



OPERATION COME HOME YEAR 2 REPORT: 2025-2026

This report contains highlights of an independent evaluation conducted by the Students Commission of Canada on the specific results of Operation Come Home's grant, funded by Catapult Canada through the Rideau Hall Foundation. Catapult Canada is a national platform dedicated to increasing equitable access to learning opportunities for youth across Canada. Specifically, Catapult Canada invests in community-based organizations committed to improving educational outcomes for youth through innovative approaches.

**Written by the Students Commission of Canada,
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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Operation Come Home Education Program is designed to support NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth experiencing homelessness in the Ottawa, Ontario area. The initiative specifically targets youth aged 16-19. This project aims to create, refine, and share an innovative approach to high school completion, ensuring that these young individuals can successfully graduate. By partnering with Ontario's largest online school, TVO ILC, the initiative will provide 30 youth with daily wrap-around and technology supports to help them progress towards graduation.

The project is funded until July 2026, during which time Operation Come Home (OCH) aims to develop a scalable model that can be adopted by other organizations. In Year Two (2025-2026), the program continues its implementation and refinement phase, incorporating lessons learned from program delivery in Year One (2024-2025). The program includes essential services such as drop-in meals, clothing support, housing assistance, and employment programs to aid in transitioning youth to stable housing.

A key component of the initiative is the partnership with TVO ILC, which enhances educational opportunities for youth. In the second year, this partnership continues to grow stronger as staff refine and adjust academic supports using what they learned from students' progress in Year One. This collaboration aims to provide social support and help youth achieve academic success alongside other program goals. The initiative also emphasizes knowledge sharing, aiming to disseminate insights and learnings to promote broader implementation of the model. Year Two places a greater emphasis on refining the emerging model and preparing interim learnings for broader sector sharing.

The John Bosco Achievement Centre (JBAC) is an integral part of this initiative, providing a flexible academic setting designed to help youth re-engage in their studies and progress toward high school completion. Its model combines individualized coursework with opportunities for credit bearing employment, allowing participants to work towards their diploma in ways that reflect their strengths and circumstances. In Year Two, JBAC continues to deliver these academic supports while further aligning its learning approach with the wraparound services offered through Operation Come Home, ensuring that education, housing, and employment supports function as a cohesive program for participating youth.

Operation Come Home, located in Ottawa, Ontario, was founded in 1971 by Reverend Norman Johnston. The organization has a long history of supporting homeless and at-risk youth by providing employment, education, housing, and support services. With a food program serving up to 14,000 meals a year and various support services, Operation Come Home continues to be a vital resource for youth in Ottawa, helping them transition to stable housing, employment, and educational success. The organization is committed to fostering personal growth and long-term stability for all participants. During Year Two of the project, Operation Come Home continues to integrate education programming into its broader service model, building on a year of implementation experience.

REPORT METHODOLOGY

In collaboration with the Students Commission of Canada (SCC) through its Sharing the Stories (StS) program, Operation Come Home conducted a multi-year evaluation using focus groups and distributed surveys to explore youth participant experiences and program outcomes. Response rates to surveys distributed in both years remained low resulting in insufficient data to support quantitative analysis; therefore, the evaluation relies primarily on rich qualitative insights from youth.

During Year Two, the evaluation plan was finalized in a consultation with program staff; they noted that a graduation took place in July 2025, with 8 (n=8) youth on track, out of 12 (n=12) youth participants. Although the Catapult grant funding and this evaluation ended in February 2026, youth will continue to be able to access virtual and adult learning opportunities beyond, including TVO/ILC online options and an Ottawa high school offering in-person learning and co-op placements.

To maintain continuity with Year One, the Year Two evaluation used similar methods; youth provided context and depth in the qualitative responses. Youth were compensated and food was provided to support participation. Existing data collection tools were used for current students, with revised versions for alumni to reflect their stages of engagement. Additionally, a combined focus group with alumni and current youth participants was planned, supporting continued tracking and deeper comparison of experiences across both years. The methodology was designed to remain responsive to youth participants needs while capturing the evolving impact of the program over time.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS: FOCUS GROUP/INTERVIEW

The Operation Come Home (OCH) focus group for this year had 6 (n=6) out of 12 (n=12) youth participants providing their experiences and views of the impact of programming so far. The analysis summarizes the key themes that arose during the discussion with supporting quotes, as well as the number of times each theme was mentioned. Youth spoke to different individual outcomes that they experienced because of their involvement in Operation Come Home's initiative. These different outcomes are summarized below.

