

## Engaging Marginalized Youth: Harnessing experiences from the inREACH Project Friday April 11, 2014

When the Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council dedicated a [Friends of Crime Prevention](#) meeting to host a community conversation on 'What Now-Post-inREACH', we didn't really know what to expect. In fact, we were actually overwhelmed and quite surprised by the community response.

But really, we shouldn't be. Our community is known for stepping up, rising to the challenge and sticking by a good idea when warranted and exploring innovative options for action to keep making our community a better place.



We didn't have a preconceived idea of what would come from bringing together a diverse cross section of our community – we simply wanted to open the gathering space for constructive discussion, bring people together, provide [material to stimulate your reflection](#) and see what wisdom, ideas, action, leadership and direction emerged.

Judging by your participation, it is clear that our community recognizes the important work done with the inREACH program and the innovative approaches it explored; approaches by which the program experienced some obvious successes in reaching and engaging some of our most marginalized youth in Waterloo Region. The loss of inREACH has left a gap in supports for marginalized youth and it is also clear that you are not willing to let this gap widen.

### **You do think BIG...ger! Thank you!**

On Friday April 11, 2014, over 100 people gathered at Knox Presbyterian Church in Waterloo to take what we've learned from the inREACH project and turn it into further action for engaging marginalized youth in Waterloo Region. Attendance was diverse – from the grassroots to the highest levels of decision making, and everything in between.



- On Time
- On Track
- Onward  
from here

At the event, we committed to 3 things – to stick to our time, to keep the discussion and focus on track and to help determine next steps in moving forward by reporting back with a summary of the ideas and discussion. We accomplished the first two on April 11<sup>th</sup>, and here we are, accomplishing the third commitment!

### **The hard work of your participation led to:**

- identification of several key principles and best practices for marginalized youth engagement
  - identification of several possible community actions for applying this knowledge in practical terms, for which our community has the ‘skill & will’ to achieve
  - foundations of a Youth Charter to guide those providing services to youth and to inform those accessing those services
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## **Key Principles and Best Practices**

This summary contains the 12 principles you identified as being the key learning from inREACH and which were felt, if pursued, would lead to better engagement and support for marginalized youth. Several of the principles were identified and highlighted by the inREACH evaluation team (Mark Pancer & Dianne Heise).

### **1. Bring both the funds and the funders into the community!**

- Funders and evaluators are usually outsiders. Bring them in: educate and inform them about the community. Engage and collaborate with them to ensure the framing of the issue fits with the community reality.

### **2. Be patient!**

- Marginalized youth are often the victims of years of trauma. This trauma cannot be ‘resolved’ in 12 weeks.
- Be patient with the process and take the time youth need.

### **3. Keep your eye on the ball!**

- Keep your focus on whom you are doing this for
- This can be challenging to navigate with funders. Good communication and building relationships with funders are key.

### **4. Believe in change!**

- Hope is the most powerful driver in human behaviour.
- Foster this hope in youth and believe in them. This will create change.

## **5. You can't do it alone!**

- Partnerships and collaboration are necessary for success, and intentional, equal collaboration is key. Map out community partners and understand everyone's perspective of collaboration and of the power dynamics.
- Projects are temporary. Sustainable action comes from community-led changes to the system.

## **6. Get to know youth!**

- Relationships are key to success and they take time to build. This should be reflected in job descriptions, job training, and organizational culture.
- Organizations must reduce barriers to building those relationships. Give rides; take the time to be present. It's not just about the 1-on-1: the whole organization has a role to play.

## **7. Recognize youth skills and strengths!**

- Marginalized youth have skills and strengths. Recognize and celebrate them, and foster their development.

## **8. Involve youth meaningfully!**

- Youth need to be listened to and involved in decision-making for two reasons: for building trusting relationships; and because you can't change someone's behaviour unless *they* want to.
- Key strategies include establishing a youth advisory council in an organization, giving youth ownership of their ideas (while the organization mentors and coaches), and taking a 'Yes, and...' approach to those ideas.

## **9. Balance "best practices" with local wisdom!**

- Identify local players with wisdom and ensure collaborative, transparent, and accountable communication with them.
- Look beyond traditional, external funding to local, more sustainable solutions early on.

