

JANUARY 2022

YESS NEWSLETTER

MESSAGE FROM MARGO



Happy New Year everyone!

This January, YESS is bundled up tight in our buildings as we rest and recharge from the holidays and from all of the incredible work done to keep youth safe and healthy through this pandemic.

This month's theme is **community** as we reflect on some of our community spotlights from last year and amplify

our friends and partners doing incredible work. In this issue you will hear about Edmonton's Emergency Winter Response from Homeward

Trust, The Alberta Black Therapists Network as highlighted by Executive Director, Noreen Sibanda, the incredible healing and self-esteem work done at iHuman Youth Society through their artistic programming as told by Artistic Director, Steve Pirot, and about the incredible work at SACE in last years interview with Meital Siva-Jain.

Through all of the difficulties and trials we have experienced, it is **community** that keeps us hopeful and supported.

Thank you from all of us.
Margo

KEEPING OUR NEIGHBOURS SAFE DURING EXTREME WEATHER

By Jasmine Salazar, Communications and Media Coordinator, Homeward Trust Edmonton

The original version of this article was published in our November 2020 newsletter. Information has been updated to reflect the current Sector Emergency Response, as of January 2022.

Homeward Trust Edmonton is a not-for-profit organization committed to ending homelessness in our city. They lead local efforts that address homelessness and its devastating impacts on individuals, families, and neighbourhoods. It is their belief that everyone has the right to a home, and that our communities are stronger, safer, and more vibrant when homelessness is addressed instead of ignored.



When temperatures drop, most Edmontonians can keep warm inside their homes. But where do you go when you don't have a home? For those experiencing homelessness this is a frightening reality that can be dangerous without contingency plans in place.

Every winter, members of Edmonton's homeless-serving sector—comprised of Homeward Trust, the City of Edmonton, and more than 25 system partners and agencies—coordinate an emergency response to reduce the risk for people experiencing homelessness by getting them into a safe space as quickly and as easily as possible. The current public health crisis has exacerbated the risk for people experiencing homelessness, highlighting a need for an emergency

response that goes beyond extreme weather to address unforeseeable challenges.

This coordinated response has resulted in a shift in focus to a broader **Sector Emergency Response (SER)** to reflect the year-round need to ensure networks are in place and active in order to support individuals when shelters are at capacity and the weather takes a turn for the worst.

"We know people experiencing homelessness are already at increased risk. The compounding effects of extreme cold weather and COVID-19 exposure and restrictions only adds to those dangers," explains Matthew Ward of Homeward Trust. "Our Sector Emergency Response, which builds off existing control measures to keep

the COVID-19 virus from spreading, are important steps to help people experiencing homelessness stay safe."

A collaborative and proactive problem-solving approach is taken to address arising challenges, which involves partners working together in sharing timely data and resource information between shelter providers, emergency services, transportation services and other service providers across the city to deliver supports to those who need it.

Triggers that activate the Sector Emergency Response in winter are temperatures of -20 or below (including windchill). The response would typically involve lifting bans at shelters under the discretion of providers, opening

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overflow spaces, increasing current shelter capacity where possible, and providing supplementary transportation services. Edmonton Transit Services has also operated additional buses to serve as a warming space and transport people to shelters.

And in the summer, extreme heat or poor air quality are conditions that could activate a

Sector Emergency Response. The response looks at weather warnings from Environment Canada, existing capacity of the city's emergency shelters, and other emerging concerns expressed by the group.

While the best solution to homelessness is permanent housing, the Sector Emergency Response ensures that people experiencing

homelessness have access to life-saving services in times of immediate crisis and are protected from the risks of COVID-19 and cold weather.

For a current list of shelters available and/or latest updates on the Sector Emergency Response, visit: <http://homewardtrust.ca/sector-emergency-response/>

BREAKING BARRIERS IN MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

This article was originally published in our February 2021 newsletter, themed around "empathy and understanding."

In January 2021, **Africa Centre** and **The Alberta Black Therapists Network** launched their new counselling program! This program not only provides free counselling services, but is also part of breaking down barriers and stigma that still surround accessing mental health supports.

