

Virtual Learning Together Series Webinar Recap

Serving Indigenous Youth

Tuesday August 24, 2021

Takeaways

Grounding work in philosophy of care

By grounding work in philosophy of care, clients are respected as individuals in a caring, safe, and supportive environment which helps growth and creates pathways towards success.

Culture as therapy

Intertwining an individual's culture into traditional therapy provides clients with a deeper understanding of themselves and tools to assist them longer term.

Individual support in response to clients and staff needs

Meeting each person, client, or staff, where they are, having conversations about needs, goals and challenges, and providing tailored tools/resolutions is vital for an individuals' wellbeing.

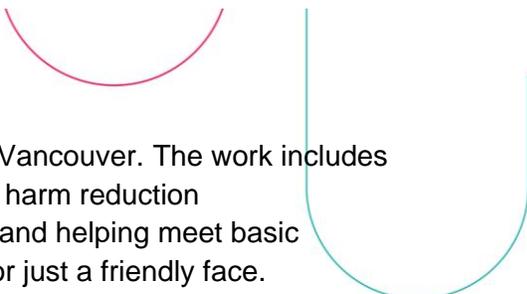
Recap

Molly Rader, Manager at Urban Native Youth Association (UNYA), discussed the programs/services available for Indigenous youth, the philosophies behind the work, and responses taken by UNYA to COVID-19.

Urban Native Youth Association

UNYA is a non-profit organization in Vancouver serving urban, self-identified Indigenous youth from a wraparound perspective. There are approximately 21 programs including alternative schools, arts and culture, recreation, wellness clinic, and sports and recreation as well as front line programs. Services include:

- Indigenous Youth Safe House: 7 beds for youth between the ages of 16 and 18 who are experiencing homelessness. One of the philosophies of the Safe House is harm reduction, meaning the youth being housed may be struggling with their mental health or be using substances. Placement is by self-referral so there is a wide variety of youth staying at the Safe House. The program's focus is to be as flexible as possible to meet the youths' needs while maintaining their safety, the staffs' safety, and building momentum for individual care plans.

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- Street Outreach: Outreach in the downtown east side in Vancouver. The work includes encouraging youth to access support services, receiving harm reduction education, taking a body break off the street in a shelter and helping meet basic needs such as providing harm reduction gear, a snack, or just a friendly face.
 - Transition to Adulthood Program: Staff have caseloads of youth who are in the process of aging out of ministry care. Caseworkers support the youth with life skills such as looking for housing and/or work, educational opportunities.

Philosophy Driven Care

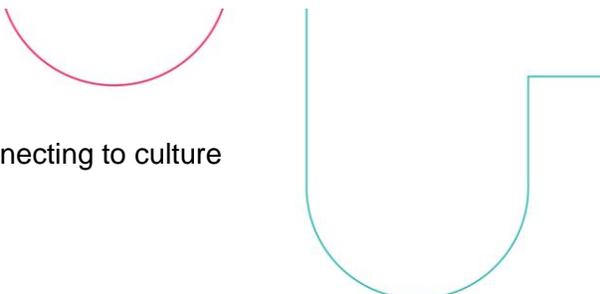
Urban Native Youth Association believes in philosophy driven care. All staff are trained in UNYA's five philosophies and use them as the basis of approach in all situations with the young people they work with. The philosophies are the basis of problem solving and used as a framework to look back at practices and analyse how to do better.

Trauma informed practice:

- Shift perspective from thinking about what is wrong with someone to asking what happened to that person, how they survived, and how to move forward.
- Take in account an understanding of trauma in all approaches and decisions made.
- Priority is placed on youths' individual safety, their choices, and what is going on for them as individuals.
- Provide empowerment and safety in all relational approaches including approaches and care with the staff, avoiding confrontational approaches to work collaboratively with youth and limit power dynamics.

Harm Reduction:

- Extremely important particularly for front line programs. UNYA provides choices of education for youth to access as they feel comfortable and without judgement of anyone's experiences (e.g., substance use, self harm behaviours, mental health issues).
- Balancing individuals need and desire to have leadership and role modeling from safe adults. It is important to have the conversations, provide education and accept youth where they are at.
- Indigenous harm reduction is also part of the programming. There is no expectation of certain levels of sobriety or certain levels of behaviour as a requirement to participate in any cultural activities offered. Offerings can include smudging and prayer, going to a



sweat, or meeting with an elder. UNYA believes that connecting to culture helps people in the healing journey.

Person Centred Care

- Youth are accepted as experts in their own lives and staff work with youth to discover the youth's personal goals and needs. Staff will meet with youths' families as well using the same approach.
- Communication of expectations occurs with those youth staff are working with; helping youth remember what the boundaries of the programs they have accessed are and helping them find success.

