

Hi my name is Judith Otto and I am a member of Community Recreation for All. I'm also speaking today as a person who has worked with youth in different communities in Toronto for several years. This is why I chose to be here today, to highlight my experiences and stress the need for youth spaces. But before I go into those details I would like to mention that youth spaces do not exist in isolation from other issues, just as youth do not exist in isolation from families, or communities.

The budget proposal for 2014 affects youth - and everyone - in several ways. The user fee increase of 6 per cent will deeply affect youth and their families. The \$700,000 cut to the Welcome Policy subsidy program will also affect youth and families. Since the Welcome Policy is currently only budgeted to serve a tiny percentage of those eligible, this will not be made up for by 16 new priority centres. The same is true of cuts to the planned Swim to Survive program, or the decision to leave fees on leisure swim on indoor pools. In general, it is important to think about an integrative approach to the strategies that you put in place for youth.

Over the years, my work with youth has taught me that youth issues are very complex and diverse and there is no one shoe fits all solution for their needs. All youth go through some form of struggle whether it be around family battles, structural violence in the schools, identity, independence, self-esteem, etc. and they will grapple with how to cope. Some of the youth I worked with came from homes where, for various reasons, parents were essentially absent, leaving them to have to deal with homework and other household responsibilities on their own. Lonely and seeking attention and affection, these youth sometimes looked for love in all the wrong places, finding themselves in unhealthy relationships that put them at risk. I have had to counsel more than 1 youth in my time around date rape, STD's, and unplanned pregnancies.

I counselled them in the context of short-term programs. I know what a difference a permanent supportive and nurturing space would have made. A space that youth could trust, and know would always be there. Running a youth space is very complex, and it is not only about running structured youth programs. Yes programs can be incorporated, but youth really need a place where they can just go after school or during the summer break to be themselves and connect with each other in a safe and supervised space. My thesis in Grad school looked at immigrant youth in the high school systems of Toronto and much of what was shared was the need to have a place where they could gain social capital but not feel like they were in an extension of school.

Youth want to know that they can access spaces where they are welcomed and can have a sense of ownership and not feel like loiterers who are only welcomed during specific program times. A space where they can access computers and other multimedia platforms. A space filled of arts based programs and supplies they can freely utilize. **A place that is a home away from home where food access and comfortable furniture is a given, not a treat.** A place where they can receive information, advice, and mentorship as additional support. A place where youth have meaningful input into what they want to do and when. Where there's ample dedicated time that is truly for them.

This is not about simply sticking a staff member in a basement to monitor youth for a couple hours. This is about the incredibly hard and important work of creating a space that is safe for and that embraces all youth, and all aspects of all youth, one that is accessible to the diverse make-up of youth in Toronto including youth with disabilities, LGBTQ2 youth, Aboriginal youth and newcomer populations. To do this, you need highly trained and talented staff with a range of training including anti-racism and anti-oppression training, appropriate staffing levels, skilled supervision and program resources. There needs to be time to assess community needs, build relationships with the community, create neighbourhood-specific protocols. There absolutely needs to be a real, genuine community advisory of people who know what they're talking about. Youth workers. Youth. Community residents. People from organizations representing different groups. And this advisory group needs time and resources to build themselves as a team, share knowledge, and come up with policies, protocols and locations, build partnerships with appropriate community agencies and City divisions, which will require some skilled group facilitation. I believe that it would make sense for this advisory group to report directly to the Community Development and Recreation Committee, just like we are speaking with you today. You all are the ones who make these critical decisions, therefore it makes the most sense for you to receive any input from this body of people working directly with youth.

Creating new youth spaces will not be an easy task, and if it is done wrong - meaning not appropriately resourced, not thoughtful, and not sustainable, - it can be unsafe for youth instead of helpful. If Councillors and Parks, Forestry and Recreation invest and do this right, it will be a beautiful thing, and there will so many people standing with you to make it happen.

Thank you for your time and consideration for the youth in our communities.