

**Ottawa Child & Youth Initiative Annual Meeting
October 16, 2023, on Zoom**

Background:

In 2023, the Ottawa Child & Youth Initiative (OCYI) finalized a strategic direction with the long-term objective of “Organizations are able to respond to the evolving mental health and well-being needs of Ottawa’s children, youth, and their families.” As the OCYI task groups and Steering Committee planned their work to align with the strategic direction, it was abundantly clear that a wider discussion of the mental health, addictions, and substance use health (MHASUH) support needs of Ottawa’s children and youth was necessary. And in our 2022 Town Hall we recognized the importance of the voice of youth in our conversations. So, with this in mind, we began planning our Annual Meeting on October 16, 2023 with a panel of youth discussing youth MHASUH needs in Ottawa.

At the same time, others in Ottawa were shaping a similar conversation. In a partnership of the Ottawa Youth Engagement Committee (OYEC), project step, Youth Ottawa, YouthNet, Ottawa Public Health, and OCYI, an evening of youth-adult conversations on Ottawa youth MHASUH. These conversations were designed to be intimate and with actionable outcomes. Approximately 30 individuals participated in the September 29, 2023 event, half of whom were youth (ages 15-24), and half adults representing various organizations and networks in Ottawa. These facilitated discussions identified specific ways the MHASUH needs of Ottawa’s children and youth can be supported.

The OCYI Annual Meeting became a first step of accountability for the youth-adult conversations, so that as a community we can keep moving to action. We invited participants in the smaller conversations event to share their experience as well as conversation with the broader OCYI network.

Event and panel:

The OCYI Annual meeting took place as a virtual event on Monday evening, October 16, 2023. Steering Committee co-chairs Johanne Levesque and Kelly Raymond welcomed the group and introduced each task group chair to share on their activities from the past year. This was celebration of OCYI’s past work. A brief introduction the youth-adult conversations event served as an introduction to the rest of the evening. Andréa Stellmach, with Ottawa Public Health, provided a brief introduction to MHASUH terms for the audience. This led into the panel discussion.

The panel was moderated by the OCYI Steering Committee co-chairs and consisted of six participants from the youth-adult conversations. Alison, Iman, Jana, and Lina are youth leaders, representing the OYEC, YouthNet’s Youth Advisory Committee, and the Rural Ottawa Youth Mental Health Collective Youth Advisory Committee. These youth were joined by Trisha Islam, United Way East Ontario, and Josée Blackburn, CHEO, who also participated in the September conversations and represent multiple partnerships on MHASUH hosted/supported by their organizations (including OCYI).

The panel conversation flowed both naturally and easily. Taking turns, the youth panelists illustrated their shared passion for the support of the mental health and well-being of Ottawa’s young residents. The moderators and adult panelists added from their professional experience. The conversation was grounded in the following prompts:

- Why were the youth-adult conversations on mental health, addictions, and substance use health in September so important? What did you enjoy about the experience?
- What was a key takeaway for you from the conversations? A specific action or plan? An insight or information learned?
- What are you looking forward to happening next? And what can/should OCYI and the organizations here do?

After the panel, the audience divided into breakout rooms for smaller group discussion, reflecting on the panel discussion as well as asking the prompting questions of themselves.

What was heard:

Throughout the panel conversation and in the subsequent breakout rooms, facilitators kept notes, summarized below. The purpose of this is to hold OCYI and those present accountable. The youth panelists identified some key takeaways OCYI, and its network of organizations, could readily implement to better support the MHASUH of Ottawa's children and youth. As that this is directly aligned with OCYI's long-term objective, the results of the OCYI Annual Meeting have provided a timely opportunity for action and response.

Bringing together youth and adults

- Youth spend most of their time in school, does not always feel like the adults there are aligned with the needs of youth
- Youth leaders empowers the youth voice
- Youth are ready to advocate for younger children, too
- Bring in youth early, empowers for future generations
- Youth are equal partners, should be approached and treated as such
- Value of inviting youth participants, even without expectation to participate or contribute, this is a great learning opportunity for preparing future leadership and action
- Building relationships is key to improving prevention of escalation of issues, and to seeking help when interventions are needed
- Youth want parents to be part of the conversation
- Parallel education and support for children/youth and their parents
- Children learn from their parents, to be effective, programs should include parental needs
- Educating trusted adults is essential
- Everyone involved in the life of youth has a role to play, e.g., parents, teachers, coaches, those in community programs
- Post-secondary students often fall into a grey area, they are in need of adult support in this transitional time
- Younger ages need adults to access resources, and that can be a barrier if the adult is not supportive
- Need to be thoughtful when inviting youth to join conversation: is the opportunity at a reasonable time, is the location accessible, are efforts made to make sure the youth are welcomed as partners?

MHASUH support

- Proactive versus reactive is wanted and needed
- Prevention, prevention, prevention

- Intervention versus prevention, and understanding where on the spectrum of support an organization falls
- Terminology is evolving, specifically, “substance use health” was new to some panelists and participants.
- Peer support
- Services where youth (and children and families) are already going
- Community-based support
- Youth want to know what resources exist, even if they do not need it right now
- Start the conversation early, with younger ages, continuing to grow the conversation as developmentally appropriate
- Shame and stigma are barriers to asking for help, making MHASUH topics part of the more general conversation will help reduce the barriers
- Removing the punitive step, shift towards education and help
- MHASUH conversations are not separate, they are always part of life
- Harm reduction knowledge is necessary
- Support must be adaptive and culturally relevant
- Extensive support exists in our community, navigating how to access it, or even knowing that it exists, is a barrier
- Streamline accessing support (e.g., 1Call1Click.ca), with very public education about how to access support (tools are not useful if not known)

Action and future

- Be creative
- Having consistent and continuous conversation is necessary
- Do not stop including youth in the conversation, and report back
- Aligned and united initiatives is more impactful
- Need more high-quality data
- Facilitate connections between healthcare and social services systems
- Organizations should have a framework about their role in supporting MHASUH, with input and leadership from frontline staff and participants (children, youth, parents)
- Expand peer support at all levels: youth, parents, frontline staff
- Share educational messages where youth are already (including social media) in a method that is preferred, preferred from a “neutral” source
- Be mindful of ageism
- Schools must be part of the conversation
- OCYI could support joint communications efforts
- OCYI’s work is well-positioned to be a player in prevention work