

Foundry's National Youth and Family Ambassador Program: Barriers, Solutions and Aspirations

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Introduction

Bringing together multiple health and social support services to provide collaborative care, better known as Integrated Youth Services (IYS), cannot exist without empowering voices of those who are directly impacted by these services. The Youth and Family Ambassador Program (YFAP) was developed to help curate a sense of interconnectedness and belonging across Canada to help promote and enhance IYS initiatives.

Objectives

The objective of this project was to empower young people and families/caregivers from across the country to advocate for IYS in their communities. This presentation will describe a Canadian Youth and Family Ambassador program led by Foundry, an IYS organization located in British Columbia.

Approach/Methods

This 18-month program was coordinated by a project lead, three staff members, and a working group involving internal and external stakeholders. A pan-Canadian call-out resulted in the receipt of approximately 90 applications. Through virtual community building and a Co-Design Session, the vision of the program was established; eight IYS themes emerged which Ambassadors could select from and be a part of developing.

Results

A total of 67 Ambassadors were selected from 7 provinces. The ambassadors included 49 youth and 18 family members. Lessons learned in the development of the program included preliminary issues vetting applicants in a fair manner, interviewing prospective applicants on their capability and lived experience, garnering proper intersectionality and geographic distribution, planning events in a virtual space, engaging the working group to provide insight and suggestions, and working with Domain7 to create timelines and agendas for the Ambassadors as the project was unfolding.

As the program developed, considerations arose for project governance, procedures for engaging meaningfully in a virtual space, managing a national project during a pandemic, co-creation of the project (leading to slower than usual project delivery) and managing expectations of Ambassadors in terms of project scale/feasibility. Other challenges included running a program of this scale in a virtual space involving several time zones, virtual engagement methods, and retention. Lessons learned in the later stages of the program included the need for more support from external stakeholders and government partnerships, clearer/more realistic expectations, and a longer project time for Ambassadors; these would have been helpful to ensure project activities were achieved in a meaningful way.

Conclusion

The YFAP is unique and daring in the sense that no other project has sought out ardent folks with lived experience on a national scale in Canada. The impact of such a project is profound and bringing together motivated people looking for positive radical change can bring about inspiring and powerful conversations. Many of the staff members working on the YFAP have expressed having their own passions reignited by working alongside driven and likeminded individuals like the national Ambassadors.

Next steps include having more diverse geographic representation in Canada, a larger Ambassador cohort, more time to bond across cohort groups, in-person events, greater family member/caregiver involvement, wider reach to municipalities with limited IYS resources/knowledge base, potential international reach, and becoming a Foundry mainstay with additional YFAP phases.

