

A Federal Strategy for Youth Mental Health

By the Graham Boeckh Foundation

Executive Summary

Canada needs effective strategies to address the youth mental health (YMH) crisis, and particularly in the following areas:

1. Youth mental health services — improved programs and access
2. Prevention — reduce harms and build resilience
3. Prevention of youth homelessness

These strategies need to be designed for our federated system of health and social services and incorporate a ‘learning health system’ approach to maximize impact.

YMH Services: Integrated youth services (IYS) is rapidly scaling across the country and can address much of the mental health service needs of young people. Federal agencies should continue to support the scale up and improvement of IYS through the \$500 million YMH fund in combination with support across multiple Federal agencies.

Prevent Mental Health Problems: Prevention of mental health problems can be achieved by employing two strategies:

- Regulating, restricting and reducing online harms
- Fostering community-based programs to strengthen child and youth resilience (e.g. the Icelandic Prevention model).

Prevent Youth Homelessness: Canada has developed and evaluated many effective programs to prevent youth homelessness but lacks a strategy to implement and scale effective services within our Federated system. We encourage the Federal government to partner with a coalition of organizations that has developed a youth homelessness strategy (A Way Home Canada, the Graham Boeckh Foundation and Daro).

Background

Youth mental health has emerged as a ‘canary in the coal mine’ for Canadian society with an alarming and rising number of young people affected by anxiety, depression, suicide and other serious challenges. Similarly, youth substance use and homelessness have emerged as vexatious problems and are often comorbid with mental health problems.

The failure to pass the On-line Harms Act was a major disappointment to the youth mental health community, and Canada now stands alone as a major western country with no protections from one of the fastest growing and most insidious triggers of youth mental health incidents.

Underlying these challenges are long-standing gaps in mental health and related services, and a combination of online harms and a lack of positive activities that are critical for building child and youth resilience (the ‘phone-based childhood’).

Canada needs an effective strategy to:

- Strengthen and scale YMH services
- Prevent YMH problems, and
- Address youth homelessness

Moreover, to ensure impact, a strategy needs to foster solutions that can be sustainably scaled within Canada’s Federated political system and support a ‘learning health system’ approach that includes data infrastructure, on-going quality improvement and pan-Canadian collaboration.

The development and scaling of integrated youth services (IYS), for youth aged 12 – 25, has emerged as the largest and most impactful mental health service transformation in Canada. See this [4-minute video](#) and the pan-Canadian [website for IYS](#). IYS is poised to make a real difference in the lives of young people across Canada, and provides easily accessible mental health, addiction, physical health and social services for youth aged 12 – 25. IYS is in urban, rural and Indigenous contexts.

IYS initiatives are in 9/10 provinces with 160 community sites open or under development. The goal is to have 400 community sites across the country by 2030, and supporting the continuous scale up of IYS, in partnership with the provinces and territories, would allow the government to achieve its commitment to help at least 100,000 young people a year with mental health care.

Moreover, IYS is providing capacity to help address a number of related and critical issues such as youth homelessness, substance use, and skill building/resilience. Finally, the development of IYS has created a ‘play book’ on how to scale effective services within our federated system, and it has a learning health system approach (data infrastructure, on-going quality improvement and pan-Canadian collaboration).

Federal agencies have provided significant and effective support to provincial/territorial (P/T) IYS initiatives, principally through Health Canada and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR). This support has included funding for a pan-Canadian learning health system called IYS-Net ([see link](#)). Other support has come through the \$500 million youth mental health fund and the F/P/T bilateral health transfer agreements which require P/Ts to report on population coverage of IYS among several other key healthcare indicators.

Canada's strategy for youth mental health services is lacking in the areas of prevention and youth homelessness.

Policy Recommendations for the Federal Government

Integrated Youth Services: IYS is an ideal platform to scale youth mental health services across Canada and to address a variety of gaps and needs such as the following:

- Health human resources for mental health services
- Indigenous integrated community mental health services
- Substance use and toxic drugs

A 'whole of government' approach within the Federal context and an innovation and research strategy would strengthen the current strategy. This can be done under the leadership of Health Canada with pan-Canadian health organizations and various other Federal ministries providing support.

Prevention: Reducing Harms and Building Resilience: The alarming rise in the prevalence of youth mental health problems indicates a need to take prevention seriously. This will require a multi-faceted approach that reduces harms and builds protective factors, thereby ensuring that our young people can be resilient, fully participate in the economy, and uphold our democratic values. The strategy will need to engage citizens and communities while regulating and restricting harms to children from the online world.

Canada needs to enact On-line Harms legislation within twelve months.

