

# Working with High-Risk, Marginalized Youth: Youth-led Development of a Framework of Youth Engagement

FINAL Report

A Research Project by:

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## Acknowledgements

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## Abstract

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Engaging high-risk, marginalized youth presents a significance challenge in our society, considering the prevalence of disconnect and distrust they often experience with their social environments/systems. Yet, meaningful youth engagement is a key concept not only for positive youth development, but also for a systems change to more effectively support high-risk youth and families. This section presents a framework of youth engagement that has been developed through working with sixteen youth leaders in our community-based research team over nine months. Although this framework has directly incorporated the youth leaders' lived experiences, talents, and voices, conceptually positive youth development (PYD) is an overall theoretical framework of our research. Contrary to a conventional approach to leading research by academic investigators, our youth leaders were the ones who led the development of the framework. The framework consists of three components (*Basis*: philosophy and principles, *What*: goals/outcomes, and *How*: actions/processes/pathways to change) that are supported by nine themes described in this report. We will also provide remarks about preparing to implement the framework in a practical setting.

### Rationale and Significance

Marginalized populations are systematically prevented from accessing opportunities and resources that are normally available to others, and that are critical to enabling them to reach their full potential and become contributing members of society (Delgado, 2002; **Ersing**, 2009; Wearing, 2011). The impacts of marginalization are compounded for urban-based youth who are at high-risk of poverty, homelessness, social isolation, violence, racism, discrimination, mental health challenges, and/or stigma (Abela & Hankin, 2008; **Guibord**, Bell, Romano, & Rouillard, 2011; **Valdez**, Lambert, & Ialongo, 2011). Not only are marginalized youth not well engaged in meaningful relationships, but they often have limited connections to community supports through programs and services (**Davidson**, Wien, & Anderson, 2010; **Ramey**, Busseri, Khanna, & Rose-Krasnor, 2010; Yohalem & Martin, 2007). Such exclusion and disengagement can magnify inequities and disadvantages and lead to poor developmental outcomes (Berkman & Kawachi, 2000; Siegrist, 2000). As a result, compromised outcomes among marginalized youth have become a growing concern locally/regionally, nationally, and globally (Bashant, 2007; Gemert, Peterson, & Lien, 2008; Johnson & Taliaferro, 2012; Wexler, DiFluvio, & Burke, 2009).

Programs for marginalized youth are typically operated by specific agency-based agenda at various levels (e.g., municipal, provincial, federal) and in a range of sectors (e.g., education, social work, health) (**Davidson et al.**, 2010; Yohalem & Martin, 2007; Wexler et al., 2009). The lack of youth engagement and multi-level, cross-sectoral coordination results in a fragmented service-delivery model difficult for marginalized youth to navigate as they often lack the necessary relationships and resources (**Ramey et al.**, 2010; Yohalem & Martin, 2007). The fragmentation and discrimination embedded in existing institutions are key factors sustaining poor development outcomes for marginalized youth (Wexler et al., 2009). Transformational change at a systems level is required to meet their needs more appropriately (Bashant, 2007; Gemert et al., 2008; Wearing, 2011); promoting the optimal development of marginalized youth is a responsibility that must be shared (Curran, Bowness, & Comack, 2010; Lynam & Cowley, 2007).

## Overall Research Project on Youth Engagement:

Since the Principal Investigator (PI) of this research project moved to Edmonton, Alberta, Canada in the summer of 2011, he has met over 200 community and university stakeholders through a series of community dialogue sessions in and around the City. These stakeholders have been identified mostly using the networks through a community-based organization, Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families (CUP) in the Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta where the PI was the Director between 2011 and 2013. These community consultations have suggested that a most pressing community issue is to more effectively support high-risk youth living in marginalized conditions such as poverty, homelessness, social exclusion, mental health challenges, abusive behaviors, school drop-out, and/or stigma. Consequently, a “youth engagement” research team has been developed, consisting of diverse partners from cross-sectorial community agencies (e.g., youth and multicultural agencies, municipal and provincial governments) and interdisciplinary departments (e.g., social work, human ecology, public health), and including sixteen youth leaders (e.g., Aboriginal, immigrant, and refugee youth) from various youth and multicultural agencies/programs across the City.

A series of team meetings have led to reach a consensus that the target goals/outcomes for the project are social change and transformation of the system to more effectively support optimal development of marginalized youth through actively engaging youth in working collaboratively with community and university partners. In particular, our team has unanimously agreed that to achieve this goal, this research should be youth-oriented and that the research process should be guided by youth. Consequently, the focus of our research is on giving voices to high-risk, marginalized youth and mobilizing youth’s talents and lived experiences into actions for a systems change. The improvement of support systems (policy & practice) and environments (neighborhoods, schools, & communities), as guided by youth, is a key objective in our larger project.

While using this youth-oriented approach, we aim to dialogue with partners including youth leaders, practitioners, government policymakers, and academic researchers, as to how to improve youth engagement at personal, family, and community levels. This project uses a participatory action research (PAR) process to address the following overarching research question: *How can practices and policies around engagement at personal, family, and community levels be changed to enhance youth’s capacity to mobilize the resources needed to promote positive development?* Participatory Action Research (PAR) is “a systematic, participatory approach to inquiry that enables people to extend their understanding of problems or issues and to formulate actions directed toward the resolution of those problems or issues” (Stringer & Genat, 2004). This project is one of the first of its kind to engage multiple partners (including and centered around youth) and support/mobilize them in shaping the collaborative process to produce knowledge that is more relevant and readily applied than traditional approaches allow (Allensworth, 2011; Miles, Espiritu, Horen, Sebian, & Waetzig, 2010).

Lind (2008) showed the power of PAR in working with youth as research partners to mobilize a research agenda, by promoting mutual respect, co-learning, as well as relationship, trust, and capacity-building.<sup>19</sup> The key principles of PAR (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Simich, Waiter, Moorlag, & Ochocka, 2009; Stringer & Genat, 2004; Petersson, Springett, & Blomqvist, 2009; Reason & Bradbury, 2008) include:

1. equal participation by partners based on mutual respect and trust in promoting co-learning and mutual capacity building, while valuing community people’s lived experiences and professionals’ practical knowledge and experiences (beyond academic/scientific knowledge);

2. power-sharing (e.g., shared decision-making) and co-ownership of research within a team that leads to empowerment of those involved; and
3. critical dialogues and reflections within the team to implement actions for positive changes.

**The involvement of youth leaders:** Our “youth engagement” team has been operative for over two years funded by several community-based research grants including the establishment of a partnership in which we are all invested. Our agency partners oversee grass-roots youth groups and provide programs for marginalized youth. Partners from ten agencies (including provincial and municipal government agencies, provincial health systems, local school systems, multicultural community organizations, and non-profit youth agencies) that serve high-risk and at-risk youth have identified and recommended youth leaders who have been trained to facilitate these programs. These youth leaders have relevant qualifications (e.g., interpersonal, communication, and leadership skills) and diverse experiences (e.g., homelessness, foster care, recovery from mental illness) and are connected to and trusted by local youth communities. Youth leaders who have been recruited and have joined our research team are aged 16 to 24 (n = 16) with both genders, including Aboriginal and immigrant leaders.

Our youth leaders have met over thirty (30) times so far since October, 2012. The structure of these semi-monthly 3-hour meetings is youth-oriented, including youth-led ice-breaker activities, small group sessions, and all-inclusive dialogues (e.g., talking circles). Discussion on the term “youth engagement” has been completed including the meanings and key factors of youth engagement, and barriers and facilitators to youth engagement, by documenting youth voices. To collaboratively plan for upcoming team meetings, youth leaders take turns to attend planning meetings and set agendas. In between meetings, youth leaders are assigned to complete homework such as researching various approaches used by community agencies (n = over 30) in Edmonton, Alberta (e.g., *Edmonton High-Risk Youth Initiative*; Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009) and elsewhere (e.g., youth engagement and development initiatives; Theron et al., 2011; Ungar, 2010; Wexler et al., 2009; such as *YouthScape* initiative, Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009). This information has helped build the basis for a youth engagement framework that will be described later in this report.

At a series of meetings, the youth leaders have discussed and identified the key components of a framework for youth engagement. These include: (1) philosophy and principles (Basis), (2) goals/outcomes (What), and (3) actions/processes/pathways to change (How). This collaborative, youth-driven process has led to the identification of nine (9) Organized Themes of Basis, What, and How. These themes focus on relationship building, co-learning, mutual understanding and respect, and the use of strength-based, growth-oriented approaches at various system and community levels. Our youth leaders have also developed a number of creative pictures/images to illustrate these themes (e.g., tree, car, and bridge illustrations).

