Letting Youth In:
youth workers talk space

Created by frontline youth workers and members of Community Recreation for All and Frontline Partners with Youth Network.

November 2013

Part 1: About this report

Why did we put together this report?

There is agreement from many youth workers, youth and youth-serving agencies that more youth spaces are needed in the City of Toronto. Recent research from the City's Parks, Forestry and Recreation Department confirms that youth are looking for safe spaces to be.[1] The need for youth access to space in Toronto was particularly well-documented in the report 'Another Winter, Another Spring: Toronto Youth Speak Out About Space,' from Social Planning Toronto (2011), which clearly outlines many barriers, most, if not all, of which are still in place.

Community Recreation for All is asking for new, permanent, city-funded youth spaces for 2014, with the eventual goal of seeing a dedicated, city-run youth space in each community in Toronto. We also understand that <u>creating safe spaces for youth requires careful thought, well-trained and supported workers and an array of resources</u>. In other words: we want new youth spaces, and we want to make sure they're done right. In addition, <u>we do not want new youth spaces to come at the expense of current allocations for city-run youth programs and spaces</u>. Instead, we are asking for an expansion of city-run services for youth.

We decided to work with Frontline Partners with Youth Network to hold a 'think tank' in October, 2013. Our goal: to gather the skills, knowledge and brilliance of frontline youth workers as a step towards informing the new youth spaces we expect to see in 2014. <u>This report should not be considered comprehensive, and should be used in conjunction with additional research to ensure youth spaces are welcoming to all youth, responsive to local needs in different parts of the city and run safely</u>. *

Who are we?

<u>Community Recreation for All</u> (CRfA) is an independent community group run by a volunteer steering committee. While many of our initiatives have been endorsed by community organizations, we currently have no dedicated funding. Our goal is to see access to community centres and recreation programs for all. For more information about CRfA:
Email: communityrecreationforall@gmail.com
Web: www.communityrecreationforall.ca
Twitter: @comrecforall

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(1) www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2013/cd/bgrd/backgroundfile-61258.pdf

* Community Recreation for All has suggested some ways to undertake this research in 'Youth Spaces, a Community Recreation for All Briefing Note,' available at:
www.communityrecreationforall.ca/youth-spaces-for-2014-briefing-note-and-road-map

Frontline Partners with Youth Network (FPYN) is a community of people who work directly with youth across sectors and the Greater Toronto Area. Our mission is to connect frontline workers to heal, learn and work for change. For more about FPYN:
Web: www.fpyn.ca
Twitter: @fpyn

Who is the audience for this report?

This report is intended to inform new city-run youth spaces in Toronto. It also has broader applications for youth programs and spaces in general. It contains information relevant to policy-makers, program planners and frontline youth staff.

When was the think tank and who attended?

The think tank was held in the evening, on October 16th, 2013. Twelve frontline youth workers with experience working in areas including North York, York, midtown and downtown Toronto along with members of Community Recreation for All and Front-line Partners with Youth Network attended. We did not collect organizational infor-mation from participants. Based on what people said at the think tank, we concluded that frontline workers in attendance were currently working, had recently worked and/or were participating in the following types of organizations:

- Two community health centres

- A neighbourhood centre

- An agency focused on youth facing homelessness

- A youth-based charity organization

- A children's mental health centre

- Two networks

Youth workers were not asked to attend on behalf of their organizations, but were asked to share their own ideas based on their experiences. For additional information about how we created this report, please see 'Appendix A.' To read the questions asked at the think tank, please see 'Appendix B.'

What do we mean by youth space?

For the purposes of the think tank and for this report, we defined youth space as permanent, dedicated space that is open the majority of the time for youth to drop in. While some programming may be offered, the primary function of these spaces is to offer youth a place to *be*, staffed by well-trained, permanent youth workers.

What does CRfA want to happen next year?

Community Recreation for All wants to see new pilot youth spaces for 2014 to respond to the current crisis in youth space.

At the same time, we would like to see Community Recreation develop a long-term strategy around the placement, expansion, governance and best practices for youth spaces. This process should include the involvement and expertise of staff from other City of Toronto divisions and branches, for example: Toronto Employment and Social Services; Social, Development, Finance and Administration; Toronto Public Health; Planning; Toronto Public Library; TTC; Transportation - Cycling Infrastructure; Shelter, Support and Housing Administration; Facilities and Real Estate; and Capital Projects.

Public consultation is also critical to the success of developing a long-term strategy. Any strategic plan should include a comprehensive public consultation strategy that engages current users and non-users of City recreation programs. Methods of engagement may include key informant interviews, focus groups, surveys, public consultation meetings and should take into consideration the geographic and social diversity of the city.

