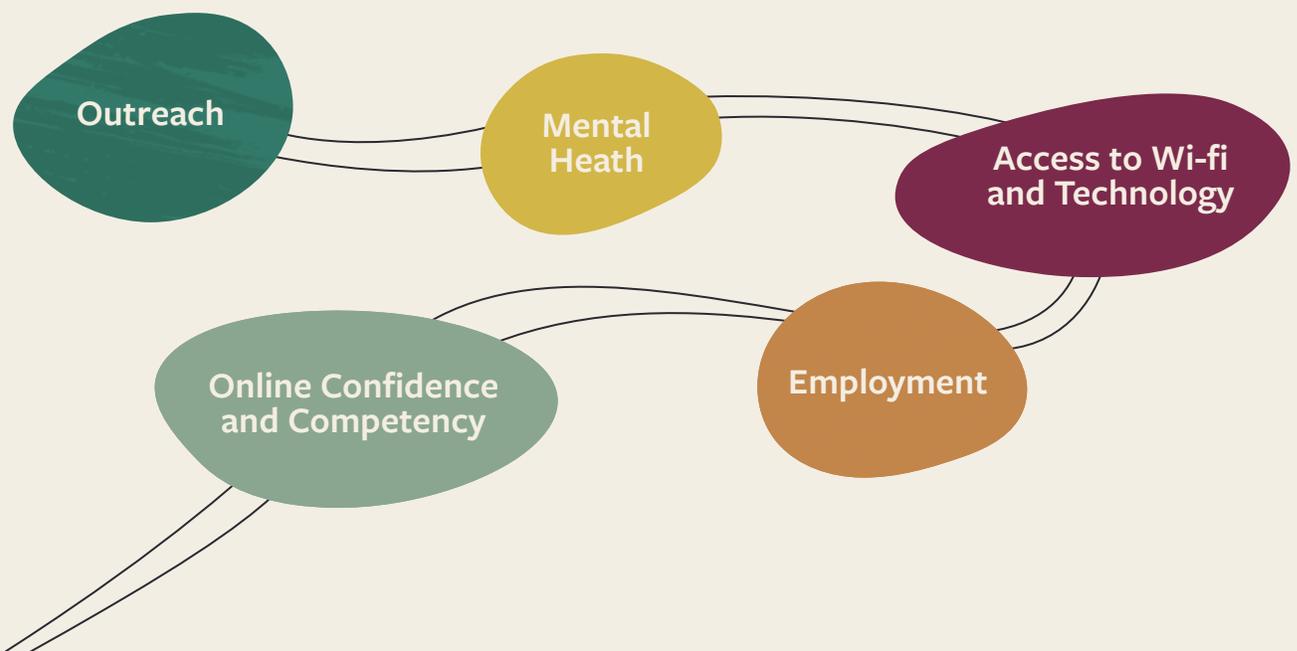
THULIEN, N. NOBLE, A. YOUTH HOMELESSNESS DURING COVID-19: FRONT-LINE PROVIDER PRACTICE ADAPTATIONS. HOMELESS HUB. AUGUST 13, 2020. [BIT.LY/3tZ8ytf](https://bit.ly/3tZ8ytf)

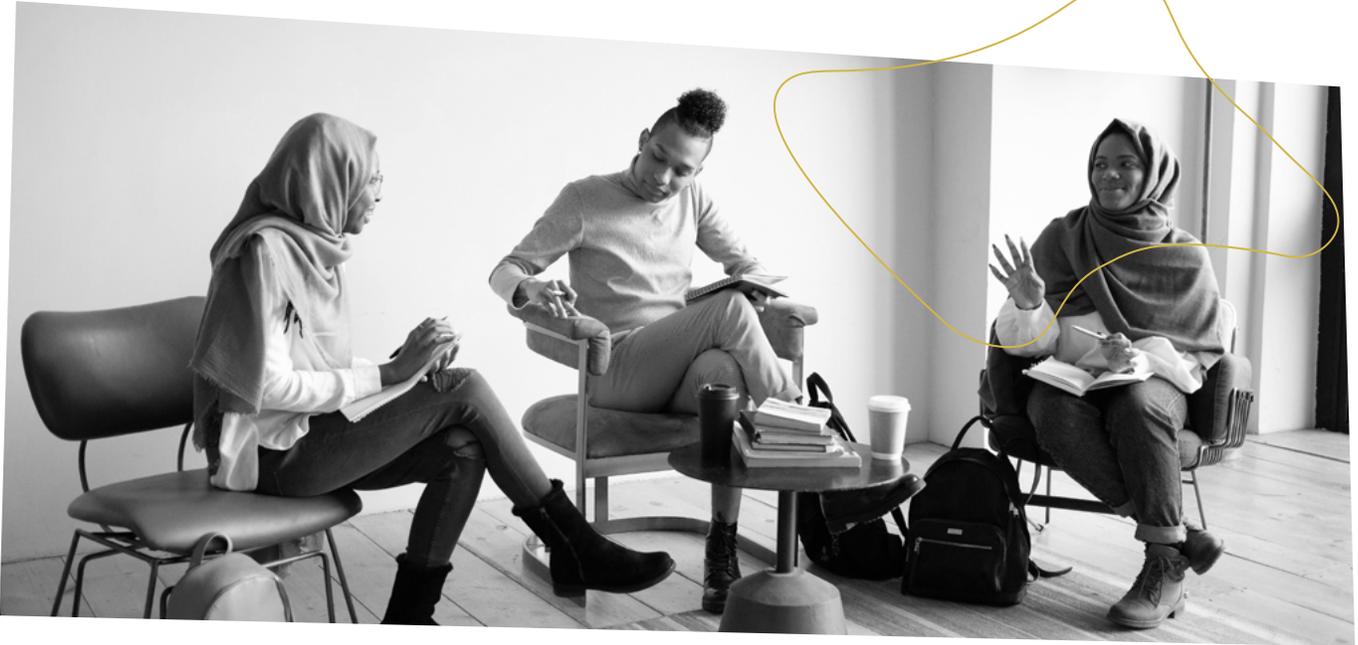
⁵ OECD. OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19): Youth and COVID-19: Response, recovery and resilience. 11 June 2020. Available at: bit.ly/3lVvDui

