

Final Evaluation Report:
RainCity's LGBTQ2S Housing First Project

May, 2017

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RainCity's Housing First project aimed to support 20 chronically homeless LGBTQ2S youth (aged 18-24) over a 21-month period. The goal was to help youth create a safe community in which they could achieve housing stability and reach their potential. The project was later extended, and a total of 29 youth took part from January 2015 to March 31, 2017.

Evaluation Methodology

McCreary Centre Society's evaluation of the Housing First initiative entailed a mixed-methods approach of youth surveys as well as focus groups with youth participants, program staff, and clinical staff (who provided medical services to youth in the program).

A total of 13 youth completed an intake survey during their first few weeks in the project, and 15 youth completed a follow-up survey after being involved for at least five months. Additionally, a total of seven focus groups took place with youth and staff (four in 2016 and three in 2017).

Findings indicated the project targeted the intended group of high-risk youth. For example, all had experienced precarious housing, such as street-homelessness; most had been in government care; and all had mental health challenges, with the majority experiencing multiple mental health conditions.

All youth reported challenges finding and keeping their housing in the past, as well as accessing needed services. Challenges included safety issues among trans youth accessing gender-segregated accommodations, and a shortage of services for LGBTQ2S youth.

Youth reported that RainCity's Housing First project offered them support not only in finding and maintaining housing, but also in accessing needed services, learning life-skills, and connecting them to school programs and work opportunities to increase their economic stability, if youth were interested in such opportunities. Youth valued the authentic relationships they developed with program staff and peers, and the sense of community they experienced because of these relationships and connections which the program helped to foster. Youth felt their experience in the program was providing them with the stability and support they needed to eventually live independently.

Similarly, staff highlighted the importance of supportive relationships, including peer mentorship among youth in the program, which helped youth feel less isolated and enhanced their overall sense of well-being.

Quantitative survey findings mirrored evaluation participants' qualitative feedback. For example, all youth who completed a discharge survey experienced improvements in their housing stability because of the support they received through the program (e.g., reduced moves and risk of homelessness). Most also reported improved skills, including maintaining their housing, finding and keeping a job, and setting and accomplishing their goals. Additionally, most youth reported improved knowledge of available supports and services, and greater access to needed services, which they attributed to their participation in the program.

All youth experienced enhanced support networks, and most reported more friendships in the LGBTQ2S community and a greater sense of connection to their community. Evaluation participants also noted a shift among youth in their readiness and desire to give back to the community, such as by volunteering. In addition, survey findings indicated improvements in

youth's overall well-being, including their general health as well as overall mood, self-confidence, and hope for their future.

Youth also reported reductions in their risk behaviours, including substance use. The low-barrier harm-reduction approach enabled youth to address and manage their substance use challenges because of the stability that came with having a place to live, coupled with the support they received through the program.

The evaluation findings indicate that the program was successful at achieving its expected outcomes. Staff highlighted the need to support this population of youth until they were ready to leave a program, and for youth to not be forced out once they reached a certain age. They felt this model could help to ensure that youth received support for as long as they needed it. Both youth and staff felt that a lesson learned from the program was to ensure there was sufficient staffing to provide each youth with the level of emotional support they needed.

Staff felt that youth had developed sufficient positive networks within the LGBTQ2S community during their time in the program to provide them with the community support they needed to be successful once they left the program.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

RainCity's Housing First project has aimed to support LGBTQ2S youth in creating a safe community in which they can achieve housing stability and reach their potential. The project's initial aim was to support 20 chronically homeless LGBTQ2S youth, aged 18-24, over a 21-month period. The project was later extended, and a total of 29 youth took part from January 2015 to March 31, 2017.

The project's goals were to connect youth to needed services and supports (e.g., health services, income supports, employment opportunities/supports, education options); offer culturally relevant support to Aboriginal participants; support youth in engaging in social, cultural, and recreational activities; provide adult & peer LGBTQ2S mentorship; support youth in life-skills development; and support youth in setting and achieving their goals.

Intake & Client Information from January, 2015 to March 31, 2017 (provided by RainCity)	
Total program referrals	43 (with 14 not fitting the mandate)
Total number of program participants	29
Participants housed through the program	21
Asked to leave a housing unit while in the program	4 (2 due to guest issues and 2 related to substance use)
Asked to leave the program	0
Successfully transitioned out of the program	4
Connected with appropriate health care	12
Found employment	10
Attended school or did volunteer work	6
<p>Out of the 28 youth, seven are First Nations and 15 are Trans. Ninety percent of youth have created community and friendships through programming, while the other 10% are new clients with whom the team is currently creating relationships.</p> <p>Nine youth no longer have problematic substance use, and three of these youth are coming up to 1 year of successful recovery from substance use challenges.</p> <p><i>For more information about these number, please contact RainCity.</i></p>	

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

McCreary evaluated RainCity's LGBTQ2S Housing First initiative from January 1, 2015 to March 31, 2017. The methodology entailed a mixed-methods approach of youth surveys as well as focus groups with youth participants and staff.

Measures

Following consultation with RainCity staff and managers, McCreary drafted youth self-report surveys (intake and final surveys) and focus group questions for participants in the LGBTQ2S Housing First project. A group of youth gave their feedback on the drafts, and revisions were made based on their suggestions.

The surveys and focus groups included questions from the Housing First self-assessment tool, including other items that measured the expected outcomes. Expected outcomes among youth were the following:

- Housing stability (e.g., number of moves, sense of safety where they are currently living);
- Access to needed services and whether the accessed services were helpful;
- Increased support networks because of involvement in the project;
- Greater community connectedness and engagement in the community (e.g., increased participation in social, cultural, recreational activities)
- Improved life-skills (e.g., budgeting, cooking)
- Improved economic well-being (increased income/income supports, access to & knowledge of the job market)
- Greater opportunities to engage in employment, training, & education programs
- The extent to which youth are setting their own goals and working toward achieving them
- Improved well-being (e.g., improved mood, hopefulness)
- Promising practices & lessons learned

Youth surveys

A total of 13 youth completed an intake survey during their first few weeks in the project. The goal of this survey was to provide a profile of project participants and to help assess the degree to which the project was targeting the intended group of marginalized-within-marginalized youth (i.e., youth who were chronically homeless and identified as LGBTQ2S). Items tapped youth's cultural or ethnic background; housing experiences and past challenges finding and maintaining housing; gender identity and sexual orientation; whether youth were born in Canada and how long they have lived in the country; physical and mental health; and community supports and resources they have accessed and found helpful. This survey also tapped participants' feedback about their experience in the initiative so far.

Fifteen youth completed a final survey, and 80% had been in the program for at least six months when they completed the survey. This survey assessed the extent to which there were improvements in youth's lives because of their involvement in the project (greater housing

stability and sense of safety, improved social well-being, increased support networks, etc.). The survey also canvassed participants' feedback about various aspects of the project. This survey was initially intended to be distributed to participants at the end of their involvement in the project. However, given that participants could stay in the program until they no longer required support, and youth did not leave because they all needed longer-term support, this survey was distributed to youth who had been in the program for at least five months.

The surveys included questions that had been successfully used in other McCreary evaluations, as well as new items specific to this initiative. Youth participants completed each survey on their own. They then sealed it in an envelope which was returned to McCreary for entry into a confidential database.

Focus groups

Evaluation participants were asked about their experiences and thoughts relating to their involvement in the initiative, and any suggestions they had for the project moving forward.

In total, there were four focus groups/interviews with youth, and three focus groups with staff. The youth sessions included a preliminary/pilot session with three youth, a focus group with seven youth, a second-round focus group with four youth, and a session with two other youth. Most youth who took part in a second-round focus group had been involved in the program since the start. Each youth focus group lasted around 1.5 hours.

The staff sessions included a focus group with five program staff; a meeting with two clinical staff from the Catherine White Holman Wellness Centre who provide medical services to youth in the program; and a second-round meeting with two RainCity staff members.

Evaluation Limitations

This report does not include the perspectives of youth project participants who were unable to take part in the evaluation or who chose not to do so, and therefore may not be reflective of the experiences of all youth in the program.

The relatively small number of participants also meant that some statistical analyses could not be conducted.

