



Youth Engagement at FIREFLY

On October 17th FIREFLY, The New Mentality, and The Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health collaborated to host an event called Youth Engagement: Becoming Agents of Change. This report outlines what we learned from the event and next steps that FIREFLY can take moving forward in youth engagement.

About the Event

Through a generous grant from the RBC Foundation, The New Mentality partnered with FIREFLY to bring together youth, community members, and service providers from Kenora, Dryden, Sioux Lookout, Ignace, and Red Lake to participate in a one-day event that developed a common understanding of youth engagement and developed next steps for FIREFLY as an agency. In addition, the youth participants created recommendations for FIREFLY to improve mental health services at their agency.



Creating the Space for Youth Engagement

As FIREFLY engages with young people it is important to create a space that is both physically and emotionally safe and comfortable for youth to participate. At this event, we learned that youth needs ranged from requiring a non-judgemental, trustworthy, encouraging and respectful atmosphere with an emphasis on confidentiality, where experiences and perspectives discussed were kept in the room. Validation, acknowledgement, and having smaller group discussions are essential in creating the space that will allow individuals to be more comfortable opening up and being vulnerable.

Something that was very important to the young people at the event was having fidget toys, as well as having food and drinks. They said this was helpful in creating a relaxing and inviting space for them.

Participants also offered what they could offer to create a safe space including active listening, staying engaged in the conversation, as well as offering comic relief as one youth mentioned “having a little dose of humour goes a long way.” Respecting boundaries when people are sharing their stories and experiences, compassion, support, empathy were just some of the key offers made at the event. These offers indicate what youth in the Kenora region need in order to be engaged.

Several youth shared their experiences being engaged in other activities in the community. They shared they were really engaged in activities when there was a sense of “family-like” atmosphere, whether it was a certain class they were in, sports teams, exploring nature, school clubs, etc. All of these activities made them feel like they were a part of something bigger. There was a sense of empowerment, trust, connectedness, and understanding which allowed youth to feel valued, accepted, energized, and where time just flew, and they couldn’t wait to come back because they were having fun!

Youth felt that it was important to have adults communicate with them effectively and engage in conversations where they felt like they have the decision making power and that their voices truly mattered. Many youth shared that when positively being engaged that they overall felt

important and that they were involved in aspects that concerned them, and their ideas weren't shut down. The environment overall in all these activities was calm, organized, and stress-free where they felt creative, motivated and were able to make new friends. Again, food and fidget toys were a big factor in the success of these engagement experiences. Having food made youth feel safe and comfortable and many youth shared that using fun games, and having playdough helped keep them engaged.

Recommendations from Youth Engagement at FIREFLY

One very clear recommendation was developed during this event; **create activities and community events to engage with youth.**

Many youth expressed that having events and activities like dodgeball, movie nights, Taco Tuesday, bowling, game nights, sporting events, where youth can share their ideas but also have fun and feel energized would allow youth to be more engaged at FIREFLY. Previous events like "Smash the Stigma" received very positive feedback but youth would like to see them happen more often, rather than just during Mental Health Week.



Many youth shared that having traditional Indigenous events so everyone can learn new cultures and traditions would be great, as it would provide an opportunity to be inclusive, as well as develop broader conversations regarding mental health.

With this recommendation, we can see that youth want to give their opinion on service improvement at FIREFLY but they want it to be fun. You can combine fun nights with important engaging conversations focused on engaging youth in service planning delivery. To further youth engagement in your agency it is recommended that FIREFLY engage with youth to be part of planning these events.

Recommendation 2: Guest Speakers

Youth also suggest having guest speakers who openly share and engage with youth on issues they are dealing with, such as anxiety, stress, addictions such as gaming, social media, substance use, and coping strategies, etc. The young people felt these presentations would help to normalize the discussion surrounding mental health and reduce the stigma. They suggested having youth speakers come and share their stories, so other youth feel comfortable in opening up and feel brave enough to also safely share their stories.

Recommendation 3: Leadership Opportunities for Youth

Many youth shared that having a youth council and/or leadership conferences would be helpful when it came to youth engagement. Youth identified that it was important to have youth leads that would be able to connect with youth, create the suggested events and activities in recommendation one, and share information regarding services. This would allow for a more seamless and involved youth engagement experience.