Furthermore, the Icelandic Prevention Model (IPM) is a framework that can engage communities and citizens in prevention of mental health and addiction issues. [The Public Health Agency of Canada has put \\$20 million](#) into supporting communities to implement the IPM, and P/T initiatives are underway in New Brunswick and the Yukon. This type of program should be further scaled and refocussed to address online harms and healthy alternatives. The strategy should support P/T initiatives to ensure scaling up and sustainable funding in our federated system. A 'learning health system' approach to prevention will be critical to ensuring impact.

Prevention of Youth Homelessness: Homelessness has increased rapidly in communities across Canada over the past several years and is becoming an important political issue. Any serious effort to deal with homelessness will need a prevention strategy focussed on young people. Data shows that 50% of homeless adults have their first homeless experience prior to age 25. Despite this evidence and the existence of effective programs, Canada lacks an effective strategy to scale and sustainably fund these programs within our Federated political system.

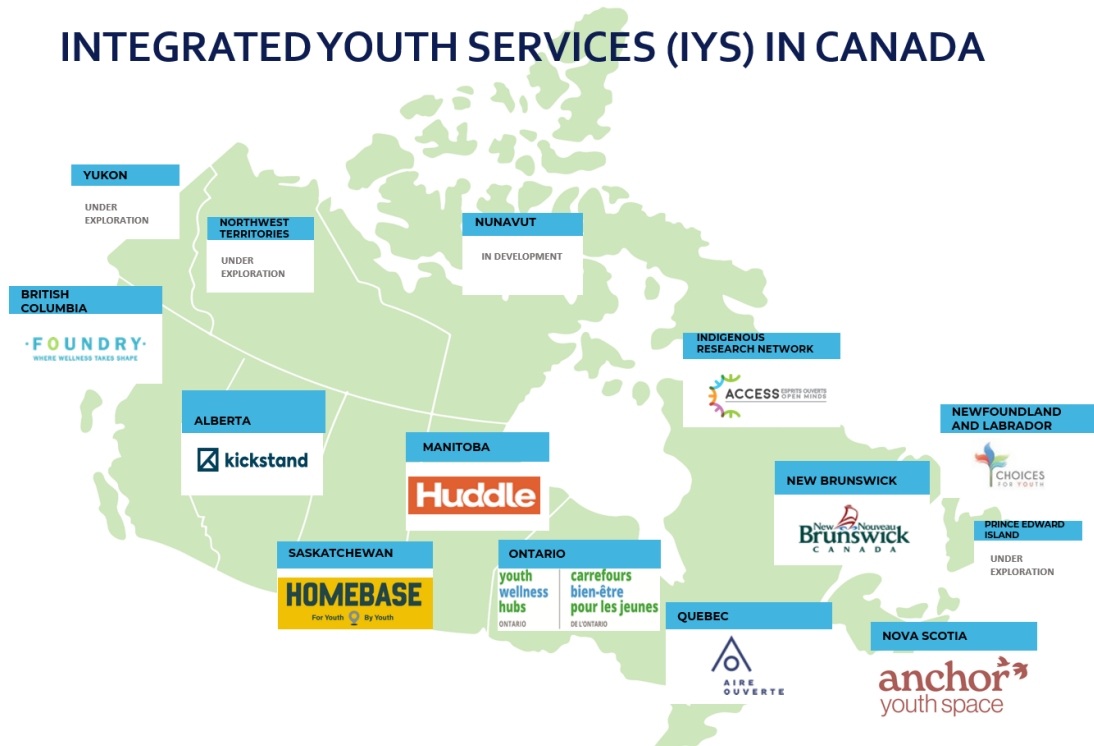
Three pan-Canadian organizations are organizing to help develop and implement such a strategy, namely [A Way Home Canada](#), the [Graham Boeckh Foundation](#) and [Daro](#). This strategy will focus on development of an integrated youth homeless prevention model to be

delivered through P/T initiatives, similar to the approach taken for IYS. The Graham Boeckh Foundation and the coalition of national organizations that it works with would welcome the opportunity to support and work with the Federal government on improving youth mental health services for all Canadians and we look forward to an opportunity to brief the new government.

About the Graham Boeckh Foundation

The Graham Boeckh Foundation (GBF) is a family foundation based in Montreal that works across Canada to address youth mental health (<https://grahamboeckhfoundation.org/>). We have helped to catalyze integrated youth services (IYS) initiatives in the 13 provinces and territories and have partnered with Federal agencies to improve the effectiveness of IYS through a ‘learning health system’ approach. GBF is also fostering collaboration among mental health funders, especially foundations through the Mental Health and Wellness Funder Affinity Group (MHWAG).

INTEGRATED YOUTH SERVICES (IYS) IN CANADA



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