





YOUTH-LED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

# STRATEGIES & TOOLS

## CANDID REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD

ANA SKINNER & CAITLIN FRENCH, 2012

A LAIDLAW LEARNING REPORT

**LAIDLAW**  
FOUNDATION



# BACKGROUND

The Laidlaw Foundation is a private foundation based in Toronto, Canada that supports passionate young people in taking action on issues that affect them and their communities. The Foundation supports the process of youth organizing, where young people work collectively with their allies to identify, advocate for and instigate change on critical issues that are having an impact on their communities and broader society. Each year the Foundation invests close to \$1.5 million in youth-led groups and intermediary organizations that are based primarily in Toronto.

Prior to 2007, the Foundation had several distinct funding programs that focused on the arts, the environment, youth engagement and social inclusion. This changed when the Foundation Board underwent a planning process to identify how its granting strategies could work more synergistically and have a greater impact. The board identified that young people were involved or had the potential to be involved in all facets of the Foundation's activities. The Foundation's experience found that young people use arts-based strategies to address the issues they are facing; that young people mobilize to address environmental and community health concerns; and that engaged young people are a cornerstone of an inclusive society. In 2008, the Laidlaw Foundation launched a five-year strategic plan that focused its granting, convening and knowledge-sharing activities on supporting the process of youth organizing.

The Foundation is committed to ongoing evaluation. As part of its evaluation activities, interviews were conducted with 48 people involved in 10 of its funded groups. The stakeholders that were interviewed included the founders of youth-led groups, coordinators, partners, participants and volunteers. Drawing on an evaluation framework called "Most Significant Change," informants were asked to share what they considered to be the most significant effect of this work on themselves, on their group, and on the community. In analyzing the data, there emerged significant insights into the underlying values of youth-led community organizing, youth organizing strategies and tools, and implications for funding practices. These have been developed into a series of reports to share the Foundation's learning with the broader community.

# YOUTH-LED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING:

## What We Are Learning

The Laidlaw Foundation's work is based on a positive youth development framework that asserts that every young person needs access to multiple opportunities to identify their talents; unconditional support from adults and allies; and multiple opportunities to act on the issues that concern them and that they are passionate about. Looking back on the Foundation's history of investing in youth-led social change strategies,<sup>1</sup> it is clear that young people and their allies (people who support youth-led and youth-driven community change strategies) are actively reshaping their communities, redefining organizational structures and changing the script of how community and social problems are defined, and by whom. The terms 'youth' and 'youth-led' often result in assumptions that the scope and impact of this work extends only to young people, as though they live separate from their broader community and social contexts. The Foundation's learning has been that young people are not organizing in order to fix or change other youth; they are organizing to create supportive and empowering environments so that their peers, families and communities can thrive.

So what do these efforts get called? Engagement... organizing... trouble-making...

The Foundation uses the term 'youth organizing' in its guidelines and materials. 'Youth-led community organizing' is another way to capture the breadth of this work. Expressions like 'youth engagement' often beg the questions: engaged in what, and on whose terms? Often the answers are: in an external group or organization, and on terms not conceived by young people themselves. 'Youth organizing' often begs the question: organizing to do what? The assumption here is that young people only wish to work on 'youth' issues, whatever those might be.

# YOUTH-LED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING:

## A Working Definition

Youth-led community organizing is a process wherein young people and their allies draw their mandate from other youth, communities and their own lived experiences. From this knowledge and experience, groups develop and implement interventions, strategies and initiatives that work to improve and transform communities, institutions and social systems.

# IT'S NOT ABOUT 'YOUTH'

As counterintuitive as it may seem, the work of the Foundation is not about 'youth.' The Foundation's vision is grounded in the concept of social inclusion and the role of young people in creating inclusive societies. The Foundation recognizes that young people are leading deep civic engagement efforts aimed at transforming the ways in which social problems are defined and solved. Youth-led community organizing is like most traditions of community organizing in that it acknowledges that people with lived experiences are experts in the issues that shape their lives. As one community organizer and adult ally reflected: "People's experiences and their adversities create in them a resilience and a third eye, a perspective that really is so different than any other kind of perspective." These strategies place the knowledge of young people and their communities at the core of broader social and community change efforts.

The Foundation believes that the receptivity of institutions and decision-makers to young people's priorities is a proportionate measure to the inclusiveness of society. Listening to the priorities and issues being raised by youth offers critical insights into what needs to change in order for young people to feel genuinely included and valued. While the focus of the Foundation's work is on youth, the same approach could be used to assess how residents or other groups are genuinely engaged in processes that directly shape their lives and well-being. The Foundation builds from the expertise and insights of young people to illuminate experiences of social exclusion and marginalization. In advocating for social inclusion, the Foundation recognizes the pivotal role that young people play in building inclusive and safe spaces for their peers, families and communities.

1. The Foundation's current organizational strategies build on the Foundation's work to date in supporting youth engagement. The Youth Engagement Program was launched in 2000 and transitioned into the Youth Organizing Program in 2008.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are deeply grateful to everyone who shared their insights with us through the Laidlaw Foundations Most Significant Change evaluation process. We had the opportunity to connect with youth organizers, community organizers, program participants, volunteers and partners. Your perspectives offered candid and rich insights into youth-led community organizing efforts across Toronto. It was a privilege to listen and to learn from you.





# OVERVIEW

Youth-led community organizing builds on the lived experiences of young people and communities to develop and implement interventions, strategies and initiatives that work to improve and transform communities, institutions and social systems. It is a process that nurtures personal growth and fosters broader community transformation. Throughout Laidlaw Foundation evaluation interviews, stakeholders described strategies they use in their work. This report shares candid reflections straight from the experiences of other young people, allies and community partners involved in youth organizing work in Toronto. It outlines examples of strategies that young people and community partners have used to:

- Change the way young people are perceived in the community
- Embed an analysis of power into their organizations and groups
- Reach young people and create ways for them to be validated in their experiences
- Develop accessible programs
- Build a stronger sense of team
- Develop community accountability structures
- And more...

This report offers youth organizers, community organizers, partners and allies tools and strategies to build on when working with grassroots community-based initiatives. If you are currently working with community-based initiatives either on the frontline or as a partner, these strategies may help to flag issues that you hadn't yet thought of or experienced directly. These insights may resonate with your own experiences or offer new perspectives on the work you are doing. This isn't designed to be a checklist or a how-to guide. Consider it a resource where you can take and build on what is helpful for you.

# CHANGING THE PARADIGM

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## STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING EMPOWERING APPROACHES TO WORKING WITH YOUTH AND COMMUNITIES

Youth-led groups and intermediary organizations that support youth organizing work to challenge how social problems are defined and who is engaged in creating solutions. Within traditional social service approaches, people are often seen as a series of issues as opposed to whole individuals, and divisions are created between who is “giving” services and who is “receiving” them. This fragmentation is something that youth organizers and their allies challenge in their daily work. Here are some ways that people are developing empowering approaches to working in and with their communities.

