

FEBRUARY 2023

YESS
youth empowerment & support services



YESS NEWSLETTER

MESSAGE FROM MARGO

Hello, everyone, and happy February! The theme of this month's newsletter is connection—one of the most important modes of working with youth in crisis. We connect with each other through relationship. Modelling secure, healthy relationships is one of the key roles of youth workers at YESS. Young people come to get help at YESS and our other youth agency partners across the city because they have had relationship breakdowns in family and/or community. They have often been hurt in relationship and this has affected their ability to trust people and know how to have healthy relationships. The first thing we do at YESS is try to connect with a youth. We

try to understand them, try to build a little trust through creating a safe space, and begin building a small, tenuous relationship that we hope will result in more engagement and trust as they build their emotional resilience and toolset. In this edition we have an interview with YESS youth worker, Clara, on the importance of connection, we spotlight our partnership with the African Civic Engagement Council (ACCEC), and we say thank you to our long-time partners, Alberta Milk.

With gratitude,

Margo



Based in Edmonton, Youth Empowerment and Support Services (YESS) provides immediate and low-barrier 24/7 shelter, a drop-in resource centre, temporary supportive housing, and individualized wrap-around supports for young people aged 15–24.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONNECTION AT YESS

An Interview with Youth Worker, Clara Lee

Tell us about yourself and your position at YESS!

Hi! My name is Clara and I am a full-time youth worker at the Nexus shelter at YESS. I work to meet youth where they are at and support them in their goals and needs.

Our mission is to walk beside youth on their journeys towards healing and appropriate community integration. How is supporting youth to build positive connections part of the that mission?

By supporting our youth in making positive connections, we provide them with the resources and supports they need to achieve their goals. We at Nexus provide the youth with shelter, food, and clothing so they don't have to worry about their basic needs while they are navigating their way out of houselessness. We support our youth, whatever their goals may be, whether it be family reunification, finding independent housing, or supportive housing. We collaborate with many great resources in the community to provide the support our youth need and help connect them with these positive supports to empower them in their journeys.

How does YESS staff build positive connections with youth? Why is it important that our staff team represent the diversity of the community we serve?

At Nexus, we build positive connections with our youth through sharing meals together, colouring, or listening to music together. We really try to assess what our youth need and provide that for them. For example, if a youth needs some time alone to regulate their emotions, we can provide them with some space and offer them craft supplies or colouring books. We also build connections with our youth through getting to know their stories and supporting them. At times, it can be difficult to relate to what our youth are going through, but we use empathy and trauma-informed care to help them. By having a team that represents the diversity of the community we serve, we are able to better connect with our youth and understand the challenges and barriers they face.



What is one thing you wish the community knew about youth who access YESS?

One thing I wish the community knew about our youth at Nexus is how resilient they are. I often see the youth meet many barriers and challenges, yet they stay positive and seek other ways to achieve what they want. They often get turned away from opportunities, but they don't let that bring them down—they come back and ask for more referrals and resources that can help them in their journey out of houselessness. Working with these youth has taught me so much and I am so excited for what they will achieve! ■

SPOTLIGHT ON THE AFRICAN CANADIAN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT COUNCIL

February is Black History Month! Here at YESS, we support a community of youth as diverse as the wider community. We have collaborated with the African Canadian Civic Engagement Council (ACCEC) in previous programs and continue to engage with their work.

ACCEC is a Black-led, Black-founded registered NGO that promotes and strengthens opportunities for African, Caribbean, Black, and Racialized Communities. The African Canadian Civic Engagement Council's (ACCEC) mandate is to protect and promote all people of African descent's dignity and human rights while celebrating our people's significant contributions to society and worldwide.

ACCEC is based in Edmonton, but works nationally, and is an innovative program in the Alberta landscape.

We worked with ACCEC within our Cohort Transitional Residence Pilot Project in 2021–2022. This pilot program came specifically from the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic that made it difficult for youth to build positive connections. The program used "family-like" cohorts of 3-5 youth to bolster safe and meaningful peer interactions that created "bubbles" that meant youth were safe to not wear masks and to minimize social distancing within their cohorts in the program.

This highly autonomous program saw changes in the trajectory of many youth who had previously been termed "difficult to house" or who had been trapped in homelessness by a myriad of barriers. This "Bridge Housing" style program had the same core purpose of giving individuals experiencing homelessness a safer space to exist in, given the health risks associated with crowded shelters during a global pandemic. The primary objective of Bridge Housing programs is to provide a safe place to live while waiting for a permanent housing to come through, with a target goal of 6-month maximum stay. We used this base and broadened our approach to include the social, emotional, and psychological development impacts that the pandemic was having on youth in particular, as the work that all youth do in their adolescence in these areas was being stunted by isolation and missed opportunities.

Around this same time, ACCEC was developing their own stabilization program. The African, Caribbean & Black Stabilization Program (ACB Program) was initially funded by the province and started out as a COVID response model that recognized the importance of belonging, connection, promoting meaningful relationships, and working with youth families and natural supports.

This program found a home with its own cohort of four beds at the Cohort Transitional Residence Pilot Project. Focused on building connections, healing from trauma, and empowering youth to achieve their goals, this collaboration between ACCEC and YESS was a natural fit. ACCEC's Afrocentric model to create a therapeutic environment is based on the African traditions of *sanofka* (the belief that people must return to their roots to move forward, from the Akan language in Ghana) and *ubuntu* ("I am because you are," a philosophy from South Africa).

"It's rooted in relationship. It's rooted in community. It's rooted in healing. It's rooted in accountability — so that's what helps a lot of these youth heal," said Dunia Nur, president of ACCEC, in an interview with CBC in 2021.

By collaborating, both ACCEC and YESS were able to benefit from a specific Afrocentric perspective and the diverse staff that were available to youth.

"You start to see this amazing community collaboration of staff and youth from so many different walks of life being like, 'Hey, we can be safe and vulnerable here,'" Alice Mwemera, who was then the supervisor of the Cohort Program and is now involved in program research and development at YESS, told CBC in an interview. "So instead, I can get to know you as a person and you can get to know me. How cool is that?" ■



Learn more about the African Canadian Civic Engagement Council on their website at [accec.ca](https://www.accec.ca)

Read the CBC article "Rooted in healing: New housing facility gives marginalized Black youth a place to rebuild" by Andrea Huncar [here](#).



FEBRUARY IS BLACK HISTORY MONTH!

On our social media channels, will be focusing on amplifying the events, teachings, and celebrations of Black History Month from Black voices and organizations in our community.

Check out @yessorg to find new organizations to follow and new learnings from incredible activists!

THANK YOU TO ALBERTA MILK!

We are so grateful to our longtime partners at Alberta Milk, who once again sponsored the purchased of milk and milk products to stock our kitchens this past year.

Being able to provide healthy and nutritious food for our youth not only fulfills a basic need, it also helps build trust and develop a sense of safety youth feel in our programs.

Did you know that Alberta Milk has tons of recipes on their website, from breakfast to dinner and everything in between! We loved the look of this spectacular tie-dye fudge—check out the recipe at albertamilk.com ■



Photo courtesy of albertamilk.com



Illustrations by Jonathan Busch