Reasons for Joining the Program

Youth described a range of pathways into OCH, reflecting how they navigated available resources and opportunities within the community. Their experiences demonstrated that access often emerged through a mix of interpersonal connections, visible outreach efforts, and self-directed searching. Many arrived at OCH during moments of instability or transition, and the organization became a responsive, low-barrier entry point into much needed supports. Collectively, these accounts showed how youth relied on multiple strategies such as social networks, curiosity sparked by visibility, and personal initiative to locate safe, supportive spaces in the community.

Larger Networks (3)

For many participants, involvement with OCH began through relationships with others such as friends, case workers, or staff who bridged them into the space. These social connections played a central role in guiding youth toward resources they may not have found independently. Such relational pathways helped reduce uncertainty and fostered comfort.

"I was introduced to the program a couple years ago from a friend that I met at... I never heard of OCH before, until they brought me here, but been a regular ever since."

"I know the program from my case worker in my shelter. [They were] working there... she stopped and started working here. So, [they] told me about this program."

"I was at [name of program] and I was at the [name of location] when you guys were doing the 24-hour homeless challenge two years ago, and one of the staff named [name of staff]. I asked [them] where it was about, and [they] brought me into the drop in."

Increased Awareness (2)

Youth connected with OCH through passive or public facing information sources. Pamphlets, events, and visibility in community spaces helped increase awareness and prompted youth to explore what OCH had to offer. This demonstrated the effectiveness of outreach strategies in reaching individuals who may not be engaged in formal service systems.

"I just saw a pamphlet for it at the library once, and I was like, 'You know, I need food and there's water... might as well come!'"

"I was at the [name of organizations group] and I was at the [name of event location] when you guys were doing the 24-hour homeless challenge two years ago, and one of the staff named [name of staff]. I asked her what it was about, and [they] brought me into the drop in."

Experiences and Challenges in the Program

Youth described entering the program while navigating instability and limited resources, through access to supports. Supports offered were food, housing, employment, and creative activities. Youth developed practical skills, confidence, and a stronger sense of independence, illustrating how the program helped them move from crisis towards stability and personal growth.

Access to Resources (3)

Youth described how access to resources played a critical role in their safety, stability, and overall well-being. Many sought out supports during periods of crisis, such as unsafe home environments, food insecurity, or unstable housing; and often did so independently, demonstrating problem-solving skills and resourcefulness. Their stories revealed the initiative taken to locate supportive services and the scarcity that made such resources essential. Limited access to food, housing, or safe spaces pushed youth to reach actively for alternatives, making the availability, visibility and accessibility of community programs particularly relevant. For many, discovering these resources whether through shelters, online research, or even a pamphlet, became a turning point in strengthening their stability and connection to supportive communities.

"I was living with an abusive parent at one point and through research that I was doing online for places to get away from them during the afternoons... I learned about this service, and I kind of just popped my head in once or twice, and I kind of fell in love with the community ever since."

"I think I was introduced in a program from either the women's shelter where I used to live, or an ex-boyfriend. I've been accessing their services for a while now, and they helped me get housed."

"Been accessing their services for a while now, and they helped me get housed."

New Skills and Knowledge (9)

Youth consistently described gaining job skills and practical independent living skills through employment services, food supports, clothing access, and smart/media activities. Employment supports appeared to improve job readiness, placement outcomes, and work-related self-regulation signaling both skills acquisition and applied workplace learning. Independent living supports (food bank, clothing) extended learning into everyday survival, budgeting, and resource navigation.

"I honestly can express great gratitude toward the Employment Service in this building, in this organization. They've helped me generously when it comes to finding a job and updating my resume. I've gotten two positions through them now, that lasted a year each, and I feel like if it wasn't for the service, I'd still be the youthful employee that I was, snapping at the minor things."

"I'm going second the appreciation for the Employment Services, because I have the best job the world. I have that thanks to Employment Services. I've never been happier, and I owe that all to them."

"Employment has helped me update my resume, and I recently applied to the library, so I'm hopeful I'll get that job. Foodbank has helped a lot with just helping me save money on my groceries..."

"I don't know if this counts, but I like going and getting the clothes, because I don't really have many clothes or money for clothes. And all my clothes I've ever gotten were hand-me-downs and stuff like that."

