

Changing Systems Through Youth Engagement: Sharing the Story of the NS Department of Community Services

*Youth can play a leading role
in change processes for our
government, institutions and
agencies.*

Fall 2012



What Is Youth Engagement?

*Youth engagement happens
when youth are enabled and
supported as leaders and agents
for positive change in their
community.*

(HeartWood Centre for
Community Youth
Development
www.heartwood.ns.ca)

In today's fast-paced world where change is a constant, our communities need to further explore the role youth can play in leading change processes for our government, institutions, agencies and communities. When young people are able to provide input, systems will shift to better serve all. By engaging youth, the systems that serve them will by consequence become more participatory and meaningful for youth.

In Nova Scotia, *HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development* has been exploring the relationship between youth engagement and systems change. In order for young people to meaningfully contribute to their communities, spaces for youth voices must be created. To better understand what this looks like in practice, we'd like to share a story that took place with staff and youth from the *Nova Scotia Department of Community Services, Lunenburg District Office* and HeartWood.



About HeartWood

HeartWood's mission is youth engagement for positive community change. We work with youth to develop their skills and confidence as community leaders, we also train and coach adults to meaningfully engage youth. For more info: www.heartwood.ns.ca.



Youth Engagement & Systems Change in Action!

In 2008, *HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development* and the *NS Department of Community Services, Lunenburg District office, Department of Community Services (LDO)* began an innovative collaboration towards improving services to youth clients (ages 13-24) in the region. The emerging question that came from staff was “*how can we better serve youth and make sure they don’t fall through the cracks?*” There are few services, opportunities and supports for youth between the ages of 16-18 years that are appropriate to their stages of development and desires for engagement and voice. There is an understanding at the LDO that more needs to be done to provide adequate services to youth clients, and that Community Services is one of the few offices where young people frequently turn to.

The partnership began with the creation of the *South Shore Youth Guide, Through Our Eyes* (HeartWood, 2008), to better connect youth to services available to them in the area. HeartWood staff trained youth connected to the LDO in diverse data collection methods and supported them in creating a youth-friendly guide for young people in the region. Youth participants were also responsible for the distribution of this youth guide, which included facilitating presentations to guidance counselors, youth service providers and LDO staff. When the youth presented their work back to government staff, this had an amazing impact on the District Manager and other senior staff as it initiated a deeper reflection on how this office works with youth. As noted from one of the staff:

We embarked on this in the beginning because we wanted to provide the best possible service. We knew that youth were not participating at the level that we would have liked, and we didn’t feel we were being as effective as we could be so we began to look at ways to make that happen. Youth engagement is where we arrived...

Four years later, with numerous successful projects, the LDO and HeartWood partnered to map the best practices and areas for growth for the entire office, involving almost 70 staff and management. The goal was to hear and collect staff’s approaches and practices toward engaging and providing youth with services they require, in ways that are empowering, respectful and effective to help youth live independent fulfilled lives. The result was a shift in practice for staff as well as structural and operational changes within the LDO to better serve youth. The lessons learned were highlighted in a report written by HeartWood and a video co-created with youth connected with the LDO, LDO staff and HeartWood facilitators. These are to be used as a training tool for all staff.

About the NS Department of Community Services

The Department of Community Services is committed to a sustainable social service system that promotes the independence, self-reliance, and security of the people we serve. This will be achieved through excellence in service delivery, leadership and collaboration with our partners. For more info: <http://novascotia.ca/coms/>



Observed Changes Within Government



Due to these youth engagement initiatives, changes occurred within staff and the operational practices of the Lunenburg District Office. Interviews were conducted with youth clients, LDO staff and community members in order to highlight these changes. Here's what was noticed...

CHANGES IN PERSONAL PRACTICES

Increased Focus on Building Relationships

Staff observed they were making fewer assumptions about young people and practicing more active listening. They were also asking more questions "as opposed to telling." More effort was also made by some staff to create opportunities for informal socializing.

