

Lessons Learned in
Collectively Supporting
Youth as They Transition
from CAS Care

Halton Youth Collective Impact
Year 2 Impact: 2021-22

Insights for program refinement in Halton
and for possible implementation by other
Ontario CAS organizations and their youth
serving community partner organizations

Acknowledgement of the Territories

Halton, as we know it today, is rich in the history and modern traditions of many First Nations and the Métis. From the lands of the Anishinabe to the Attawandaron, the Haudenosaunee, and the Métis, these lands surrounding the Great Lakes are steeped in Indigenous history. We acknowledge and thank the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation for being stewards of the traditional territory upon which this research and programming took place. We are in solidarity with our Indigenous brothers and sisters to honour and respect the four directions, lands, waters, plants, animals and ancestors that walked before us, and all of the wonderful elements of creation that exist.

This report proudly builds on earlier reports. We are grateful for the support from Halton Region, Red Hill, and Sheridan College, for their foundational contributions respectively, through the evaluation/reporting of the first year of the pilot, and assessing comparisons between various cohorts and a control group. We thank Lynn Fergusson for her additional analysis and creating this report.

The Halton Youth Collective Impact is a proud Halton Region Community Safety and Well-Being Action Table

Special thanks to our friends, the participating community organizations:



Funding provided by:



Why focus on Education, Employment and Training for Youth Transitioning from Care?

The Challenge:

For the majority of the 36,440 youths aged 15-19 in the Halton region, the transition from their formative years to adulthood comes with the support of family, friends, education, etc. (Statistics Canada, 2021). For the roughly 100 youth who transition from Halton Children's Aid care each year, this transition is not always as seamless (Halton Children's Aid Society, 2021a). There are approximately 136,000 youth turning 18 in Ontario, and roughly 800 to 1000 of those will "age out" of government supports at this same time (Korvarikova and the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2017). These supports can include housing, employment, life skills, and financial support.

(Halton Youth Collective Impact Study - 2019-2022, Sheridan College and Halton CAS, Dec '22)

Today's child protection system does not often recognize the importance of long-term youth outcomes throughout the transition process from the system and into young adulthood. (Kovarikova, J., Exploring Youth Outcomes After Aging-Out of Care, 2017). As a result, transitioning youth (specifically between the ages of 19 and 24) are left at an increased risk of adverse life outcomes and are left vulnerable to becoming homeless and entering the criminal

justice system. (Bender, K., Yang, J., Ferguson, K., & Thompson, S. (2015). Experiences and needs of homeless youth with a history of foster care. Children and Youth 2 Services Review, 55, 222-231.

(Halton Youth Collective Program Overview, 20-21)

The Response:

The Halton Youth Collective Impact (HYCI), a collaborative initiative of Halton CAS, Halton Region, the Oakville Community Foundation, and many youth-serving organizations in the community, seeks to address the gaps in youth successfully transitioning from the care of the Children's Aid Society. The HYCI has been developed to support the long-term goals of transitioning youth in a way that is focused on the real-time needs of each program participant.

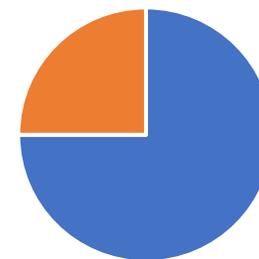
HYCI Focused on Education, Employment & Training (EET):

In determining where to focus their efforts, the HYCI focused on addressing NEET

"The proportion of young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) is a well-established indicator...that has been closely monitored by policy-makers as young people who are NEET may be experiencing difficulties transitioning from school to the labour market, and could be at risk for low income and social exclusion."

<https://www160.statcan.gc.ca/prosperity-prosperite/neet-eng.htm>

Halton CAS Youth Not in Education, Employment or Training - NEET - 2017 Baseline



■ In Education, Employment and/or Training ■ Not - NEET

As of 2017, as a baseline for this work, it was estimated that less than 75% of youth, in the care of CAS, aged 18-24, were in Employment, Education or Training.