## **Context: Literature-Guided Conceptual Foundation**

*Positive youth development* (PYD; Alicea et al., 2012; Delgado, 2002; Ersing, 2009; Lind, 2008) is an overall theoretical framework of our research. PYD seeks to promote a variety of developmental competencies that young people need at individual, social, and system levels to become productive, contributing members of society. Instead of a pathological focus, PYD adopts a holistic view of development, giving attention to youth’s physical, personal, social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual development, and emphasizes the strengths, resources, and potential of youth. Consequently, PYD holds positive expectations regarding youth’s growth and development and the contributions youth can make to society, while it acknowledges the diversity in youth populations, for example, based on gender, age,

race/ethnicity, disabilities/abilities, and sexual orientations (Alicea et al., 2012; Delgado, 2002; **Ersing**, 2009; **Lind**, 2008). PYD's conceptual framework illustrates how the promotion of competencies both at the individual-level and system-level changes lead to desired youth development outcomes (Commission on Positive Youth Development, 2005; Delgado, 2002; Durlak et al., 2007; Geldhof et al., 2013).

Durlak et al. (2007) systematically examined the effects of positive youth development programs on school, family, and community systems. They reviewed efforts at social system change in 526 outcome studies that attempted to promote various social and emotional competencies in children between the ages of 5 and 18. They found that 64% of the interventions attempted some type of systemic change involving schools, families, or community-based organizations in an attempt to foster developmental competencies in children and adolescents. However, only 24% of the reports from these studies provided quantitative data on the change that occurred in targeted systems. In particular, Durlak et al. emphasized that “youth should not be overlooked as important contributors to system change. More studies are needed of attempts to empower youth to take the initiative in changing systems” (p. 278). In addition, Hodges and Wotring (2011) highlighted the importance of focusing on youth-specific, meaningful outcomes to meet the needs of at-risk youth in their community and improve the youth's functioning.

*Meaningful youth engagement* at personal, family, and community levels is a key concept for positive youth development (**Davidson et al., 2010; Ramey et al., 2010; Yohalem & Martin, 2007**). Engaging marginalized youth to build meaningful social relationships, however, presents a significant challenge in our society, considering the prevalence of disconnect and distrust they often experience with their families and in their communities (**Guibord et al., 2011; Valdez et al., 2011**). Meaningful youth engagement involves listening and responding to youth (Caine & Boydell, 2010), equitable power-sharing between youth and adults, critical reflection and reflective action, and social change (**Jennings et al., 2006; Pearrow, 2008**). The key ingredients of effective and meaningful youth engagement include: mutually respectful and non-judgmental relationship-building to promote a sense of trust and connectedness, and strong excitement and passion for changes by appreciating and mobilizing the voices and talents of youth into actions for positive changes at personal, family, and community (e.g., practice and policy) levels (Fogel, 2004; Jones, 2011; Laursen & Birmingham, 2003; Surko et al., 2005; Wexler et al., 2009).

In *YouthScape*, an initiative in five communities across Canada (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009), relationship-building was identified as the top overarching practice for working with youth who often have trust issues and may have experienced difficulties in relationships (e.g., neglect, abusive relationship, lack of intimate and secure relationship). Blanchet-Cohen and Salazar (2009) emphasized that the meaningful engagement of marginalized youth requires moving away from the dominant hierarchy of relationships in which adults are providers and youth are receivers, to a more equal, collaborative model of relationships (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009). Relationship-building through youth and community engagement also helps bridge the “disconnect” between youth and the communities in which they live (Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009). Engaging youth in a meaningful way can promote a sense of connectedness within a group or community, help youth understand themselves and their experiences within this larger context, and provide meaning-making structures and mobilization pathways that can be used to better support youth (McKay, 2010). For example, making meaning out of shared adversity, such as discrimination, can create a sense of coherence and shared purpose (Wexler et al., 2009), which can become a basis for collective community action and change (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009).

Meaningful youth engagement is a key concept for positive youth development (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Yohalem & Martin, 2007; Wexler et al., 2009) because it facilitates protective factors such as greater self-esteem, self-confidence, empowerment, and social connectedness (Lind, 2008; Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009). In Ramey et al.'s (2010) study with a community sample of 5,015 Canadian adolescents (average age = 15.8; 15% French, 85% English; 50% female) from two urban centers in Ontario, youth engagement was measured with several dimensions including: youth's most important type of activity, frequency of involvement, and psychological engagement. They found that youth engagement was associated with protective factors (e.g., greater self-esteem, stronger connections to others, and lower depressive symptoms), which in turn were related to positive long-term outcomes for youth (e.g., lower youth suicide risk) (Ramey et al., 2010). Similarly, Armstrong and Manion (2006) found that greater youth engagement, measured as a composite of quality and quantity of activity engagement, was associated with lower suicidal ideation. Also shown was the role of positive peer relationships as a mediator between youth engagement and depressive symptoms (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Simpkins, Eccles, & Becnel, 2008). That is, more engaged youth had better peer relationships and in turn, fewer depressive symptoms. In addition, Preyde et al.'s (2011) study of marginalized children and youth showed the significant role of reciprocal active engagement in empowering youth and their families and improving family relationships and functioning. All of these studies support the importance of positive youth engagement as a potential means of effectively promoting positive developmental outcomes (e.g., self-esteem, connectedness, mental health, empowerment, family relationships and functioning) of marginalized youth.

## **Framework of Youth Engagement Developed by Youth Leaders**

At a series of meetings through both small- and large-group activities, youth leaders have discussed and identified the key components of a framework for youth engagement. These include: (1) philosophy and principles (Basis), (2) goals/outcomes (What), and (3) actions/processes/pathways to change (How). Youth leaders have brainstormed, discussed, and interpreted their ideas, lived experiences, and insights at these meetings. This collaborative, youth-driven process has led to the identification of nine (9) Organized Themes of Basis, What, and How:

- *Basis (Philosophy/Principles)*: (1) Empowerment, (2) Opportunity, (3) Learning, (4) Community
- *What (Outcomes/Goals)*: (5) Relationships, (6) Stability, (7) Achievements
- *How (Actions/Processes)*: (8) Communication, (9) Activities

By synthesizing diverse ideas originated from a series of meetings and individual homework, the youth leaders have worked together to develop definitions of the 9 organized themes, along with a number of examples to illustrate these themes (e.g., tree, car, and bridge illustrations). An executive summary of the definitions is provided, followed by detailed information on both the definitions and examples.

## Executive Summary

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1. Empowerment means to enable youth to recognize their abilities and potentials by helping them feel uplifted and confident in order to implement positive, inspirational changes in their lives, allowing the youth to feel as though they *can* and *will* succeed. In order to promote empowerment, support and accommodation should be offered to the youth.
2. Opportunities are chances and outlets that help facilitate action towards a particular goal or achievement. Opportunities are also seen as spaces that enable youth to grow and better the youth's lives--open, honest, safe, and stimulating spaces.
3. Learning involves actively exposing youth to different experiences and fostering interactions with a diversity of people and situations in order to allow them to develop and practice certain skills. The idea of co-learning or mutual learning is very important--there is no one teacher and no one student--we are learning from each other in a reciprocal way.
4. Community is a collective group of people that work together to create a supportive and reliable network in order to foster healthy relationships. A community is a "safety-net" that allows people who genuinely care for one another to continuously support and encourage each other when in need and work together to better address issues.
5. Relationships involve an interaction between two or more people, in which they feel a sense of connection, bond, and trust. This also means having a relationship with self where individuals connect with themselves, such as their personal growth, goal setting, health, self-value, and self-reflection.
6. Stability is defined as being able to hold something reliable, stable, and strong so that people can rely on it and be assured that their expectations will be met. Stability is consistency.
7. Achievement means to accomplish a goal that requires hard work and perseverance, along with courage, effort, and ability. To be able to achieve something meaningful, youth need support and focus. Accomplishing something helps establish a sense of pride and self-confidence in youth.
8. Communication is a form of expressing oneself or exchanging information in such a way that is understood by another person, as a means of connection, including verbal speaking, body language, expression (e.g., facial, through art), technological (e.g., email, internet, blog, facebook), and networking.
9. Activity keeps one's time occupied, by using skills in a productive way physically, socially, mentally, spiritually, etc., such as exercising, art, talking, reading, going to school or work, etc. Activities are meant to engage those who participate.