It is essential that a community advisory committee reporting to the Community Development and Recreation Committee be established to provide input and help offer ongoing evaluation to these spaces. This committee should include representatives from youth serving agencies as well as youth workers and youth themselves. A budget should be provided to support the coordination of this committee and transportation support, food, child care and honoraria should be available to committee members.

Part 2: What did participants share?

The information shared below reflects the themes, practices and needs emphasized by the frontline youth workers present at the think tank, and those reviewing initial drafts of this report.

It became clear over the course of our conversation that creating safe youth space is a delicate balance requiring highly skilled and invested workers with time, resources, and a mandate to address the realities of Toronto youth. It also became clear that youth spaces are deeply important to the wellbeing of many youth on a number of levels.

There was incredible investment around the table in the expansion of youth spaces. And absolute agreement that this must be done right. Participants also expressed concern that, at the time of the think tank, there seemed to be no systematic plan from the City of Toronto to do both of the above.

All participants agreed with the premise that more youth spaces are needed in Toronto. There was also agreement that youth spaces should include:

1. A sense of home away from home

"It's the love that goes into it."

Youth spaces are about youth having a place to go, and to be. The elements below were mentioned as contributing to an ideal youth space which some participants characterized as feeling like 'home.'

- Different enough but still home. Open space with a kitchen, so youth feel they can move anywhere in the space. But see-through glass for workers. So workers are still close enough to provide support but youth still feel the space is their own.

- Attention given to the impact of the social environment when considering young people's personal histories of triggers and traumatic experience—i.e. make the space empowering, clear, involved and supported.

- Examples re: considering trauma when setting up space include creating open spaces where youth can see every part of the space and making sure the exit is never blocked.

- Not too many rules, a lot of windows, vibrant colours.

- A beautiful space to hang out.

- A kitchen and counselling rooms behind glass walls for private conversations.

- Very little structured programming, so they can do what they want, youth workers are in the background to provide support.

- Minimal access to technology can help to facilitate face-to-face dialogue.

- Necessary resources for youth spaces include:

    - Food was mentioned many times. In one case, an example of a worker who cooks for the youth was discussed and it was noted that the youth appreciate the food, and also 'the love that goes into it.'

    - Transportation supports. This was mentioned over and over—youth need tokens to be able to access youth spaces that are not within walking distance (and sometimes youth choose to access spaces outside their neighbourhoods).

    - Arts materials.

    - Wifi, x-box, pool table.

    - Clothing, shoes, toiletries, condoms.

    - Showers and clean towels.

    - Concurrent programming. Youth often babysit after school or are caring for their own children. An ideal setting would have spaces for both age groups, so youth don't have to worry about younger children. Programming available concurrently for younger siblings would help with the childcare issue.

2. Continuous flexibility

"Whoever's coming through the door, that's our program that day."

Participants talked about the importance of having the mandate and resources to respond to youth realities, concerns and interests. They also noted that creating a welcoming space—whatever that requires—should be the priority over delivering a prescribed set of programming. It was noted that in a successful youth space, programming may change from week to week or month to month or daily depending on who's there.

Youth should also have flexibility in terms of how they interact with the space. As one participant described, service providers can be there in the background, but not necessarily directing activities. One participant talked about youth 'coming to you when they need you.' There were also comments about making sure there is not 'too much structure.'

3. Relationships/continuity

It was noted more than once that the ability to create a long-term dynamic with a youth worker—and be able to trust that this dynamic will last—is key to youth spaces. Comments/ideas falling under this theme included:

- Youth often feel a sense of loss due to youth workers leaving and programs not lasting for very long.

- Contracts and part-time positions are a huge problem.

- Relationship building is key.

4. Creating safe space

"If you create space, anything can happen."

Participants talked about the fact that creating a safe space for youth is a delicate balance that shouldn't involve too many rules. At the same time, there should be clear boundaries that allow youth to feel safe. In some cases, rituals help maintain respect for the space. Comments/ideas falling under this theme included:

- If it's done right, it can feel like a second home.

- "Not too many rules, but they should have respect for the place."

- Holding youth in positive regard and maintaining clear boundaries helps create safe space.

- Space can be governed by agreements and rituals like when to come and how to commit to the space. For example: everyone shakes hands when they walk in. Or, if someone is uncomfortable with shaking hands, that person makes eye contact and acknowledges everyone else when they walk in.

- People from different neighbourhoods who wouldn't normally be together will be together in a space, '...if you create that kind of culture.'

- If the space is curated carefully, 'they take [the] space as their own safe space.'

- They should feel the space is their own. This also helps provide a sense of safety.

- You help to build bridges by creating the right space to build bridges.

- When asked what youth ask for most, one participant responded 'a second chance' from workers.

5. Creating space for everyone

The ideal space is where each person can be 'every part of themselves.'

Many participants talked about the challenges around—and the necessity to—create welcoming spaces for *everyone*. While the question of population-specific spaces was raised, there was more concern about making youth spaces welcoming for all youth.