## SEE PEOPLE AS A WHOLE

Groups identify a need to do things differently because many existing programs and services are not meeting the needs of young people and their communities. Many groups work to change how young people see themselves and how young people are seen in society.

“Rather than breaking them [young people who have experienced homelessness and insecure housing] up into a parcel of issues and case managing them so that they have a psychiatrist here, they have a housing worker over there.... I mean, all those things are necessary and don’t get me wrong, I don’t know how we could exist if we didn’t operate in a city that had many of these resources, but my point is that we should understand that the way resources are structured reinforces negative things about people.” — ADULT ALLY AND YOUTH PROGRAM COORDINATOR

“These systems that reinforce all these often-tragic things that happen to them, and I’m not trying to diminish them in any way, but they are not all that the person is. As long as that’s the lens that we’re looking at the youth through this is going to dramatically influence their feelings of potential and their feelings of possibility. Like I said at the beginning, those are the things that make a difference: the personal narrative and self-talk of people. That’s what is going to give them the power to get through the rough spots while still keeping their eyes on some kind of positive future. To me that’s what we’re developing here.” — ADULT ALLY AND YOUTH PROGRAM COORDINATOR

# CHALLENGE ASSUMPTIONS

about the way community services are delivered

It is important to question and reflect on the ways in which community-based services are delivered so that we don't assume that things have to be done a certain way – especially if the usual way fails to create supportive, dignified and empowering environments. Youth organizers and their partners working directly with young people who have lived experiences with homelessness, the criminal justice system and living in racialized communities reflected on how they challenge labels and assumptions and have adopted different approaches to working with young people.

“I think that we're changing this idea of what it means to be 'at risk' ...For so long in the youth sector they are always like, 'are you doing the 'at risk' ones?'. [We] have heard that question so many times: 'are you getting the ones that are on the corners?', even from funders and so-called people that get it. There are so many young people at risk and it doesn't necessarily have to do with guns or gun violence or gangs.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

# BRING ATTENTION

to what is working and not working in your communities

Lived experience is an essential form of expertise, though it is not always valued or incorporated into traditional models of working with youth and communities. Youth-led groups and their partners often base their work on their own lived experiences and those of their communities, bringing attention to priorities and issues that they are seeing.

“I think that people are excited to hear the truth and scared of it at the same time. We're well positioned to tell the truth, the unedited truth. We don't edit what we know in order to couch it or make it sound better because that's how we started. We started in spaces where people could tell the truth and to say what was really going on with them.” — COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

“It's basically saying, 'okay, let's do some beautiful stuff and let's have a beautiful family that's grounded in real value. Let's also ensure that we don't sugar coat what the reality of the situation is. Let's make sure that we hold our ground and not make compromises and really be true to ourselves.’” — COMMUNITY PARTNER

# CONDUCT YOUR OWN COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH

Every day groups are experiencing what is going on in their communities. They are also learning firsthand about which initiatives are working and which ones are not working. Whether it is an evaluation of their own strategies or a scan of what is happening on the ground in their community, this research is important to help groups better understand what is needed, plan their own strategies and raise awareness about what is going on.

“They've been collecting huge amounts of data. They have all this practical experience. I think they'll probably take it to thesis level because they really want to get into the education system. That's what they've been critiquing for the last four years of work. They're building a curriculum, looking at different media influences and using the whole hip hop movement.” — COMMUNITY PARTNER

“We also did a research paper last year talking about grief and trauma for frontline workers. That has been an incredibly powerful tool to introduce people to [the network]. People see themselves reflected in different ways in that research piece.” — COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

# LET YOUR WORK SPEAK FOR ITSELF

Youth-led groups and their partners can face resistance by others as they work to do things differently. In this context, sometimes you have to focus on the work to not get bogged down by the negativity.

“At the beginning, when there was a lot of hesitancy, we really just tried to let the work speak for itself. We focused on what it was we wanted to do. We didn’t pay attention to the negativity that might come our way, negativity that comes from fear and also something new. We needed to understand where that comes from, recognize it and just focus on the work.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

# BE PERSISTENT

and challenge assumptions about how things are done

Young people are developing alternative programs and projects because the status quo is not working. Usually it is not the residents and young people themselves who are defining what the problems and priorities are; the issues are most often defined by organizations and institutions outside of the community. Many groups are now working to change people’s assumptions about what is needed in their lives and challenge the stereotypes and identities imposed on them.

“If it was only us three alone trying to demand some things from the institutions we would get shut down left and right. So be persistent and keep pushing and if you have a passion for what you’re doing keep at it. Hopefully things will fall into place and you’ll meet good people that have the same passion as you and help you to carry out your work.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

“[A good strategy is] to be persistent, to keep pushing, ‘cause a lot of the time, especially with the police and the school system, there were a number of times that we tried to reach out and we got turned down. We could have easily given up and said ‘you know what, there is nothing we can do about it, we’re just a small organization, let’s forget about it,’ but we learned to keep pushing. Sooner or later someone will hear you. The more people you have with you, the more parents and children supporting you and your cause is what makes things possible.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

# CREATE ORGANIZATIONAL MODELS THAT EMBODY YOUR VALUES

Youth-led groups and intermediary organizations that support youth organizing efforts are not assuming that they need to become traditional nonprofit organizations or charities. They are taking time to create structures that enable them to do this work in a way that honours their values.

“You can’t start a network as one person. To learn from and with other people, to trust other people and to really try to build a community is also a network. It’s sort of an organization that you want the world to be like. We do so much stuff that is aspirational.” — COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

“I think anybody who’s involved with [the network] in anyway is both a service user, in a sense, as well as an integral part. There is no real difference. People who are involved are building it. People give and receive. We don’t differentiate that much. We’re trying to create a cultural shift in the sector by diminishing the split

between the “service provider” and the “service user”. This split is political and is causing enormous harm in so many ways.” — COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

“We were really struggling with ‘can we do this differently?’ ‘Can we interact and create a system of relationships in which we can lean on each other for support and healing and find human relationships and then offer that and broaden that and scale it up?’ It’s a big experiment but I think that’s one of the biggest parts of it.” — COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

# COMMUNITY ACCOUNTABILITY

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## STRATEGIES FOR BEING RELEVANT TO, DRIVEN BY AND GROUNDED IN COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

A defining feature of grassroots, youth-led and community-based work is the commitment to communities and drawing mandates from the lived experiences of peers and community members. This is a continual process of checking in and adjusting strategies to reflect the priorities and needs of the communities you are working in. Here are some examples of strategies that groups use to stay connected with and do work relevant to the young people and the communities they care about:

### SEEK ADVICE

from peers and people with lived experiences

Youth-led groups often start by engaging young people and community members in creating solutions by asking them what is needed.