The four themes: (1) Empowerment, (2) Opportunity, (3) Learning, and (4) Community constitute the *Basis* of our youth engagement framework. These act as the Philosophy or Principles when developing and implementing a youth engagement plan. The three themes: (5) Relationships, (6) Stability, and (7) Achievements represent the *What* of our framework. These are considered desirable Outcomes or Goals. Finally, the two themes: (8) Communication and (9) Activities are about the *How* of the framework. These represent Actions or Processes.

In essence, the themes (1) to (4) conceptually guide the development and implementation of a youth engagement framework, whereas the themes (8) and (9) are used as a means for achieving the goals of youth engagement, that is, the themes (5) to (7). In practice, Communication (Theme 8) and Activities (Theme 9) are used to achieve the goals of promoting Relationships (Theme 5), Stability (Theme 6), and

Achievements (Theme 7) through enhancing Empowerment (Theme 1), Opportunity (Theme 2), Learning (Theme 3), and Community (Theme 4).

## Introduction

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Our ongoing community-based project uses a grass-roots, youth-led, and strengths-oriented approach to the engagement and development of youth who face a multitude of life challenges. Youth homelessness is a central issue, but this is contextualized within very complex lives of youth, including poverty, violence, racism, discrimination, stigma, mental health issues, abusive behaviours, and/or compromised developmental outcomes. This is a homegrown, grass-roots/community-based project emerged from dialogues and networks with a number of government and non-profit agencies and university departments in and around Edmonton, Alberta. Rather than directed strictly by academic researchers, this is a youth-driven/led project, guided by a diverse group of our talented youth leaders in working with interdisciplinary and cross-sectorial agency and university partners and broader youth participants. Importantly, our project builds on the talents and strengths of youth into the execution of our project. Our youth leaders collectively came up with our team name, “Youth 4 YEG,” along with a creative team logo, as you see above. Throughout the project, we are addressing key questions such as: (a) how can we best engage youth?, (b) how can we more effectively facilitate the optimal development of youth?, and (c) how can we better support youth to become more engaged, successful citizens in our community?

### Implications

Overall, this project has demonstrated evidence for the usefulness of a grass-roots, youth-led, and strengths-based approach. Practical implications of this approach are discussed in this section, especially for agencies that address community issues that impact the lives of youth, in particular, high-risk youth (e.g., youth poverty and homelessness). Conventional approaches tend to focus on fixing problems such as youth homelessness. This deficit-based approach does not seem effective in building a positive relationship with youth who are often disconnected from the system. Our research has shown the significant role of building a positive, respectful, and trustful relationship with youth, which is the most important, first step in addressing major community issues such as youth poverty and homelessness. This research has demonstrated that the use of a grass-roots, youth-led, and strengths-based approach is essential to build these positive relationships with youth.

### Relationship-building with Youth Leaders:

Our research has started from using our networks with our research partners to identify, recruit, and welcome a diverse group of youth leaders with relevant skills including communication, interpersonal, and leadership skills, as well as a strong connection with local youth culture. Once this youth leader’s group was assembled, we have spent considerable time and effort in building positive, respectful, and trustful relationships with the youth leaders. Our youth leaders have met over thirty (30) times so far since October, 2012. The structure of these semi-monthly three-hour meetings is youth-oriented, including youth-led ice-breaker activities, small group sessions (e.g., art-based creative activities), and all-inclusive dialogues (e.g., talking circles).

Discussion on the term “youth engagement” has been completed including the meanings and key factors of youth engagement, and barriers and facilitators to youth engagement, by documenting youth voices. Each meeting always ends with critical reflections on the meeting through collective debrief within the youth leader group to identify what they liked and what we can improve on. Detailed meeting minutes are kept to document our progress. To collaboratively plan for upcoming team meetings, youth leaders take turns to attend planning meetings and set agendas. In between meetings, youth leaders are assigned to complete homework such as researching various youth-engagement approaches used by existing youth programs at community agencies in Edmonton, Alberta, and think about and write down personal ideas on a key agenda item to be discussed at a next meeting.

By focusing on this relationship-building aspect, the operation of youth leaders has become the hallmark of our research. This youth leader's group has played a significant role in both the processes of and outcomes from this project, including the youth-led development of a home-grown youth engagement framework (see a later section for more detailed on the framework), and further engagement of broader youth participants through pilot-testing the framework.

### **Contributions of Youth Council:**

One major implication from our research is that agencies can benefit from establishing and working respectfully with a diverse group of qualified youth leaders as a form of "youth council" to address community issues such as youth poverty and homelessness. Such a youth council can provide important voices based on youth's lived experiences and talents to help the agencies better understand the key issues facing youth and generate youth-oriented recommendations/solutions to these issues. Furthermore, a youth council can play a liaison or networking role in building a broader, positive relationship with hard-to-reach youth populations including high-risk youth. Importantly, the youth council can also play a leadership role in inspiring and mentoring these youth populations in a positive, youth-friendly way.

From a more programmatic perspective, the engagement of youth, for example, through the involvement of a youth council, can contribute significantly to both the development and quality control of programs (e.g., youth-first housing projects). For example, if addressing youth homelessness is a key objective of the programs/projects, these must be youth-oriented/friendly. Youth's voices are not just add-on; rather, their voices play a central role in informing both the development and quality control of the programs/projects in an ongoing, sustainable way.

With the aim of building positive, respectful, and trustful relationships with youth, it is essential to ensure that the process implemented is youth-oriented/led/guided. A key factor here is to give voices to youth and engage/mobilize youth into actions for positive changes. In particular, agencies must conscientiously show respect and understanding about youth's lived experiences and talents as they are an expert in their own lives. Youth's lived experiences provide valuable information and stories about the realities of youth's lives and help identify recommendations for effective solutions to community issues such as youth poverty and homelessness. Agencies can gain so much from the learnings that youth can provide, including the talents and strengths that youth possess, as well as the areas for improvement with respect to the support system for which the agencies are responsible. Youth's voices can offer such very important information. But, again, without building a positive, trustful relationship with youth, these valuable learnings are hard to obtain.

### **Respectfully Learning from Youth:**

We have learned that relationship-building with youth requires the acknowledgement of youth's strengths and skills, and appreciation of their lived experiences and talents into the process of research, as an expert in their own lives. It is essential to show respect, empathy, and openness toward acknowledging and appreciating youth's contributions to achieving the goal of more effectively addressing community issues such as youth poverty and homelessness. For this purpose, respectfully showing willingness to learn from youth is critical. Importantly, building a positive, meaningful relationship with youth is about basing on a human foundation of respect and cooperation toward learning from each other and bringing diverse knowledge together to identify and implement a best possible solution collectively.

Consequently, meaningful relationship-building with youth can lead to other positive outcomes for youth including empowerment and achievements through being provided meaningful opportunities for youth such as optimal learning, effective communication, and fun-provoking activities that utilize youth's talents and creativity. All of these elements (i.e., empowerment, achievements, learning, communication, and activities) are included

and articulated in our framework of youth engagement developed by our youth leaders (again, see a later section for more details about the framework). Our research has provided evidence to support practical utility of the framework, using a grass-roots, youth-led, and strengths-based approach.

### **Operation of Youth Leaders' Group and Broader Youth Engagement:**

Besides the development of our youth engagement framework, youth leaders' meetings also involved discussion and decision-making on how (i.e., process) the youth leaders implement the framework. Specifically, the youth leaders developed an activity guide/action plan, which is being used by them when facilitating engagement sessions. It includes a description of specific activities (e.g., icebreakers, art-based, fun-provoking engagement activities, talent-showcasing, empowerment workshops) that are being used during a series of sessions with a session agenda (i.e., check-in, activities, and check-out; see pages 4 and 5 for an agenda example). The youth engagement framework developed has guided the selection of engagement activities so that these activities are purposefully designed to promote each of the nine components of the framework. In addition, the skills/talents, qualifications, and prior experiences of our youth leaders have been taken into account for the selection of these activities.

We used youth leaders' and partner agencies' networks to recruit participants. This involved reaching out to and recruiting high-risk, disconnected youth (e.g., homeless youth, those dropping out of schools) who are not usually responsive or connected to existing youth programs or services, and thus most in need of support. Purposefully, our target marginalized youth population is very broad both in the age range (12-28 years old) and in ethno-cultural backgrounds (including Aboriginal, immigrant, and refugee youth) to appreciate the diversity of urban-dwelling marginalized youth.