In addition to employment, youth described gaming skills through media arts, harm reduction, and community programming, which expanded their knowledge, coping strategies, creativity, and peer learning. Practical writing and communication were mentioned, mainly in relation to resumes, references for applications and job documents.

"The variety of community events, like the harm reduction group, the trips to the farm, all the different things, like the trip that just happened recently, the Art Gallery yesterday."

"Stuff like the media art group has helped me a lot with learning new skills and just finding new stuff to work on."

"I was going say the same thing about the art groups here at OCH... I found a wide community of other artists and I can feel a sense of belonging."

"I honestly, myself, can express great gratitude towards the employment services in this building, in this organization, they've helped me generously a lot when it comes towards, you know, finding a job, updating my résumé."

"I'll say honestly, my debating skills and my communication skills have gone up a lot since I've joined the program..."

Personal Growth (9)

Youth described transition to independence and achieving goals through employment progress and sustained engagement with OCH supports. Several moved from isolation to purposeful activity (regular programs, services). These marked concrete steps towards independence.

“Employment has helped me update my résumé, and I recently applied to the library, so I’m hopeful I’ll get the job.”

“I’ve gotten two positions through them now, that lasted a year each...”

“Even though the Ottawa Food Bank has reduced... having access to emergency food here... is... an insurance policy for continuing a day of healthy living.”

There was evidence of rising confidence and self-esteem, pride, and identity development. Youth spoke about happiness, belonging, and being themselves; the arts/community context was especially important for identity and social connectedness. Proactive engagement with services also indicated increased ability to ask for help and a growing sense of responsibility toward their wellbeing.

“I feel like I found a community where I feel comfortable being myself and creating a family... I love it here... Just being here makes me happy.”

“I’m going to second the appreciation for Employment Services... I have the best job in the world. I’ve never been happier...”

“I was going to say the same thing about the art groups here at OCH... I found a wide community of other artists and I feel a sense of belonging.”

Youth also demonstrated adaptability in the face of reduced hours and food constraints, using alternative routines and supports to maintain stability. Comments about changes in behaviour at work suggested maturing coping skills and increasing responsibility.

“Honestly, I like the openness of the hours... Some of the challenges were the cutbacks... Sometimes it [jars] me... And I’m like, ‘Oh, OK, I guess I’m just going to go home’...”

“Even though the Ottawa Food Bank has dropped the amount of food... It’s still an essential lifesaver... Even if it’s uncomfortable, sometimes to use...”

“... If it wasn’t for the service, I’d still be the youthful employee that I was, just snapping at the minor things”

Diversity and Common Ground in the Program

Across the group, diversity showed up in many forms, such as race, gender, sexuality, beliefs, family structures, and life experiences with substance use, stigma, and mental health. The program intentionally created a non-judgemental environment where these differences were acknowledged and valued. Youth encountered perspectives different from those they grew up with, particularly around harm reduction and family expectations. This expanded understanding, challenges assumptions, and built new knowledge. This exposure to diverse viewpoints enabled participants to reframe earlier messages, learn practical strategies, and engage more confidently with their own identities.

At the same time, a strong sense of common ground bound the group. Despite varied backgrounds, participants shared experiences of feeling isolated or misunderstood, navigating complicated family dynamics, managing anxiety, and seeking belonging. The program became a place where youth recognized they were not alone, which normalized help seeking and fostered trust. This shared foundation supported personal growth such as youth developing coping skills, feeling safer voicing their perspectives, and forming chosen family bonds. The group's diversity drove learning, while their common ground provided the stability that makes that learning possible.

"I feel a lot of us have that situation where we had broken families, and it's a situation of the saying, you know you can't choose your family by blood, but you can choose your family by heart. And I realize that through this community as well, because I'm not the only one who was suffering through a bad parenthood or a bad childhood... I have people who understand me. I have people who are there to support me when I'm in my really bad down moments."

Coping Skills (2)

The program brought together youth from diverse backgrounds, some raised in anti-drug households, others exposed early to substance use. This diversity allowed participants to compare contrasting beliefs and learn from each other's experiences. Many found common ground in shared struggles with anxiety, stigma, or confusion about substance use. Through harm reduction, education and open dialogue, youth participants were able to revise assumptions formed in childhood and built new coping strategies informed by multiple perspectives. Diversity prompted learning, while common emotional experiences created a supportive foundation for growth.

"It has been really an eye-opening situation... I realized [weed] is not as stigmatized as I thought... Having insight from staff on safe supply and using safely... correct usage and amounts does calm that anxiety down a lot..."