“I’d consult him before I went into various meetings to get his perspective. He would give me ideas and he’d say very simple things that are very true, like ‘a hungry man is an angry man.’ Breaking down that concept of a hungry man being an angry man within the context of our communities here in Toronto showed what it leads to. I started to really take his counsel to heart.” — COMMUNITY PARTNER AND YOUTH ORGANIZER

### BE INTENTIONAL IN INVITING PEOPLE TO PARTICIPATE

For youth-led groups and partners, inviting people to participate, especially people who are generally excluded from conversations, is a key strategy for connecting with communities. This invitation is open and extended more than once to ensure ongoing accessibility.

“We want to continue developing and if we’re to be meaningful, people need repeated opportunities. How we extend those invitations at the beginning is going to determine later on how many people are ready for peer leadership programs or how many people are able to apply for job share. We have to be continually critically aware of how we’re doing so that we’re reflective of our community.” — COMMUNITY PARTNER

# INCLUDE YOUR STAKEHOLDERS IN GROUP DEVELOPMENT

so that everyone owns the processes

Groups and organizations often emerge to support specific communities and stakeholders. Involving these stakeholders in the actual development and evaluation of the group helps identify gaps, problems and opportunities to better meet the priorities of communities.

“[The organization] has been really dedicated to a lot of equity and anti-oppression stuff that came out. We needed a complaint system for when things would happen in open studio. For example, this is a safe space so [if] anyone felt threatened by any type of behaviour, whether violent, racist, sexist or homophobic, we needed a way to deal with that. How were we going to negotiate with people and set those boundaries? That’s been a really big process that I’ve been a part of and seen happen over the past year or two. It’s always ongoing but that’s been pretty cool.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER AND PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

# EMBED COMMUNITY CHECK-INS

into your way of working

Community accountability is a continual process that requires grassroots groups and organizations to be in conversation with their communities.

“Being accountable to our community in a very real way has been something we’ve always wanted to do but something that we’ve only now been able to manifest tangibly. It takes a lot of work to do that because it’s one thing to run the program and another thing to keep checking in on it. That’s a very easy thing to let go of when you get busy. I think realizing how important and necessary it is has been – not necessarily a significant change, but a growth. Through that accountability we realized we share a common vision with our students, our staff and our outside community members.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

# BE CONSISTENT

When groups are starting out it takes time to build trust in a community. Being consistent and staying engaged in a community is an important way to demonstrate that you are committed to the community.

“As somewhat of an outsider in the community I had to learn a lot about the stuff that was going on before being able to start teaching kids. For a long time they didn’t pay any attention to me because people come into [the community] all the time and leave. Now that I’ve been there for four years they think that maybe I’m around to stay. The kids have grown up with us and they didn’t leave either so the community realizes that [our group] is something that is here and it is dedicated and committed. We had to prove ourselves because we weren’t from these communities. We had to go that extra step in terms of making partnerships.”  
— YOUTH ORGANIZER

“I know that when we started five years ago there was huge mistrust in the community about, ‘what are you really doing out here?’ And, ‘who’s benefiting?’ And, ‘what are you doing and why are you doing it and why now?’ So it took us a long time to get through some of that and to really say, ‘no, we’re really not out here researching you or trying to figure out what we’re going to get out of the equation.’ I think this particular model has really brought to light areas for the whole college to pay attention to, not just us.”  
— COMMUNITY AND INSTITUTIONAL PARTNER

# GROUP DEVELOPMENT

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## STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING GROUP STRUCTURES THAT PROMOTE HEALTH AND WELLBEING AND ENABLE COMMUNITY ACCOUNTABILITY

A group or organization is a microcosm of the world it's working to create. The way in which each person treats each other inside the organization is a direct way to embody the values and changes that organization is working towards in the broader community. By not assuming particular organizational forms, youth-led groups and organizations often offer models for how things can be done differently. Here are some examples of strategies groups use to address power within their group, promote group health and wellbeing and enable the group to be accountable to its communities.

## ADOPT CONTINUAL PRACTICES OF ADDRESSING POWER IMBALANCES

Power dynamics can be really clear in some cases, but are often really subtle. Individuals within a group may hold more power than others because they are paid, because they are looked to as the leader or because they take control. Organizations and groups can hold power within their communities because of how they are seen by others, because of their reputation or because of the way they treat others. Power dynamics are not something that are worked out at the beginning of a project or group and then everything rolls along after that. Addressing power dynamics is a continual process of checking in with each other and changing strategies to ensure that the tensions that arise between people don't end up silencing some or making others feel excluded and unsafe.

“One of the things we did to respond to this was start off by having talking circles that focused on equity. We've opened it up since then but [she] was able to bring in some people that I think had the experience and they demonstrated commitment over a long period of time. The participants really responded to their leadership and were able to again feel safe enough to speak clearly about things.” — COMMUNITY ORGANIZER



# HAVE THE CONVERSATIONS THAT ARE HARD TO HAVE

When there is tension in a group or space, it is often because of unspoken or unnamed power dynamics. Intentionally creating space to name these dynamics can help to address things that may impede a person's ability to actively participate. It can also enable a group to identify processes that need to be in place.

“We definitely don't ever take a formal business approach with anyone. We're human. I like the analogy of elephants in the room. We haven't used that terminology but we're starting to. What are the concrete challenges, the things that aren't very pleasant to talk about but that are also a part of the culture of your group or are affecting the culture of your group? I guess that's the biggest thing in terms of a new process that we've developed.” — COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

## DIVIDE ROLES UP

based on each other's strengths and interests

Within collective group processes, it is important to have some clarity on who is responsible for what. This doesn't mean that one person is responsible for everything or that there can't be a core group of people in this role.

“In our third year it was decided that the three of us would just get it all done. We work very well together. We understand each other. We're all practising artists in our own fields and we just get things done very quickly. We go to meetings and decisions are made because we're like-minded. We all have different strengths so it works. If I need to move around

numbers or crunch numbers we do it very quickly. If [he] needs to do some press releases, we can do it. So to have three coordinators is really good. That way when youth need to speak to someone they know to speak to either one of us and not to all these other people who might not exactly know what's going on.”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

## EMBRACE DISCOVERY IN YOUR GROUP DEVELOPMENT

Nothing is static. Groups change, memberships change, and the issues and priorities of the communities change. This happens everywhere. For a group, checking in to see what is changing within the team and externally in the communities can help you adjust your strategies and grow. Asking questions is a good practice for discovering new opportunities.