HYCI raised the bar to focus on youth *satisfaction* with EET:

HYCI decided it wasn't enough for youth to simply meet the standard of participating in education, employment or training (EET). That would not address youth working part time when they wanted to be full time, or working when they wanted to be in school to be able to get a better job or pursue a career. They opted to focus on satisfaction with EET as a way to capture this. *Satisfaction* didn't necessarily mean youth were happy with their current EET, but they could see that they were on the path they wanted to be on.

In 2017, HYCI created an overall goal, or intended impact statement, that by 2022, 90% of youth, 18-24, supported by Halton Children's Aid Society*, are satisfied with their education, employment or training.

Satisfied; youth feel they are on the right path in their:

✓ Education ✓ Employment +/-or ✓ Training

*supported = had an open file with Halton CAS before age 18, and/or are currently in a Halton CAS program (including Continued Care Supporting Youth - CCSY and Bridging the Gap).

Theory of Change – How Will the HYCI accomplish this?

If we take these actions:



Then, we believe it will result in these interim goals:

- Youth are connected to a caring adult/mentor
- Youth have long term goals
- Youth's needs are met to address barriers to employment, education, or training
- Youth have sustainable, continuous housing

So that,

By 2022, 90% of youth, 18-24, supported by Halton Children's Aid Society*, are satisfied with their education, employment and/or training.

*supported = had an open file with Halton CAS before age 18, and/or are currently in a Halton CAS program (including Continued Care Supporting Youth - CCSY and Bridging the Gap)

One Participant's Objectives:

"I would like to gain financial coaching and advice to become financially stable. I would like to get support through my schooling at Sheridan and help with employment. I would also like to build a bond with my mentor and know that they will be there for me whenever."

- Youth participant

First, this means youth in the program are "satisfied" with their EET. Then, how do we get 90% of all CAS Halton youth there? How does this move from a program to broad systems change?

This would mean:

Halton CAS youth beyond the HYCI program are gaining access to a significant person of support and progressing on their goals (with financial and community support to address barriers)...leading to EET satisfaction.

Eventually, leading to:

Other CAS organizations leveraging the approach, philosophy and/or learning from this program...leading to EET satisfaction with their youth.

Context – Barriers & COVID 19

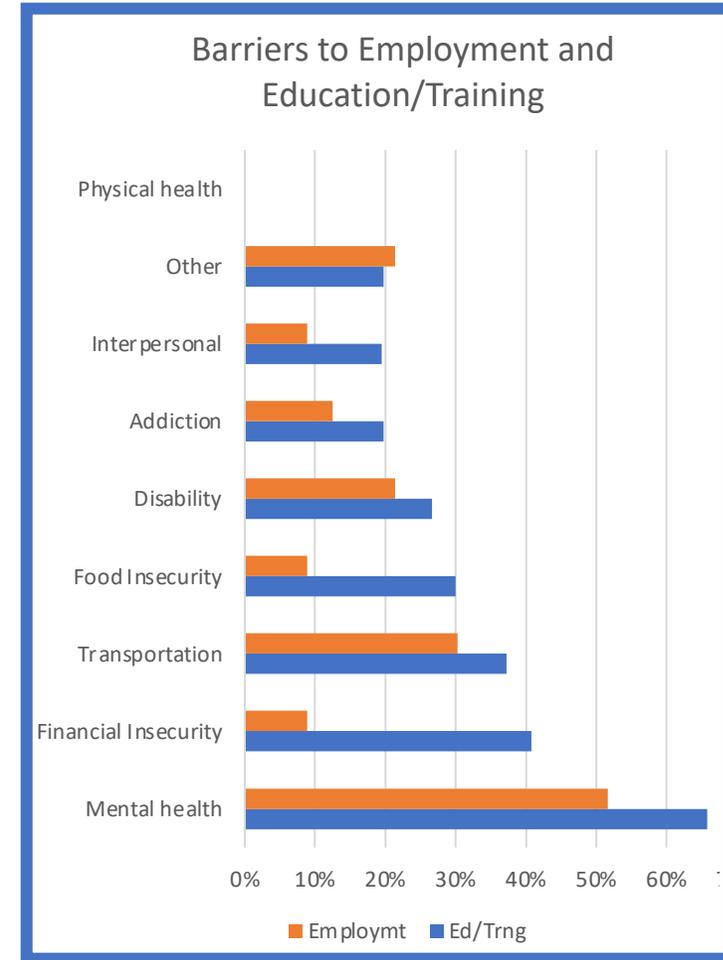
Like many other young people, youth in this study saw their employment opportunities and experiences negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Most participants indicated that their industry of employment was retail, food service and/or customer servicing roles, which were the industries and sectors most negatively impacted by the pandemic.