Session planning and orientation of our youth leaders have been completed in preparation for the actual implementation. For example, a two-hour meeting in November, 2013 was spent for a formal training session with our youth leaders to better prepare working with/engaging high-risk youth, provided by iHuman's "uncensored group," followed by an one-hour debrief session within the youth leaders.

Our youth leaders developed recruitment materials including project postcards and information sheets with its group name, "Youth 4 YEG" and creative project logo (see page 1). So far, the total number of youth who participated in a series of engagement sessions is 30. The size of this group is manageable to develop a sense of connection and belonging within the group. Implementation includes a series of engagement-dialogue-reflection-mobilization sessions, facilitated by our youth leaders, twice a month (every other Friday evenings) for six months (12 sessions, 2 hours per session), using the activity guide/action plan and agenda developed by the youth leaders. These sessions currently take place in class rooms at University of Alberta's Enterprise Square, and the Principal Investigator (PI) and Graduate Research Assistant (GRA) monitor and oversee how each session is run and provide support if necessary.

Besides a series of fun-provoking activities including ice-breakers, each session consists of a talking circle over food to openly talk about and dialogue issues that are central to the purpose of our research including youth engagement, youth development, and other key issues such as youth poverty and homelessness. At the end of each session, check-out involves seeking youth participants' feedback such as things they liked and areas for improvement to more effectively engage youth. Immediately following each engagement session, all the youth leaders who facilitated the sessions debrief with each other (to be facilitated by the PI and GRA) to share their experiences and learnings and plan for next engagement sessions.

## Youth 4 YEG Agenda: February 28, 2014

1. Grab some snacks
2. Review Project & Consent Form
  - a. Review agenda
  - b. Freedom to not participate
  - c. Check-out sheet
3. Check-in (Name & how you heard about project)
4. Write out some safety guidelines
5. Order Pizza
6. Fun Activities
7. Eat pizza & Talking Circle
  - a. What do you think are the most important things for getting you engaged?
  - b. Tell us about one positive change that happened in your life.
8. Fun Activities
9. Check-out
  - a. What did you like
  - b.** What can we improve on

## Youth 4 YEG Agenda: March 14, 2014

1. Grab some snacks (5 min)
2. Check-in (Name & how you heard about project)(10 min)
3. Order Pizza
4. Review Project & Consent Form (15 min)
  - a. Review agenda
  - b. Freedom to not participate
  - c. Check-out sheet
5. Review and add to safety guidelines (5 min)
6. Fun Activities (20 min)
7. 10 minute BREAK (5:25 pm)
8. Eat pizza & Youth Perspectives (45 min)
  - a. Word association (Life challenges & solutions) & sharing ideas
9. Fun Activities (10 min)
10. Check-out (5 min)
  - a. What did you like?
  - b. What can we improve on?

## **Key Factors for Effectively Engaging Youth:**

In this section, we will share our learnings from a series of youth engagement sessions with our youth participants. First, our youth participants mentioned several key factors for effective youth engagement. In particular, our youth participants stressed the importance of “empathy” (understanding of another person’s situation and feelings) and “respect” (genuine admiration for someone or something elicited by another person’s qualities, abilities, or achievements). Both empathy and respect are considered basic human qualities that are highly valued by youth to build a good relationship and promote a positive engagement of youth. Not only is a respectful treatment of and conversation with youth as a “real human being” essential, but the use of non-judgmental, empathetic communication is also critical. In fact, our youth participants pointed out that they enjoyed attending sessions because they felt comfortable with and capable of speaking their minds openly without fear of judgment and enjoyed hearing what everyone had to say.

Another key facilitator to positive youth engagement noted by our youth participants includes meeting “positive people” and being engaged in a positive way. In particular, youth engagement can be more effectively facilitated by knowing that “people care about me” and “want to get to know me.” Being surrounded by these “positive people,” a positive atmosphere or environment can be created conducive to meaningful youth engagement. Such a positive, youth-friendly atmosphere/environment can help create a good sense of belonging within a youth group, which resembles friendship and family based on a positive, caring relationship. Besides meaningful dialogues within youth, fun-provoking activities can be used such as ice-breakers and physical activities to effectively engage youth.

In addition, our youth participants emphasized the importance of being flexible to meet the diverse needs of youth using an “open doors” approach. There are a lot of issues going on in youth’s lives; thus, it is important to acknowledge busy, transient, and often unpredictable nature of youth’s everyday lives. People who care about youth should be flexible and open-minded to respectfully accommodate youth’s unique, diverse needs and wants. Caring support and help should be available for youth whenever it is needed.

## **Key Elements for Positive Change of Youth:**

Another key learning we have gained from a series of youth engagement sessions was about the key elements for positive change of youth. First, our youth participants spoke about the importance of “learning from experiences as life lessons,” that can act as a facilitator to positive change. They even talked about “learning how to love from suffering” with their descriptions of personal life stories in the past—“From suffering can come beautiful things! Being dragged through the dirt to learn from it.” Life is considered as a “journey” and lived experiences can help youth grow and develop into a “better person.” From this perspective, the notion of “shaping you to become into a better person” was recognized. Considering the diversity of life experiences, looking at life from different eyes/lens was noted as well.

In addition, our youth participants mentioned that it is essential to try to find out strengths/talents to “love yourself and stand up on your own,” as another promoter to positive change. Any single youth has strengths/talents regardless of their backgrounds and life situations. Thus, it is very important to discover and identify abilities, skills, and talents so that youth can promote sense of self-esteem/identify. For this reason, providing a variety of opportunities to find and utilize youth’s strengths and talents is crucial.

Furthermore, the youth participants indicated that having an inspiring person and having a person who “cares about you and trusts you” are very important as youth pursue their positive and hopeful journey. These “positive

people” can support and inspire youth not to give up and generate strong hope and determination for a better life and positive growth.

Another key idea raised by the youth participants is willingness and desire to help other youth. For example, the notion of being an “ambassador” to inspire other youth was noted. In particular, they stressed the importance of using youth leadership to inspire and engage broader youth groups in a collective, positive way and advocate youth’s rights as valuable human beings.

### **Things That High-Risk Youth Need:**

This section will end with briefly describing the things that high-risk youth need, based on our talking circles with our youth participants. First, the youth participants spoke about the importance of being non-judgmental because they noted that being judged based on how they look or how they behave is a major barrier to build a positive relationship with youth. They also mentioned that judgmental people and judgmental agencies are a major barrier to make programs and services accessible and youth-friendly.

Another related issue noted by our youth participants is the prevalence of a variety of “isms” in our society. They strongly asked for no more isms in terms of no more discrimination and oppression based on race and ethnicity, gender, age, disabilities, and sexual orientation. Therefore, programs and services for youth should be based on the notion of no more isms and discrimination.

In addition, our youth participants talked about the significant role of support groups in helping and inspiring youth to pursue a better life. They mentioned that whenever they come to our youth engagement sessions, they feel a sense of belonging with our Youth 4 YEG group because they feel welcome, comfortable, and supported to build a friendship within this Youth 4 YEG support group.

Finally, our youth participants emphasized the importance of being provided with a variety of opportunities for youth in terms of education, jobs/careers, and leisure/hobbies. In particular, they insisted that they are willing to actively being engaged in a variety of opportunities for educating themselves so that they can pursue a good career and employment. They also talked about an important role of leisure activities/hobbies in improving the quality of their lives, for example, through music and dance and physical activities in a healthy way.

### **Framework of Youth Engagement Developed by our Youth Leaders**

This next section of our report will present a framework of youth engagement, which represents an impressive milestone of hard work by our youth leaders between October 2012 and June 2013 through a series of semi-monthly three-hour meetings, along with a variety of homework assigned to the youth leaders. This section consists of (a) abstract/introduction, (b) rationale and significance, (c) a description of our overall research project on youth engagement, (d) literature-guided conceptual foundation, and (e) a detailed description of our framework of youth engagement.

