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EVALUATION NEWS

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EVALUATION OF A YOUTH ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE TO PROMOTE HEALTHY CHOICES



improved health for the individual and the community. The theory behind this approach is that through involvement in the planning and implementation of health programs, youth contribute to creating programs and services that can better meet the needs of young people. They can also gain a sense of responsibility and empowerment, build skills and increase self-confidence.^{1,2}

Why Study Youth Engagement Initiatives?

Adolescence is an important stage of development, when youth are gaining increased independence and making personal lifestyle choices. During this time, many young people may adopt unhealthy behaviours such as tobacco and other substance use, physical inactivity and unhealthy eating habits that may lead to obesity, addiction and poor mental health, and may put them at risk for the future development of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, and diabetes.³⁻⁵

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the first newsletter in the series on our evaluation of a youth engagement initiative to promote healthy choices in Ontario. This evaluation is an ongoing multi-year effort that supports learning throughout the Ontario Ministry of

Health Promotion and Sport youth engagement initiative from its initiation, through initial roll-out and full implementation.

What is Youth Engagement?

The purpose of youth engagement health programs and initiatives is to involve youth in activities that promote

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Why Study Youth Engagement Initiatives?

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There is growing recognition that a youth engagement approach is important for promoting healthy lifestyle choices and behaviours among young people. While an increasing number of youth engagement programs for healthy lifestyle choices are being evaluated, there is a lack of understanding about how best to engage youth and what key program ingredients lead to positive outcomes within these programs.⁶⁻⁹ In-depth evaluation of youth engagement initiatives is needed to help understand what works best in a variety of contexts to address the complex challenges of preventing unhealthy behaviours among youth.

Youth Engagement and Public Health in Ontario

The Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion & Sport (MHPS) has established a youth engagement (YE) initiative focused on preventing tobacco and other substance use and promoting physical activity, healthy eating and optimal mental health among youth. The initiative involves the provision of training on the principles of YE to staff and youth, the funding of youth-

led health promotion projects and activities in the 36 public health units in Ontario, and opportunities for peer networking and learning. The Youth Engagement Principles¹⁰ guiding the initiative are outlined in Table 1.

Funding for the implementation of the YE initiative supports the hiring of Youth Engagement Coordinators in each public health unit to coordinate the development of YE projects and activities guided by the YE principles.

OUR EVALUATION STUDY

The Ontario Tobacco Research Unit (OTRU) is working with the MHPS, Tobacco Control Area Networks (TCANs), public health units (PHUs) and youth representatives to conduct an evaluation of the Ministry's YE initiative. As part of the evaluation, we will describe how the YE initiative is unfolding and what activities are being planned and implemented within the 36 public health units. We are exploring facilitators, challenges and mechanisms related to successful youth engagement projects and activities to inform their further development and refinement. We are also exploring key initiative ingredients and examining the impact of projects and activities at individual and community-levels.

Launching the Evaluation at the Youth Engagement Training Conference

In January 2011, the Youth Advocacy Training Institute (YATI) hosted a Youth Engagement Training Conference to provide education on youth engagement and advocacy to Youth Engagement Coordinators and other PHU staff in Ontario, as well as other key stakeholders. OTRU, with the help of YATI staff, conducted breakout sessions with conference participants to gather information about the status of YE project planning in Ontario PHUs and to help inform the development of the evaluation design for the youth engagement initiative. Questions focused upon the perceived goals and objectives of the youth engagement initiative and those factors most important to their achievement. Other topic areas included potential barriers to implementation, anticipated short-term and long-term effects for youth, and how OTRU can best support PHU evaluation needs. Key themes that emerged from the breakout sessions are described next.

Table 1: Youth Engagement Principles

Youth Engagement Principles*
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Inclusiveness ■ Positive youth development ■ Accountability ■ Operational practices ■ Strengths based approach ■ Flexibility and innovation ■ Space for youth ■ Sustainability of resources ■ Cross-sector alignment ■ Collaboration

*The YE principles were developed by the Youth Engagement Advisory Group for the Ministry of Health Promotion and Sport (MHPS, 2010).¹⁰

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Key Themes Identified in Breakout Sessions at the Youth Engagement Training Conference

1. Evaluation Foci

- Participants were interested in evaluation, but there was concern over whether the youth engagement initiative was at too early a stage to begin evaluation.
- Developing standardized tools to measure change, reporting mechanisms and conducting a formative evaluation were the most commonly cited ways in which OTRU could help support PHUs.