Overwhelmingly, youth identify mental health challenges as being one of the most significant barriers that has affected their education and training goals. Other barriers include, financial insecurity, food insecurity, transportation challenges, addiction, and disabilities. Many youth shared the pandemic was a barrier to fulfilling their education goals, captured by one youth: “education online doesn’t work for me.”

Another wrote “I have not been able to work due to Covid and school had moved online which made it harder to learn and pay attention.”

These young people, like so many others, would have attempted to fulfil their educational goals during a very challenging period of learning. We know youth in the HYCI are already vulnerable and the pandemic made educational opportunities more difficult to achieve.

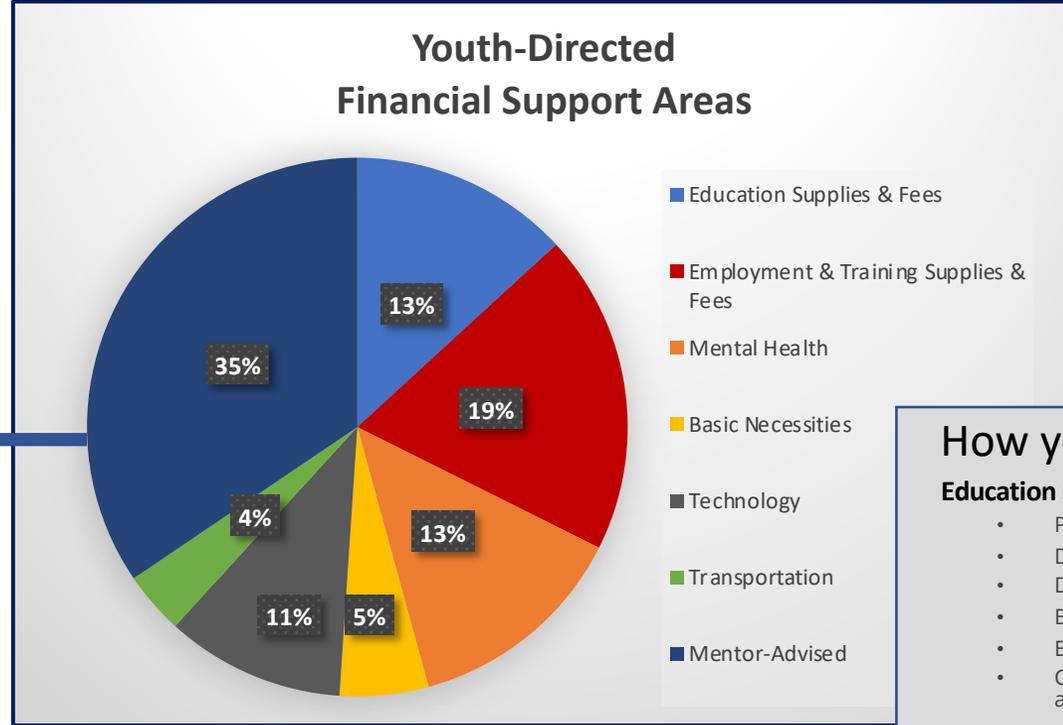
“There are no accessible jobs with my health needs that I have been able to find since the pandemic started.” This young person, like many others in the HYCI indicate that mental health challenges are one of the most significant barriers to employment goal fulfilment. Similar to the previous discussion on barriers to education and training, youth report financial insecurity, food insecurity, transportation challenges, addiction, and disabilities as significant barriers to achieving their employment goals.