“Now is the time for us to take those risks and ask, ‘What does [our group] look like externally? What would [our group] look like if we were in our own space? What are the processes to create a school? What does that look like? What are the meetings that we need to have with people to research these ideas?’” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

“What, how, why: what do you want to do, how do you want to do it, why do you want to do it? And then the next step would be the organization overview: what are the barriers they're facing? What are the responses that you want to come up with as a result? What are your objectives? What are your activities? What are your expected deliverables? What are your expected outcomes? What's the rationale for all of those? From that organizational overview you can then develop grant proposals, you can develop marketing material, you can develop a work plan and you can develop policies. That's by far been the most central focus and tool that we've used.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

# SHARE RESPONSIBILITIES

and check in with one another

Checking in with each other enables workloads to be shared or people to feel supported even if at times they are busier than others.

“I like that we’re trying to dissolve these kinds of silos of expertise and to work more effectively as a team. That feels great. It’s nice that there’s not one person that’s totally stressed out while another is leaving to go to the beach. It feels like we’re in it together. All our meetings start with a check-in. We just take two minutes to say what’s going on for us. I don’t feel like a worker drone. I feel like we actually and genuinely care about each other.”

— COMMUNITY GROUP MEMBER

# TRUST PEOPLE

For the founders or core group, sharing your vision or that of your organization/group with others is important. Trusting people to work with you and the team allows for broader community ownership over the work and can help spread the workload.

“There are only two people that are fully staffed and you have to rely on volunteers who traditionally, in other organizations, need a lot of managing. To have faith and say ‘you know what? I can’t micro-manage them so I hope that these volunteers are going to pull through and hope for

the best.’ And these amazing volunteers actually do pull through. I don’t know any organization that relies on their volunteers as much as they do here... The fact that they just trusted us is remarkable. That’s the first time I’ve ever seen that happen.”

— COMMUNITY GROUP VOLUNTEER

# USE TECHNOLOGY WHEN APPROPRIATE

to help coordinate and collaborate within your team

Within a team, web technology can help you collaborate better and give you a sense of your reach. But technology isn’t a replacement for face-to-face interactions amongst your team. The stronger the relationships between each group member, the more effective virtual communication and tools can be. The place where technology has been helpful is in enabling groups to gauge their reach.

“I think that within our organization we’ve built in some good tools, like the Google Calendar. [She] has always been very resistant to technology until this year and I’ve really seen her grab the Google Calendar and go with it and help the team get organized.”

— COMMUNITY GROUP MEMBER

For example there are tools that can help a group assess how much traffic its website has.

“For a few months I found my role pretty frustrating because I was posting content all the time to the old phase of the website. We didn’t have Google Analytics so I was wondering if anybody was reading it or if anybody cared. It’s been really helpful with the new phase of the website... I’m able to see what content...people are drawn to. By far, it’s job postings, which to me makes sense. We are coming out of a global financial crisis and we are a network of people connected by our type of employment. The average job posting will get 80–100 clicks whereas an event might get 20–30, so it’s significant; knowing that information helps me filter different things.” — COMMUNITY GROUP MEMBER

# USE FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS

to help create healthier group dynamics

Face-to-face meetings enable the team to connect and for each member to get a sense of how others are feeling.

“We’ve learned that communication is the most important tool, whether it’s sending out updates by e-mail or posting things on the wall or just having our weekly meetings. I would argue that our weekly meetings have saved the organization a number of times. We look at planning, professional (which is more financial), action and emotional [issues]. And I would argue that the emotional stuff has really been the most profound and cathartic discussion during Tuesday morning meetings because everybody’s hustling so hard in this line of work.” — COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

When people meet face to face, a relationship develops that then makes it possible to work together in a virtual space. It is important to be in the same physical space with your peers and colleagues because it helps you to get a sense of how everyone is feeling. Building relationships between the team is key and this doesn’t only happen through formal scheduled meetings. Informal interactions also play a huge role.

“It’s important to work physically alongside people because conversations emerge, you feel more in the loop, you see the bigger picture and what’s emerging day to day, what people are going through. I am able to support them as individuals and to support the work that we’re all collectively trying to do.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

# REDUCE ISOLATION THROUGH MEETINGS

People are social. Not everything can happen online or in virtual spaces. Creating trust and a sense of team happens by being in conversations and seeing each other face to face. It can help reduce isolation.

“[Before we began these meetings] there wasn’t a sense of team necessarily, whereas now there is. When more staff were hired I felt really disconnected. I was just like, “what are you working on? What are you doing?” I was part of the push to meet regularly, to have conversations and to at least update each other. That’s now a weekly thing and in fact there are several weekly meetings. It reduces isolation. For a while I was doing a lot of my work at home because I felt that if I was just posting information on the website I didn’t need to be there. But then I felt really disconnected.” — COMMUNITY GROUP MEMBER

# SUCCESSION PLANNING

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## STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING TRANSITION AND CHANGE WITHIN YOUR GROUP

Succession planning within a group is directly related to maintaining accountability and a connection to communities and community priorities. Changing leadership and creating opportunities for others to come into your group enables the priorities and perspectives of peers and communities to infuse the organization on all levels. It means that priorities are being discussed based on what is happening today and not just what happened to initially get the group started. There are natural transitions within youth-led and youth-focused groups as people age. Succession planning is something that groups are actively addressing. Here are some examples of strategies that groups are using to develop succession plans and to create engagement strategies that bring in new energy and leadership:

## BE INTENTIONAL IN SUCCESSION PLANNING PROCESSES

Succession doesn't have to be something that a group addresses in response to someone leaving, it can be an ongoing process. Developing a strategy and having facilitated support through the succession planning process can make it more manageable for the group. Documenting the succession process is an important aspect of organizational memory.

“We began developing a contract with them to remain honest consultants, to help us through our transformation, to ensure that we're staying accountable to new structures of equity and decision-making and ensuring that we're capturing all the information and all of the experience within the organization. There is no point in attempting succession planning if the documentation isn't there. You can try and mentor but we need better organizational systems in place to capture everything so that anybody could walk on to our board or walk onto our staff and at least have that foundation or grounding of where to begin.”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

# CREATE SPACE FOR NEW LEADERSHIP

## to take over programming

A challenge with succession is actually making space for new people or perspectives to come in. There needs to be a willingness to trust others with the vision.

“A lot of my energy and visions have served the organization well. I think we’re moving to a place where my energy and directions are better spent somewhere else, not in being a leader or decision maker for [our organization]. I might explore possible opportunities and look for innovation and connecting with lots of different partners and then come back to the community and say ‘here is what I’ve been working on and what do you think of it.’ Right now I’m just pushing things forward.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

“The [program] was run by [another organization] but now it’s 100% run by the former participants. That’s a really unique thing to see in any program anywhere. I think that’s pretty cool. The people who coordinate the program are not interns; they actually carry the full weight of staff.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

Often, groups develop from very grassroots strategies, driven by the passion and dedication of a core group or person. As time goes on, creating space for new people to inform priorities and take on leadership enables strategies to adapt to changing realities. This can help broaden ownership over the work and develop a core group that can exist beyond the current leadership.