We talked to Noreen Sibanda, Executive Director of The Alberta Black Therapists Network, about this new program and its impact on the community.



Tell us about the new counselling program in collaboration with The Africa Centre.

The clinic is funded by the United Way and a collaboration between Africa Centre and The Alberta Black Therapists Network (ABTN). We are proud to offer free counselling support to the African descent community through licensed therapists who have a cultural understanding and offer trauma and healing centered approaches. Our services provide formal, 50-minute, one-to-one counselling sessions in the form of short-term intervention, utilizing solution-focused therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy. The services are available over a secure video platform and can be accessed as an individual, group, or couple. We also had secured a donation from Ikea to furnish an office space that we look forward to utilizing when restrictions are lifted.



*Noreen Sibanda /
Photo courtesy of Noreen Sibanda*

Why is now an important time for this resource to be available?

We have seen a rise in the need for mental health resources because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and now more than ever people need professional support. Unfortunately,

despite this desperate need, the barriers to accessing support (cost, long waiting times, stigma), still exist. This service allows people who are struggling with their mental health to connect and not have to worry about costs, as most people cannot afford to access therapeutic support. It allows our community to access services from the organizations that they already know, at no cost and from individuals that share similar lived experiences.

What is something you wish the community knew about youth mental health?

I believe mental health needs to be a part of our overall wellness. Supports services need to include healing, otherwise we are merely treating the symptoms which leads to an overuse of services.

COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT: IHUMAN YOUTH SOCIETY

This article was originally published in our March 2021 newsletter, themed around "art."

iHuman Youth Society is a non-profit that believes all young people have gifts to share. In partnership with marginalized young people, they amplify their creative expression, address their needs, and support goals that privilege their voices. They support youth impacted by the negative outcomes associated with poverty, intergenerational trauma, addiction, mental health, abuse, racism, discrimination, and exploitation. Over 500 youth between 12-24 years of age access iHuman every year, 80% of whom self-identify as Indigenous. While iHuman provides free access to their services and

programs, they are not a drop-in centre—youth actively engage in determining their individualized journey through iHuman's resources and guide how they can be supported.

We talked to Steve Pirot, Artistic Director of iHuman Studios, about their mission to invite young artists to use acts of expression to transform their experiences of trauma into experiences of self-worth, purpose, identity, and belonging.

Tell us a bit about yourself and your work with iHuman.

My name is Steve Pirot and my job title is

Artistic Director of iHuman Studios; prior to working here I was an actor, writer, director, and producer of theatre and festivals. My function at iHuman is to provide direction and oversight to our studio system. I work for a large collective of artists who happen to be between the ages of 12 and 24. My job is to organize schedules, budgets, materials, staff, volunteers, spaces, and shows so that members of that collective have opportunities to express themselves. Sometimes that opportunity for expression will be personal, quiet, private; sometimes that opportunity will be public and effusive. Sometimes my job is to ensure a studio has a gentle vibe for an artist to work undisturbed,

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and sometimes my job is to bark into a microphone as iHuman's hype-man.

In coming to iHuman from a mainstream artistic practice, I have had to recalibrate. My definition of art used to be informed by the idea that art was a commodity to be consumed; in that paradigm the idea of The Artist was necessarily elitist, because there needed to be an audience (the majority) that would consume the work created by the artist (the minority). In my practice at iHuman I have transformed to a perspective that art is not a product, but rather it is a process of expression. If you have the capacity to express, then you are an artist, and therefore all people are artists because it does not matter if your artistry is public, or even if it is ever viewed by another person.



iHuman studio space / Photo courtesy of iHuman

Why is art/creativity an important experience for youth to cultivate and have access to?

The essence of art is expression, and it is important for ALL people regardless of age to have the ability to express themselves. Cultivating the tools and habits of self-expression is essential for scores of reasons: to be sound in one's mind, to build solid relationships, to foster a balanced society. It is especially important to cultivate these habits when younger because the skills one learns through the process of producing beats, or organizing chords, or composing a

photograph, or beading earrings, or sewing a ribbon skirt... these are all transferable skills. In essence we are talking about pattern recognition, project planning and execution, communication. At iHuman we don't look at art as being a product, but rather it is a tool to promote other outcomes.