The need for ongoing, 'real,' anti-oppression and anti-racism training for youth work-

ers was discussed extensively as key to creating diverse spaces. * This includes having support from management to reflect, organize anti-oppression training, and unpack complex issues with teams.

One participant discussed the need for youth workers to have the ability and training to facilitate the difficult conversations and dynamics that come up all the time between youth, and stated that this ability is key to holding a safe space for *all* youth.

Participants also emphasized the need for youth workers who think critically and can point out racism and other systemic injustices. For example, there was discussion around the criminalization of racialized youth, and the need for youth workers to be able to engage youth about this issue.

Additional comments/ideas falling under this theme included:

- Acknowledging the reality of trauma and people's lived experiences.

- Taking a harm reduction approach was discussed. The challenges of applying a harm reduction approach for a wide age spread was also discussed (in the case of the space in question the ages were 13 - 21).

- The need not to criminalize or sanction youth who smoke weed was discussed.

- Workers can also learn from youth. 'Space should be about sharing. We all bring life experiences that we can share.'

- Spaces need to have youth workers who back anti-oppression training up with actions.

- The spaces themselves should be run on an anti-oppression framework, and staff should come in with an understanding of anti-oppression/anti-racism and represent communities served.

- Youth are often perceived as being trouble. Space should be there to give them a chance to *be* without 'looking over their shoulder.'

When asked 'who is being left out?' responses included LGBTQ2 youth (and in particular LGBTQ2 youth experiencing homelessness), newcomer youth, First Nations youth, young women, young transgendered women and youth living with disabilities.

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* Community Recreation for All defines appropriate anti-racism/anti-oppression (AR/AO) training as: ongoing AR/AO training along with cultural competency training for different populations; Aboriginal cultural safety training and specific training around LGBTQ2 youth; girls; and youth with disabilities. Trainings should be undertaken in partnership with community organizations representing communities. Please note: this does not replace additional comprehensive training needed around health and safety; crisis response and de-escalating situations; trauma-informed practice; mental health; youth engagement and activities; general youth work, etc. (This list is not comprehensive.)

Additional responses included:

- Newcomers might come for service but should be made to feel welcome in the space. This can be difficult due to language barriers and dynamics between newcomers and youth who have been in Toronto/Canada longer.

- LGBTQ2 youth don't feel safe in many spaces—it's important for staff to be able to create safe space and facilitate conversations.

- Spaces should have sign-interpretation for youth who are hearing impaired (as just one example of how spaces should be made to work for youth who are differently abled).

6. Team composition, skills and referrals

It was made clear that youth space workers need extensive experience and training. Many necessary competencies are listed throughout this document. It was also made clear that youth space workers need to work in strong, stable and supported teams that represent a range of experiences and expertise. The need for specialized supports—in particular around mental health—was discussed. It was proposed that spaces could be staffed by core youth space worker teams and that supplemental specialized workers, including mental health workers, could rotate between spaces on a regular basis. Other needs mentioned that could be covered by specialized workers included supports for newcomer youth. Additional comments/ideas under this theme included:

- Each worker cannot be an expert at everything. So in a team, it is easier because you can share the expertise.

- Most youth spaces aren't capable of dealing with mental health issues. Training is needed, and someone who can recognize mental health needs and be capable of supporting colleagues.

- The ability/knowledge to make referrals to appropriate supports was mentioned, in particular for housing and health care. Waiting lists for these types of services were also mentioned as a huge problem, including the fact that waiting lists aren't often kept up to date, which contributes to long wait times.

- Youth move around, and there should be a way of networking youth spaces. Maybe some youth workers should work in more than one space. Youth workers should be able to suggest additional youth spaces.

- Local artists/community leaders could run workshops and programs in the space if youth identified the need for them.

7. Support for Staff

Participants identified the need for staff support from management, community members and each other. They talked about the importance of having time and space to unpack their experiences and how working in a team provides them with necessary emotional support. Youth workers need to be offered training in self-care and should have counselling available to them in the case of youth in the neighbourhood being harmed in any way.

8. Youth input / voices

Participants emphasized how important it is to involve youth in creating and running the space. Decorating the space and choosing and developing activities give youth a sense of autonomy and ownership over the space. Comments/ideas under this theme included:

- Youth should be able/encouraged to decorate the space. The space should reflect their thoughts/feelings/art.

- The space should have very little structured programming, allowing youth to decide what they want to do.

- Youth need to be involved in running the space and identifying relevant activities.

- Youth need to be given space/free time that they can use for meetings and creating their own programs/workshops.

9. Location

It was mentioned more than once that centralized locations allow youth from different parts of the City to be together in a youth space outside of their community (neutral space).