“Without us [the group] should be able to function and if it can’t then we need to get staff and we need to get them trained and we need to get ourselves trained to a level where [it] can function in a particular way. So to have [new staff] take care of artistic development...completely by themselves, completely run that part of the session, has been amazing. I think it’s been a great learning experience for them where they feel that they know their roles in [the group] more because it’s not the [our] show. It is a part of all of us.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

# RECOGNIZE THAT PEOPLE MOVE ON

Succession plans cannot be built assuming a particular person will take the lead. Despite best laid plans, people won’t always assume leadership roles within groups they are involved in and that is ok.

“I think that one of the things that was really difficult to swallow was that young people transition all the time and you have to prepare to build an organization that is flexible in that way. You expect certain people who you’ve been mentoring and supporting or nurturing to take on roles. When they have the choice not to take on those roles and they walk away, it’s hard not to feel hurt. It’s important to build that into expectations and roles and responsibilities.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

# RECOGNIZE THAT LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS

## are not as simple as implementing a model; there is a continual need to be honest

Leadership transitions are not easy because people deeply care about the work. It isn’t as simple as hiring in a new person or developing a new plan. Being honest about the process is important.

“We’ve tried to work non-hierarchically but to also acknowledge the reality that I’m still the leader. How do I extricate myself from that role? It’s a delicate balance because sometimes leadership is really required. Sometimes I’ve tried to pull back from that role too soon and I’ve been told that. How do you balance being a leader but not being a boss? That’s been a very interesting journey for all of us. We talk about that so I can openly say, not just to the team but to the...group that I’ve changed. I’m more open to say, ‘I don’t know the difference between the leader and a boss sometimes but I’m struggling. Help me,’ and then people understand that I don’t have the answers a lot of the time.” — COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

# SAFE SPACE

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## STRATEGIES FOR CREATING SAFE, ACCESSIBLE SPACE WITHIN PROGRAMS, GROUPS AND IN COLLECTIVE EFFORTS

Safe space is not just physical space. The people and relationships within the space make it empowering, safe and accessible. Youth-led groups and community-based groups are often working to create empowering and safe environments for their peers and communities, many of whom experience exclusion, systemic violence and racism when attempting to access services and institutional spaces. Because safe space isn't as simple as constructing a room a certain way, this safeness isn't something that can only be designed for at the beginning and then assumed to exist indefinitely. Creating safe space is a continual process. Here are some examples of strategies that groups use to create safe space within their communities:

### LET PEOPLE BE THEMSELVES

without their affiliations or organizations

Often people feel unable to speak their experiences when they are associated with or seen to represent other interests, such as their employers. Creating policies that let people be themselves can help.

“We ask people to try and remove their affiliations, if they can, while they're in the room, to just be human beings; for people to remember that we aren't just working with brains and bodies but we're actually working with our hearts and that we came together for spiritual reasons in some ways.” — COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

### ENSURE TIME TO BUILD TRUST

It takes time to build trust. Building relationships between members of a group and communities they are working with are key to creating safe space.

“When you actually sit down with them and you build that trust with them and they are able to reveal the things that they do after you have built up a relationship with them. You look at them differently. You see how they really impact you, how they are really impacted by society, the education system, the criminal system, the police and all that stuff.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

# THINK ABOUT HOW ROUTINE PRACTICES

impact the people accessing your spaces

It can be very invasive and disempowering to be interviewed and scrutinized before accessing a space. It is important to think carefully about what information is actually needed and how to go about asking for it so that young people and communities are not being inadvertently disempowered through the process.

“Whereas here, we really don’t collect hardly any information unless somebody is registered in a very specific program. We collect a name, which only has to be someone. It doesn’t have to be backed up by any ID or anything like that. The questions we ask are more about ‘What would you like to do? What are you interested in? What would you like to be doing in the future? Do you like this? Do you like that? What’s your favourite song?’ Whatever. It’s all about what you can do, what you would like to learn, how to give it a shot. It’s very focused on possibility and potential. That’s the foundation of the relationship from the get-go.” — COMMUNITY ORGANIZER AND YOUTH PROGRAM STAFF

# BE LOVING

Being genuine and showing that you care is an underlying value in this work. It helps create safe and trusting relationships.

“They are really loving. When [he] gets really passionate about things he can really make things happen. The way they work together, they’re really amazing. They are gentle and they provide a space for a lot of people. How they meet other people halfway. They’ve done a really good job, from how they started to where they’re going today, from what I can see.” — COMMUNITY PARTNER

“I think that [it] is the perfect combination of how this type of organizing should be done. It’s just the perfect amount of education being given with the combination of support and love that you get because any time you walk in, the first thing you’re going to get is love.” — YOUTH PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

# FOCUS ON ACCESSIBILITY

Creating safe and accessible spaces is a key aspect of running community-based initiatives. This can mean being flexible and creative about how you reach out to people.

“Sometimes the grantees can’t come during the day but are available at 2 a.m. We’ll make that time to see them, talk to them and go over their grant application with them. No granting officer at [x funder] will see us at 2 a.m. to talk about budgets. We wouldn’t rush, we’d sit there, those are our hours anyways, those are artist hours, so it’s not a big deal. For some folks to hand in their written grant application is a big deal. Others do verbal applications.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

# KEEP THINGS MANAGEABLE

It takes time and space to develop the relationships needed to help people feel safe in a space, program and group. The reality is that it isn’t possible to meet everyone’s needs at all times. Being clear about what is manageable and realistic for a group to do is important.

“We have a lot of people coming to ask how they can get involved with [our group] and asking when the next application for the other round of sessions is. There’s a lot of interest growing in it. I think they don’t want to just go out and do mass advertising, I think they want to keep it manageable within a group of people so that they can monitor who comes in and out of the program. They are very protective of who’s in their space and that we all understand to keep the space a positive space.” — YOUTH PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

# STRESS, BURNOUT AND VICARIOUS TRAUMA

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## STRATEGIES FOR RECOGNIZING, MITIGATING AND VALIDATING EXPERIENCES OF STRESS, BURNOUT AND VICARIOUS TRAUMA IN YOUTH-LED, FRONTLINE, COMMUNITY ORGANIZING EFFORTS

Frontline, grassroots community organizing combines urgency with aspirations. Groups are often working to respond to urgent needs within their communities through models and strategies that illustrate the communities and world they aspire to be part of. This is extremely stressful work. It is under-resourced. And people often live in the same communities they are working in, making the idea of work/life balance or separation impossible. Increasingly, people are recognizing the pervasiveness of burnout, stress and vicarious trauma in community organizing. Here are some examples of strategies that groups use to begin to address these issues:

### DELIBERATELY CREATE SPACE FOR CONVERSATIONS

Stress and burnout are often treated as an individual's problem as opposed to something that many people experience in frontline, community based, youth organizing efforts. Being able to create an intentional space that acknowledges this can help people feel less isolated.