## Context: Literature-Guided Conceptual Foundation

*Positive youth development* (PYD; Alicea et al., 2012; Delgado, 2002; **Ersing**, 2009; **Lind**, 2008) is an overall theoretical framework of our research. PYD seeks to promote a variety of developmental competencies that young people need at individual, social, and system levels to become productive, contributing members of society. Instead of a pathological focus, PYD adopts a holistic view of development, giving attention to youth's physical, personal, social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual development, and emphasizes the strengths, resources, and potential of youth. Consequently, PYD holds positive expectations regarding youth's growth and development and the contributions youth can make to society, while it acknowledges the diversity in youth populations, for example, based on gender, age, race/ethnicity, disabilities/abilities, and sexual orientations (Alicea et al., 2012; Delgado, 2002; **Ersing**, 2009; **Lind**, 2008). PYD's conceptual framework illustrates how the promotion of competencies both at the individual-level and system-level changes lead to desired youth development outcomes (Commission on Positive Youth Development, 2005; Delgado, 2002; Durlak et al., 2007; Geldhof et al., 2013).

Durlak et al. (2007) systematically examined the effects of positive youth development programs on school, family, and community systems. They reviewed efforts at social system change in 526 outcome studies that attempted to promote various social and emotional competencies in children between the ages of 5 and 18. They found that 64% of the interventions attempted some type of systemic change involving schools, families, or community-based organizations in an attempt to foster developmental competencies in children and adolescents. However, only 24% of the reports from these studies provided quantitative data on the change that occurred in targeted systems. In particular, Durlak et al. emphasized that "youth should not be overlooked as important contributors to system change. More studies are needed of attempts to empower youth to take the initiative in changing systems" (p. 278). In addition, Hodges and Wotring (2011) highlighted the importance of focusing on youth-specific, meaningful outcomes to meet the needs of at-risk youth in their community and improve the youth's functioning.

*Meaningful youth engagement* at personal, family, and community levels is a key concept for positive youth development (**Davidson et al., 2010; Ramey et al., 2010; Yohalem & Martin, 2007**). Engaging marginalized youth to build meaningful social relationships, however, presents a significant challenge in our society, considering the prevalence of disconnect and distrust they often experience with their families and in their communities (**Guibord et al., 2011; Valdez et al., 2011**). Meaningful youth engagement involves listening and responding to youth (Caine & Boydell, 2010), equitable power-sharing between youth and adults, critical reflection and reflective action, and social change (**Jennings et al., 2006; Pearrow, 2008**). The key ingredients of effective and meaningful youth engagement include: mutually respectful and non-judgmental relationship-building to promote a sense of trust and connectedness, and strong excitement and passion for changes by appreciating and mobilizing the voices and talents of youth into actions for positive changes at personal, family, and community (e.g., practice and policy) levels (Fogel, 2004; Jones, 2011; Laursen & Birmingham, 2003; Surko et al., 2005; Wexler et al., 2009).

In *YouthScope*, an initiative in five communities across Canada (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009), relationship-building was identified as the top overarching practice for working with youth who often have trust issues and may have experienced difficulties in relationships (e.g., neglect, abusive relationship, lack of intimate and secure relationship). Blanchet-Cohen and Salazar (2009) emphasized that the meaningful engagement of marginalized youth requires moving away from the dominant hierarchy of relationships in which adults are providers and youth are receivers, to a more equal, collaborative model of relationships (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009). Relationship-building through youth and community engagement also

helps bridge the “disconnect” between youth and the communities in which they live (Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009). Engaging youth in a meaningful way can promote a sense of connectedness within a group or community, help youth understand themselves and their experiences within this larger context, and provide meaning-making structures and mobilization pathways that can be used to better support youth (McKay, 2010). For example, making meaning out of shared adversity, such as discrimination, can create a sense of coherence and shared purpose (Wexler et al., 2009), which can become a basis for collective community action and change (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009).

Meaningful youth engagement is a key concept for positive youth development (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Yohalem & Martin, 2007; Wexler et al., 2009) because it facilitates protective factors such as greater self-esteem, self-confidence, empowerment, and social connectedness (Lind, 2008; Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009). In Ramey et al.’s (2010) study with a community sample of 5,015 Canadian adolescents (average age = 15.8; 15% French, 85% English; 50% female) from two urban centers in Ontario, youth engagement was measured with several dimensions including: youth’s most important type of activity, frequency of involvement, and psychological engagement. They found that youth engagement was associated with protective factors (e.g., greater self-esteem, stronger connections to others, and lower depressive symptoms), which in turn were related to positive long-term outcomes for youth (e.g., lower youth suicide risk) (Ramey et al., 2010). Similarly, Armstrong and Manion (2006) found that greater youth engagement, measured as a composite of quality and quantity of activity engagement, was associated with lower suicidal ideation. Also shown was the role of positive peer relationships as a mediator between youth engagement and depressive symptoms (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Simpkins, Eccles, & Becnel, 2008). That is, more engaged youth had better peer relationships and in turn, fewer depressive symptoms. In addition, Preyde et al.’s (2011) study of marginalized children and youth showed the significant role of reciprocal active engagement in empowering youth and their families and improving family relationships and functioning. All of these studies support the importance of positive youth engagement as a potential means of effectively promoting positive developmental outcomes (e.g., self-esteem, connectedness, mental health, empowerment, family relationships and functioning) of marginalized youth.

## **Framework of Youth Engagement Developed by Youth Leaders**

At a series of meetings through both small- and large-group activities, youth leaders have discussed and identified the key components of a framework for youth engagement. These include: (1) philosophy and principles (Basis), (2) goals/outcomes (What), and (3) actions/processes/pathways to change (How). Youth leaders have brainstormed, discussed, and interpreted their ideas, lived experiences, and insights at these meetings. This collaborative, youth-driven process has led to the identification of nine (9) Organized Themes of Basis, What, and How:

- *Basis (Philosophy/Principles)*: (1) Empowerment, (2) Opportunity, (3) Learning, (4) Community
- *What (Outcomes/Goals)*: (5) Relationships, (6) Stability, (7) Achievements
- *How (Actions/Processes)*: (8) Communication, (9) Activities

By synthesizing diverse ideas originated from a series of meetings and individual homework, the youth leaders have worked together to develop definitions of the 9 organized themes, along with a number of

examples to illustrate these themes (e.g., tree, car, and bridge illustrations). An executive summary of the definitions is provided, followed by detailed information on both the definitions and examples.

## A. Basis (Philosophy/Principles):

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### Empowerment:

- Empowerment means to enable youth to recognize their abilities and potentials by helping them develop the confidence to implement positive changes in their lives. That is, empowerment is about gaining the confidence and feeling that youth *can* and *will* be able to succeed; having the power to conquer the challenges with an ongoing action plan (see below for more about addressing challenges/barriers).
- Support and encouragement are needed to enable youth to recognize and increase their abilities and strengths. Such support and accommodation should aim to *meet youth where they are at personally* in order to promote confidence-building. It is important to learn about each and every youth as an individual by building a relationship. By doing that we are able to relate to the youth on a personal level such as knowing if they have any issues or what they feel comfortable with. This would help to create activities or workshops that will cater to every youth, enabling the youth to perform in a much more successful manner. Personalizing the programs and workshops will allow the youth to feel cared for and to know that they matter, thus encouraging them to perform to their full potentials. Rather than forcing youth to do things, this is about helping youth with what they are doing by starting off where youth are personally at, physically/socially (e.g., safe, comfortable location), mentally, intellectually, and emotionally.
- When youth feel discouraged, it is important to encourage them to feel positive about something and to help them believe in their abilities. This will help youth find inside of them a purpose and inner strength that will lift them up and help them feel good about themselves. *Lifting youth up* means lifting the spirits of the youth and encouraging them to feel happy and enhance their self-esteem, for example, through play, creative writing, or simply having someone to talk to. Lifting youth up involves giving youth who are going through a difficult time, or youth who feel discouraged and alone hope that they will be able to rise up and continue their lives in order to achieve their goals. Lifting youth up is to enable them to find their voice when they feel silenced and to provide them with opportunities to stand strong and empowered.
- Youth often encounter individual challenges and/or systemic (e.g., racism and other forms of discrimination) barriers. It is important to approach individual and systemic barriers with honesty and on a case by case basis. This means that we acknowledge that barriers exist, and we may not be able to overcome or fully eliminate them but we take them into consideration—not being shallow about issues when we are approaching each youth. Approaching individual and systematic barriers with honesty also involves making sure that advice given is honest and truthful. Rather than dismissing every issue as a typical occurrence, it is crucial to critically examine every issue faced by each youth with respect. This would involve self-reflection and assessment/analysis of their lives and circumstances. Upon recognition and reflection, youth would gain control over the barriers and then deal with these more effectively. For example, youth may face challenges with drugs and alcohol. A barrier to meeting the challenge can be the lack of knowledge of and access to appropriate services. When youth are made aware of their strengths and weaknesses and also able to properly identify a problem or barrier surrounding them, youth then feel much more powerful on the inside. This feeling then leads youth to find a solution allowing them to overcome or better address barriers in personal life. By supporting self-growth and learning through self-awareness, we can aid them to feel empowered enabling them to better address barriers.
- Another key approach to enhancing youth's empowerment is to enable *inspirational changes* in youth. Inspirational changes could include changes physically, mentally, or emotionally. For example, a youth may not feel happy emotionally because he or she doesn't have friends. A youth program may have the ability to create a space for that youth to make friends and then in turn increase his or her happiness. Inspirational change in youth is a change that may have seemed impossible or challenging for that youth to achieve at that time. Then through a

succession of progress and overcoming challenges, the youth would be able to achieve their particular goal. It would then serve as an inspirational change to other youths who are going through similar difficulties. The goal of change is to inspire others to also change in a positive way. Long term changes that are influenced by many others are changes to the core of the youth, not just the surface. This is a model effect—seeing someone else overcome challenges often inspires others to want to do the same