Addressing Barriers with Financial Support

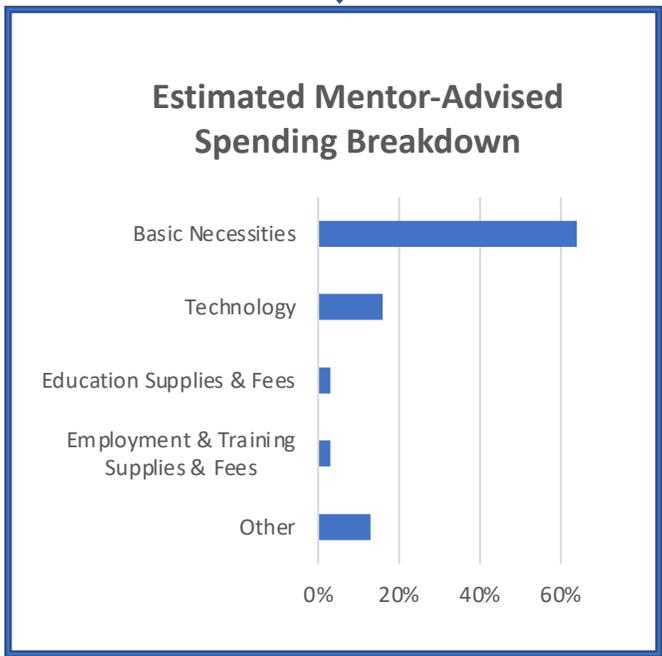
HYCI provided youth funding to address barriers to education, employment and training. This included directly funding related supplies and fees, and also supporting more foundational basic needs and mental health, to make education, employment and training possible.

In addition, mentors were provided gift cards to allow the youth and mentor to work together to meet the youth's needs. These purchases generally fell in the same spending categories, with an estimated 60% focused on addressing basic needs, such as groceries and clothing.



How youth used financial supports

<p>Education Supplies & Fees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Placement clothing • Desks • Desk chairs • Book shelving • Exam/course • College/university applications 	<p>Technology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • iPad • MacBook
<p>Employment & Training Supplies & Fees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work shoes • Work clothing • Personal grooming • Business supplies; art • SmartServe certification • Music studio sessions • Personal trainer certification 	<p>Transportation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Driving school • G1-Licence
	<p>Mental Health</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neuro Feedback Therapy • CBT Therapy
	<p>Basic Necessities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eyeglasses • Groceries



Centring the Youth Voice – here’s what we heard about the experience from participating youth, in their own words:

“ *Being a part of the collective impact has been a motivating, educational, and clarifying experience for me overall. From being a part of the table that help create this program to this program helping me put food on my table in my own home, I've learned so much. The mentors have been there for so many important times in my life. I don't know how I would've gotten the courage to go to almost any of the interviews I've been to or the support with appointments during and after my pregnancy without my mentors. And when I couldn't find work the collective impact still gave me and my son a sense of food security that we needed so badly. During this time, I was also inspired to finish my high school so I can achieve my goal of post-secondary. I am so so thankful for the time I had as part of this program and I'm excited to see how many more youth like myself will benefit and flourish from (this) collective in the future!* ”

“ *I've been apart [sic] of The Collective Impact Program since September of last year and it's been a great help getting me through hard times both financially and through letting me know that there was always someone who had my back. Jennifer (Program Coordinator) in particular was very kind and understanding whenever I came to her for any kind of help. I'm very glad and grateful that I'm apart (sic) of the program.* ”