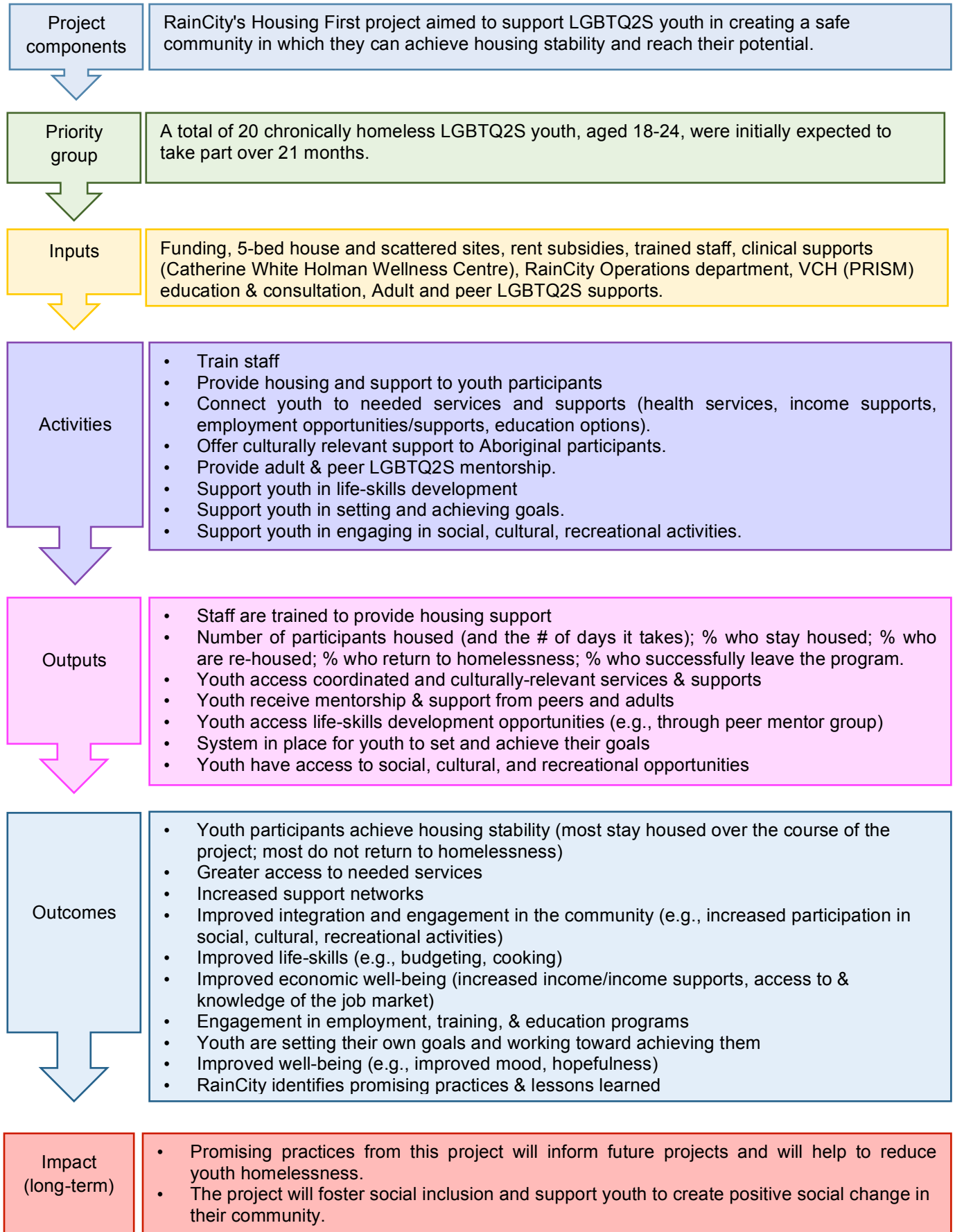
About the Report

McCreary submitted an interim evaluation report to RainCity in January, 2016. This final evaluation report builds on the interim report and reflects all participants who took part in the evaluation.

All comparisons and associations included in this report are statistically significant at $p < .05$. This means there is up to a 5% likelihood the results occurred by chance. When numbers were too small to report quantitatively, they were reported descriptively.

Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in this report reflect comments by youth participants in the focus groups/interviews or in their responses to open-ended survey questions.

Logic Model



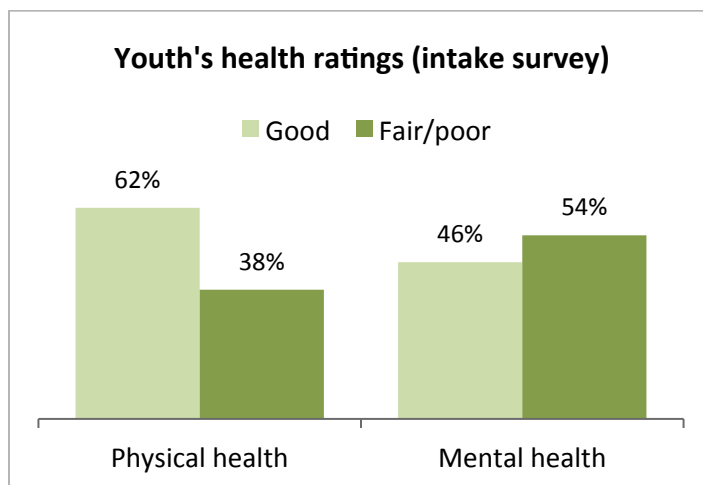
YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

The 13 project participants who completed an intake survey ranged in age from 19 to 25, and their average age was 22.5 years. They indicated a range of gender identities, including woman (cis and trans; 46%); man; Two Spirit; and androgynous. They also reported a range of sexual identities, including bisexual (50%), lesbian, queer, straight, and asexual.

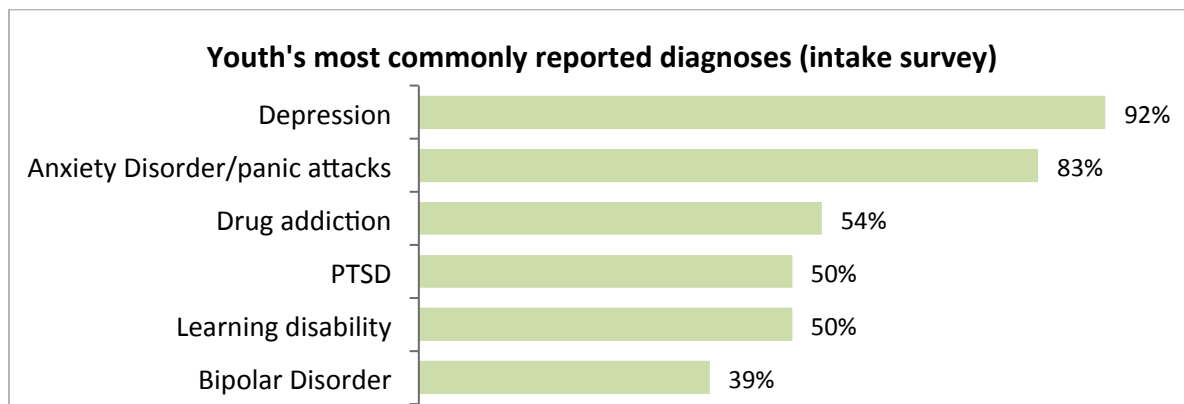
Youth most commonly identified as European (85%) and/or Aboriginal (54%), and a few identified as East Asian, South Asian, African, or were unsure of their background (they could select all options that applied). All participants had been born in Canada.

Health & Well-Being

Youth were asked how they would describe their physical and mental health (response options were poor, fair, good, or excellent). They most commonly rated their physical health as good, and their mental health as fair or poor. None rated their health as excellent.



All youth indicated that a health professional had diagnosed them with at least one mental health condition, and the vast majority reported multiple diagnoses. On average, they had been diagnosed with 4-5 conditions. The most common were depression, anxiety, an addiction to alcohol or other substances, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and a learning disability.



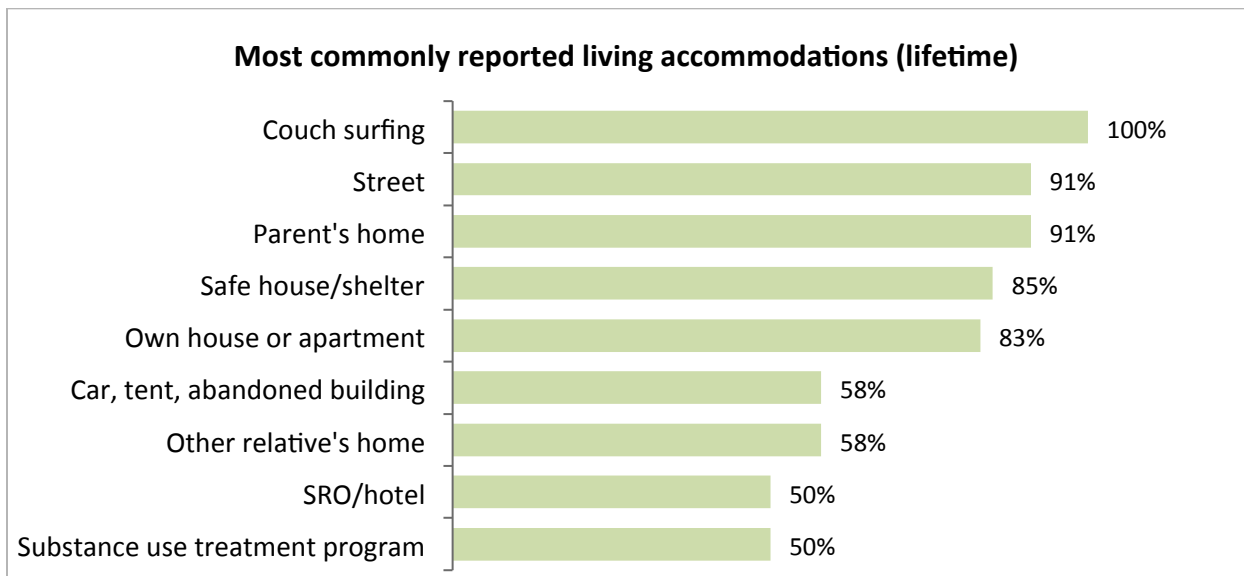
Note: Other reported diagnoses included Borderline Personality Disorder, ADHD (Attention Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder), Autism or Aspergers, FASD (Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder), and Schizophrenia.

Mirroring the youth’s survey responses, staff noted that youth in the program commonly had multiple diagnoses. Staff added that many participants presented as angry and scared as a result of their past experiences and traumas. Staff felt the youth participants required a high level of support around their mental health challenges and coping with past trauma. They said the level of emotional support needed was higher than they had anticipated, and higher than among the general youth homeless population. Staff described a high frequency of internalizing issues, including depression and suicidal ideation. Staff pointed out that the general LGBTQ2S youth population experiences high rates of isolation and suicidality, which can be compounded for those experiencing homelessness and other challenges.

Despite challenges, most participants (77%) identified strengths in themselves and felt competent in at least one area. They most commonly identified competence in the arts, including music, painting, drawing, singing, beading, dancing, and writing. Some also identified being good at cooking and communicating with others.

Past Housing & Homelessness Experiences

On the intake survey, participants indicated having stayed in a range of living accommodations at some point. The most common were couch surfing, living on the street, and with their parents.



Two thirds of youth (67%) reported having been in government care or an alternative to care at some point, including a foster home, group home, custody centre, or Youth Agreement.

