

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

Next Steps for &/&Z

The first step for &/&Z is building trusting and authentic relationships with youth. &/&Z 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 &/&Z 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 Ignance felt there was a lack of FIREFLY services present in their communities.