“ *It's been about 3 years now since I met my mentor Cathy through a mentorship/get together event at the CAS office. During that time in my life I was going through a lot mentally and physically pushing myself to the limit with very little peer or adult support to keep me grounded. As youth in care, facing challenges that many kids don't have to think about, we don't always feel comfortable reaching out for support. Sometimes the things we go through are so terrible that we don't know how to explain that to people our own age and avoid talking about it whatsoever. When I was told about this mentor opportunity I was nervous, yet excited to have someone to talk to that's different from anything I ever had within youth programs before. A lot of youth I know - including myself - feel uneasy when we get 'assigned' a new 'worker' in our case. Who will they be? What do they do? Most of our workers aren't there to tell us personal details like that, they help with other things. The mentorship opened more doors to have those conversations with our mentor and for youth to choose who that person will be to support them in their life journey as I call it. At first, the mentorship kind of felt like therapy, until I realized that this supportive adult connection is a normal part of life. Not only 'normal' it's an important part of childhood to have a trusting adult that can be there for you in ways your peers can't be. Youth in care don't get to experience that childhood connection, many of us grew up finding adults hard to trust, which is why this mentorship program is so important for us to grow. Over the years, my support group has grown and I've learned a lot about myself from Cathy. She has been able to connect me with businesses and art related contests that have helped me get my art business off the ground. Of course, the youth need to have an open mind and be willing to learn about themselves from this experience.* ”

“ *I am a former youth in care that was lucky enough to be a part of the collective impact. The collective has really helped me with my education, with this program I was able to get a nice rose gold Macbook Air laptop and the software I need for my program. Without the Collective I would not have been able to afford a laptop or the software to get through this year online.* ”

“ *I feel like the progress I have made with the collective impact will help me now and in the future. I think the additional First Aid training will make my resume more appealing and being able to pursue a career in an industry I am interested in I think will really help in achieving my life goals of stable reliable work and housing.* ”

100% of survey respondents felt they received the right supports and services to meet their needs, and help them better manage some of the challenges they have faced in preparing for stable education, training or employment.

The Youth Impact from a Mentor's Perspective:

As a mentor in The Collective Impact Program (CI), my role was to offer encouragement, emotional support, build confidence, and help my mentee fulfill program goals with regards to education, employment and training.

My experience as a mentor in the CI has been a rewarding experience for myself and my mentee. In the beginning there were some challenges connecting with my mentee, however, with the help of the Program Coordinator, we were able to make a meaningful breakthrough. **The initial breakthrough occurred when the CI was able to offer food security** in the form of a grocery order placed and delivered once per month for the duration of the program. This support enabled my mentee to stop worrying about groceries and focus on other education and employment goals.

The first employment goal, with the help of STRIDE, was to get their **resume updated and prepare for future job interviews**. Secondly, the CI paid for my mentee to have their **hair professionally maintained and styled**, because that was a personal barrier to confidence and employment success. Thirdly, the CI helped them **purchase clothes to aid in their employment journey**. With the help of these supports, my mentee found a job. Not just any job, **"their first real job!"** - My Mentee

Another goal we accomplished was connecting with the re-engagement counsellor at the public-school board. This was very important, because the re-engagement counsellor helped my mentee **get back into school so they could finish their high school credits**.

As the program progressed, my mentee was doing great and accomplishing the goals we had set. They shared barriers that were still greatly impacting their mental health, pride and overall self-confidence. That was the need for **some basic furniture to instill a sense of pride** in their apartment setting and the need for **a functional bed**. My mentee had been struggling to get a proper night's sleep for well over one year and their overall energy and mental health was suffering as a result.

I cannot put into words how meaningful the Collective Impact Program is to the youth we support. The Program Coordinator is always available, creatively supportive and a fierce advocate for our youth. **I am very proud to be a part of this program and I truly believe it changes the life trajectory for those that participate.**

The Youth Impact from a Staff Perspective:

As the Collective Impact Coordinator over the past year and a bit, I have seen how truly impactful this program has been for the youth preparing to exit Halton CAS care. It has given them a sense of knowing that they have support from people within this program and in the agency not only financial supports but also within the mentorship relationships that are established. As a worker, I think we tend to forget about how impactful a relationship can be for the youth outside of the worker-youth relationship **This program has been vital in its removal of some barriers that exist for the youth such as, transportation, food insecurities and navigating macro systems which can be very overwhelming for the youth.** With the support of the community partners at the table who also support the youth it can make breaking down these barriers less overwhelming. Halton Youth Collective Impact program is vital to the youth exiting care to assist with their own goals and success within employment, education and training.

