

# NEWCOMER YOUTH RECREATION FORUM



**REPORT BACK  
SEPTEMBER 2017**



# ABOUT THE NEWCOMER YOUTH RECREATION FORUM

Despite the many benefits of recreation in health and in settlement, newcomer youth have much lower participation rates compared to their peers. On Monday, June 12, 2017, more than 120 young people, service providers, volunteers, and elected officials gathered at Toronto City Hall to explore ways to improve access to recreation for newcomer youth. Below is a summary of the afternoon and themes that emerged.

The day started with a chance for participants to engage in drop-in activities, like sports skill trials, and breakdancing, and informal networking. A formal welcome was made by Councillor Pasternak, Chair of the Community Development and Recreation Committee, and Councillor Karygiannis, one of Toronto's Newcomer Advocates. This was followed by panel presentations, summarized below, and breakout sessions in which every participant had the opportunity to share their experiences through participation in a single session.

There was a focus on genuine youth engagement, with youth from all backgrounds embedded throughout these conversations. Diversity and intersectionality were brought up by participants and presenters as essential principles for any work with newcomer youth, from conducting outreach to developing

program evaluations. Youth continuously described the multiple, intersecting identities that newcomer youth possess, as youth, as immigrants, as members of particular cultures, and young men and young women with varying abilities. They talked frequently about how this affects their experiences of power and oppression, and shapes how and where they can be engaged and be connected to recreation. This concept should inform all work with newcomer youth and be the starting point for genuine youth engagement.



## SUMMARY OF PANEL PRESENTATIONS

### Hsain Al-Shihabi, Canadian Mental Health Association Toronto

Al-Shihabi spoke about his experience coming to Canada from Syria at the age of 14. Now working as a Case Manager focused on supporting newcomer youth, he shared several practices, drawn from his work and his experience as a refugee that he always tries to keep front and centre in his work: 1) programs are responsive to the needs of the population he is working with, 2) young people see themselves reflected in the program staff, 3) co-create programs alongside the youth, 4) ensure programs aren't too structured or rigid.



### Chinue Bute, Rosa Solorzano, & Maria Alejandra Ramirez, FCJ Youth Network

Bute, Solorzano and Ramirez presented the From Youth to You Toolkit and highlighted what real youth engagement looks like. They emphasized the importance of the relationship staff have with the young people, saying they must work together like a community. More so, the youth should be active participants in designing the program and making decisions.



## Laura Aversa, Katrina Miller, CUPE Local 79

Aversa and Miller shared findings from a survey and two focus groups with City of Toronto recreation workers (instructors, youth recreation programmers, community recreation programmers, and youth outreach workers). The survey findings identified some key barriers they faced when servicing newcomer youth, including lack of programs that reflect the culture and interest of newcomer youth; language barriers; budget and space constraints; and inaccessible registration processes. Some challenges of outreaching to newcomer youth were outlined, including the need for partnerships, resources, planning and training. Engaging Youth as councillors and in other forms of youth leadership are essential to success.



## Sharma Queiser, Social Planning Toronto

Queiser presented findings from Social Planning Toronto's research project on newcomer youth access to recreation in Toronto. She highlighted the contrast between young people's desired recreational activities and the ones they most often engage in. Barriers such as high fees and related costs, insufficient program funding and inaccessible information were mentioned. The important role of seeing themselves reflected in the staff, the need for relevant and responsive programs, and more appropriate outreach methods were discussed as some of the ways to attract more newcomer youth to recreation programs.



## BREAKOUT GROUPS

Much of the afternoon was spent in breakout groups on Program Development and Space, Outreach and Engagement, and Evaluation and Funding, which were led by youth and by service providers jointly. The breakout groups each explored specific areas relating to recreation programming for newcomer youth, but shared many similar conclusions.

## KEY FINDINGS FROM THE FORUM

### Guiding Principles:

- Authentic and ongoing youth engagement
- Respecting intersectionality by valuing young people's multiple identities

Authentic and ongoing youth engagement is critical. Newcomer youth tell us (if we didn't already know) that it shows when programs are planned without youth input, and it affects participation. Newcomer youth need not only to be considered in the planning but be present and empowered in the development and delivery of services. If we want youth to be engaged, we must encourage their active roles in planning and design, as one youth said, "if I see myself reflected I am paying attention".

Intersectionality describes the multiple, overlapping identities that newcomer youth possess and how this affects their experiences in programs and with engagement efforts. Intersectionality is one of the complexities of this work that makes newcomer participation in planning and design so important. It's hard for anyone to grasp all the intersecting considerations, unless they have first-hand experience. This concept should inform all work with newcomer youth and be the starting point for genuine youth engagement.

Attending to these guiding principles helps frame a process for developing newcomer youth recreation programs that uses the following approaches.