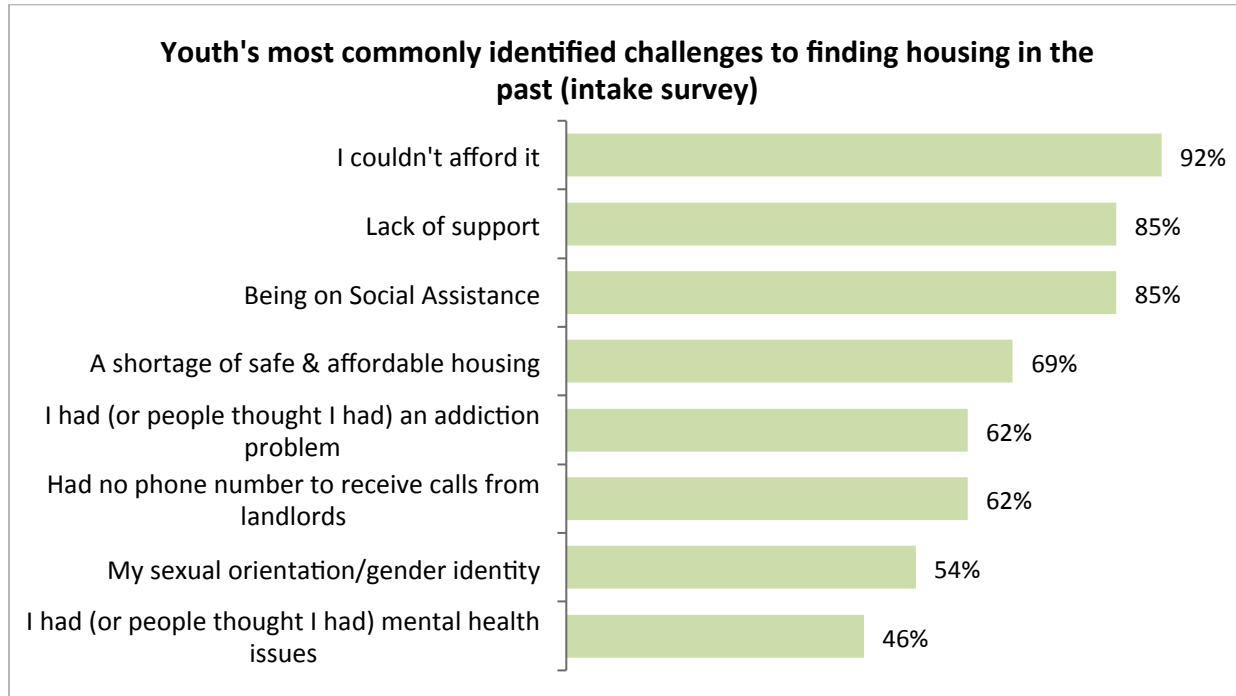
All youth indicated having moved multiple times in the past year, before joining the RainCity Housing First program. Staff added that all youth were episodically or chronically homeless at the time of intake to the program.

Challenges finding housing

“Youth face stigma for being youth.” –Program staff

*“My first own home was really hard to find on my own, so I found RainCity really helpful.”
–Youth participant*

All youth who completed an intake survey had experienced challenges finding housing in the past. Their most commonly identified barriers were being unable to afford housing, lack of support, and being on Social Assistance.



Note: Youth could mark all responses that applied.

Also, 85% of youth who completed an intake survey felt that discrimination contributed to their past challenges to securing housing. This included discrimination because of their age (67%), a disability they had (64%), their gender identity (58%), physical appearance (58%), sexual orientation (55%), and/or their race or ethnicity. Further, 62% of youth reported experiencing two or more types of discrimination when trying to secure housing.

Youth and staff who participated in focus groups identified trans-phobia and discrimination due to youth’s physical appearance as major challenges when trying to find housing. Most youth felt they had been denied housing because of how they looked, and staff said that landlords were sometimes unfamiliar with trans people and were hesitant to rent to them as a result. Staff said they tried to accompany program participants to view rentals in order to establish a positive connection with landlords.

Youth and staff also felt that participants had been denied housing for other reasons, including landlords’ concerns about youth’s lack of finances, lack of a job, and their young age. Youth expressed frustration about not hearing back from a landlord after submitting an application,

which they described as a regular occurrence. Staff also noted that Indigenous youth faced additional stigma.

Youth described their mental health challenges as another barrier to finding housing, as well as maintaining it. Some explained that due to mental health challenges, they experienced lack of energy, motivation, and hope, which made it difficult to search for housing. This situation also made it difficult to work and earn enough money to afford rent.

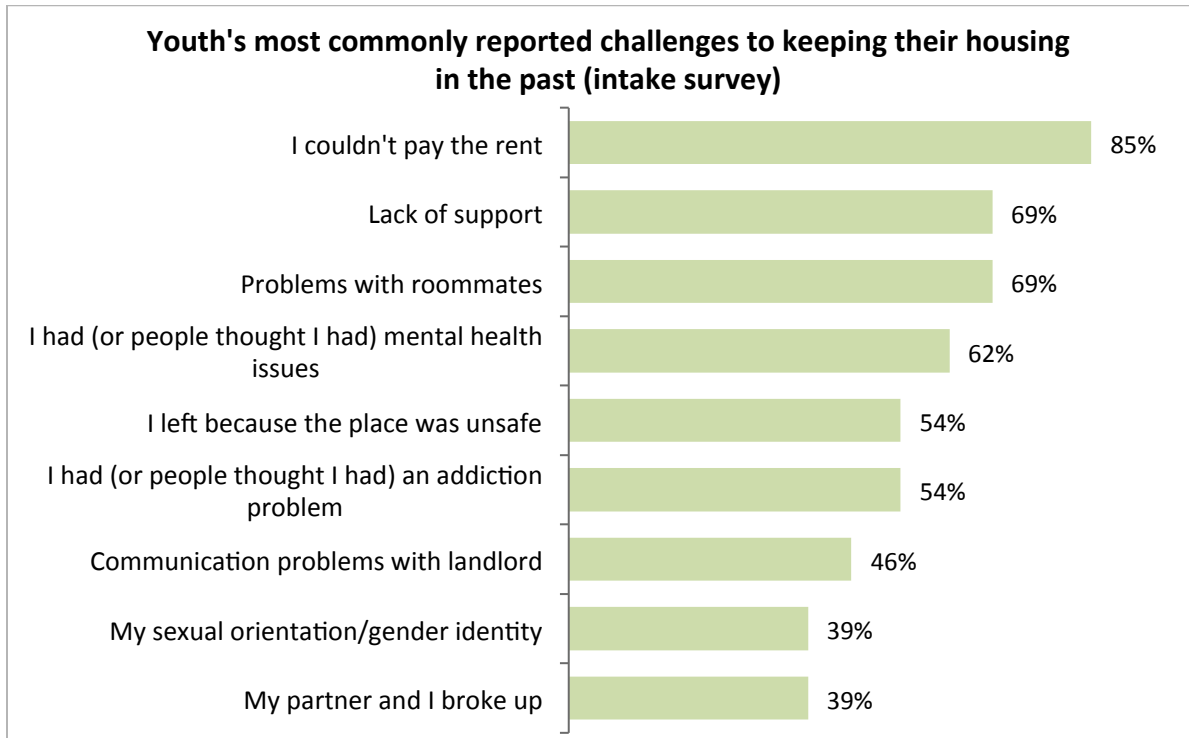
Prior to their involvement with RainCity, lack of support was another barrier to finding and keeping housing that youth identified both in the focus groups and survey. Focus group participants said they would have appreciated adult support with filling out application forms and with transportation to view available rentals. They would have also benefited from emotional support and encouragement to pursue their housing search, particularly after unsuccessful attempts at securing housing.

The lack of safe and affordable housing in Vancouver sometimes propelled youth to live in other communities which were more affordable but were further away from needed supports and the LGBTQ2S community. Further, LGBTQ2S youth who moved to communities outside Vancouver, such as Surrey, sometimes did not feel safe in those neighbourhoods and moved back to Vancouver as a result.

Challenges maintaining housing

Similar to their most commonly reported barriers to finding housing, youth's most common challenges to keeping their housing were being unable to pay the rent and lack of support. Other common challenges were problems with roommates and mental health problems.

Program staff said that a barrier to keeping housing was that many youth had difficulties setting healthy boundaries. Specifically, when other young people or adults who did not have housing wanted to move into a youth's place or extend their stay, youth sometimes had difficulty saying no and were vulnerable to exploitation. This included exploitation by older members of the gay community. Also, staff said that some young people with histories of chronic homelessness were unaccustomed to living indoors and needed support to maintain their housing.



Note: Youth could mark all responses that applied.

Past Challenges Accessing Services

All youth participants said they had been turned away from services in the past. Some had been denied youth housing services and had not been given a reason, while a few others felt they had been turned away because they did not fit the stereotype of homeless youth.

Program staff also discussed the challenges some youth faced when accessing gender-segregated shelters. They said that access to these shelters could be challenging to individuals who did not 'pass' as a specific gender. Further, if shelter staff asked youth whether they identified as LGBTQ2S, youth might not be safe disclosing this information because it could pose a danger to them if others staying in the shelter found out.

Youth recounted past challenges with accessing support around their gender identity and transitioning (e.g., gender affirming surgery). Some from smaller communities said there were no gender specialists in their home community and they had to make appointments in Vancouver. Without a car, they experienced barriers travelling to Vancouver for their appointments, which delayed their transitioning process.

In addition, youth had wanted concrete answers to their questions about the process of transitioning, but many felt that doctors had dismissed their questions, not taken their situation seriously, and had discouraged them from transitioning. In contrast, youth felt they were taken seriously and validated as soon as they joined RainCity's LGBTQ2S housing program.

Clinical staff identified lack of cultural competency among practitioners as a barrier when working with trans youth. For example, the language that some doctors used, their insensitivity

to pronouns, and not understanding the reality that goes on in trans people's lives could contribute to young people's negative experiences accessing services.

According to program staff, there was a shortage of services for LGBTQ2S youth. They talked specifically about mental health services, and that youth often needed more counselling than the eight visits they were covered for, in order to effectively work through their past traumas. Also, staff felt that detox services were unavailable to youth when they wanted them, which posed another barrier because youth often no longer felt ready to access these services when they did become available.

Some youth also said they had not had access to information about available services and supports before becoming involved with Raincity. Staff explained that the priority of the LGBTQ2S housing program, after helping youth to get housed, was to connect them to needed services.

RAINCITY'S LGBTQ2S HOUSING FIRST PROJECT

Referral & Intake Process

“I was sleeping outside and it was hard to say no to free drugs [before entering this program]. I wanted to start my life back up.”

Program staff explained that the criteria for joining the Housing First program were that youth were between 18 to 24 years old, identified as LGBTQ2S, were chronically or episodically homeless, and had access to \$375 a month for rent. Staff said they had initially worried it would be difficult to find youth who fit the criterion of being chronically or episodically homeless, but that the program had filled up within a few months of opening. They noted that many of the youth who had experienced this type of homelessness were trans or Two Spirit.

Staff added that the marginalized youth they served usually had other serious challenges aside from homelessness. They said there were no program restrictions around addictions or mental health challenges, and noted that many youth felt ready to work on these issues after finding stable housing.