^{6,7} Thulien, N. Noble, A. Youth Homelessness During COVID-19: Front-Line Provider Practice Adaptations. Homeless Hub. August 13, 2020. Available at: bit.ly/3tZ8ytf

What strategies have youth-serving agencies developed to meet these challenges?

During the COVID pandemic, service providers augmented their approaches to work with Opportunity Youth in many creative and effective ways, including changes related to:





Reaching out

The pandemic brings with it the risk that Opportunity Youth will be further disconnected from services and supports. For this reason, service providers in Calgary have bolstered their outreach strategies to ensure they are connecting with youth who may not be accessing services. They do this by:

Developing partnerships with sites or organizations where Opportunity Youth are more likely to be found. For example, one agency developed a partnership with the Calgary Housing Company, the largest supplier of affordable housing in the city, to be able to connect with young people who live in low-income housing. By gaining access to their housing sites, the outreach worker was able to connect to youth who are not currently accessing services.

“Our outreach worker has been working with tenant liaisons – going door to door with them to chat about employment with youth and natural supports. He connects with the household, provides his cell phone number, and arranges to follow up with the youth.”

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“We’re restructuring existing partnerships we have with community associations, churches, looking to change some of the messaging going out to say ‘yes there are jobs, we want to work together to get you to that point.’ Then building relationships where we know there are more Opportunity Youth in the city – connecting with natural and professional supports.”

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Shifting marketing materials to identify where the outreach worker can be found each day, and specifying the window of time that they will be available to meet with youth.

Engaging youth in the recruitment process so that they are able to help connect their peers to services: “Peers are trusted messengers and stay connected through social media to young people who might otherwise be missed in the absence of school or community-based in-person outreach.”⁸

Increasing investments in social marketing and social media, and seeking to make posted content as engaging as possible.

“We did lots of social media before COVID but we’ve had to step up our game because we’re not able to see youth in-person – so staff need to be really engaging online. We feature silly staff photos, stories of real youth doing things – just being more creative with our social marketing.”

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Adjusting program offerings so that they work well in an online environment (e.g., one organization found that events to highlight a particular employer did not work as well online as they did in-person, so they changed their approach; instead of having employers present, they had youth who have worked for that employer share their experiences. This turned out to be a far more engaging approach.).

Offering mobile employment counselling.

“Being out in community registering kids – we’ll continue with that [after the pandemic eases] – especially in suburbs where there are huge Opportunity Youth populations and transit can be an issue sometimes. We’re actually wondering if it would make sense to have a couple of counsellors in those areas.”

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⁸ Miles, M. Martin, N., Swigert, M. *Digital Summer Youth Employment Toolkit 2.0*. Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions. December 2020. Available at: bit.ly/3crYG5q

Supporting human connection & mental wellness

Service providers have developed a number of creative ‘work-arounds’ to address the lack of human connection and support mental health. These include:

Being responsive to emerging needs outside the scope of the program (e.g., provision of food, gift cards, access to counselling and technology).

Taking more time to connect with youth via text messaging and phone. This includes doing assessments through a series of smaller interactions via text messages and phone calls over the course of a couple of weeks and focusing on relationship-building.

Engaging peer mentors to support deeper conversations and connections.