What is something you wish the community knew about youth who are healing from trauma?

I wish that the community at large was better informed about our brains actually function. How do our brains behave when hijacked by the amygdala? Can we identify the symptoms

of an individual in shock? How is an individual in the grip of a flight/fight response able to interact with the world? If the general public were better informed about how human brains work, then we could have a better foundation to have meaningful conversations about more complex issues like multi-generational trauma, addictions, etc.



COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT: SEXUAL ASSAULT CENTRE OF EDMONTON

This article was originally published in our May 2021 newsletter, themed around "safety."

This month we want highlight the work being done at the **Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton (SACE)**. May is Sexual Violence Awareness Month in Alberta, and May 5 the National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

We talked to Meital Siva-Jain, Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Initiatives Team Lead at SACE. Meital shares the programs and resources SACE offers as well as the impact she sees their work having on the community, from youth to older generations.



Tell us about your organization and your role.

The Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton's mandate is to support people impacted by sexual violence and to change the attitudes and values that lead to sexual violence. We offer counselling services to ages 3 and up, support and information lines, police and court support, public education, and community and institutional support. We offer these services to all genders and backgrounds at no fee. We also have a Diversity and Inclusion program that works to ensure our services are accessible to anyone that might need to access them.



Meital Siva-Jain / Photo courtesy of Meital Siva-Jain

I joined SACE in 2014 and have been leading the Diversity and Inclusion program since

then. Under this role I focus on building relationships with other organizations and community members to address barriers to services. This role has allowed me to learn from community members about how systemic barriers impact their access to support. I also learned that addressing those barriers is often the support that folks need to do their own healing.

One way to address barriers is to offer tailored content and services. Last summer, a group of SACE staff started creating a resource for newcomers in Canada that provides information on consent and healthy relationship in accessible and inclusive language. This work included many

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community consultations with partner organizations, and it resulted in the creation of **Landed**. We are very happy to see how well Landed has been received by the community.

Is there anything new or innovative your organization is currently promoting or focusing on?

We're excited to soon be offering the WiseGuyz program to our community; **WiseGuyz** is a school-based program for grade nine boys that addresses the issues young men face and gives participants tools to engage in healthy relationships.

We're also now offering training for professionals and care providers working with older adult populations. The trainings seek to provide those in the elder care sector with the skills and knowledge necessary to be able to recognize sexual violence in their places of work and supportively respond to older adults who have been recently or historically impacted by this issue. We'll be releasing a one-pager handout and learn article that summarizes key information from the presentation and that service

providers can use as a reference and to promote awareness and competency in their workplace around elder sexual abuse. We hope this information will be a reminder to folks that it is never too late to start healing.

How do you see your organization's impact on the community?

I see our impact in twofold: the impact on survivors of sexual violence and their families, and on the community at large. In terms of survivors, it is important for people of all genders and backgrounds to know they can be heard and accepted. As a survivor, I remember that just the mere existence of a sexual assault centre made me feel acknowledged. So I think that the first impact of SACE is that survivors know there is a place dedicated to support them. Being believed and accepted helps with healing and ultimately contributes to a healthier community.

The second part of our impact is in the community level. Like others in the anti-violence sector, we work hard to promote consent and show that violent behaviours are linked to specific attitudes and values. Our

approach is centred on non-victim blaming education, and we use an anti-oppressive lens when working with communities. I am an optimist and see a positive shift in how the public understands sexual violence and addresses it.

What is one thing you wish the community knew about the realities that youth currently face when it comes to sexual health and safety?

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, youth are more dependent on social media to connect with their peers. Many of us did not grow with social media and we need to remember that beside social connection it can also offer great resources and support for kids. For example, I hear from my daughter how youth use social media to promote inclusiveness and "cancel" people who use offending behaviours. It is our responsibility to teach kids about sexual health and healthy behaviours, and to provide them with this toolbox to better navigate the digital world. But we also need to trust them when they use it and not blame them if they experience any kind of violence.



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