The importance of having spaces near subway stations—and accessible subway stations—was also mentioned. At the same time, transportation was mentioned as a key barrier to access; tokens must be provided.

While centralized locations on the subway line should be offered, some youth spaces should also be located within walking distance of neighbourhoods where the need for youth space has been specifically identified.

The idea of proximity to other services/agencies was also mentioned. For example, a library where youth can do homework before or after visiting the youth space.

Comments/ideas under this theme included:

- A youth space located on the subway line would allow youth coming from other neighbourhoods to participate.

- Youth spaces should be at subway stations that are accessible. Not all of them are.

- There is a need for one central, accessible location.

- A space within a walking distance would allow more youth to participate.

- Participants also identified geographical areas in Toronto where they were felt there was a need for youth space:*

  - Scarborough has a lot of need for youth spaces

  - Victoria Park/Finch (Chester Le Park)

  - Jane/Sheppard

  - Dundas West/Scarlett

  - Swansea Mews

  - Bathurst/Finch

Participants also raised the issue of brokering relationships between youth spaces and the community/other organizations in the vicinity. It was pointed out that youth are often stigmatized, mistreated and presented as 'trouble.' One of the participants discussed the fact that youth are often asked to leave a nearby library for one reason or another. Youth workers sometimes help negotiate with the library so youth can return.

In addition, youth space workers need to maintain a delicate balance between being a good neighbour and creating a safe space where youth are allowed to be themselves and sometimes must negotiate with surrounding businesses and services.

10. Advisory committee, oversight and evaluation

The need for ongoing oversight and evaluation of youth spaces was discussed. It was suggested an advisory committee made up of youth workers, youth, agencies that serve youth, community residents and potentially others be created. The role of the advisory committee would be to assess youth spaces and work directly with the Community Development and Recreation Committee to provide their feedback and suggestions.

It was also suggested that decision-makers be encouraged to visit youth spaces 'not for a photo opportunity' but to really spend time there and get a sense of what is going on.

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* CRfA feels strongly that the City of Toronto needs to do their own, independent research in terms of where these spaces should be located, and validate this research with community residents, youth and frontline workers. The think tank was not comprehensive and did not represent all areas of the city.

11. Age spread

The age range for youth space participants was discussed. Youth workers indicated that their youth spaces have various age requirements. Some examples included: infants to 25, 13-21, 15-30. Strengths and weaknesses of a wide age spread were examined. While having youth of different ages in the same space creates some positive opportunities, applying a harm reduction approach could require adjustment for different ages. It was also cautioned that while there are advantages to a wide age spread—including youth mentoring younger youth and children—youth can sometimes negatively influence younger youth and children. It was also mentioned that youth of varying ages need their own space.

12. Outreach

While this was not explicitly discussed at the think tank, an outreach strategy tailored to youth space goals (i.e. addressing groups of youth who are left out, etc.) is essential to any youth space.

Appendix A: About the think tank and report

How were participants invited to attend?

We put out an open call for frontline youth workers to attend a think tank about youth spaces through the Frontline Partners w/ Youth Network (FPYN) email list, which goes out to 1,500 people in the youth serving sector. We also put the notice out to Community Recreation for All's (CRfA) contacts through email and our twitter account.

What happened at the think tank, and how was it recorded?

During the think tank, participants responded in one, large-group conversation to a set of questions (please see Appendix 2). The conversation was not taped, but transcribed by two different notetakers. Sentences in quotations are a close approximation of a direct quote, although might not be exact in all cases.

How did we write the report?

Members of CRfA wrote a draft report, which was then circulated to think tank participants, who had the opportunity to share input.

What are the limitations of this research?

- We did not ask participants to define baseline activities, programming or infrastructure for youth spaces. Rather we asked them the questions outlined in Appendix B.

- We did not collect information about job positions/responsibilities of think tank participants.

- We did not collect demographic information from think tank participants.

- Participants' recent working experience cited at the think tank did not include every part of the city or represent every type of organization. Notably, recent work experience in Scarborough was not represented.

- Although some youth workers present were also 'youth,' youth voices were not explicitly included in this report. This research is meant to be used in conjunction with additional research capturing the perspective of youth on youth space.

- **This research includes input from a relatively small sample of extremely knowledgeable youth workers in the City of Toronto. It should not be considered comprehensive, but should be used to enhance a youth space-related city-wide needs assessment along with a thorough examination of best practices around youth space**.

Appendix B: Think tank questions

1. a) What is one of the best things about your youth space or a space you have visited?

1. b) What is on top of your wish list for your youth space? What have people been asking for? Why?

2. a) If you had the power to create a new youth space, where would it be?

2. b) Who is being left out? How can program spaces address this?

3. a) What kind of support do you need to make your youth space successful?

3. b) What kind of expertise do management and frontline workers need?

3. c) What kind of community oversight or governance or accountability or evaluation does there need to be?