“In conversations I’ve had with frontline workers, there is a lot of excitement about the types of workshops that [the network] offers. I’ve actually had frontline workers say, ‘I don’t know to do that, I didn’t know who to ask about that. Nobody teaches you how to say goodbye to a young person...’.The fact that we’re offering these types of changing workshops is actually creating massive impact on young people’s lives and in the framing of how they understand their work.”  
— COMMUNITY ORGANIZER



# SEEK OUT SUPPORTS

when you don't know how to deal with what has come up

There are a lot of grey zones in community organizing. For example, sometimes when people are using arts-based strategies to connect with their peers, deeply personal experiences are shared in the process. These may not have been foreseen at the onset of the program, and community organizers struggle to not leave people hanging when issues come up that are beyond the initial scope of the program. This is an area where external supports can help.

“There were stumbling blocks in terms of programming. Our program was amazing and really challenging. It was the first time we tried to do a program with our peers. It was with young women between the ages of 18 to 30. It was around storytelling and sharing your stories. We hadn't done adequate training to take on those stories. A lot of trauma that a lot of the young women had experienced was shared because the space felt so safe to so many people but the necessary supports to engage and deal with that were not in place because we didn't know that it would require that kind of training.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

“It's not a support or a service in any way but it sort of has that quality because we're inviting people to come in to do expressive arts and share their stories. A lot of their stories are super traumatic and for them to tell it is really complicated. It definitely brings out things. People are coming and whether they explicitly say it or not are seeking [a] chosen family. There is just a need that comes out of that and so again to try to find a balance. I welcome that in a lot of ways.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

# ACKNOWLEDGE THAT COMMUNITIES AND FRONTLINE WORKERS

are facing continual stress and traumas – it isn't just acute crisis

Acknowledging systemic and pervasive experiences of stress, burnout and community trauma in community and youth-led organizing can enable people to recognize the ways in which they are experiencing this in their daily lives. It can also help identify strategies for addressing these realities.

“[my colleague] and I talk about this all the time in a process of trying to figure out a strategy with our new staff 'cause similarly they are all people who have experienced a lot of trauma and are also so committed to this community.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

“A lot of the young women that I was working with were coming in weekly with stories of having lost people that they were close to and also being in scary situations themselves. Best practice would say that therapy needs to happen when people have some stability – like there needs to be some triage in the system. But this was a systemic issue. Communities were being deeply impacted by violence, not just that summer but in all kinds of ways through the year and years before that.” — COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

# CREATE RITUALS TO ACKNOWLEDGE LOSS AND TRAUMA

Developing different rituals or processes to acknowledge loss and experiences of trauma is another way to help validate people's experiences and reduce feelings of isolation.

“We were lighting candles and we were trying to talk about grief but it was every week, there were more deaths.” — COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

“We just tried to start naming those elephants and now finally we have some space to sit in and we light candles. So we lit candles in the beginning in 2005 and we continue to light candles. Even when we're having a conversation about fiscal policy we'll light candles. We ask ourselves if we are here to create a bureaucracy. We don't have the answer but let's keep asking the question. Grappling with the stuff is the point maybe. So we use candles.” — COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

# PARTNERSHIPS

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## ROLES FOR PARTNERS AND STRATEGIES FOR WORKING COLLABORATIVELY

Partnerships are not just formalized relationships between different groups. Partners include people that offer guidance, advice and can be counted on. Here are some examples of the different roles partners can play in supporting youth-led and community-based work:

## SEEK OUT DIFFERENT EXPERTISE THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

It is not realistic to know everything about everything. Working with partners that have different expertise can help a group and its stakeholders access important information and its networks.

“Not only did we have a workshop done by a lawyer, which was very empowering because it gave us some really tangible and specific and concrete indications of what it means to have a conflict in an adult setting (we are all youth and we are growing and still figuring out what it means to be an adult and the responsibilities in society) but we also got a chance, all of us, to keep in touch with this person. All the people that we’ve met through the workshops that [this program] has organized are people that are still in our lives....I think the most tangible and concrete example for me would be the lawyer. I have never had a chance to talk with a lawyer without having to pay \$300 for 30 minutes and this person was so queer positive and youth positive and understandable and patient, which is so hard to find.” — YOUTH PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

Groups often work with other organizations to help to manage their finances. This is sometimes called a trustee. Instead of simply working with a group that will manage the finances, groups can explore administrative partnerships that enable groups to learn firsthand about financial management and to connect to other supports from the organization such as mentorship and space.

“In the last few years, we’ve been assisting with some strategic thinking about the growth of the network, helping her to write proposals, helping her to think about the governance structure, helping her to create and manage her budgets and just otherwise pitching in and trying to offer advice as the network started to grow. We formally became the legal home of [the network] in terms of fiduciary and legal responsibility for the project and its contracts.” — COMMUNITY AND INSTITUTIONAL PARTNER

# WORK WITH PARTNERS TO ACCESS SPACE AND RESOURCES

Partners can help a group access resources including tangible things like space for programming.

“The partnership with the library has been huge. Our kids are able to come in here and book a room whenever they want work. It is to the point where this room is permanently booked for us. When some of our kids are having issues in school or if they don’t go to school, they can come here and ask one of the librarians to open the room for them. They come here and work on their own.”

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

# WORK WITH PARTNERS TO NAVIGATE INSTITUTIONAL CULTURES AND BARRIERS

It can be hard for a community group to be recognized or seen as legitimate by other institutions and decision-makers. Partners can help groups open doors. Working with partners also shows that more people are invested in a groups work and see its importance.

“At first we tried to reach out to the police numerous times a few years back but because I guess we were a small organization and all of our coordinators were young they weren’t really paying us no mind. We were getting the run-around. We got in touch with our city councillor. She contacted the superintendent. He got us in line with the staff sergeant. It took a long time but we were able to make it happen.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

“They weren’t recognized as youth workers. So I went and sold them as youth workers that are working with the youth in the community. They’re not just volunteers because there is a whole volunteer/officer dynamic that happens that they have to work through. I sold them as professional youth workers. That was an important thing that they were able to bring to the table.”

— ADULT ALLY AND INSTITUTIONAL PARTNER

# CONNECT WITH A SUPPORT NETWORK

or community of practice

Sharing is caring. For emerging groups or anyone that can feel isolated in their work, making connections with groups with shared values can enable you to learn from the experiences of others, share resources and work to solve problems as they come up.