”

- Collective Impact Coordinator



”

Results

Interim goals achieved!

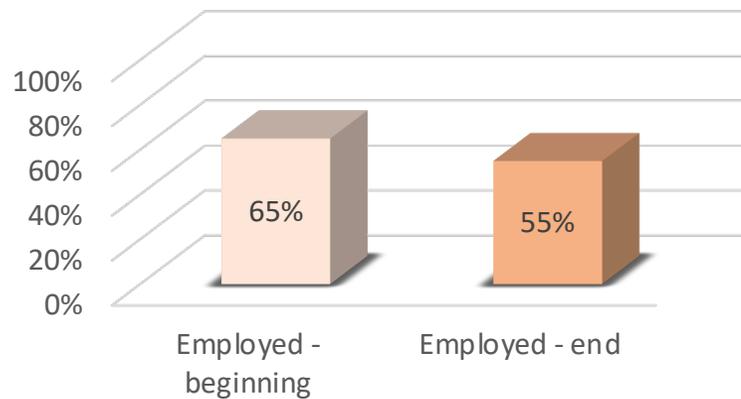
- ✓ Youth are connected to a caring adult/mentor
- ✓ Youth have long term goals
- ✓ Youth's needs are met to address barriers to employment, education, or training
- ✓ Youth have sustainable, continuous housing



What about their Education, Employment and Training Outcomes?

Employment Status

% Employed at Beginning and End of Program



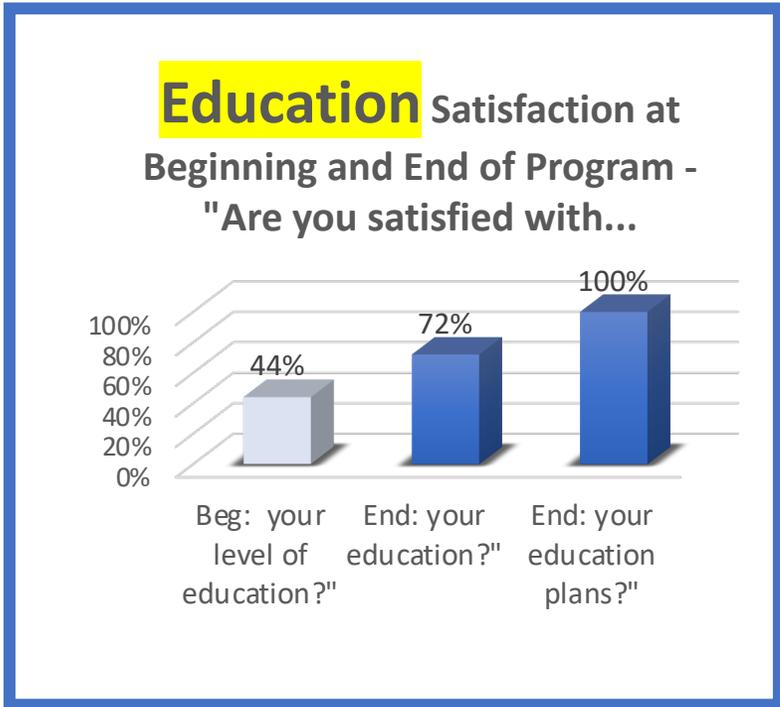
“Like many other young people, youth in this study saw their employment opportunities and experiences negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Most participants indicated that their industry of employment was retail, food service and/or customer servicing roles, which were the industries and sectors most negatively impacted by the pandemic.”

Halton Youth Collective Impact Study - 2019-2022, Sheridan College and Halton CAS, Dec '22)

Based on beginning and end surveys available for 19 of 26 participating youth.

Are More Youth Satisfied with their Education, Employment, and Training at the End of the Program?

Looking at each of the Employment, Education and Training areas individually, with paired reporting by individual for the beginning and end time periods, we see growth in the number of youth who are somewhat or very satisfied in each of these areas by the end of the program. We expanded this year’s survey to capture, at the end of the program, both their satisfaction with the current state of their Education, Employment and Training, and also their satisfaction with their EET plans. More youth were satisfied with their current EET at the end of the program than the beginning, and even more youth were satisfied with their EET plans.