Recommendation 4: Don't create a one-size-fits-all youth engagement strategy

Youth expressed that they would like FIREFLY to create a tailored engagement plan for each community rather than one broad engagement plan, as the communities and individual's FIREFLY services are unique with specific needs and strengths.

Recommendation 5: Have incentives for youth to participate

Youth shared that they should be compensated for their involvement with youth engagement activities with incentives such as, receiving free food, recreational opportunities, volunteer hours, prizes, fidget toys and play dough!

For youth involved in a leadership role during the planning of activities, you will want to consider honorariums, gift cards, or volunteer hours.

Barriers to Participation and Implementation

As youth-created these recommendations for FIREFLY, they also thought about what challenges FIREFLY staff might face while implementing their recommendations and gave advice to overcome these challenges. Individuals felt that some of the challenges they foresee FIREFLY staff facing are funding, space, travel, costs for food and incentives, motivation of youth to attend, consistent times for events, and staffing for events.

Youth identified barriers that might detour their participation including stigma/social pressure, lack of diverse staff to connect to, motivation, and transportation. Stigma is still very strongly present for youth, it is important to be consistent with youth engagement activities to support normalizing the conversation of mental health. Youth identified that they need staff members from many different backgrounds and identities to help them better connect and feel supported. Youth said motivation for them to attend events might be a barrier and the best way to encourage them to attend is to make them fun and have incentives. Transportation was identified as a barrier as the cost and time to get to an event might outweigh the motivation to attend. When creating any youth engagement strategy FIREFLY staff will need to consider transportation for youth to attend. In terms of space, they suggested FIREFLY reach out to schools to use their space. They suggested having young people help plan exciting fundraising events to fund future events.

Even with these challenges, they want FIREFLY to be persistent and not give up on engaging with youth, ask youth what they want to see and allow them to be a part of the conversation.

Build

genuine and trusting relationships with youth and ask youth to help with the events, and be leaders in their communities.

Next Steps for FIREFLY

The first step for FIREFLY is building trusting and authentic relationships with youth. FIREFLY staff need to meet youth where they are at and show them that they are open to their ideas and implementing their recommendations. The New Mentality would suggest creating a youth group focused on implementing these recommendations. Due to your large geographical region, we would suggest you create a youth advisory committee in each community that FIREFLY services. These groups can work on projects in their community that youth are passionate about while continuing to give recommendations to FIREFLY to improve services. Ideally, these groups could connect at least once a year to get a regional lens on what's happening in the Kenora Region.

Tips for starting a Youth Advisory Group

- When starting a group focus on building relationships and trust
- Have an adult ally for each group as someone who supports advocates and works alongside the youth to ensure a safe and productive environment. It is important to show youth that their work is valued and having an adult ally present from the beginning and throughout the process demonstrates that there is support from both the adult and the agency
- Make it fun! It was very clear at this event that youth in the community wanted to be engaged but they need it to be fun – you can do this by doing ice breakers, games, or activities to help the young people to build relationships with each other.
- Be ready to forfeit some control and take direction from youth
- When developing the group, young people should be involved in the planning process from its early stages
- Work with youth to establish realistic timelines and expectations
- Engage in goal-setting activities with youth – creating structure, direction and a plan of action with youth that helps them develop a sense of ownership, responsibility and vested interest in the partnership
- Trust the process. Sometimes the group dynamics will feel chaotic, out of control, or awkward. It's okay. Adults are used to leading, but challenge yourself to take a back seat. Help youth figure out their meeting structure and process.
- Youth are used to adult leading. In the beginning, they will look at you to make the end decisions around projects and activities. Push that decision making back to the youth to decide this together. Provide the suggestion of creating a decision process together.
- Breaks are helpful. Give them the space for them to decide when they need it – both individually as well as collectively
- Over time, develop something along the lines of a Mission, Vision or Values for your group.

Recommendations from Youth to Improve Services at FIREFLY

Many youth found this event helpful in beginning a much needed conversation about improving services at FIREFLY and would like to continue to have opportunities to provide feedback on how FIREFLY can improve their services. Youth mentioned that they were pleasantly surprised that they were invited because they felt their opinions are not usually asked.

