

# WHEN THE SUPPORT OF THE COMMUNITY MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE CHOICES FOR YOUTH, ST. JOHN'S (ST. JOHN'S, NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR)



Located in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, Choices for Youth has existed since 1990. Its mandate is to serve the youth community through programs developed along four dimensions: crisis response, safe and supportive housing, targeted supports and fostering independence<sup>1</sup>. Its mission is to provide youth with a range of supportive housing options, access to a variety of services that promote healthy personal development, and a sense of belonging within an environment of respect, tolerance, peace, and equality. The organization operates an intensive case management team using the Housing First model.

<sup>1</sup> See Choices for youth website for more information : <http://www.choicesforyouth.ca/what-we-do/#what-we-do-1>

According to executive director Sheldon Pollett, the characteristics of the community behind the organization make all the difference. In St. John's, the nature of the community fostered a very collaborative approach. Actions are driven by a whole community planning process with key leaders that "carry the torch around."

### **Collaborating instead of competing**

When the intensive case management call for proposals was issued, instead of competing with each other for funding, the agencies chose a different process. They hired a consultant to help bring the community together and develop a common sense of purpose. The final proposal was designed in a way to guarantee that any youth in the city, from any organization, could be served. And it worked! It was led by Choices for Youth because the organization had the necessary expertise for this type of work. One of the magic ingredients is therefore the community itself, and community leaders who are ready to help.

"If you can identify the community leaders, you can talk to them. If you can talk to them, then hopefully you can get them to take action. And so on from there."

In 2001, Choices for Youth underwent major staffing changes. This state of flux was the perfect time for the organization to step back, evaluate its programming models, and take a new approach to supporting at-risk and homeless youth. They were now operating a Housing First model, with 45 youths living on their own in the community at any given time. When it was decided that a youth services centre would be developed, they needed help but knew that they had the entire community supporting them. In fact, there were many organizations and populations that needed support, so it evolved into a collaborative effort to ensure that the project would work well.

### **Creating a sense of common purpose**

This community sense of purpose for youth in crisis developed gradually, starting 15 years before the intensive case management call for proposals. According to Choices for Youth's executive director, the whole sector went through a massive shift in 2000–2001, going from working with the youth population from an in-care perspective to a harm reduction and outreach philosophy. Organizations had to revisit their strategy and were asked to submit proposals related to youth (under the original HPS). Choices for Youth, an organization running a young women's shelter at the time, (Stella's Circle) and another organization (Eastern Health at the time), put in a joint proposal for satellite housing. Other organizations bid for the money as well for emergency shelters. However, before the proposal went through, the community rallied around and asked to combine the satellite housing approach with different initiatives (a youth centre model, a shelter for young men, etc.). All the interested organizations met for a full day. By the end of the

day, it had been decided that Choices for Youth would be the lead proponent on the creation of a new youth services centre in downtown St. John's.

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“So the common sense of purpose? Already there. The leadership of who is going to do it? Already there. And we had the backing of the entire community, who already signed off on the community plan, who was in the room when it was decided that Choices would take the lead. So check, check, check.”

### **Partnerships are a Team Effort**

The executive director believes that partnerships are team efforts. They are not a “point in time.” Partnerships must become the expected way of working, the natural inclination whenever something comes up. This call upon the notion of organizational change: “Get used to it, stop resisting it, stop fighting it. It’s actually in the best interests of our clients to be adaptable, to be ready to change.” The key is to teach a community to think and act differently. Although Choices for Youth is aware that every community has its own challenges, there was a tipping point where enough people and leaders in the community were adopting this way of working, resulting in more people involved for a change than people wanting to work alone.

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“The HPS dollars . . . are a catalyst for conversation, they’re a catalyst for different ways of thinking about things, they’re a catalyst for how we engage the Province, they’re a catalyst for the community coming together and saying okay, here’s what we need to achieve.”

### Engaging with governments

Another important aspect of community partnerships is to engage different levels of government in a meaningful way. Although relations with the provincial government were well established for Choices for Youth, the conversation at the municipal level was only recent. The City is an important partner for a community but it may not have the financial resources to help community organizations. When the youth service centre was built, the City of St. John's came on board, and while they did not make a direct financial contribution, they supported the project by waiving the taxes and other fees (permits for construction, for example), which represented thousands of dollars. The City also donated a piece of land downtown worth \$70,000, and was very supportive through processes such as zoning applications. Over the following years, the City became an important community partner with a

more defined relationship with the organizations.

Another way to engage meaningfully with community partners is to foster different types of partnerships with governments. For example, partnering with the provincial government on the poverty reduction strategy meant that Choices for Youth strategically aligned what it was trying to achieve—reduce homelessness—with an internationally recognized strategy to reduce poverty. This approach of meeting multiple goals with common outcomes resulted in an alignment of the government's and the organization's strategies. Choices for Youth was able to identify key components of the poverty reduction strategy that could be adapted and implemented in St. John's to further the Homelessness Reduction Strategy.

The youth services centre in St. John's is now known as the Outreach and Youth Engagement Centre, and it

serves over 100 individuals each year. It operates a daily drop-in program where youth can get a warm meal, connect with youth workers, or be referred to internal or external support programs. Also on site is an emergency shelter for young men, a community health nurse, and multiple programs for youth looking to unlock their potential and move forward with their lives. The centre was created by the community coming together and proposing to do things differently through durable partnerships. For the organizations involved, it was the sheer force and commitment of the entire community towards a specific goal. People felt connected to it and shared a sense of ownership of the plan that drove the response. Strong leaders contributed to making this project happen. With this community support, a totally different relationship was built with the government officials who became committed stakeholders in the project.

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