- Examples: (a) Talent show (all talents welcomed; Talents come in every size--being a good singer, a great actor/actress, a great mathematician, and a great speaker; having a talent in teaching, bringing unity among people, and being able to speak many different languages; and having a talent in drawing, painting, working with computers, etc.); (b) community events (for example, if youth are passionate about a certain cause, they could set up some sort of community fundraiser); (c) self-esteem speaker series (various inspirational speakers from particular backgrounds, relatable people who have succeeded); (d) workshops (educational, artistic, issue-based such as racism and other barriers, etc.); (e) “improv” or improvisation--acting on the spot with no script; you create as you go along--reacting in the moment and reacting to one’s environment and inner feelings such as the practise of acting, dancing, singing, playing a musical instrument, creating artworks, and problem solving; and (f) awards: celebrating youth’s successes (e.g., scholarships, bursaries, trips, dedication of merit, community recognition). Other examples include giving youth an opportunity to do what they have never done before, and an opportunity to overcome their fears and do something different. By doing that, youth would realise their potentials, and what and how much more they are capable of doing. This can create a sense of empowerment among youth.

## Opportunities:

- Opportunities are chances and outlets (planned and/or spontaneous) that help facilitate action towards a particular goal or achievement. Providing resources and support for youth to achieve the goal is very important. Having a way to achieve a certain goal is seen as *doors open*—it is essential for youth to take an initiative and be open to experiences and resources to better themselves. Rather than imposing opportunities, asking youth what kind of opportunities they actually want and need is important to cultivate youth’s ability to pursue self-enhancement.
- Opportunities are provided in spaces that enable youth to grow and learn in an open, honest, stimulating, and safe environment. This *growth-oriented enabling space* or environment is a place where youth feel free to express themselves and where there is no judgement—a *judgement free zone*. In this space, the youth should be able to try different things and by doing so, they will be able to find or cultivate a passion and increase their potentials. Consequently, a place that enables youth to grow is a space where they are challenged—they would then be able to learn life lessons such as the importance of perseverance and hard work.
- In addition, creating a space to build a youth-created content and an opportunity to form relationships is very important (e.g., in programs). This kind of *content- and relationship-building space* is a place where there is a sense of unity so that everyone has an opportunity to work together and collaborate on a project or a task, which helps build relationships. This space is also a place, in which there is mutual respect; providing youth with an opportunity to know how it feels to have a healthy, positive relationship.
- Opportunities also offer chances to better youth’s life. Those are chances in which they would be able to grow and develop their potentials and improve themselves. These include unique chances such as travelling to another country and seeing a different world, and having a chance to improve their creative skills such as arts and a chance to express one’s self more freely.
- Furthermore, it is important to take actions to provide youth with resources and opportunities. For example, we would take an initiative to put information out there for youth as well as encourage the youth to seek opportunities. We, the youth leaders, should advertise the opportunities to the

youth, through word of mouth, community outreach, social media, etc. (i.e., connecting youth through communication). These actions that aid youth in finding resources and opportunities are the ones in which youth take the initiative by finding them themselves with appropriate support; by doing that they would feel connected and empowered.

### Examples:

- Opportunities for networking, self-care, and education, such as opportunities to explore (e.g., field trips), career/job fairs, attending a youth conference, receiving a health care class, and attending evening classes in whatever youth is interested in. For example, if youth is passionate about music, being provided the support and the resources for playing and/or appreciating music will help the youth feel as though they can pursue it.
- Other opportunities to learn include workshops where youth gain hands on experiences. Youth can take home these experiences and use them and teach them to other youth. These hands on experiences enable youth to gain and remember certain aspects and redo and practice them by themselves and/or in working with other youths.
- Another example of an opportunity could be to allow/encourage youth to work for a particular organization that they are interested in, through internships, as a means of gaining valuable work experiences and connections with different people (networking). This gives the youth a chance to develop their skills and meet others that may inspire them to keep working at improving themselves.

### **Learning:**

- Learning involves actively exposing youth to different experiences in different situations and environments and fostering interactions with a diversity of people in order to allow them to develop and practice certain skills. Learning is not necessarily in an academic setting, but involves being challenged to think critically and adapt to various situations. In order to be more inclusive and appreciate diversity, we must consider a variety of learning styles such as visual, audio, tactile learning, etc.
- The idea of *co-learning* or *mutual learning* is very important—there is no one teacher and no one student—we are learning from each other in a reciprocal way. Mutual learning involves exchanging information and learning from one another through co-operation to build a better relationship.
- Through learning, youth can *acquire new skills*. Acquiring new skills means learning anything that youth do not already know. This could include both academic and non-academic skills such as social skills, networking skills, writing skills, team work skills, communication skills, life skills, and any skills that can be used in the work force
- Encouraging *critical thinking* is essential for learning. Critical thinking involves rationally analyzing a situation or information, reading in between the lines, and thinking before speaking and acting. Critical thinking is about thinking beyond what is given, and thinking about all the possible perspectives that can be involved, as well as evaluating all the various possible outcomes. Critical thinking requires thinking of the bigger picture, and asking critical questions such as why certain things are occurring in our world today, who is involved in the situation, what kind of solution is needed to solve certain problems, and how we implement problem-solving strategies.
- Incorporating both *formal and informal learning* is important, by using both classroom-based formal and structured education, and personal life experiences to accent each other. Informal learning is to learn to do things that are assumed to be norms or general knowledge through life experiences or experimentations, often without realizing that you are learning. Informal learning is a spontaneous type of learning that the individual is able to base on experiences, which may not necessarily require a certificate of completion for recognition. Whereas, formal learning is the learning where there are requirements to pass a course, a certificate, or transcript as a result of completing that particular course.

**Examples:**

- Learning life skills: Life skills are the skills in which an individual is able to use to survive, such as learning how to attain a job which can help individuals make their own living. Life skills are also the skills which can never leave individuals once they learn it, which can once again help them survive. Life skills can be anything from cooking, cleaning, doing dishes, and anything that makes living possible.
  - a. Self-care skills/basic needs: how to access material to keep yourself healthy and clean, how to access your health care card, where to go if you don't have health coverage, how you get access to medicine, informing youth about who to call for bus information/emergency care/resource number, safe-sex information (where to get free condoms, referring birth control centers, needle exchanges, where to get checked for sexually transmitted infections), buddy-system for street-walking, where the shelters are, where detox and rehab centers are, where to find mental health services (distress center line, suicide hotline, kids help phone, "kids cottage" emergency child care), and child care services.
  - b. Long-term needs: job-prep skills (e.g., resume writing, interview ethics/practice, dress code/appearance), opening a bank account, paying bills, financial literacy, getting social insurance card, access to healthcare, birth certificate, budgeting, home economics (e.g., cooking, laundry, groceries, housekeeping), driver's license, how to balance social life with work, learning time-management, how to keep healthy relationships (e.g., learning boundaries, learning communication, recognizing abusive relationships), learning to be active members and contributing to the community (e.g., volunteering, being helpful to the members of your community, learning how to be a good ethnic community member such as a Samaritan), being able to maintain a balanced lifestyle, and conflict resolution (e.g., being able to handle different situations with a level head).
- Learning to communicate, interact/socialize, and facilitate (e.g., leadership skills), allowing youth to be *experts of their own experiences*—This means that individuals uphold and respect each other's personal lived experiences. Experts of their knowledge means that we accept that youth have knowledge of certain things that adults may not have and allow them to have that knowledge without imposing or disputing with them. These lived experiences and knowledge would enable youth to feel that they are competent and not just children who are growing up but as people who are at a valuable stage in their lives. This gives them more insights into certain things that other people may not have. Expert of their own experiences also means that youth would be the one taking the initiative in every opportunity given to them. By doing that they would become the one creating how they would like to experience each opportunity and chance given to them. Each youth brings to the table his or her own lived experiences, which only they themselves can know the details. Every youth has her or his own experiences of which no other experiences are more right or wrong.
- Another example for learning involves experts coming in and giving an inspirational workshop about their own experiences, relatable to many youth. Youth can gain knowledge and values by listening to the speakers' personal experiences that may resonate with youth. Listening to how someone who can relate with youth has dealt with their life challenges can inspire the youth to think about how they will overcome their own challenges; this involves listening, critical thinking, interaction, reflection, and adapting.