Youth did not note what they felt was working well at FIREFLY including easy accessibility for students to access services in Dryden due to the location next to the school as well as having a FIREFLY office connected to the high school and Confederation college in Sioux Lookout. They shared that the overall atmosphere at FIREFLY is friendly, with light refreshments offered, the colours of the space, having a comfortable room with beanbag chairs, and of course play dough! Youth shared they were happy with the quick services, programs, and workshops offered.

The young people at the event with the support of adult allies created the following recommendations for FIREFLY to improve services across the region.

Recommendation 1: Outreach

Have presentations in schools and to parents about what FIREFLY has to offer when it comes to services, what counselling looks like, and how to make an appointment. Many youth at the event shared that they didn't know what FIREFLY did, with some under the assumption that they only work with the Indigenous population in your region. Outreach in schools is a great way to help youth understand what services are available in your community. Youth specifically wanted outreach to be targeted at themselves and their parents.

Recommendation 2: Flexibility & Accessibility

Hire additional staff to create more flexible hours, as many youth felt the hours of the agency don't reflect their needs. Offering online counselling would be helpful to those in other communities outside of Dryden. Youth expressed that mental health is not 9 to 5, having accessible services that offer flexible hours such as in the evenings, on the weekends, and having drop-in sessions were significant in creating a more engaging environment. Individuals from Sioux-Lookout suggested having better accessibility accessing the FIREFLY office since they feel they are being locked out and are not trusted.

Recommendation 3: Diverse Staff

Have staff members that reflect the needs of the youth. Many youth shared that they would like to have more male staff at FIREFLY so that they would feel more comfortable, as well as diverse staff from all different cultural backgrounds, age, etc.

Recommendation 2: First impressions matter

Many young people mentioned that the first impression when entering the office/counselling either makes or breaks a relationship. It is crucial that the space is welcoming and all staff are mindful when interacting with youth.

Recommendation 4: Making Connections with Counsellors

Youth recommended that they would like to be able to meet counsellors or have their bios to read beforehand. This would allow for a less intimidating atmosphere and allow youth to be able to choose the counsellor that they feel most connected and comfortable with. Youth expressed that they wanted the opportunity to select from a variety of diverse counsellors, male and female, closer in age, and from different cultural backgrounds which would allow them to have someone to be able to relate to and feel at ease.

Recommendation 5: Alternative Counselling Spaces and Approaches

Having counselling sessions outside of the office space and in nature or having rooms with windows would help ease tension and build rapport. Youth identified that they wanted counselling sessions that are fun, whether that be through board games or activities to open up a dialogue and build a connection, rather than “sitting in a room talking about your problems” as one youth put it.

Recommendation 6: Smooth transitions into the Adult System

Youth also suggested having the transition from youth to adult services be more fluid, as there is currently no procedure and building trust with a new counsellor should be done slowly and with support.

Barriers to Youth Accessing Services

Youth at the event identified several barriers that deter them from receiving services at FIREFLY.

Barrier One: Stigma/Social Pressure

Young people identified that they were afraid and embarrassed in being associated with the Child Protection Services when accessing services. Many individuals also face cultural barriers, as many cultures do not feel comfortable when accessing mainstream services. Several youth wondered what their friends might think if they were to access mental health services, or how to even start that discussion with their peers and parents.

Barrier Two: Lack of Diverse Staff

Not having compassionate and diverse staff in terms of age, gender, cultural backgrounds, etc., creates a barrier for many youth who would feel more comfortable with individuals they are able to relate to, and who can understand them on a deeper level.

Barrier Three: Transportation

Youth identified transportation and the cost associated with transportation as a barrier when trying to access services. Many youth from neighbouring communities do not feel like they have the same opportunity as their peers to access the services offered in Dryden.

Barrier Four: Lack of services or knowledge of services

Youth noted that not having enough knowledge of the services offered and the language used is a bit difficult for them to understand and causes barriers for them. Many youth at this event thought that FIREFLY was indigenous specialized, and was unaware that it was open for everyone to access. Youth from Ignace felt there was a lack of FIREFLY services present in their communities.