Staff said there were youth whom they could not house through the program but whom they helped in other ways, such as by finding them other housing, involving them in community dinners, and working on relationship building.

When youth were asked why they had decided to take part in RainCity's LGBTQ2S housing program, most said they had been homeless or precariously housed (e.g., staying in shelters, crack houses, couch surfing) before finding housing through RainCity, and some described experiencing discrimination in their home community for being LGBTQ2S. Youth were looking for housing as well as a sense of community and support. Some were preparing for gender affirming surgery and were looking for a supportive environment, while others were wanting support with their substance use and mental health challenges.

On the intake survey, most participants indicated this was the first RainCity program they had accessed. The most common reasons they reported for joining the program were to secure housing, to have a safe place to live, and to access needed services.

Youth's reasons for joining the program (intake survey)	
To get housing	100%
To have a safe place to live	100%
To access needed services	92%
To expand my support network	85%
To live in Vancouver	85%
To feel connected to a community	69%
I won't lose my housing when I reach a certain age/leave the program	69%
To meet others with diverse gender identities/sexual orientations	62%
To help me live openly as LGBTQ2S	54%

Note. Youth could mark all responses that applied.

In the focus groups, around half of participants said they found out about the program through their doctor. Other youth said their social worker, addictions counsellor, or support worker told them about the program, while a few heard about it through their friends.

Youth were very satisfied with the referral and intake process. They said that RainCity staff were flexible when setting up the intake meeting and were willing to meet at a location that worked best for the youth, including areas outside the City of Vancouver. Participants appreciated that the intake process was made easy for them and that staff were friendly and helpful.

Youth said it took between one week and two months to get housed through the program. Most were impressed with the short amount of time they had to wait, although a few felt their wait time was long, particularly if they had been living on the streets at the time. One youth said they had turned down a space in the program three times before they felt ready to join.

General Project Description

“You don’t just get a house, you get bus tickets and food and stuff, as well as social and emotional support.”

Youth in the focus groups explained that the LGBTQ2S Housing First initiative offered them support not only in finding and maintaining housing, but also in accessing needed services. They described how staff regularly drove them to important doctor appointments and helped to connect them to other services and supports they wanted to access, including around food, transportation, and education. Staff also provided support in other areas if youth asked, such as to obtain certification (e.g., FoodSafe, First Aid), get their driver’s licence, obtain funding for school, as well as to meet their basic needs such as by taking them grocery shopping and providing laundry money. The general feeling among youth was that if they asked for support, RainCity staff would try to provide it. Youth explained that having their basic needs met through the program, including stable housing, gave them the opportunity to focus on aspects of their life beyond survival.

Program staff noted that the type of support offered to youth was dependent on what the youth wanted. Support might include help with budgeting, completing application forms, returning to school, and rides to appointments. In addition, staff said they supported youth by buying them transit passes and work clothes to remove some of the financial barriers they experienced.

Staff emphasized the importance of providing youth with emotional support and encouragement. They said the program served as a support system where relationships were valued and nurtured. Further, a major goal of the initiative was to help build a community for LGBTQ2S youth. Staff said the weekly community dinners at the RainCity house were meant to help in this regard. The idea was for youth to meet other LGBTQ2S individuals and to gain a sense of community in a safe environment. Youth expressed gratitude for these weekly dinners, and appreciated the informal context in which to build relationships with healthcare professionals, program staff, and others in the community.

Program staff also underscored the importance of connecting youth to services and supports in the community. They saw this connection to community resources as a ‘bridge’ that could contribute to ending youth’s cycle of homelessness. They added that they tried connecting youth with health services that were non-judgmental and supported harm-reduction, such as the Catherine White Holman Wellness Centre (CWHWC). They had also helped Aboriginal youth connect to culturally-relevant supports and services.

Clinical staff stressed the value of a Housing First model and of this program in particular. For example, trans youth who were going through gender affirming surgery received the support they needed through the program, including post-surgery care, which they would not have otherwise received had they been homeless or in precarious housing.

Program staff felt a strength of the initiative was that participants were not forced to leave the program once they had stayed for a certain length of time or reached a certain age. They noted that a few participants had turned 26 and were not yet ready to leave the program. Youth said they appreciated there was no risk of aging out of the program.

Harm Reduction Approach

“Even if you’ve had a bad couple of months, they’ll help you out as much as they can.”

“[RainCity is] a breath of fresh air, or a second chance, or a fifth or sixth chance.”

Youth valued the flexible rules and the harm-reduction approach. They felt that once participants were in the program, staff would work very hard to support them in staying there. For example, youth said they would not get kicked out for using substances, as had been their experience in other housing programs, but rather that staff would support them through difficult times.

Youth also noted that the program gave them the support they need at any given time. For example, youth might feel they needed harm reduction support at one point, but support with abstinence at another, and the program showed flexibility in supporting their changing needs.

Housing Accommodations

Staff explained that participants were offered a choice to live in communal housing or to receive a subsidy and to live in market housing. They highlighted the importance of getting to know each youth and of helping them find an accommodation that best fit their needs.

Around half of youth indicated living in RainCity’s LGBTQ2S house at the time they completed a final survey (they completed the final survey at different points), and the rest had been connected to other housing through the program.

Youth focus group participants said their current accommodations felt like ‘home.’ Some mentioned they were impressed by how clean the place was when they moved in, which helped them feel comfortable and stable. One explained they had received donated furniture for their market rental, and became very emotional after setting it up because they felt they were finally in a place that felt like home.

Most youth said they planned on living in their current RainCity accommodation until they felt ready to leave. A few others had a specific goal and time-frame around when they wanted to leave and live independently (e.g., in a year).

Staff highlighted that a priority of the program was to rehouse youth if a given accommodation did not work out for them, which was consistent with the Housing First model.

Market housing

Staff said that if a market housing situation did not work out for a youth, they would have a conversation about what had happened and would discuss the lessons learned. Sometimes staff could anticipate problems in advance (i.e., youth losing their housing because of the decisions they made), but felt it was important for youth to be allowed to make their own choices and mistakes, which was part of the learning process. However, staff acknowledged that it was difficult to see a youth lose their market housing when there was a lack of safe and affordable housing in Vancouver.

Overall, staff felt that youth in the program were able to reflect on why they lost their housing, and that many youth were extremely motivated to learn from their experience and to keep their housing the second time around.

LGBTQ2S house

Staff said that according to bylaw, they were not obligated to inform neighbours about the LGBTQ2S housing accommodation because the house was occupied by fewer than five people, and they had chosen to not disclose. They felt the youth had fit into their neighbourhood, developed friendly relationships with neighbours, and were respectful of the space.

Staff said they had an office in the house where they worked during the day, while youth were on their own at night. Staff had initially worried about not having staff members at the house overnight, due to concerns about youth having parties or other issues arising. However, they noted having no problems in this regard and felt it was important for the youth to experience the responsibilities that came with living independently. They said that if a youth was struggling with their mental health and no staff members were present, it was sometimes stressful for the other youth but that all youth in the house looked after one another and were understanding of each other's' struggles.

However, youth and staff acknowledged that youth's biggest challenge of living in the communal house was getting along with each other. For example, youth said there were sometimes conflicts about food going missing or people not cleaning up after themselves. Staff said that at the start, they had facilitated meetings and conversations to help youth address their conflicts, but that participants were now learning how to communicate with one another and deal effectively with conflicts on their own, and that staff encouraged them to do so. Youth said that staff's support and guidance helped make the house environment feel safe.

Staff noted that youth living in the house had to negotiate rules around substance use, and these rules changed depending on who was living in the house. Staff said it could be challenging if youth were using at different levels (e.g., if some youth wanted to abstain while others did not have goals around managing their substance use). They said it was an important lesson for the program, and important to share with other agencies following a harm-reduction approach, to match participants appropriately in this type of environment. Youth explained that when a participant's level of substance use was not a good fit for a particular RainCity housing accommodation, staff would find them another accommodation rather than ask them to leave the program.

Relationships with Staff

“The staff have been very helpful and supportive.”

“The staff here are excellent. They are caring and knowledgeable. That has gone a long way in getting me into a stable position. I wouldn't have gotten to this place without them.”

Youth said they appreciated the genuine, respectful, and trusting relationships they had with program staff. They felt they could relate to staff and that staff understood what participants were going through because they had shared similar experiences. Youth felt the LGBTQ2S representation among the staff team was very good, and that staff were accepting of them as they evolved with their gender identities. They also felt staff were an excellent source of support and information for youth, both in terms of general knowledge of the LGBTQ2S community as well as specific topics, such as details regarding gender affirming surgery.

Youth pointed out that many program participants had had experiences in institutional settings—such as government care, residential addictions programs, and hospital stays—and the ‘clinical detachment’ among staff and the power differential between youth and staff in those settings could create resentment among young people. In contrast, in their current RainCity program youth said that staff members’ authenticity helped participants feel comfortable opening up to them and asking for help. Some said they regarded staff as family, yet felt staff did not overstep their boundaries. Staff noted they were surprised about how close the relationships had become between staff and youth.

Staff said that to stay in the program, participants had to commit to meeting with staff regularly, and that the meetings could be casual check-ins. Depending on participants’ needs, they saw some weekly or more often, while other youth were more difficult to connect with this frequently.

Youth found the one-on-one meetings with staff very helpful, but in the second round of focus groups they said that individual meetings, as well as group meetings, were not taking place as regularly as they had in the past. They felt that some participants received more individualized support than others, and expressed a desire for this support to be distributed more evenly among participants. Youth said the program was short-staffed and acknowledged that some participants needed more crisis support than others. However, they felt it was important for them to meet regularly with staff because it had a tremendous impact on their sense of emotional security and connectedness, which was particularly important in light of their challenging family histories. Youth added, though, that staff were doing the best they could, and that more program funding to hire additional staff could help the situation.

Staff acknowledged that youth sometimes felt let down when they could not receive the individualized support they needed because staff were busy working through a crisis situation with another youth. They also said that youth sometimes experienced difficulty when a staff member went on leave, because it elicited feelings of abandonment due to their past experiences. Staff noted they had recently submitted a grant for additional staff coverage.

Staff said that youth tended to perceive a large age gap between youth participants and staff, and suggested bridging that gap by creating a role for a younger staff member who could be a dedicated point-person whom the youth could interact with. At the same time, a few older participants mentioned how they sometimes felt awkward interacting with staff younger than

them because they felt embarrassed about being older yet not having their life as on track as the staff.