We note that it’s challenging to have complete, reliable surveys from all participants, at the beginning and end of the program. While we’ve had incentives in place to encourage participation, and a process to capture the information, we will be looking for additional ways to ensure completion so that more fulsome results can be confidently reported. In reporting the data above, for those reporting both beginning and end reporting, we are reporting on 18/26 participants for education 19/26 participants for employment, and 13/26 for training (with a lower response here because training is not relevant for all youth). We are not able to confidently report on the current state of participation in education (being in school), due to data irregularities.

Overall, Were Youth Satisfied with Education, Employment, and/or Training at the End of the Program?

Achieving EET Satisfaction

Given the context of COVID-19, with job loss and a challenging educational environment, the stretch target for 90% of youth to be satisfied with their education, employment and/or training, was not expected to be achieved. Only 65% of youth were satisfied at the start of the program. However, post-program survey results show 95% of youth who responded were somewhat or very satisfied with at least one of their employment, education and/or training plans. This has met the intended impact set out for this group. While this is cause for celebration, the objective is for this result to be achieved not just for program participants but for all CAS youth, as outlined on page 4.

95% of program participants were satisfied or very satisfied with at least one of their employment, education and/or training plans, based on post-program survey responses.

“Overall, youth in care respond resoundingly to practical supports that aid with housing, financial supports, mental health, education, employment, and training. The research reaffirms the need for programs like the HYCI and the potential long-term benefits (e.g., stable housing, employment, income, etc.) that may result from wraparound support services for youth exiting care.”

Halton Youth Collective Impact Study - 2019-2022, Sheridan College and Halton CAS, Dec '22

Continuing to make progress

The post-program survey also showed that 75% of respondents made at least some progress on achieving their goals, with 50% achieving moderate progress or fully achieving their goals.



Expanding our view of the support and youth outcomes

Beyond specific achievements, we also know that this program provided CAS youth with emotional and financial support in a challenging time. Knowing the value of this, it underscores the importance of considering some additional metrics going forward, which might include how supported the youth felt, their confidence, the state of their mental health, and sense of stability.

Key Findings and Lessons Learned

A. Mentorship Matters

- Youth transitioning from care benefit from having an ongoing relationship with a caring, committed adult.
- Mentors act primarily as life coaches.
- Mentors can best support youth when they have:
 - a clear understanding of their role and expectations and some background on the particular youth they are matched with (e.g., through an onboarding or orientation process)
 - access to resources to support the youth (e.g., how to get help completing high school credits, how to get mental health support, what financial support is available and how it's accessed)
 - training to support the mentoring process
 - an understanding of the youth's goals, particularly around employment, education and training
 - a designated staff person to connect with for help, focused on addressing NEET
- The pool of mentors should be diverse, reflective of the backgrounds and experiences of the youth, as advised by youth.
- Youth should have an opportunity to informally meet possible mentors, perhaps at a group social event, to then select a mentor who will be a good fit.
- Youth can “bring their own mentor” (a peer, friend, family member, etc.). Youth should understand the purpose of a mentor and be given guidance on selection criteria. This mentor should receive the same orientation, training and supports as other mentors.
- Support one-on-one and group social activities to support building trusting relationships.

B. Setting and executing on EET goals

- Establishing goals related to employment, education and training, and the foundational pieces that enable them, including housing, mental health and financial stability, should be done as soon as possible once the relationship is founded. Youth, mentors and CAS workers should revisit these goals regularly to guide the discussions and actions to be taken.
- General info sessions (in-person or virtual) by community partners are a good social activity to strengthen relationships and helpful to let youth and mentors know what's possible, and the supports available. This might include sessions on completing high school graduation, applying to post-secondary schools, apprenticeship programs, tenant rights, budgeting, well-being, cooking, etc.