This shift in practice not only had a positive impact on youth,

but also on staff due to an increase in job satisfaction. Staff noticed that they carried less stress by measuring the success of their work by being a supportive adult in a young person's life, as opposed to forcing program participation. As one staff member stated, a young person might not necessarily be ready to learn or engage at that level, but they do need someone that listens and cares for them.

Using A More Appreciative Approach

Staff began highlighting the gifts and qualities of every youth by "noticing when they are doing well, no matter how big or small, and commenting on it" (LDO Staff). The success of these past youth engagement projects enabled staff to see youths' strengths and abilities and what they have to offer, as opposed to focusing on the deficits highlighted in their files.

In practice, staff can put more energy into connecting youth not just to services and resources, but also to meaningful opportunities for them to contribute and engage with others in the community.

CHANGES WITHIN THE OFFICE CULTURE

Stronger Working Relationships

In order to support the youth engagement initiatives happening at the LDO, a Youth Services Committee was created in 2009. This group is made up of individuals from diverse staff teams that serve youth directly. The work of this committee has resulted in a better understanding of each other's work amongst individuals and staff teams.

Prior to the establishment of this committee, on-going communication between different staff teams wasn't

The LDO's Journey to Youth Engagement

- **2008...** *Though Our Eyes* (South Shore Youth Guide created by LDO through participatory action research)
- **2009...** *Get to Know Me* (Youth Strength-Based Assessment Research created with LDO youth, staff and HeartWood); Youth Services Committee made up of staff who directly serve youth ages 16-24; Management discussions on improving youth services
- **2010...** *We're Getting Heard* (Youth action research on building empowering relationships between staff and youth and youth friendly spaces); *Empire House Guide* (Empire House youth residents edit and design a youth friendly booklet of the guidelines and rules at the youth shelter)
- **2011...** Staff training with Empire House staff and other LDO staff ; Youth room focus groups and design; *Growing Green Youth Video Project* (LDO youth create a video for the town of Bridgewater during the Sustainability Festival) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AsjFbenzuSw&feature=player_embedded
- **2012...** Mapping Sessions on Youth Engagement with all LDO staff; LDO Youth Room (furniture purchasing, decorating & painting with youth); *Splash of Colours: Youth & Adults Working Together* (youth and LDO staff create a short video to highlight some of the lessons learned of this work)

happening. Because of the Youth Services Committee, one interviewed staff said, “Our working relationships are stronger.” It has also highlighted the importance of creating opportunities for staff to gather through professional development opportunities, team meetings and participation in youth engagement initiatives.

Establishing a Youth-Focused Approach

There is a shift in culture happening in the LDO, from becoming more youth-focused as opposed to policy driven. The establishment of a youth-focused approach was created in part by all the past youth engagement initiatives, but mostly through the mapping sessions that engaged every single staff member. Through these mapping sessions, a

common language and shared understanding of the desired approach for this office was created.

From the mapping sessions, a *Framework of Practice for Youth Services at the Lunenburg District Office* (HeartWood, 2012) was created. Based on HeartWood’s Framework for Community Youth Development, it was adapted to meet the specific requirements of the LDO. This framework of practice is supporting staff to change their perspectives and see their work with Community Services as a resource and partner in the community, as opposed to just being a place of last resort.

OPERATIONAL AND STRUCTURAL CHANGES Shared Intake Process

A significant and noticeable operational and structural change is the shared intake process for youth clients between the youth shelter,

Empire House, and other services such as Income Assistance and Employment Support Services. In the past, a young person would have to share their story more than once to different LDO staff in order to receive different services. Now, a Youth Case Worker streamlines the intake process between different LDO services by doing the intake and sharing the file with other programs. This avoids having a young person share their story multiple times to different staff members.

Youth-Friendly Documents

The process for completing paperwork with youth clients has also changed. Some LDO services have created a process to better engage youth in filling out the required documentation necessitated by the province. “My Plan” is a new level of involvement for youth to create their own plan with the support of staff. This allows youth to narrate their own story and identify their personal goals and passions.