“I was also impressed because...we’d give them a set of resources that they would then take and transform into something crazy. They have always been, for us, one of the shining examples of what’s possible when you provide even a little bit of support to a group. It’s not like we put [them] through some rigorous mentorship process. We were just there, a phone call away and just being accessible. It led to so much success because they’re so talented and they’re so smart. They’re so capable, more so than us in a lot of areas. I think that they showed us in real time how little is actually required in terms of just being open and accessible and then as a result, what’s possible if you’re just open and ready to share as much as you can.” — COMMUNITY PARTNER AND YOUTH ORGANIZER

“It’s sort of a combination of giving you some ways of question-based framework for thinking about how you go about collecting information, figure out who should be at the table or are you equipped to make this decision alone. Depending on who is at the table, how are you going to make the decision? Is it important to everyone that this is a consensus-based model? Again, some way to think about how to do that, whether or not to do it and then some tools to do it and also a template for imputing all of those findings as we go along. Then you come up with this nice little report. So we’ve been able to make sort of a user’s guide.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

# REACH OUT TO PARTNERS

to get a sense of the impacts of your work

Partners can provide a group with ongoing feedback about the impacts of their work and how their work is seen in the community.

“Through the last couple of years working with the organization has given me a chance to really connect to a lot of different groups. I find it’s less just the two of us now and it’s a lot more volunteers, a lot more organizations that we get to collaborate with. That’s why when we had our stakeholder meeting we just felt like we were almost losing ourselves because we’re in so many things right now. After the meeting I kind of changed my perspective.

Before it was the idea of being lost but now it’s more like we’re actually very much connected to all these different projects as opposed to just being two people working on one-off things here and there. So I guess my life has changed in terms of that: being more connected to people in the community. I am also a lot more confident.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

# SHARE SPACE WITH EACH OTHER

Sharing space is a way for groups with common goals or values to work together. Sharing space enables new opportunities to present themselves and for things to develop organically.

“I really appreciate the space that our office is in because I feel like we’re so lucky to have so many people who understand the difficulty of grassroots work and who are really willing to share and help each other out. There are so many other people I could name. Any time I have a problem, I go to the office and I ask questions to whoever crosses my path first. I remember for a week and a half, we were looking for a venue on our own. I went to the office and that day, I booked a room because there were five people there with ten different ideas. I wouldn’t be able to name just one member of the community.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

# WORK WITH OTHERS TO HELP REDUCE ISOLATION

Connecting with a community of practice can help a group feel less isolated in their work. It also lets people see the importance of their work, by being able to see it in a broader context.

“Being affiliated with [this collaborative] has helped us because we see that we’re not alone. That in and of itself, being part of a community, makes you feel like there is meaning behind the work that you’re doing. If all these groups are doing similar work, that means there is a greater purpose in the work that you are doing.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

“Being part of that program and connecting with all of those individuals was huge for us in terms of knowing what amazing and brilliant work is going on and all the different ways you can do it. Having the opportunity to have a support system every single week that you can go to was really important for us at that time because we were so overwhelmed.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

# PROGRAM DESIGN

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## STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING RELEVANT AND EMPOWERING YOUTH PROGRAMS AND SPACES

Running a community-based program, developing a pilot project or launching an advocacy strategy brings a lot of unexpected opportunities and challenges. Here are some insights from community organizers of strategies they have used to develop meaningful and relevant programs and projects:

### INCLUDE YOUNG PEOPLE IN EVERY RELEVANT OPPORTUNITY

Youth engagement isn't something that is programmed; it is a core strategy for supporting youth personal development and creating relevant programming. It can infuse all aspects of a group's work.

"I think another active strategy has been trying to pull young people in at every stage of what we were doing, whether it's planning a program, implementing a program, presenting or writing a grant. We have tried to pull whoever is willing to be part of the experience into that experience. I think this has worked so well in terms of mentorship. That's definitely been the case. Mentorship has happened on many levels." — YOUTH ORGANIZER

### ADAPT YOUR STRATEGIES TO THE CONTEXT YOU ARE WORKING IN

Programs change based on the location and context you are working in. Being flexible and adapting your strategies are key ways to create relevant programs.

"What they realized is that if you were to conduct this, these kinds of seminars in a grade 12 setting and you were to just transpose that directly without any changes into the maximum security detention centre, it doesn't translate. And that there are, there were a lot of learning curves that the team had to accommodate insofar as that they were very comfortable doing it with grade 12 students but with people in our industry, who may have had brushes with the law, it was a whole

different ball game. So they were comfortable with that and when they came in here they figured that they could just duplicate that and that's where there was real education for them as well as the clients. They realized that now they had to morph it considerably. They had to change the focus. And it started changing to the point now where it evolved more to the GED." — ADULT ALLY AND INSTITUTIONAL PARTNER

# GIVE PEOPLE PERSONAL ATTENTION

Throughout youth spaces and programs, there is an important role for one on one attention. This helps build trust and develop strong relationships.

“They give a lot of support. You see when you’re with them and someone is having a harder time, one of the workers will move over and sit beside them and quietly talk to them. It’s so smooth. They are so smooth with what they are doing. They are so committed. They are always here.” — COMMUNITY AND INSTITUTIONAL PARTNER

“The first strategy and all strategies when working with this community is, as I’ve said before, lots and lots of one-on-one work with people.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

# GROUND THE WORK IN YOUR EXPERIENCES

In developing programs and strategies, organizers focus on building from their own lived experiences. They connect with their participants by sharing insights into their own lives. In this way, they are not just asking participants to share; they are also contributing to the conversation.

“To be able to find that comfort zone, with someone you don’t know that well but you know this person understands the situation and can empathize with you in a world where not too many can understand or fathom the situation at hand.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

“Because I shared my story it allowed them to open up and share something very personal about themselves. I realized that we, in some ways, are similar. We’ve all experienced similar things or have similar regrets and I think that after talking about it they made me realize that you can trust one another and trust is one of the main things that we should go by.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

# BE CREATIVE

and use arts-based strategies to engage people

Groups frequently use arts-based strategies to connect to young people and community issues.

“He started to do some really grassroots things on the side. For example organizing an art competition to get young incarcerated people through a cathartic process but also to serve almost as an advocacy tool. What he’s done is hire young incarcerated people as outreach workers...They find all the artists/young people on the range...It’s called 1000 words and people with artistic abilities can draw, sketch and paint their ideas of what got them there, what they’re thinking and what they’re going through; just something to basically identify their state of mind and also the process of how they got there. Then they write 1000-word descriptions. The program coordinators have the responsibility of distributing the art supplies, making sure that people meet their deadlines to get their art in and they mail the works to him. The works will be framed. A show from behind the bars will be mounted.” — COMMUNITY PARTNER AND YOUTH ORGANIZER

“We have done art performances within our own group. They have been very therapeutic in a way. We’ve done performances in the community, which has been amazing because we are all people ranging between 16 or 17 to 21 or 22 and for some of us we had never had the experience or opportunity to perform outside of a group of friends. Nor did we have the tools to do something. We have created a film. We have done photo shoots. We have done singing. We have done painting. We’re going to have an exhibition in the next few weeks of photos that we took.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

# EXPLORE THE ROLE FOR INTERGENERATIONAL COLLABORATION

Young people don't live or work in isolation. Working with allies and adults can help support the work. For example, in some instances groups identified connecting with parents as an important strategy.