C. Access to Community Supports

- Youth benefit from being able to quickly and easily access trusted, reliable community services, such as housing (when facing a rent shortfall or possible eviction), mental health (when seeking quick access to counselling services), education (e.g., help converting their experiences to high school credits), and getting connected to employment or training opportunities. Housing, mental health, and even access to basic necessities, such as food and transit, are foundational to being able to move forward on employment, education and training.

D. Access to Financial Support

- Financial support is crucial to address barriers to EET such as laptops, cell phones, internet or data plans, transportation, interview clothes, work clothes and equipment, post-secondary application fees, and driver's licenses.

As the program ended, participants were asked to reflect on the changes in their lives the mentors have brought... Common responses included the mentors helping set goals, and providing support in accessing transportation and employment.

Halton Youth Collective Impact Study - 2019-2022, Sheridan College and Halton CAS, Dec '22

More Key Findings and Lessons Learned

E. Housing

- Sustainable, affordable housing within their community, to be near employment, education and their support network is an ongoing issue for many of these youth. We believe many pay significantly more than the guideline of spending a maximum of 30% of their income for shelter. Youth in the program are able to access housing support but it exposes a much bigger issue, affecting all CAS youth, and the broader population.

F. Process

- Have a designated staff point person for the program for youth, mentors and CAS workers.
- Invest time upfront in matching youth and mentors, orienting everyone to the program, and getting foundational training, to enable goals to be set early, support to be provided and progress to be made.
- Have a portal to house program information in one place, including all the community partners, the support they can provide, and who to contact. Halton service providers created video introductions, in hopes of breaking down barriers to being contacted. At Halton CAS this is our Youth Rolodex.
- Encourage at least monthly meetings between mentors and youth, and allow youth to drive the frequency.
- Enable mentors to connect with each other, with or without CAS, to learn from and support each other through the mentoring process.
- Standardizing and documenting the annual program, by month, is expected to support consistent and timely delivery, allow for continuous improvement, and withstand staff and organizational changes.

G. Duration

- The program is generally for 1-year (10-12 months). Mentors commit to 1 year and most see this as a life-long relationship. About 1/3 of youth participated for a second year where it was believed they would benefit, and they were interested. In the end, results from 1 and 2-year program participants were similar.

H. Measurement and Evaluation

- The program continues to evolve. Gain insights not just on the overall EET outcomes but on understanding progress being made on the established interim objectives:
 - Youth are connected to a caring adult/mentor
 - Youth have long term goals
 - Youth's needs are met to address barriers to employment, education, or training
 - Youth have sustainable, continuous housing
- Also look to uncover what other benefits are being achieved, or need to be achieved, to get to a point of youth satisfaction with EET.
- Get feedback from youth individually and/or collectively, after the first 1-2 months; and again ~6 months in. Do the same with mentors.
- Capture insights from mentors and CAS about changes in the youth.
- Wrestle with the trade-offs and limitations of capturing the youth voice independently, or with the support of a mentor or CAS worker who is part of the program. Consider other methods of capturing the information, such as a third-party interview with the youth. Focus on gaining insights for improving the process and outcomes, vs. for research and evaluation purposes.
- Continue to revise the program as needed, as you go.

Moving Forward

HYCI will continue to refine its evaluation approach, to capture the key actionable difference-makers in this program, while making the data acquisition easy for participants.

HYCI aims to expand its reach to more Halton CAS transitioning youth, by embedding the critical pieces of the program within Halton CAS practices and philosophy broadly, working towards all of our transitioning youth setting employment, education and training goals, with access to mentorship, community resources, and financial supports to pursue their goals.

There are approximately 17,000 children in foster care in Ontario; 800 to 1000 of those youth will "age out" out of the child welfare system each year (Kovarikova and the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2017). HYCI welcomes any opportunity to share more information about this work, and learn from others, to affect the lives of more youth transitioning from care.

Contact us!

Jennifer McKnight, Collective Impact Coordinator:

JMcKnight@haltoncas.ca

Steve Levac, Manager of Youth Services:

slevac@haltoncas.ca

Frances Pace, Oakville Community Foundation:

frances@theocf.org