Diversity

In the first round of focus groups, youth voiced appreciation for how sensitive the housing program was to diversity. They felt the range of diversity represented in the program, including gender, sexuality, religious, and age diversity, led to a variety of perspectives among program participants and staff. Youth highlighted how important it was for them to have a safe, non-judgmental, transphobia-free place to stay where they could be themselves and be open about their sexual orientations and/or gender identities.

When staff were interviewed for the interim evaluation, they felt that participants were accepting of certain forms of diversity, particularly relating to gender and sexuality, but more work needed to be done in other areas because some participants held discriminatory views. Staff said they were working with participants to address intersecting oppressions and discrimination, and acknowledged that this was an ongoing process.

In the second round of focus groups, youth noted that their understanding of diversity had improved since joining the program and learning from others, and they felt less judgmental and more accepting of others. They said that participants were constantly learning how to create a safe space for everyone, and were more intentional about not allowing bullying to take place.

All youth felt the program met their cultural needs. In the first round of focus groups, Aboriginal participants expressed gratitude for opportunities they were given through the program to connect with their culture. For example, they could take part in sage picking and sweats, and meet with Elders. Staff added there were opportunities for Aboriginal youth to exhibit their artwork at Indigenous art shows. However, in the second round of staff interviews, staff noted that the First Nations cultural programming which took place at the start of the program had ended because of staffing issues. Staff hoped this programming could resume as soon as their staffing issues were resolved.

Peer Mentorship

"It's great to see [participants] work through things together and be there to kind of catch each other." –Program staff

Youth felt that peer mentorship played a major role in the program. They said that although peer mentors had not been formally designated, participants supported and cared for each other. They added that youth who had been in the program longer tended to take on a mentor role with younger youth, and would offer them support and advice.

Similarly, program staff said that younger and less experienced youth turned to older ones for guidance, particularly around substance use. Staff pointed out that peer mentorship was beneficial when youth were influenced positively by their peers but could also be challenging and risky because of misinformation that might be exchanged. However, they felt that overall the positive aspects outweighed the risks because youth supported one another and typically arrived at a healthy outcome that would likely not have occurred in the absence of peer mentorship. Staff also said that some socially conscious participants became allies to youth who felt alienated by others in the house (e.g., when inappropriate language was used). These allies helped to educate others about social issues and contributed to creating a safe space.

In the first round of focus groups, staff said that if more funding were secured they would consider incorporating a paid peer-support component into the program. However, in the second round of focus groups, staff noted that they now saw peer mentorship develop naturally and that youth participants were proud to take on the role of peer mentor to support youth who were new to the program. They noted that these peer-mentor relationships were particularly strong among trans youth who were working through transitioning and those who had transitioned.

Youth Input into Program Planning

“I like that we can make our own rules in the house – and our own food!”

Youth were asked if they had opportunities to provide feedback on how the program was run. They all felt they could provide input at any time, and were comfortable doing so because staff were approachable. One youth stated, “everything is feedback” in that program staff were very open and accommodating to participants’ requests and suggestions.

Staff said they gave participants contact information so they could connect with staff, managers, and directors at RainCity to ask for help, provide feedback on the program, or voice a complaint. Staff added that youth in this program, unlike in other RainCity programs, were given the after-hour numbers of RainCity managers and other staff. They noted that providing cell phone numbers has not been a problem as the youth were respectful with not overusing them.

In addition, staff said they facilitated conversations with the youth to discuss the program, and had recently brought in a therapist to facilitate one. They also framed this evaluation as a way for youth to provide feedback.

Youth also appreciated that they were given the opportunity to establish the rules in the LGBTQ2S house, rather than staff imposing rules on them. They valued having input and a voice in decisions that affected them.

Goals

“Staff work with where you’re at and where you want to go.”

Youth said that goal setting was youth-driven, in that staff did not pressure them to set specific goals for themselves. They remarked that when they had felt forced to set goals in the past, they were not motivated to pursue those goals. They particularly appreciated that keeping their current housing was not contingent upon setting and achieving goals. Without this pressure to work on goals, they felt they were able to process past trauma, and had the time and space to think about what they wanted in life.

Youth said that participants who were ready to set a specific goal could approach staff who were extremely helpful in supporting them to meet that goal. For example, participants who were interested in finding a job were provided with transportation to job interviews and with emotional support. Also, in the second round of focus groups, a number of participants said they now felt ready to start volunteering to build their résumé, and were going to approach staff for support around this.

Consistent with youth's comments, program staff said they worked with participants on setting and achieving goals once youth were housed, stabilized, and felt ready to work on goals. Staff said it was important to wait until youth were self-driven and motivated to set and achieve goals. Examples of goal domains included education, employment, and recovery from substance use. Staff reiterated that support in these areas was available to youth but that youth were not mandated to pursue these goals. Staff stressed it was up to the youth to decide what they wanted support with, and staff would help them in whatever way they could.

Transitioning Out of the Program

"I've gotten what I needed from this program but I still need help to reach my full potential."

Program staff said that transitioning out of the program was a mutual discussion between youth and staff, and depended on the youth's ability and readiness to manage independently. Staff noted that a continuum existed in that some youth felt ready to leave the program and experienced a successful transition to independent living, whereas others would likely need program support for a longer time. Most youth who had successfully transitioned out of the program were living independently, while the remaining youth still required support but no longer needed their rent subsidies as they were now employed.

In the second round of focus groups, some youth said they wanted to stay involved in the program for as long as they could, while others wanted to become financially independent and eventually move on. Some expressed an interest in staying involved as mentors to participants after leaving the program.

Youth felt their experience in the program was providing them with the stability and life-skills to eventually live independently. A few voiced appreciation for the opportunity to start acquiring basic household items while in the program, which helped prepare them to eventually leave. A couple of youth also said their involvement in the program helped them learn what they liked and wanted in a living space once they left the program. For example, they realized they wanted to live close to transit and that they valued bright living spaces.

A few youth commented that while the program supported and prepared them for independent living as much as it could, they would still benefit from ongoing supports after leaving. Staff acknowledged that youth would likely need extended community support after they left the program, given their histories of trauma. Staff felt that youth would have access to such support because youth and staff were part of the same small community. However, staff highlighted the importance of such a program clarifying boundaries and ethics around staff interacting with youth after they left the program, while simultaneously ensuring that staff did not separate themselves in a way that could cause youth harm (e.g., sense of abandonment).

PROGRAM FEEDBACK & OUTCOMES

Reasons for Staying Engaged & Other Feedback

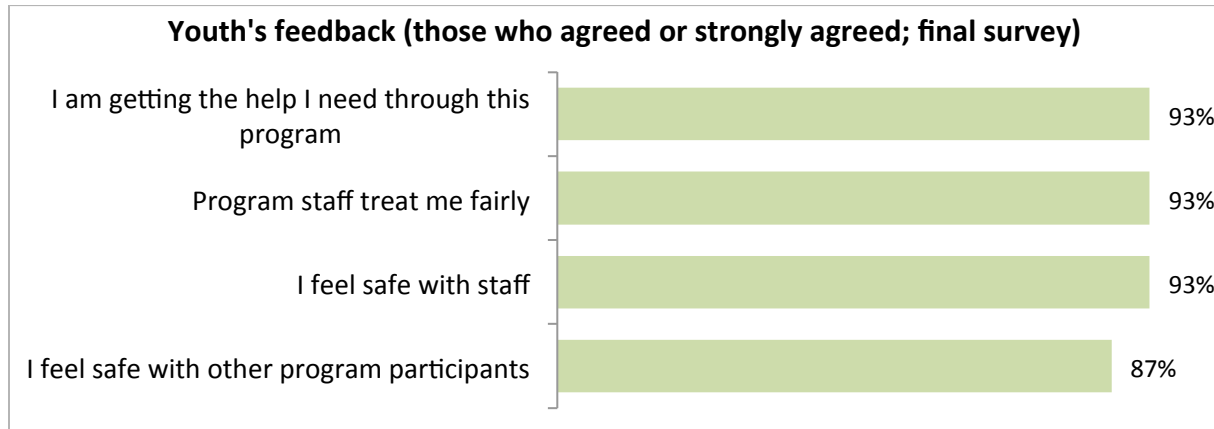
On the final survey, youth identified a number of reasons for staying involved in the program. The most common reasons were similar to those for joining the program, and included having stable housing and accessing needed services. Other common reasons for staying engaged were the support they received from program staff and the support from others with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. A few Aboriginal youth specified an additional reason for staying involved, which they identified as the culturally sensitive support they received.

Participants' most common reasons for staying involved in the program (final survey)	
Stable housing	100%
Access to needed services	100%
Support from program staff	100%
Support from people with diverse gender identities/sexual orientations	100%
Sense of connection to a community	93%
Being able to live openly as LGBTQ2S	87%
I won't lose my housing when I reach a certain age/leave the program	87%

Note. Youth could mark all responses that applied.

Many trans youth who took part in focus groups said their 'proudest moment' in the program was transitioning and getting gender affirming surgery. Staff felt a success of the program was supporting youth through their transitions and the high degree to which staff were involved in the post-op process. Staff said they were surprised by how open the youth were about it and how willing they were to include staff in this process. Other youth were pleased about their ability to take care of themselves, which they attributed to their involvement in the program (e.g., hygiene, sleep). Youth also identified working, going back to school, and getting their learner's licence as successes they had experienced because of their participation in the program.

Survey responses indicated that the vast majority of participants felt they were getting the help they needed through the program, that staff treated them fairly, and they felt safe with staff. Most youth also felt safe with the other program participants. The remaining youth reported neutral feelings (e.g., none felt unsafe or treated unfairly).



In the focus groups and responses to open-ended survey questions, youth described how grateful they were for the support they received through the program. They felt their involvement was what they needed to become stabilized and set them on a healthy trajectory. Youth commonly identified the support they received from staff as particularly helpful, and valued having these staff members in their lives.

Youth also appreciated having a safe and stable place to live; a rental subsidy; support around food; and access to counselling, health services, and activities. A few also voiced appreciation for having been connected to school or work opportunities through their involvement in the program.

Some expressed gratitude for all the supports they received through the program (e.g., stable housing, access to health care, funding for school) but felt they still needed more supports (e.g., legal name change, educational support, vocational support) while in the program and after they left.