2. Capacity

- Capacity building (within the PHU and in the community) was identified as a key goal/objective of the YE initiative.
- Capacity to roll-out the YE projects and activities under the initiative currently varies across PHUs. Participants felt that capturing the different capacities of PHUs to implement the YE initiative scopes of service as well as the process of roll-out from the Ministry to PHUs should be part of any evaluation.

3. Funding and Internal Buy-in

- Internal buy-in from management and staff from other programs within the PHU was considered vital for success of the YE initiative.
- Identifying outside resources (financial, in-kind) for YE and

sharing resources (documents, ideas, etc.) between PHUs was a goal for some.

- Lack of funding was considered a barrier to implementing the YE initiative at early stages.

4. Recruitment and Retention

- Participants wanted the evaluation to support learning about who are the youth engaged, successful/ unsuccessful recruitment and retention strategies, and understanding whether an unpaid model of youth engagement works.

5. YE Principles and Scopes of Practice

- Participants were enthusiastic about receiving the YE principles from the Ministry to guide their work.
- Adherence to the youth engagement principles was considered important for success and participants wondered how they could evaluate adherence.
- Some participants felt there was a lack of clarity associated with the principles and would like more alignment between YE goals, objectives, principles and outcomes.

We considered the themes that emerged from the breakout sessions with YE staff and stakeholders at the training conference in the design of our evaluation of the YE initiative.

METHODS

Approach

We are using a cluster evaluation approach in the YE initiative evaluation. This approach includes the evaluation of a cluster of programs or projects that are part of a larger, multi-site initiative.¹¹ In this case, each PHU will be considered as a site that may be implementing a cluster of various YE projects and/or activities.

The evaluation study will consider contextual factors, such as location of the site or quality of organizational relationships, which may influence initiative workings. A mixed (qualitative and quantitative) methods approach is being used to examine how the YE initiative unfolds in PHUs and what is working well. YE staff, youth and other initiative stakeholders are involved in an evaluation advisory group that provides expertise on youth engagement, helps in refining study design and in interpreting study findings, and assists in dissemination of study results.



Components of the Evaluation Study

Evaluation Activities at the Local Level

Case Studies

Case studies of selected PHUs will explore facilitators and challenges of the YE initiative in local contexts and will assess preliminary impacts of initiative involvement on youth and their communities. A series of surveys, in-depth interviews and/or focus groups with PHU managers, YE initiative staff and youth will be conducted, as will observations of YE activities.

Support to Public Health Units or Tobacco Control Area Networks

OTRU is providing expertise on evaluation design and assistance with the development of measures and tools that PHUs can use to assess impacts of the initiative in their local settings. While local YE projects vary in design and context, they have similar common goals and adhere to an agreed set of principles. OTRU will guide local project level evaluation and provide common tools and measures to allow for comparison and cross-learning. Communications and occasional meetings will be held with local level personnel to share knowledge

about evaluation approaches and emerging evaluation findings.

Province-wide Formative Evaluation of the YE Initiative

Results of local level project evaluations will be synthesized to help broader learning about which types of YE projects and which specific mechanisms are having greater effect on engaged youth and on communities. Knowledge gained through the case studies and through the provision of evaluation design support to PHUs will help to describe how the YE projects have been implemented and begin to identify factors related to how well they are working.

We are conducting a series of in-depth interviews with various YE stakeholders, including YE Coordinators, Youth Development Specialists, PHU Managers, Ministry staff, youth and community stakeholders. In these interviews, we explore facilitators and challenges to developing and implementing YE projects in the PHUs. These interviews also explore how contextual factors might influence the development and implementation of the YE projects across the province.

We are looking forward to sharing some preliminary results on what is working well in the YE initiative in future newsletters.

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