The LDO Framework of Practice includes the following tools for working with youth:

- Youth-Adult Partnerships: creating empowering and positive relationships with youth ☐
- Meaningful Contribution: Connecting youth to opportunities to meaningfully contribute to their community ☐
- Supportive Peers: Supportive Peers: Encouraging youth to be part of supportive peer groups ☐
- Challenging Learning Experience (replaces “adventurous learning” from the HeartWood Framework): Challenging youth to take safe risks through different learning experiences ☐
- Empowering Culture: Listening and giving space for youth voice ☐



Continued...

Policies & Procedures

Policies and procedures are also being interpreted under a different lens, with more of a focus on doing what's in the best interest of the youth.

A young person interviewed observed that, *"it's not as strict as it used to be... You would mess up once and you'd be kicked out but it's not like that anymore."*

Some policies under the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services are broad and there can be varying interpretations across the province. Within Lunenburg County, there are limited resources that are available outside of the LDO to individuals in need. Staff members avoid turning people away by connecting programs or services to individual needs and by doing referrals to other social programs available in the area that could support them.

Lessons Learned- Promising Practices in Youth Engagement & Systems Change

Start With A Tangible Project Addressing A Specific Issue

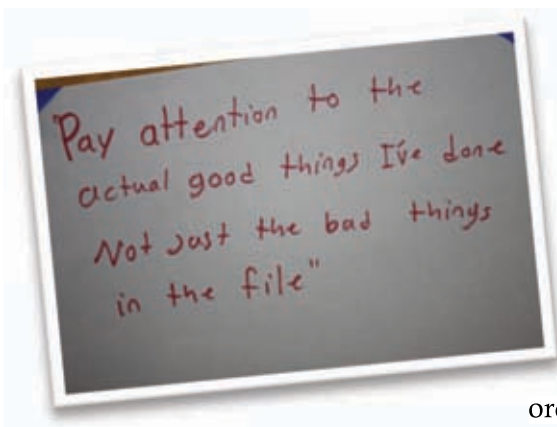
The starting point for this change process was to identify an issue that needed to be addressed and to begin addressing it through a tangible project. This whole youth engagement initiative began with a few core LDO staff members, including the District Manager and a few supervisors, observing that youth were being turned away from services at the LDO and that some staff were not happy about this. A core group of staff saw the potential in further exploring how to better serve and support youth within their office. Youth engagement initiatives and research projects naturally emerged from this inquiry.

A tangible project allows for concrete action to take place throughout the change process. This stimulates energy, enthusiasm and buy-in from others. The project must be framed within the area of influence of those involved so it can have a direct impact. From these tangible projects, results can be tracked in order to identify next steps. Building on success, the youth

Engage Those Impacted By The Change

Since this change process began with the inquiry of how the LDO can best serve and support youth, young people were actively involved right at the beginning, along with a few staff that work directly with youth. These youth engagement initiatives intentionally involved those who were going to be impacted by the desired change. By doing so, it also showcased how to do this work successfully.

Initially a small group of staff, including the Regional Director and a few supervisors, pushed these youth engagement initiatives forward. While support is needed from those who have decision-making power, it was quickly realized that a sustainable change process must also engage all those, including youth and staff members, impacted by the desired change. Consequently, the Youth Services Committee was created, inviting representatives from each staff team to be part of this group and steer the direction of this youth engagement change process. From this group, invitations slowly spread across staff teams to participate in upcoming youth engagement initiatives and research projects. The group eventually realized that for system-wide change to happen across the LDO, all staff members would need to be involved. All of these youth engagement initiatives used a multi-layered approach that simultaneously engaged youth, staff and the management team.





What Is Systems Change?

Systems change is a change process that strives to shift the underlying infrastructure of a particular context to support a desired outcome.¹ This shift can include existing policies and practices, resources allocations, relational structures, community norms, values, skills and attitudes.

Watch what youth engagement and systems change looks like in action (Splash of Colour: Youth & Adults Working Together):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Ci7MwkxtgY&feature=youtu.be>



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Invest in the Process

In order to change a system and the practices of the individuals who work within it, there needs to be an investment in the process. This investment includes staff time and financial resources towards youth engagement initiatives and research projects.