“I got a job about right away, I have food to eat and a place to stay... I also have a lot more confidence.”

“The First Nations acknowledgement and respect is a reason I stayed involved in this program.”

“The staff are especially awesome. I’m very thankful to have these people in my life.”

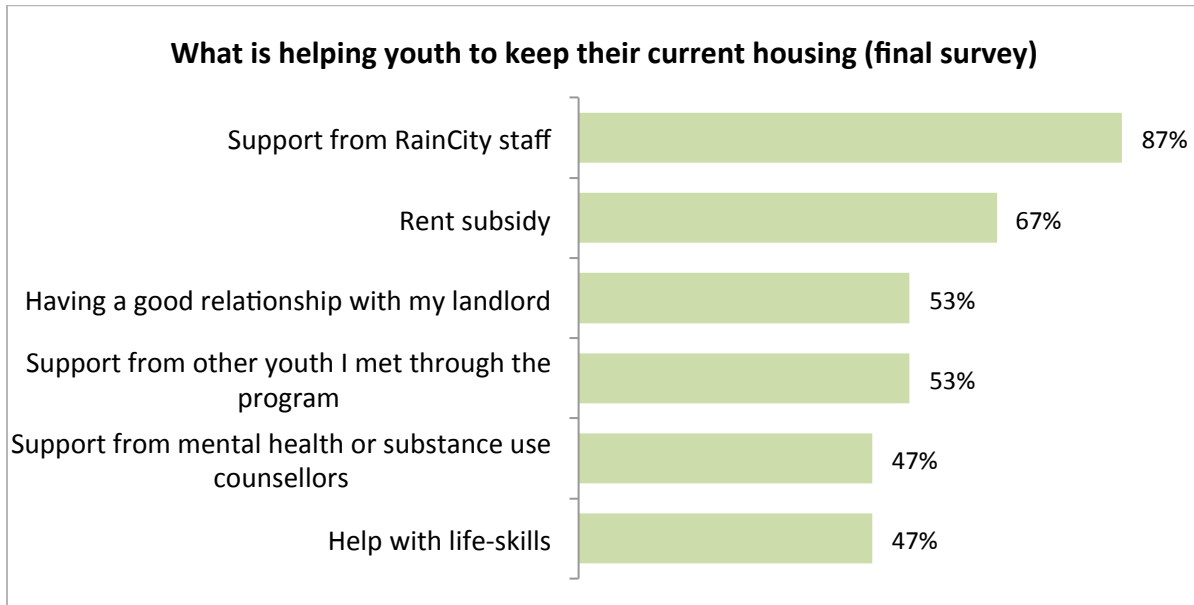
Housing Stability

All youth who completed a final survey reported that their involvement in the RainCity Housing First program helped to improve their housing situation, and helped to reduce their moves and risk of homelessness. In the focus groups, many youth said they would still be on the street or precariously housed if not for this program.

Housing improvements (youth who indicated ‘quite a bit’ or ‘very much’ improvement; final survey)	
Improved housing situation	100%
Reduced moves	100%
Reduced homelessness	100%

On the final survey, youth most commonly reported not moving at all while in the program, or moving once, compared to their responses on the intake survey which indicated multiple moves and instability before joining the program.

When asked what was helping them to keep their housing, participants who completed an intake or final survey most commonly identified the support they received from RainCity staff. Most youth also identified that receiving a rental subsidy was helpful.



Note: Youth could mark all responses that applied.

All youth who completed an intake or final survey felt safe in their RainCity accommodation, with most feeling very safe. In comparison, when asked about their safety in the accommodation they had had just before joining the program, 83% felt not at all safe or only a little safe.

Most youth indicated they would want to stay in their current accommodation even if they had more money (64% on the final survey). Those who indicated wanting to move if they had more money explained they were currently living with roommates and would prefer living alone.

Two thirds (67%) of youth who completed a final survey felt they would be ready to live independently once they left the program.

"I would still be homeless [if not for this program]."

"This will be my first winter in a house in 4 years."

"I have food, clothes and a place to sleep that isn't outside. It's awesome."

"I've received a rent subsidy that allows me to have my own safe housing."

"I have safe, stable, supported housing which I have never had my entire life until this program."

"I am so grateful to live in my own place. It is amazing, it is safe & wonderful."

"I now have my own apartment where I won't be evicted & where I can get support with my medication, and my cupboards are FULL of food!! Having my own space is a dream come true."

Skill Improvements

On the final survey, youth were asked about any skill improvements because of their involvement in the program. Most youth reported their skills had improved quite a bit or very much in keeping their housing (83%) and housekeeping (e.g., cleaning, cooking; 62%). Most also reported this level of skill improvement in areas beyond housing, including finding a job (75%), keeping a job (63%), setting goals (57%), reaching their goals (64%), making friends (62%), coping with challenges (57%), and managing stress (57%).

The majority of youth also reported at least a little skill improvement in communicating with others (100%), maintaining healthy relationships (92%), self-care (e.g., sleeping well, eating healthy; 92%), interacting with landlords (91%), and budgeting/money management (77%).

Some youth focus group participants identified improvements in their abilities to socialize and communicate with others, and attributed these improvements to their relationships with program staff. They felt safe interacting with staff, and grew to feel more confident and competent interacting with others as a result of their positive interactions with staff.

Staff and youth also explained that workers supported participants in learning independent living and housekeeping skills, such as budgeting, cooking, cleaning dishes, recycling, reducing clutter, and living with roommates. Some youth, such as those from smaller communities, also gained skills in navigating public transit. In addition, staff said they offered skills workshops to youth, which they felt helped youth learn valuable work-related skills and to then secure employment if they were ready to do so.

Most youth identified feeling competent in at least one area, on both the intake and final surveys. However, youth were more inclined on the final survey than the intake survey to indicate that they were good at supporting their peers and being a positive role model.

Connections & Supports

Community connections and engagement

Youth felt the program helped to enhance their sense of community, both within the program as well as in the broader LGBTQ2S community. They described belonging to a supportive community made up of accepting and genuine individuals. Some recounted the fear they had experienced as a trans person in their home community prior to their involvement in the program, and how meaningful it was to meet people and make friends similar to them through this program. They were appreciative of the sense of safety and community they now experienced, and for some it was a major reason for staying involved in the program.

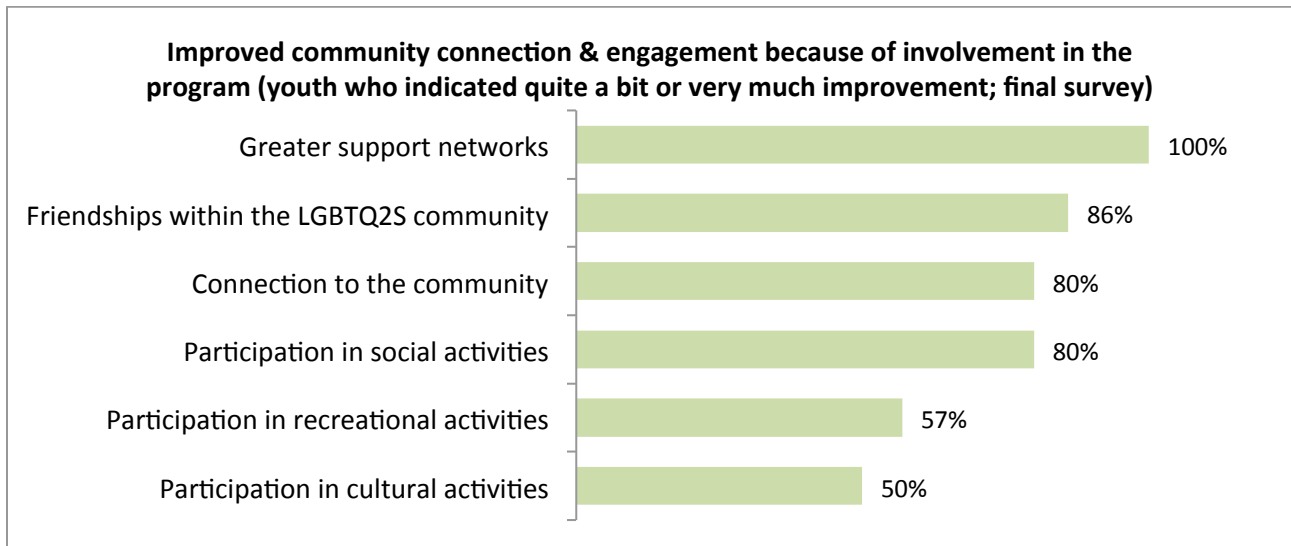
Youth also felt their involvement in the program expanded their support networks, which is why many had initially wanted to join. Similarly, staff said it was satisfying to see youth shift from being isolated to making friends and realizing there was an entire community of LGBTQ2S people they could relate to. Staff emphasized that peer relationships developed through the program helped youth to feel less isolated and to increase their sense of connection to the community.

Several youth expressed appreciation for the strong connections they had developed with other youth and staff in the program. Some described their 'proudest moment' in the program as finding genuine friends and maintaining healthy relationships. Other youth said they had

become more social and outgoing because of their involvement in the program, and had taken on mentorship roles with other youth participants.

A few youth also described how their relationships with their families had improved because of their involvement in the program. For example, they developed a better understanding of how to communicate in a non-confrontational way, which they have applied when interacting with family members.

Youth's responses on the final survey were consistent with their comments in the focus groups. They indicated improved support networks, connections to their community, friendships within the LGBTQ2S community, and participation in various community activities because of their involvement in the program.



“The youth don’t just need a worker, they need a solid community.” –Program staff

“We build our own community.”

“I couldn’t imagine a community more tight-knit than the one I’m in right now.”

“It’s been helpful to have staff I can talk to about my everyday problems.”

I’m so thankful to have met the staff in RainCity and all the support and love they have added to my life.”