**Community:**

- Community is a collective group of people that work together to create a supportive and reliable network in order to foster healthy, meaningful relationships. A community is a "safety-net" that allows people who genuinely care for one another to continuously support and encourage each other when in need and/or work together to better address issues. Relationship-building, sense of belonging, and the provision of support are very important elements of community.

- Community is an important part of youth engagement, recognizing that youth do not operate in silos. A community can be created among a supportive and reliable network of people who have the interest of youth in mind and who consistently provide the youth with the necessary support and resources. Being a part of community allows youth to feel a sense of solidarity and a sense of belonging. Consequently, our youth leaders have identified the importance of working with the community for the community using a bottom-up/community-up approach (that can be combined with a top-down approach) to identify and meet the needs of the community.
- The idea of “intersecting communities” has been introduced by our youth leaders’ group. Briefly, this means different communities coming together and integrating with each other through connecting different communities together. Intersecting communities is to bring unity among communities, give youth an opportunity to work together, and find a relating point where they would be able to, for example, work on a project or event. For another example, different youth organizations come together for one purpose at a summer event. One may not belong into one or another community but these communities may overlap—youth can be in a student community and at the same time in a community of girls, for example. You are not one or another but all of these communities make you who you are. Intersecting communities is about being able to give youth an opportunity to reach out to other communities just in case their community couldn’t provide it for them. At the same time, it is important to give youth the choice to be part of a particular community or multiple communities.

#### Examples:

- Community or neighborhood BBQ’s, community events such as arts to ‘decorate’ the community, volunteering or positive events that give back, mentorship opportunities (transferring knowledge from youth to youth in order to learn from each other, building new relationships, sharing different experiences, etc.), “chosen family” (this means youth’s support system—making it more inclusive than one’s biological family; can be friends, cousins, mentors, social workers, etc), a community organization committed to common goals and mutual interests—a community can be based on ethnicity, gender, age, etc.
- Agencies/programs: A community can be formed by relationships and shared experiences created by the members of a program (e.g., an agency/program that targets youth that are addicted to alcohol). By doing that, they are creating a community of individuals who deal with similar problems (e.g., an agency that specifically targets youth with learning disability). Once youth engage in a program together, they come to identify themselves as being part of that community.

## B. What (Outcomes/Goals)

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### Relationships:

- Interactions between two or more people, in which they feel a sense of connection, bond, and trust based on experiences. This also involves having a relationship with self—individuals working on themselves, such as their personal growth, goal setting, self-value, and self-reflection. A relationship involves knowing that one can rely on another person and feel comfortable around them. Thus, building trust and feeling comfortable and respected are key elements of relationships.
- Communication is the key to building a relationship. By communicating with and getting to know other individuals on a personal level, youth are building trust with that individual or these individuals. Youth are then able to feel much more comfortable among them and from there youth can create a connection and a relationship that has a strong foundation.
- The key factors that make a relationship positive include respect, trust, honesty, co-operation, support, forgiveness, and equal effort. A relationship is to be co-created and co-operated with one another. It is important that whoever involved in a relationship value the importance of respect—mutual respect and understanding, then create a strong foundation for that relationship. A relationship that is positive is also one in which there are no secrets—honesty is shown by the members of that relationship. A positive relationship can be about helping the person better themselves in order to become the person they aspire to be. Negative relationships are those that hinder one from fully realizing and reaching their potential.
- Creating a healthy, meaningful relationship would mean that youth could feel comfortable and open enough to express their feelings and their situations with a mentor/friend/leader. If youth know that they have someone to turn to (even just to debrief) when in times of stress, it may prevent relapsing into old life habits, getting down on themselves, or turning to other ineffective methods of coping.

### Examples:

- Friendship: youth to youth, youth to mentor, youth to parent, mentor to parent, etc.
- Youth engagement project: We all share in a large relationship between us all, along with other singular relationships between individuals.
- An example of a relationship with self and working on oneself includes going to yoga to get in tuned with one's own mind and state of being, as well as trying new things and doing more of what makes you happy. Keeping in mind of your goals and keeping them real and reasonable.

### Stability:

- Stability can be defined as being able to hold something reliable, steady, stable, intact, firm, and strong so that people can rely on it and be assured that their expectations will be met. If not, an effort will be made to help meet the expectations.
- Stability involves establishing a sense of consistency and reliability with room for positive change and flexibility where changes can be made to better accommodate the needs of youth.
- Stability can also be seen as a foundation that keeps a structure from collapsing. It is important that stability is guaranteed to keep a trustworthy relationship and also is consistent in progress so it does not turn stagnant.
- Stability is an essential aspect in youth engagement because it is important that youth create a

framework that is guaranteed to be stable. If youth partake in youth engagement, they learn life skills and the basic skills to be able to stand on their own and create their life foundation so that they will be able to lead a stable life in the future.

### Examples:

- A youth program will have a stable staff that will be able to help in their defined field of status. For example, if there is a counseling program for youth, youth should be able to rely on the services of the counselors when they come in for help.
- To add to the previous example of the counseling program, in a case where there is a female counselor at the facility and a male youth isn't comfortable communicating his problems/concerns with the female counselor for personal reasons, the facility should be able to substitute a male counselor for some time to accommodate those who are not comfortable communicating to the present counselor.
- Stability means that youth could feel confident and reassured that this service, resource, or person would provide continuous and constant support. This could mean knowing that there is always a bed to sleep in or always someone to talk to regardless of the circumstance.
- Paying back model—youth will be able to go back to the centres and can rely on the people there, and can trust them and have a sustainable relationship.

### **Achievements:**

- An achievement means to accomplish a goal and/or overcome a challenge that requires hard work and perseverance, along with courage, effort, and ability.
- Achievements are personally based on individuals in terms of what their goals are, and what each and every achievement means to them—these could be tangible or abstract. An achievement can be big or small, accomplished through a progression of an individual's journey to attaining her/his goals.
- To be able to achieve something meaningful, youth need support and focus. Accomplishing something helps establish a sense of pride and self-confidence in youth.

### Examples:

- Depending on one's age and stage of life, an individual may set different goals (big and small) and will want to accomplish these by a reasonable time frame. Examples include: being able to finish a high school with good grades in order to apply for and study at a university; experimenting with one's artistic side in forms such as writing, painting, and acting; a six-year old learning how to ride her/his two wheeler bike for the first time on her/his own; and a youth that has never had an opportunity to receive a formal education is given a chance to learn how to do math and may graduate with honours in math.
- Rewarding youth for their achievements can encourage them to continue on with positive change. Acknowledgments can also bring youth up to feel like they can accomplish achievements. Small achievements such as finishing a project can be recognized as milestones with, for example, certifications, rewards, "a good day coffee date," "a day sober card," or simply a kind, verbal acknowledgement. Big achievements such as graduating a high school, receiving a scholarship or bursary, getting a job, or getting a place to live can be acknowledged with a celebration, ceremony, party, and/or reward. To celebrate youth's achievement we could go bowling or watch a movie or we could simply give them a gift card to a book store. By doing that youth would know that every little step will eventually build up to a milestone and they should celebrate each little achievement/milestone

## C. How (Actions/Processes):

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### Communication:

- Communication is a form of expressing oneself or exchanging information in such a way that is understood by another person, including verbal speaking, body language, expression (e.g., facial, through art), connections, advertisement, technological (e.g., email, internet, blog, facebook), and networking. Communication may involve expressing one's thoughts, feelings, goals, dreams, desires, hardships, losses, etc. Even silence can be a form of communication.
- Communication is a means of connection. Face to face communication is an effective method of communication. However, it is important to be open to different, multiple forms of communications, by providing various options for communication (e.g., social media), given a context and relationship.
- Besides better understanding of others, communication can facilitate personal discovery to oneself through communicating with self.
- Communication could be a form of therapy (either personal or group therapy), by getting things (e.g., hardships) off of one's chest by talking about these, and by being alert to both verbal and non-verbal communication (e.g., body language, the lack of words to express oneself). Communication in a group could be a form of group therapy by enabling youth to share experiences to release hardships, frustrations, etc. These occasions could also improve youth's communication skills to be comfortable and build confidence. These could also promote a sense of belonging by sharing experiences and building relationships with realization that "a problem shared is a problem halved" and others might have been through same or similar experiences. Personal therapy could be seen as a time when youth are given an opportunity to relax and talk about their anger, sadness, confusion, and so on. By speaking about it, at the end youth might be able to feel relief because they will know that they aren't alone and that maybe there is someone else that is going through hard times just like them.
- An example of communication is when youth express their feelings through art and share it with someone. Another example is when a person communicates a philosophy, idea, values, beliefs, experiences, and religious or political views to another person

### Activities:

- Activity is what we partake in every day of our lives—it is anything that keeps our brain thinking and our body moving. Activities can be seen as a means of keeping one's time occupied in a productive way—being active whether mentally, physically, socially, spiritually, etc. Activities can involve exercising, art, socializing, reading, going to school or work, etc—anything that encourages youth to use their skills and better themselves in a productive/constructive way. Activities are meant to engage those who participate.
- Activities have unique, beneficial properties such as physical exercise, mental health promotion, relationship building, and many more. These unique, beneficial properties of activities could be things either tangible or non-tangible, in which youth can use or be engaged in an effective and useful manner. The properties of activities can also be seen as something that sets someone apart and can be used for one specific purpose. Being unique means that the activities are not just repetitive—they are always changing and engaging youth. Being beneficial means engaging in activities that have lessons or a deeper meaning such as morals or skills learnt—they are not pointless.
- Examples that illustrate effective youth engagement through activities include: (a) ice breakers to be acquainted, open up, and get everyone to be comfortable; (b) activities that foster group work

such as team sport and music band; (c) healthy risk taking (e.g., extracurricular activity); (d) attending a youth conference and meeting new people/youth; and (e) a leadership program where youth have an opportunity to engage in or lead various activities, such as going hiking together and attending or facilitating a sport day. By doing these, youth are able to build teams and closer relationships and maintain a balanced social lifestyle. Another meaningful activity could be an opportunity where youth partake in a challenging activity or game to learn and use skills. Another example could be when youth are the ones creating their activities and taking the initiative, which could show that they have applied things they have learned from their experiences of being engaged.

- How are various activities going to be implemented? This can be done by having a list of meaningful and healthy activities in “fun” ways to bring youth up. *Bringing youth up* means to have them respect themselves and respect others and things around them. Bringing youth up involves enabling youth to gain confidence and move forward and work together. Bringing youth up also involves providing them with a strong platform where they are able to come together and speak about any issues. In addition, this process involves helping youth stand stronger and know the “rights from wrongs.” This is all about “uplifting” youth! This notion is in line with “lifting youth up,” as noted earlier when the concept of empowerment was described.

## **Additional Note about Framework Implementation:**

To prepare for implementing the framework, a session plan that includes outlines of activities and workshops over a series of sessions needs to be developed. Each session may start with a *check in* to get participants settled/oriented by sharing how each participant is doing, followed by ice-breaker activities and main activities/workshops, ending with a *check-out* to reflect on each session. Conceptually this session plan should be in line with the framework that contains the key themes/facilitators to effective and meaningful youth engagement. Its rationale is that specific activities chosen are purposefully designed to promote each of the nine components of the framework. In addition, the basis upon which activity options are selected can be the skills/talents, qualifications, and prior experiences of youth leaders who facilitate these sessions.

For example, discussion with our youth leaders in our team has revealed that these youth leaders possess skills/talents and qualifications with prior experiences that would enable to implement numerous engagement activities. Specifically, our youth leaders are skilled/capable to facilitate a variety of engagement workshops such as art, theatre, poetry, and music (e.g., rap and spoken word workshop). For instance, from a strengths-based perspective, “I am powerful” is a workshop around understanding oneself, one’s strengths, and one’s community to facilitate participants to identify what makes the person powerful. Other examples include: a workshop on “developing your life’s vision” (opportunity to create a personally crafted vision of life), “finding your passion” workshop (through engaging in different activities to help find youth’s passion and embrace authentic self), and a workshop on “body mapping” (developing youth’s relationship with their bodies) that can be combined with theatre. Several of our youth leaders have been trained and qualified to facilitate workshops on conflict resolution, harm reduction, and anti-oppression.

The youth leaders have also suggested that art-based workshops can involve creating self-identity portraits to build up to a talent show akin to “open mike” (a live show where audiences may perform at the microphone or on a stage) to showcase youth’s talents and build youth’s confidence, as well as creative painting leading to a mural art exhibit at a local community gallery or youth centre. In addition, dialogues with our youth leaders have generated a wide variety of potential activities: (a) interactive icebreaker activities, (b) activities that provide opportunities for self-expression such as art posters and a community

art project to revitalize the community, (b) role playing with different life scenarios (to develop communication, leadership, and life skills), (c) positive affirmations through which youth share stories and complements about each other, (d) making a script about how youth want to see things changed in the community (can also be “improv,” improvisation—acting on the spot with no script; you create as you go along), (e) sharing circles and panel discussions (e.g., on healthy communication through active listening and non-judgmental conversation), (f) field trips such as visiting local universities/colleges and community youth agencies, (g) going for spiritual nature walk to promote a sense of letting go and spiritual renewal/rejuvenation, (h) facilitating a talent show to showcase youth’s talents—every youth should be a star for one day, (i) hosting an employment/career educational youth conference to help open youth’s eyes to positive experiences and educational and career options, and (h) Youth Summit/Youth Forum to feature motivation speakers relevant to youth’s life circumstances and have youth-led sessions to identify and prioritize youth issues and prepare strategies or action ideas.

Our youth leaders have noted that accommodating youth’s interests and encouraging youth to try new, positive/constructive activities are important; thus, these should be considered when developing an activity guide/action plan. Extensive discussion among youth leaders/facilitators should take place to collectively identify and agree on a list of activities with its description and required resources and to work toward developing an activity guide/action plan. Again, the conceptual basis on which this activity guide/action plan is developed is our framework of youth engagement and its principle described earlier. Representatives from partner agencies who have expertise in youth engagement can provide training and mentoring for youth leaders/facilitators (e.g., safety, anti-oppression, conflict resolution, anger management, harm reduction, mental health). In our project, a two-hour meeting in November, 2013 was spent for a formal training session with our youth leaders to better prepare working with/engaging high-risk youth, provided by iHuman’s uncensored group, followed by an one-hour debrief session with the youth leaders

## Concluding Remarks:

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Engaging high-risk, marginalized youth presents a significance challenge in our society, considering the prevalence of disconnect and distrust they often experience with their system in which they live. Yet, meaningful youth engagement is a key concept not only for positive youth development, but also for a systems change to more effectively support high-risk youth and families (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Yohalem & Martin, 2007; Wexler et al., 2009). Importantly, youth should be respectfully acknowledged as a key contributor to both positive youth development and a systems change (e.g., Durlak et al., 2007; Hodges & Wotring, 2011). This report presented a framework of youth engagement being developed through working with youth leaders in our community-based research team, by using a PAR process. Although the notion presented in the framework has directly used our youth leaders' lived experiences, talents, and voices; conceptually positive youth development (PYD; Alicea et al., 2012; Delgado, 2002; Ersing, 2009; Lind, 2008) is an overall theoretical framework of our research, as noted in an earlier section of this report. However, contrary to a conventional approach to basing primarily on an academic perspective, youths were the ones who were in charge of the development of the framework, with appropriate support by academic facilitators, including the identification of the key themes/dimensions and its definitions and practical examples presented here. Our research team has a full faith on and credit to outstanding work by our talented youth leaders throughout the entire process of developing the framework. This framework is a true result/milestone of ongoing hard work by the youth leaders between October 2012 and June 2013 through a series of semi-monthly three-hour meetings, as pointed out earlier. Testing of our framework is currently under way, and preliminary learnings from this activity were reported in an earlier section of this document under "Implications."

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