All 70 staff members were invited to participate to a three and a half hour mapping session. In addition, an LDO staff co-facilitated all the sessions with two HeartWood staff. While this time was taken away from employee's regular tasks, it was seen as an investment in their training and in this youth engagement change process by the management team and the Youth Services Committee. This demonstrates a high level of commitment on all levels of the organization.

In general, change processes can take time and will not necessarily be immediate, in particular within rigid systems and structures. An LDO staff mentioned during their interview that, *"people are slow to change their practice and behaviour. Implementing it slowly helped."*

This youth engagement change process with the LDO has been going on for four years, and is still continuing. What is important is to have a long-term vision and support from those who have decision-making power to approve and support this investment. Outside of gaining support from those

in leadership roles, it is also wise to create a structure within the organization that can sustain this work. For succession planning, the Youth Services Committee played that role.

Leadership for the Change Process

For this office of seventy staff members, it was valuable to have a third party intervener who knows the system and the community in order to help guide the change process. A staff noted:

"The support of someone outside the office to guide the process has assisted us to move forward with youth engagement. Without that, I am not sure we would have been able to do this since none of us had a good grasp of what youth engagement looked like or could look like in our office."

HeartWood has operated for over 15 years in Lunenburg County and therefore has a deep understanding of the community. This, in addition to working with the LDO through a series of successful youth engagement initiatives, has built trust and respect between both parties. This has resulted in a mutually beneficial relationship where both parties are learning, co-leading and contributing to this on-going change process.

Benefits of Engaging Youth in Systems Change Processes



Young people can be at the centre of a change process. An organization should consider engaging youth in a change process for the following reasons (i.e. benefits to the organization):

- Youth enliven organizations, agencies and communities,
- Youth are tremendous volunteers, when asked²
- Youth are attracted to ways of engagement where actions and results are immediate³
- Engaging youth promotes asset-based communities⁴
- Engaging youth supports learning organizations⁵

Other benefits for youth to be engaged in change processes (if inspired by positive youth development and/or community youth development practices) are:

- An opportunity for youth to contribute to others and the community⁶
- The increase in developmental assets a youth possesses⁷
- Better decision-making and reduction in youth crime rates⁸
- The acquisition of the five following skills (the five Cs): competence, confidence, character, connection and caring⁹

By engaging young people, stronger relationships can emerge amongst a staff team, a youth-focused approach can be created and real operational and structural changes can happen to better serve youth. Changes can also occur in staff's personal practices such as an increased focus on relationship building between youth and staff and the use of a more appreciative approach. By getting youth involved within the LDO, this has resulted in an increase in job satisfaction for staff and better relationships amongst youth and staff.

Conclusion

By getting youth engaged within an organization, the organization itself changes. The case study of the Lunenburg District Office demonstrated how youth engagement initiatives changed personal practices of staff and transformed some of practices within the office. It also identified some of the factors that supported the success of this change process. While this case study and past research demonstrate that certain pre-existing factors can be identified to support a successful change process, there are still varying findings in this area of research.

What is important is a good understanding of the system to be transformed and the use of participatory processes to engage all those impacted by the desired changes. The results of any change process are not immediate, as this work is still on-going. Implementation can take time¹⁰ therefore investing in the process is important. To implement a change process participatory methods, such as the use of small groups, are used to engage those affected. In particular for service delivery organizations, it is of primordial importance to include citizens in the change process, as their voices will support an organization to better serve their needs and interests.

Engaging Youth For Positive Systems Change

Systems change involves an operational and culture shift that benefits youth, staff and the organization as a whole.

Since 2004, HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development has established itself as a leader in youth engagement to support and enhance the systems that impact youth. HeartWood consults and provides training and coaching support for organizations looking to revitalize their youth program work and their organizational effectiveness.

Some of our major clients include:

- Leaders of Today, Provincial Youth Network, 2010-present
- Lunenburg District Office of Community Services, 2008-present
- YouthScape HRM, 2006-09
- HRM Public Libraries, 2005
- HRM Recreation, Youth Engagement Strategy and Tool Kit, 2004-06

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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ENDNOTES:

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