## 1. Program Development

It is essential that the development of programs for newcomer youth is centered around an ongoing process of engagement. Youth need to be engaged in all aspects of the program but especially in designing and leading the program. More than just seeking youth input, programs should provide opportunities and support for young people to take ownership over the program, making key decisions. Having young, diverse, animated staff who the youth can identify with assists in this process. When young people feel engaged and witness the implementation of their contributions, their participation is retained and they enjoy the many benefits of recreation.

This approach helps to ensure that the diversity of the young people is reflected and respected in the space and the program. We heard repeatedly that newcomer youth are not a homogeneous population; there are more dimensions to their identity than just being new to Canada. It is essential that programs consider this in their operations. One aspect of this should include co-creating an environment which celebrates diversity and fosters respect. This sets the stage for a safer environment for both service providers and service users in which everyone can feel comfortable to be themselves.

Finally, budgets need to prioritize things that attract newcomer youth, including music, transit fare and culturally appropriate food. Likewise,

fees and other related costs are barriers that can prevent youth from attending the program. These are important considerations that should be deliberately included in the planning stage.

## 2. Accessible and Safer Spaces

Strongly related to program design, spaces should strive to be accessible and safer. Valuing respect and diversity, the space should be a place where young people can be themselves without fear of judgment or harm. Having a process for preventing and managing conflicts can support this goal.

Youth input and contributions should also be reflected in the physical space. This includes decorating with posters and youth artwork, having comfortable chairs and bright lighting, and playing music. When young people can express themselves in the physical design of the space, they feel more comfortable and appreciated as a contributing member of the space.



### 3. Outreach and Engagement

Outreach and engagement is directly tied to programs and spaces - you need inviting programs to engage and retain participants. Leveraging the places and partners youth are already connected to (i.e. settlement agencies, schools, individuals, etc.) was an effective strategy highlighted at the forum. In addition, programs should strive to build trusting relationships with newcomer families to connect with the young people. Often young people attend a program because it was recommended by credible source.

Like program design, young people should see themselves reflected in the outreach staff and tools. This includes using appropriate and multiple strategies. Outreach methods should be tailored to the needs and preferences of the diverse communities being served and, preferably, in the languages of the communities being served. Remember, it takes time and dedication to build trust.



### 4. Evaluation for Program Development and Funding

Evaluation serves two important purposes in recreation programs: to document impact and to improve program design. However, no matter the purpose of evaluation, some common principles can be followed.

Evaluation should be a collaborative process that involves stakeholders at every aspect from designing the tools, to recruiting the participants, to interpreting the feedback. To increase accessibility, and reliability, and credibility of results, multiple methods should be used and multiple stakeholder groups should be consulted. For example, conducting both focus groups and surveys with youth attending the program as well as their parents would result in more accurate and comprehensive results. The tools utilized should also respond to the participants. For young people, engaging, participatory tools will result in increased participation.

Lastly, evaluation should never be something that only happens once. It should be conducted in cycles in which feedback is used to improve program and participants can directly see the value of their input.



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The principle learning from the forum is that we need to create processes to help all recreation service providers move to a more inclusive, engaged, co-designed approach to service. This will involve engaging newcomer youth in an ongoing way in program design and ensuring that the results are implemented, rather than asking providers to redesign programs, in isolation, to attract newcomer youth. Young people need to participate and have a sense of ownership over the program design process and feel that their participation is having a meaningful contribution.

The recreation sector in Toronto would benefit from a joint and collaborative effort to engage newcomer youth in the design and implementation of more inclusive services. The City of Toronto's Parks, Forestry and Recreation division and their partners, including Social Planning Toronto can be valuable collaborators in that process and should be jointly engaged in designing a review and the development and implementation of strategies to address existing gaps in service. Through coordinated and collaborative efforts, the sector can assess the barriers and identify the changes necessary to maximize impact for newcomer youth populations.



# ORGANIZATIONS IN ATTENDANCE

Akin Collective

North York Community House

Arab Community Centre of Toronto

OFA (Opportunity For Advancement)

Basketball Ontario

Ontario Basketball

Canadian Mental Health Association of Toronto

Open Sports

Catholic Crosscultural Services

Polycultural Immigrant and Community Services

City of Toronto

Right to Play

CultureLink

SHIP (Supportive Housing in Peel)

CUPE Local 79

Social Legacy Event Group

East Metro Youth Services

Sony Centre for the Performing Arts

Eva's

SPACE Coalition

FCJ Refugee Centre

St. Stephen's Community House

Flemingdon Health Centre

Supporting Our Youth - Sherbourne Health Centre

For Youth Initiative

The 519

Gallery 44

The Hincks-Dellcrest Centre

Hospital for Sick Children

Thornccliffe Neighbourhood Office

JAYU

Toronto Community Housing

Maximum City

Toronto District School Board - Priority Schools Initiative

MLSE Launchpad

Toronto Public Library

Middle Childhood Matters Coalition Toronto

Toronto Sports Council

North York Arts



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