“We’ve included a peer mentor in our programs, and that has been a game changer. When Opportunity Youth meet with someone who has been through the program, someone who has experienced similar challenges, they open up way more. They can meet one-on-one with a peer mentor, or with two mentors at a time in a smaller group setting... If they’re having challenges, it’s easier to share at a peer level – more comfortable. It’s been great for bringing more participants out of their shell.”

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Spending time in outdoor spaces where young people tend to hang out – basketball courts skating rinks, and community hubs, for example. (The workers follow strict COVID protocols related to masks and social distancing when they meet with youth this way.)

Implementing weekly welfare checks by phone or email.

“ We do [welfare checks] with all our clients, not just Opportunity Youth, but it gives our staff a good pulse. That’s why we can say ‘Oh this youth went back to the reserve’ and that sort of thing.”

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Making programming cohorts “smaller than usual to increase relationships among participants and between participants and staff.”⁹

Creating online programming that is more relational and individualized.

Facilitating virtual connections between youth, and encouraging them to share their “experiences, ideas, stories, coping strategies and more.”¹⁰

Creating a greater focus on mental health and self-care in their programming.

Connecting youth to mental health services and supports. This sometimes involves investigating supports in other jurisdictions as some clients have moved back to their reserve or to another city during COVID.

⁹ Miles, M. Martin, N., Swigert, M. *Digital Summer Youth Employment Toolkit 2.0*. Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions. December 2020. Available at: bit.ly/3crYG5q

¹⁰ Yohalem, N., Cooley, S., Guizar, M., Ocana, V., Meshnick, M. (2020). *In their Own Words: Young People Describe the Impact of COVID-19*. Seattle, WA: Community Center for Education Results. Available at: bit.ly/3sttAQE

Increasing access to wi-fi and technology



Some of the ways that service providers are addressing inequitable access to Wi-Fi include:

Conducting a technology assessment with Opportunity Youth early in the intake or onboarding process to identify:

- Access to Wi-Fi,
- Types of devices available to them (if any),
- Knowledge and confidence in using online platforms like Zoom or Teams,
- Their living situation and any other barriers that may impact engagement.¹¹

Letting young people know where they can access free WI-FI within the city (e.g., Shaw Hotspots).



¹¹ Miles, M. Martin, N., Swigert, M. *Digital Summer Youth Employment Toolkit 2.0*. Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions. December 2020. Available at: bit.ly/3crYG5q

Advocating for and identifying funding to connect Opportunity Youth to low or no-cost Wi-Fi.

The federal government has created a program to support low-income families with low-cost internet access. While many Opportunity Youth no longer live with their families, the program might be helpful for those who do. Called [Connecting Families \(ic.gc.ca/eic/site/111.nsf/eng/h_00002.html\)](https://ic.gc.ca/eic/site/111.nsf/eng/h_00002.html), the program is scheduled to run until March 2022.

Partnering with organizations that are able to support a device lending program. In Calgary, the local United Way and the Calgary Public Library have provided this type of assistance. In other jurisdictions, agencies have partnered with private corporations to provide refurbished computers and technical support.¹²

Establishing technology lending processes for participants in their programming. NPower Canada created a laptop lending bank where students in their program can borrow a laptop so that they can participate in programming and job searches. These youth return the laptop when they achieve employment.

Reallocating funds for transportation (or other items that have less relevance in a COVID context) to technology-related costs.¹³

Using only those technology platforms that function well on a smart phone as that is the only device available to many youth.¹⁴

Providing mobile Wi-Fi services.

One public school system in the US “parked school buses with Wi-Fi hotspots next to homeless shelters to provide residents with internet access.”

MILES, M. MARTIN, N., SWIGERT, M. DIGITAL SUMMER YOUTH EMPLOYMENT TOOLKIT 2.0. ASPEN INSTITUTE FORUM FOR COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS. DECEMBER 2020. AVAILABLE AT: [BIT.LY/3CRYG5Q](https://bit.ly/3crYG5Q)

^{12, 13, 14} Miles, M. Martin, N., Swigert, M. *Digital Summer Youth Employment Toolkit 2.0*. Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions. December 2020. Available at: bit.ly/3crYG5Q

Enhancing youth's online confidence and competence



Some of the ways that providers have sought to bolster young people's confidence to engage online include the following:

Letting youth know that everyone is struggling with at-home space and no one is judging them online.

Offering clients regular access to over-the-phone and online technical assistance.

“Many youth don't know how to use Zoom or Teams effectively. We spend a lot of time coaching them on tech issues, helping youth get set up and proficient navigating the online platforms.”

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Creating how-to and trouble-shooting resources (e.g., FAQs, videos, etc.).