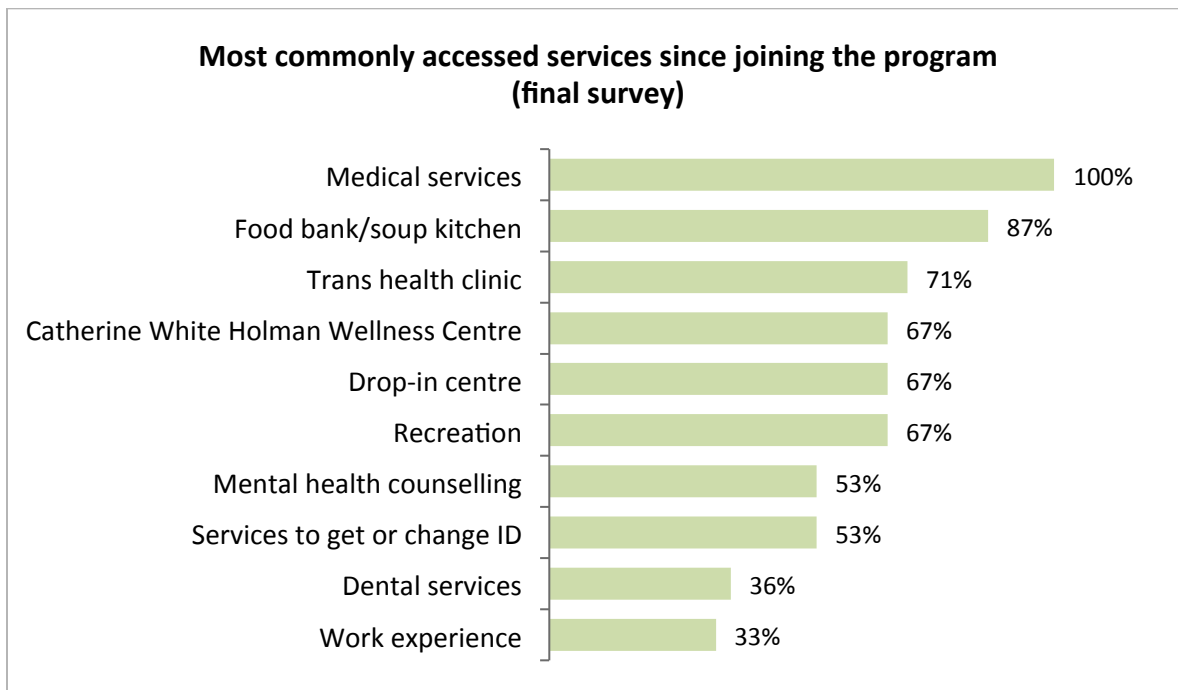
Accessing supports & services

“You’re going to feel safer accessing services from people you can relate to.”
–Clinical staff

Youth felt their involvement in the program helped to improve their knowledge of available supports and services (86%) and their access to needed services (93%). Youth focus group participants said that RainCity staff helped them gain access to services and resources they had not previously accessed. They added that access to needed services and resources was a major reason they wanted to stay involved in the program.

Youth who had been in the program several months noted that the type of support they currently received was different from the support they had received when they first started the program. They explained that at first they were accessing supports to help them stabilize and transition out of homelessness, whereas now the focus was more on seeking opportunities to develop skills.

Responses on the final survey indicated that youth accessed a variety of community services and supports while in the program. The most common were medical services, food banks or soup kitchens, and trans health clinics. Further, most youth who accessed supports or services found them helpful. For example, 100% who accessed the CWHWC found it helpful.



Note. Youth could mark all responses that applied.

Youth described staff as extremely helpful in connecting them to needed services and felt they received whatever they asked for in this regard. Similarly, clinical staff felt RainCity staff went above and beyond to help youth to access needed supports and services, including income assistance and disability benefits, as well as employment and education programs.

Most youth (83%) reported an increase in their access to professional supports since joining the program (none reported a decrease). However, on the final survey some indicated not having

accessed certain services while in the program which they wanted to access. The most common were job training (47%), alternative therapies (47%), dental services (43%), work experience (40%), and life-skills training (33%).

Youth were also asked on the surveys if they had approached various people for help since joining the program and if they found the assistance helpful. On the final survey, they most commonly indicated approaching RainCity staff, doctors, and one-on-one workers. The majority of youth who approached people for help found the assistance helpful. For example, all youth found helpful the support they received from RainCity staff.

Whom youth approached for help while in the program (final survey)		
	Asked for help	Found the support helpful (among youth who asked for help)
RainCity staff	100%	100%
Doctor	100%	93%
One-on-one worker	93%	93%
Relative	80%	67%
Other program participants	73%	91%
Nurse/midwife	71%	100%
Staff at CWHWC	67%	100%
Counsellor	64%	78%
Social worker	57%	88%
Friend/romantic partner	53%	75%
Aboriginal support worker	50%	86%
Teacher	43%	NR
Education Employment Specialist	36%	NR
Other adult mentor	36%	NR

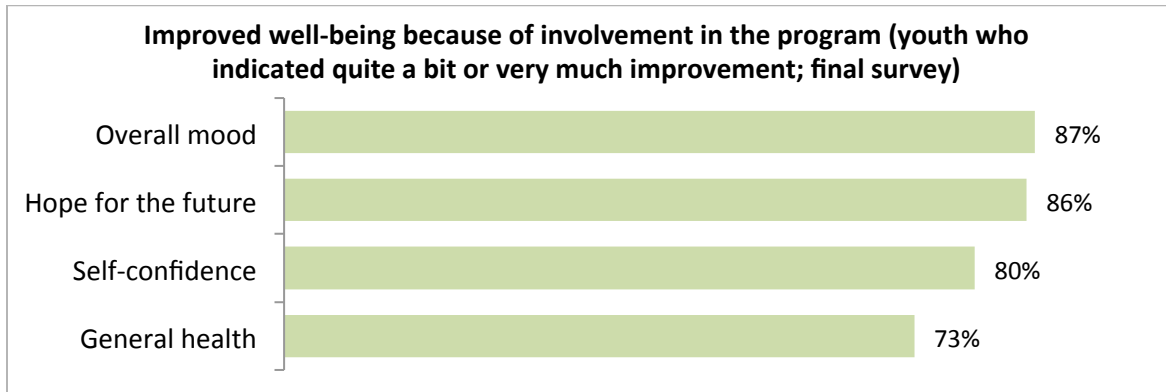
NR = Not Releasable due to small numbers.

Some youth focus group participants shared how they now wanted to give back to their community, such as by volunteering at a food bank. Similarly, staff mentioned that some participants were now at a place where they wanted and were able to contribute. Staff said this shift among youth from only feeling they were in need of support to feeling they could also give support had a powerful effect on the youth.

Well-Being

Youth in the focus groups noted improvements in their emotional well-being and reductions in their mental health challenges, which they attributed to their involvement in the program. Some shared that their experience in the program helped them gain a better understanding of themselves and fostered self-acceptance and increased self-confidence. Further, youth said that having stable housing helped them feel more emotionally stable and gave them hope for their future.

Similarly, most youth who completed a final survey reported improvements in their health and well-being, specifically their general health, overall mood, self-confidence, and hopefulness.



Note. Youth could mark all responses that applied.

On the final survey, youth were also asked to rate their mental health while in the program as well as to reflect on their mental health before joining the program. They were more likely to rate their mental health as good or excellent while in the program than before joining (53% reported good or excellent mental health while in the program vs. a small minority who rated it this way before joining). This pattern of results was similar for ratings of physical health.

Program staff said there had been a number of suicide attempts among youth within the program, which was consistent with the high rate in the LGBTQ2S population. Staff noted that no youth had died by suicide while in the program, and noticed mental health improvements among most youth. Some youth also said they had previously thought about suicide every day and now they no longer did, and described their quality of life as having drastically improved because of their experience in the program.

Staff also said that many young people had entered the program feeling angry but progressively became more accepting of others and themselves, and their anger subsided.

"This program is mostly about growth."

"I can't believe I'm still stable and happy."

"Somebody's got me and I can worry about me for a minute."

Substance Use & Criminal Involvement

"I'd still be using if I wasn't in this program."

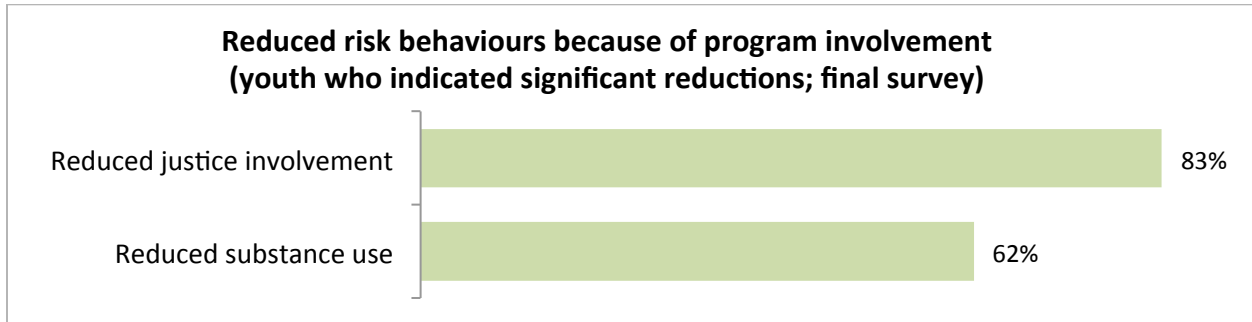
The majority of youth who completed a final survey reported that their involvement in the program helped to lower their criminal justice involvement quite a bit or very much.

Most youth also reported that their involvement helped to significantly reduce their substance use. Similarly, staff noted that many youth had successfully managed their substance use while in the program, including abstaining from drug use or reducing the frequency of their use.

Some youth focus group participants felt they had successfully managed their substance use as a result of the stability they experienced in the program, and the low-barrier approach which enabled them to stay in the program while working through their substance use challenges.

Many youth identified reductions in their substance use as their ‘proudest moment’ in the program. This included no longer using substances to self-medicate, and having more money available to spend in other areas because they were spending less on substances.

However, some youth felt the program’s harm reduction approach could be damaging to participants. For example, a few who were trying to abstain from substances struggled to do so because others around them were using substances. A couple of other youth indicated they had not used substances before joining the program but had started using since joining because they were influenced by program participants who used substances.



Access to Healthy Food

Program staff noted that while they could meet participants’ housing needs, they were unable to fully meet youth’s needs in the areas of hunger and poverty. Staff said they connected youth to a local food bank and regularly provided transportation to the food bank and to Quest Food exchange (an affordable grocery store for people experiencing food security challenges). Staff taught youth how to buy as much healthy food as possible for as little money as possible. Staff also cooked with youth, and the youth took turns cooking for the community dinners. In addition, staff occasionally went emergency grocery shopping for youth who were experiencing significant food insecurity. Staff added that there was a garden at the LGBTQ2S house where youth had access to kale and tomatoes.