"Parents are very important because a lot of the time, kids don't want their parents to be around the area that they're in. When a parent is supportive of their kids, like watching them play basketball or attending one of the programs that we are running and involved with their kids by seeing and understanding what they go through then it helps them to become a better parent but also it helps the young person because they come from two different worlds." — YOUTH ORGANIZER

# USE RELEVANT AND RELATABLE TOOLS

A key way to be accessible is to use tools and language that are relevant and come from the lives of the people you are working with. For example, hip hop is a tool that groups use to connect with and support their peers as they engage in political activism and personal development.

"[Hip hop] became a passion for me and something that was narrative for my life. I saw it being used for politics; I saw it being used for social change with literally no money so I was like 'this hip hop thing is on to something.' There's a reason why people all around the world use it in their movements to engage youth. I became very inspired and when I came back to Toronto I started researching different ways of learning – like using a hip hop approach to talk about literacy, to talk about social issues, mathematics or science."

— YOUTH ORGANIZER

"We do a lot of problem solving. We'd think about different video clips that highlighted the problems and issues and helped them realize that they weren't alone in feeling this way. We pointed out some of the historical and political views that might contribute to why they were feeling this way. It helped them better understand their position in their community and helped them advocate for themselves." — YOUTH ORGANIZER

# TRAVEL TO BROADEN EXPERIENCES

## and support personal growth

The opportunity to explore other places and communities can help organizers ground their work. Travel supports people to see other models firsthand and also helps them to gain a wider context for their work.

"Personally I've been able to travel myself and go to a couple of countries. The impact that has had on me has changed me significantly in terms of my human compassion. A lot of youth at the moment internalize a lot of things in their corner of the world. They are seeing things as either you're Crips or you're Bloods instead of 'we're people live on this planet Earth'. I find that when you travel, you see other people's situations ... Instead of being the victim and victimizing yourself, all of a sudden you're in another country that is not as developed as yours and they're looking at you as if you're privileged. You internalize things differently now. I think for the kids to experience that, the feeling of travelling, going somewhere new is key to changing their paths and changing their ways. When I talk about being in the moment, traveling is just that. You're in the moment." — YOUTH ORGANIZER

Seeing other models first hand can help to inspire action.

"I think being able to travel and then connecting with other young people who are doing local grassroots work in other places is important. A lot of the programs that we connected with were kind of alternative education through artistic means. We were inspired by so much stuff that we saw." — YOUTH ORGANIZER

# TAKE PEOPLE OUTSIDE

## their community and comfort zones

A field trip isn't just an event; it is a way for people to access spaces that they have been or felt excluded from. Facilitated trips can enable people to enter spaces in more empowered and safe ways. These experiences can enable reflection opportunities for why these spaces have been inaccessible.

“Some of the cool partnerships have been with landlords. We've been able to go exploring through the properties. We did a photography day where we went into the underground tunnels to check what's going on and to design inner city youth spaces. They let us in and let us go underground where there's a pretty nice auditorium. We saw this underused community space and used youths' photographic talents to explore.” — YOUTH GROUP VOLUNTEER

These experiences can fuel action.

“We watched a group of five youth go from having an interest in the environment and caring about green stuff, thinking it's cool and interesting but not really knowing how to act on it, to learning what other kids their age are doing and actually getting involved in a campaign and running it back home in St. Jamestown. During the Copenhagen summit they ran a signature campaign to get people involved in encouraging Canada to set targets for our greenhouse gases. They did it completely on their own. We took them on a trip and they took the initiative to do the campaign. That's huge. When I heard them talking about it, it wasn't just that they had done it but that the trip had inspired them to do it. I thought that was pretty cool.” — YOUTH ORGANIZER

Field trips and other experiences enable people to be in spaces they might not otherwise access. This can contribute to sense of belonging and personal growth.

“I was able to take some of the kids to different locations. I took them to a museum and a lot of the kids that I talk to talk a lot about travelling and wanting to travel. You'd be surprised how many youths don't leave their community, have not even been downtown or have passed the museum millions of times but have never had a chance to go in there or even had a desire to go in there. I found that there is a lot of discovery when you look under the rock type of thing. I find that it's a great impact over here in terms of social inclusion because these kids going to the museum, they felt 'wow, okay, we're in the museum.' The type of kids that I deal with, many of them might feel marginalized at a place that's not for them. It was powerful for them being there. They were able to learn something. They were able to educate themselves but at the same time they're in a place where they belong. When they left they felt they belonged. Who knows what doors that will open now?” — YOUTH ORGANIZER



# REFLECTIONS

Youth-led community organizing is driven by aspiration, intention and thoughtfulness. People work to develop programs, create groups and organizations and implement strategies that challenge assumptions about the ways things are done in and with communities. At the very core, groups challenge themselves to model and embody their aspirations for the world they are working to create. This is not easy and straightforward. And there is no one model to this work. It is also not a theoretical exercise, as the insights and reflections captured in this report demonstrate.

Throughout Laidlaw Foundation evaluation interviews, people shared Insights and candid reflections that demonstrate the breadth of intention that goes into this work. There are strategies and tools that youth organizers, community organizers and partners use to create supportive and healthy environments for young people and communities. People are actively creating strategies that change the script on how social problems are defined and who is involved in developing solutions. People are creating different organizational and group models that create safe space and prioritize community accountability. Groups are tackling the challenge and necessity of succession planning. As these strategies and tools demonstrate, youth-led community organizing and community organizing involves continual processes of trying, doing, learning, and adapting; while checking-in with young people and community stakeholders.

This report offers some ideas to build from, based on the insights of dedicated and passionate community change makers. Take from it what is helpful and reach out with any tools and strategies that are supporting you in this work. There is so much to be learned from and celebrated in youth-led community organizing.

# A NOTE ABOUT THE DESIGN

What is youth-led community organizing, and what does it look like? As this series of Laidlaw Learning reports asserts, it begins with youth but its impact extends beyond them, more broadly and deeply into their communities. The design envisions youth-led community organizing as a complex and kinetic force — a power that communities can tap into, support, and cultivate for lasting and meaningful change.

— UNA LEE, DESIGNER



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