Providing training in “online etiquette, professionalism, and rules (e.g., When should video be on? When is it okay to turn it off? What does it mean to be professional while on a video conference?),” etc.¹⁵

“We’ve found that youth are not always answering their devices in the most appropriate places. For example, a number of youth, when we’ve called them, have answered in class. And it’s like ‘Let’s reschedule - and if it’s an employer who’s calling you, make sure you step out of class.’”

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“Some youth do not know how to create an appropriate online or remote identity.... Programs need to coach youth on these parts of the online employment process and need to support them to think about their brand: What is the image they want to portray online and in-person?”

CALGARY-BASED SERVICE PROVIDER

Connecting youth to employment opportunities

Given the uncertainty and constraints of the current hiring environment, connecting youth to employment opportunities may be one of the most challenging aspects of this work right now. Strategies gleaned from both online resources and Calgary-based practitioners include the following:

Offering pre-screening and interview-scheduling for employers that are receiving high volumes of applications so that Opportunity Youth have greater access to hiring managers.

“Employers don’t have to come to us for help - they have a ton of applications, but the fact that we can pre-screen applicants takes so much off their plate.”

CALGARY-BASED SERVICE PROVIDER

“Pre-screening and setting up an interview appointment help Opportunity Youth to make sure they’re the first in line to get those opportunities. Whereas if they were trying to do it on their own they wouldn’t necessarily have that connection to a hiring manager.”

CALGARY-BASED SERVICE PROVIDER

¹⁵ Miles, M. Martin, N., Swigert, M. *Digital Summer Youth Employment Toolkit 2.0*. Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions. December 2020. Available at: bit.ly/3crYG5q

Implementing virtual hiring events and/or appointment-based events with pre-scheduled interviews.

Monitoring trends and targeting employers that are busier because of COVID.

Targeting positions that are new or increasing because of COVID – including sanitizer/greeter positions, remote customer support, workers in long-term care facilities, and ‘Click and Collect’ (personal shopper) positions at grocery stores.

Identifying opportunities for young people to “respond to their communities’ needs related to the pandemic, economic downturn, and movement for racial justice.”¹⁶ For example, one US agency responded to stay-at-home orders by engaging youth in “pandemic response internships involving delivery of food and PPE, testing, and outreach. The young people who participated experienced a huge sense of empowerment and responsibility to the community.” A group in Chicago engaged youth in developing public service announcements about masks and social distancing.¹⁷

Offering job training now so that when jobs open up, Opportunity Youth have an edge. For example, summer camps would normally be recruiting and training young people in the winter months, but they are ‘on hold’ because of COVID-related uncertainties. One agency is providing training in First Aid and High Five training¹⁸ so that their young people will be ahead of the game when summer camps are suddenly hiring.

“A lot of our young people would apply to be counsellors in summer camps – and right now is when camps would do recruitment and advertising. But there’s so much uncertainty around what that would look like that they don’t know how much staff they need to hire. So hiring has been put on such a hold. When they do get that sorted out, they will be in a scramble to hire the young people and there will be a shorter time where they can onboard and train. By providing the training that they would normally provide, we give our youth an advantage... That’s going to position our youth to be ready.”

CALGARY-BASED SERVICE PROVIDER

^{16, 17} Miles, M. Martin, N., Swigert, M. *Digital Summer Youth Employment Toolkit 2.0*. Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions. December 2020. Available at: bit.ly/3crYG5q

¹⁸ High Five is a Canadian training program for those working in recreation and leisure programs. See: bit.ly/39n97oV

Conclusion

As Winston Churchill famously said, we should “never let a good crisis go to waste.” The pandemic, while challenging, offers opportunities for innovation and learning. By sharing the strategies that youth-serving agencies have developed to assist Opportunity Youth in the COVID crisis, we hope to inspire others in their efforts to support youth during these challenging times – and beyond.

Futher resources

Miles, M. Martin, N., Swigert, M. *Digital Summer Youth Employment Toolkit 2.0*. Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions. December 2020. Available at: bit.ly/3fg9soG

Yohalem, N., Cooley, S., Guizar, M., Ocana, V., Meshnick, M. (2020). *In their Own Words: Young People Describe the Impact of COVID-19*. Seattle, WA: Community Center for Education Results. Available at: bit.ly/3tSu96K

About the Collaborative Funders' Table

In 2017, the Collaborative Funders' Table (CFT) launched a collaborative funding initiative with the goal of improving employment prospects for Opportunity Youth in Calgary. The initiative focuses on the interface between 'supply' (youth and youth serving agencies) and 'demand' (employers). The goal is to ensure that youth seeking work are better prepared to meet the needs of employers, and that employers are better able to recruit and retain youth. The Collaborative Funders' Table includes: the Calgary Foundation, the United Way of Calgary and Area, Burns Memorial Fund, the RBC Foundation, the City of Calgary, JPMorgan Chase Foundation, and other anonymous donors.

Suggested Citation:

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