On the intake survey, 73% of youth indicated that before joining the program they went to bed hungry often or always because there was not enough money for food. In contrast, virtually none indicated going to bed hungry this often since joining the program, while 46% indicated going to bed hungry sometimes, and 46% never went to bed hungry since joining the program. Also, 60% of youth reported very much or quite a bit of improvement in their access to healthy food because of their involvement in program.

Work, Learning, & Goal Setting

“I have received funding for an intro college course, which I hope will help start my career.”

Youth in the focus group felt that the changes in their lives came from the program’s positive focus, such as on participants’ strengths and what they could accomplish. They said this focus helped them to feel more confident in their own abilities and more hopeful about their future, and encouraged them to set and achieve meaningful goals.

Staff said that several youth became successfully employed while in the program. Staff were successful at finding employment opportunities for some youth through their own connections in the LGBTQ2S community. Staff felt the work opportunities helped to inspire and encourage youth to think about a career path.

Staff also said that youth in the program were currently volunteering or/and attending school (e.g., GED, upgrading, bartending course). Staff helped with some of these opportunities, whereas youth created others for themselves.

Among youth who completed a final survey, a few were currently attending post-secondary education, and 69% planned to complete post-secondary at some point. A few were currently working at a paid job or volunteering in the community. Findings from the intake survey were comparable.

Most youth indicated their participation in the program helped to improve their education planning (64%) and involvement in education programs (64%) quite a bit or very much. Most also felt their involvement in the program helped, at least a little, to improve their employment planning (89%), knowledge of the job market (88%), access to the job market (88%), and involvement in job programs or training (86%).

When asked on the final survey what (if anything) they hoped to achieve when they left the program, youth's responses included living independently and maintaining stable housing; pursuing their education and/or career; and experiencing emotional stability.

What youth hoped to achieve after leaving the program (final survey)...

"I hope to be an independent young adult, successful and happy."

"Stable housing for the rest of my life is what I sincerely hope for."

"To have stable housing and a more guided and detailed plan for my future."

"Graduating from my post-secondary certificate program and choosing my major/degree."

"To create a non-profit organization and a business."

"To become a restored human being, and to take part in or go to school."

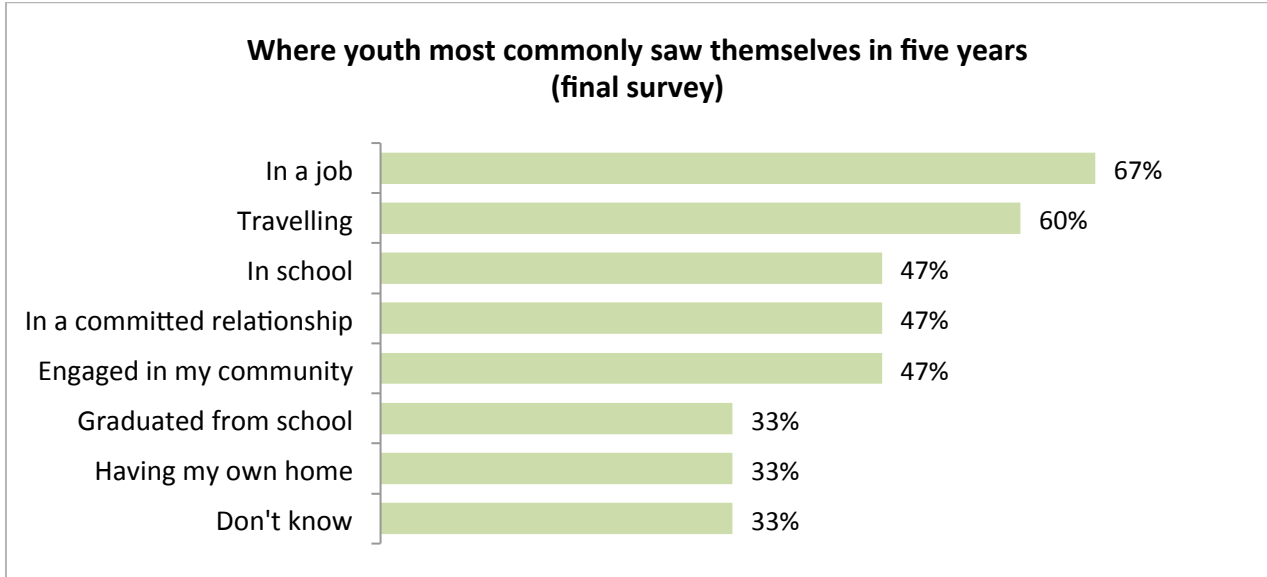
"To continue bettering my mental health and support network."

"I hope to achieve inner peace."

"I'd like to be closer to finding and pursuing my life's passion, whatever that may be."

"To give back to my community, being completely independent."

When asked where they saw themselves in five years, youth who completed a final survey most commonly anticipated having a job and/or travelling. Responses were similar on the intake survey.



Note: Youth could mark all responses that applied.

"[RainCity is] the only place that has actually helped me achieve my goals."

"I've accessed [a local college]."

"This program gave me a home and a future."

"I'm content. My life will go far. Before this program, I didn't think it was possible."

LESSONS LEARNED

“It’s not about fitting people around the program, it’s about fitting the program around the people.” –Program staff

Staff were asked what they had learned through their experience in the program and if they had any advice or suggestions for service providers who were planning on developing a similar program.

Staff highlighted the importance of clarifying a program’s values and boundaries to both staff and youth participants, and of adhering to those values and boundaries (e.g., clarifying boundaries around the relationship between youth and staff, and staffs’ interactions with youth after youth leave the program). They added that details pertaining to the actual program should be driven by the youth’s needs.

Staff said the original group of youth participants had stayed in the program for longer than staff had expected because all youth needed more intensive and longer-term program support than originally anticipated. Staff observed that youth found it difficult to trust others, and as a result needed a long time to develop trusting relationships with staff and peers. Staff said it was important for service providers to understand that youth had justifiable reasons to not trust staff, given their past relationship histories and traumas.

Further, staff said an important lesson was the need to support this group of high-risk youth until they were ready to leave a program, and for youth to not be forced out once they reached a certain age. This model helps to ensure that youth’s past abandonment experiences are not repeated, and that they receive the support they need for as long as they need it.

Adhering to a harm-reduction approach in this type of housing program was seen as essential to best support youth. However, staff said it is important to ensure that youth living together in a shared accommodation have similar levels of use and similar goals around managing their substance use. Matching youth in this way can help to ensure they positively support each other and that substance use does not increase (e.g., if one youth is influenced to use more frequently because of another youth’s frequent use). If a youth’s level of substance use is not a good fit for a particular housing accommodation, staff should offer them another accommodation rather than ask them to leave the program.

Staff’s involvement with the program highlighted to them the many stigma-related and safety issues experienced by LGBTQ2S youth, and particularly trans youth. For example, some youth participants had been threatened by neighbours and targeted in recovery houses because they were trans. Moreover, safe services for this specific youth population are lacking, such as recovery houses, housing, and shelters.

Peer relationships were identified by staff as paramount in helping youth feel less isolated and to increase their sense of connection to the community. Staff felt that healthy peer relationships in this type of program should be encouraged and nurtured. They also felt the development of healthy relationships and networks in the community should be fostered so that youth had community supports available to them once they left a program.

EVALUATION PARTICIPANTS' SUGGESTIONS

When asked on the survey if there was anything they found unhelpful or if they had suggestions to improve the program, most youth indicated they found nothing unhelpful, and were extremely satisfied and grateful with how the program was running and with program staff. Many youth in the focus groups felt similarly.

Some youth and staff shared suggestions to make the program even stronger. The following is a summary of their suggestions:

- Both youth and staff felt that if the program received more funding, additional staff should be hired to best support all youth participants. This included providing more consistent support to youth with lower support needs who sometimes felt that staff could not devote enough time to them due to other youth requiring more intensive support.
- Staff said that youth tended to perceive a large age gap between youth participants and staff, and suggested bridging that gap by creating a role for a younger staff member who could be a dedicated point-person whom the youth could interact with. Staff also suggested hiring an Aboriginal staff member as a dedicated point-person who ensured that cultural issues were properly addressed within the program.
- If more funding were secured, evaluation participants suggested the program could acquire a second (larger) house for participants so that more youth could take part and live in a desirable neighbourhood which was centrally located. Acquiring another van for transportation was also suggested, as well as further supporting youth's cultural needs (e.g., more opportunities to take part in Aboriginal activities and events, and offering honoraria to Elders).
- Some youth felt the program should focus more on rules and accountability (e.g., in the LGBTQ2S house), and that there should be consistent consequences for not following the rules.

Other comments from youth participants:

"I wouldn't change anything about this program. The staff are all superstars."

"Expanding this program would be very beneficial and life-saving for youth, like for LGBTQ people that are having trouble keeping their home."

"This program is the best thing that happened to me."

"The best help I've ever got anywhere in Canada."

"Everything and everybody [in this program] is above and beyond any expectation. This program is awesome."

"I'm grateful to be a part of this program. I don't want to think about where I'd be if I weren't in this program."

"Thank you for everything. This program saved my life!"

CONCLUSION

The evaluation findings indicate that RainCity's LGBTQ2S Housing First initiative was successful at achieving its expected outcomes among youth participants. These included greater housing stability; improved life-skills; greater opportunities to engage in employment, training, and education programs; greater access to needed services; enhanced support networks, community connections, and engagement in the community; and improved overall well-being.

A limitation of this evaluation was that it was unable to capture the perspectives of all 29 youth who had participated in the program, although a little over half of youth who took part in the program also took part in the evaluation. The mixed-method approach of surveys and focus groups enabled youth to take part in the evaluation in a way that worked best for them (e.g., if they experienced challenges with reading or writing, they could share their feedback verbally in a focus group rather than completing a survey). In addition, the integration of qualitative and quantitative data helped to create a more complete picture of youth's experiences in the program.

Staff highlighted the importance of implementing a program model which enabled youth to stay involved until they felt ready to leave, and which did not force them out once they reached a certain age. Also, a promising practice identified by evaluation participants was to support youth in a program to develop healthy relationships and support networks in the community, so that community supports were available to them once they left a program to further facilitate their healing and growth.