Two Eyed Seeing

- Recognition that Indigenous youth are walking within two different worlds: in an Indigenous way with Indigenous background and learning; and living in a western world. UNYA believes that it is possible for the two belief systems to exist and work together
- The use of clinical and cultural teachings helps young people learn about their experiences, talk about what they are feeling or what is troubling them, and realize that both systems are valuable and can work together.

Culture as Therapy

- Connect youth to their traditional teachings to help them learn cultural practices and systems of belief that are from their ancestry or that speak to them personally. Different drop- in programs are offered that connect to culture e.g., drumming, rap being produced and crafts. The counsellors, trained clinically, also offer cultural perspectives such as smudging before a western traditional appointment
- At the Safe House Indigenous cultural food, smudging, traditional arts, and crafts are incorporated. As the House is multicultural, non-Indigenous youth are encouraged to share their cultural practices.

Responding to COVID

- UNYA has been able to offer culturally supported vaccination clinics for youth which have been very successful.
- Many programs moved online such as counselling and creative programs.

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- The food bank program opened and grew larger as sustainability was a clear need.
 - There were challenges to ensure staff and clients were safe and supported including ensuring mental wellness. Staff was supported by giving as many mental health and wellness days as possible. More staff were hired to help make this happen.
 - The outreach team reported that harm reduction supplies were harder to access for the adult population. In response, UNYA opened their mandate to offer supplies/services
 - Further efforts were given to trauma informed care by analyzing what could be controlled and what could not in the COVID environment. Further awareness and focus were given to education and offering tools to clients to keep them safe
 - Flexibility in setting goals for youth became even more important as resources were harder to access e.g., finding housing or shelter spaces. Staff have been very creative in finding resources for schooling online, finding shelters that were offering beds etc.

Questions

How has UNYA managed to support both youth and staff and not placing anyone at further risk?

To deal with safety issues, the house was set up with different spaces to support COVID protocols. In the downstairs area, accommodations were made including providing a mini fridge stocked with snacks, board games and tablets with apps and access to the Wi-Fi. Staff, with PPE, would take food and connect with those youth. Also, staff were given phones to text with those in quarantine. When issues arose with behaviour that contradicted COVID protocols, conversations were had with staff and with those who chose not to take on the protocols; focus was on individual behaviour and non-judgmental responses.

Is there anything you are doing to ensure safe substance use with COVID protocols?

Conversations around proper practices for substance use have not changed despite COVID. The focus has been on open and honest discussions regarding safe use of substance use gear and incorporating issues regarding COVID restrictions such as having a buddy but keeping socially distant.



What are the changes that UNYA wants to sustain post pandemic and what plans are there on how to imbed those changes?

Clinical counsellors used ZOOM to keep in touch with clients who may have moved around the province, back to their communities or even out of province. This practice is going to continue as needed basis. For the Safe House, some of the changes adopted cannot continue for confidentiality reasons (like use of Wi-Fi), however, clients are now be able to use their cell phones in the safety of the Safe House backyard only.

Do you provide peer support to the youths as well?

UNYA does not have a peer support program, but prioritizes hiring people with lived experience (e.g., growing up on reserve, struggled with addictions, grew up in care).

Can you speak more about what culturally safe vaccination sites look like and the practices that are being used?

The Wellness Clinic has an Elder who has made himself available to talk with youth and their families who want the vaccine or are curious about it. Onsite staff support youth who are nervous with various techniques (smudge with them, give them cultural medicines such as cedar and sage to hold while they were vaccinated). Also, vaccination appointments are spaced out so people can get the shot in their own time and can take time afterwards as needed.

Was the service delivery model discussed earlier the usual practice at the clinic or adapted for COVID (e.g., nurse practitioner, Elder)?

The service model is the usual model. The Elder is at the clinic a few days a week or available by appointment for youth, their families, or staff. This is part of the two eyed seeing philosophy.

Can an anecdote be shared about a strength-based approach taken with a client where there were challenges or successes?

A client was having problems with anger that would unexpectedly become worse. Despite concerns surrounding certain outlets taken to release the anger (e.g., punching holes in walls), staff discussions were based on using philosophy of care solutions; gathering insights and sharing insights with the youth and having conversations on how to have healthy expressions of anger such as talking with the Elder, connecting the client with something to release the energy, like boxing.

How do you embed the philosophy of care into the practices and the organization, especially with new staff?

It begins with the job posting and the interview questions. Conversations in interviews deal with the level of harm reduction services that UNYA supplies. The handbook and policies all speak to the philosophies, and all training and conversations are centred around the philosophies using real lived situations. There are ongoing daily conversations on approaches



for each youth and their individual care plans and staff is encouraged to participate in other training that would be helpful for them.

What other strategies or efforts are being taken to support staff wellness?

Outside of COVID, many Indigenous staff have been affected by their communities finding children's bodies on residential school grounds. The role of non-Indigenous leadership is to support those staff and meet individual needs. Also, the isolation of staff was handled by keeping connections in various ways to support wellness, chatting on ZOOM, meeting at a park, or talking on the phone while walking in each person's community.

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