## **10. Be welcoming and accessible!**

- Be organic: responsive, reflexive, and dynamic
- Make space for youth to be involved, to lead
- Create a comfortable, welcoming atmosphere

## **11. Don't limit your involvement to projects!**

- Work towards a community transformation. Build community-wide values of inclusion and access.
- Use existing community capacity to provide safe spaces and engage youth between projects.

## **12. Feed the grassroots!**

- Grassroots groups have important strengths: financially efficient, strong personal connections with clients and with the community.
- Partnerships with larger organizations can help grassroots groups overcome their weaknesses and help the larger organizations benefit from these strengths

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In addition, we've provided you with the notes captured from each of the table discussions. For those of us with fuzzy memories, they are listed by topic and the person who facilitated each discussion.

### **1. [Dianne] Educate funders about the how of partnerships and how to recontextualize**

- Bring community stakeholders together in partnership
- Put a face on the issue by collecting and sharing stories (that could be presented to funders)

### **2. [This table joined Table 5]**

### **3. We have the capacity internally – do it!**

- Create a group like inREACH's Prooject Advisory Committee (P.A.C.) so that the community can lead its own marginalized youth engagement strategy using local resources.

### **4. [Felix] Give voice to the idea of hope/love and change (tell the stories)**

- Foster a mindset in those working with youth that is hopeful, that believes in youth, and that strives to help them achieve what they believe they can

### **5. [Ryan & Anthony] We need a continuum of care for youth**

- Create a regional/community template for marginalized youth engagement to move from a projects approach to a systems approach.
- Ensure that systems are bridged (education, justice, community centres, etc.), as this was a key strength of inREACH.

- Build on what is already working – we're further ahead here than many communities are.

**6. [Peter] Agencies to give time to build relationships (in job description)**

- Modify job descriptions and training in agencies to reflect the importance of taking the necessary time to build relationships between the agency and youth and their families.

**7. [Paul] Operationalize the acknowledgement of the strengths, skills and capacities of youth**

- Recognizing that valuing youth, their diverse strengths and capacities in an inclusive way is an important mentality and skill for those working with youth to have, youth-serving organizations should explicitly include this criterion in hiring processes and job training
- This is particularly relevant for the public education system and for youth-serving agencies

**8. [Aaron] Engage Youth in decision making**

- Youth-serving organizations should establish mechanisms for ensuring that their voices are heard and that youth are meaningfully involved in decision-making by, for example, creating youth advisory councils

**9. [Doug] Look beyond traditional funding to multiple funding sources**

- Programs to re-evaluate based on lessons learned from inREACH
- Programs and organizations should redefine youth involvement to include structural roles and youth in leadership

**10. Neighbourhood centres and churches should collaborate to create safe spaces for youth, particularly in high-needs areas**

- This would contribute existing community resources to building youth's sense of inclusion, belonging and acceptance

**11. Large organizations & grassroots groups can work more effectively together (using their unique capacities)**

- Large and grassroots organizations can build trusting, collaborative partnerships
- Youth and diverse populations should be well represented and be made a real part

## **12. [Sue] Build trust *by* action (hearing the youth voices)**

- Youth-serving organizations should articulate a commitment to building the capacity of youth to participate meaningfully, to listening to them and treating them with dignity
- This commitment should entail accountability, perhaps to a youth council

## **13. [Mark] Leverage what we have (community centres + inREACH knowledge)**

- Community centres should embed the lessons learned from inREACH in staff training and education

## **14. [Andrew] Build broader ownership in community**

- To ensure sustainability and avoid dependence on government funders, the marginalized youth engagement strategy must remain based in the community, but the definition of the community should broaden to include partners beyond the ‘usual suspects,’ such as social services
- Alternative funding sources could include social enterprises; youth could be taught skills such as entrepreneurship that would enable them to raise their own funds

## **CHARTER OF YOUTH RIGHTS**

- A youth charter should include:
  - A mandate to treat youth with dignity, to listen to their voices, to give them the liberty to access services on their own terms
  - A commitment to integrating the Charter into policy and practice
  - Accountability to youth, perhaps in the form of a youth council
- It should clarify and communicate information about:
  - Mental health that is relevant to youth, as many issues manifest at this age
  - Their rights and freedoms
  - The places they can go for help and what they can do, themselves
- It should work to:
  - Dispel fears of working with youth and of hearing what they have to say
  - Dispel the myth that youth don’t want to participate
  - Put youth-serving agencies on the same page
- It might be accompanied by a “youth-friendly” designation