"I was raised in a very anti-drug household... The harm reduction program helps to release a lot of that stigma... Helps to educate me, and I feel a lot more comfortable."

Transition to Independence (1)

Youth arrived with different histories of adversity, instability, or isolation. Despite this diverse background, they shared a sense of rebuilding their lives. This created common ground, where participants felt understood by peers who were also navigating change.

Exposure to different pathways toward independence helped youth recognize their own capacity to restart and move forward.

“Whatever I went through, I always can start again... there was a light in my life. I can do [that].”

Confidence and Self-Esteem (1)

Interacting with peers who brought diverse experiences encouraged youth to reshape their beliefs, which strengthened their confidence. The common ground of previous poor health, stigma, confusion, or fear helped youth feel less isolated as they navigated personal change. Diversity of perspectives provided assurance that growth was possible, while shared vulnerabilities, fostered, safety, and belonging.

“A lot of my beliefs have been changed for the better.... I feel a lot more comfortable in this community now.”

Ability to Ask for Help (1)

Although participants came from diverse structures and emotional backgrounds, many shared experiences of neglect, loneliness, or mental health struggles. This created strong common ground that encouraged help-seeking behavior. Youth expressed that recognizing other's similar hardships, despite different histories, made it easier to reach out and feel supported.

“Coming into this community, it opened my eyes... I'm not alone... I have people who understand me and support me in my down moments.”

Identity Development (6)

Youth came with diverse identities, beliefs, and family histories, some from supportive homes, others from strained or harmful ones. This diversity created opportunity to understand different forms of identity development. At the same time, youth found common ground and shared emotional experiences, especially around difficult family relationships, feeling misunderstood, or seeking a sense of belonging. Many described forming a “chosen family” within the group, where diverse background was accepted and shared struggles were mutually understood. Many youth used this balance of difference and shared experience to redefine their identities in a validating, inclusive environment.

“It’s like race, gender, sexuality, belief... It helped me understand how many people are going through different stuff.”

“I do not have a lot of positive feelings about my family... But I appreciate the others here relate.”

“Coming here... I can talk about not liking my mother... They get it.”

“Realize... I’m not the only one... I have people who understand me.”

“Chosen family is a lot better than blood family, because when you have chosen family, they’re [going to] be by your side no matter what... chosen family is there for me when my family wasn’t.”

“Some of my beliefs have been strengthened... I’ve learned a lot just by being here.”

Learning and Skill Development

Youth described strengthening their creative abilities such as drawing, photography, and personal artistic expression. The group’s diverse creative styles and open-ended environment encouraged youth to experiment without fear of judgement.

Confidence and Self-esteem (5)

The program's inclusive atmosphere allowed youth to gain insight into themselves, especially as they compared their experiences with those of peers who faced similar emotional invalidation at home. Exposure to diverse stories of mental health struggles helped normalize their feelings and created common ground. As a result, participants described increased self-esteem and ability to express emotions more openly.

"I would say... my self-esteem has definitely gotten better."

"When I talk to my... mother about mental health... she'd say 'Cheer up... get over it. You'll be fine. You're overeating, you're being dramatic...'"

"I can really open up... No one will tell me [that it's] all in my head."

Youth described meaningful growth in their creative abilities, noting improvements and skills, such as drawing, photography, and artistic expression. Some also expressed uncertainty about artistic activities and meeting the pressure to understand "what art is supposed to represent." Having a supportive space where they could explore without judgement helped reduce these insecurities and gain confidence in creative expression.

"I feel like photography. Feel like I've gotten a little better at drawing."

"I would say that I have learned to tap in heavily into my creative side. I think I was, I have... a bit of insecurities about my art, because it's more so I don't really know what... it's supposed to represent, what it's supposed to mean."

Communication and Interpersonal Skills (3)

Youth emphasized significant growth in communication and debating skills. Many came from homes where expressing emotions triggered conflict or punishment, leaving them silent. Within the group, the diversity of communication styles, some open, some struggling with triggers, became a learning environment. The common ground of navigating difficult family communication helped participants practice healthier expression, gain confidence in speaking up, and feel heard without fear of retaliation.

"My debating skills and communication skills have gone up a lot... I felt silenced a lot during my teenage years... But here I am able to come with my feelings and be heard."

"The biggest [quote] I remember from my mother was 'stop crying, or I'll give you something to cry about'."

"You can't change somebody's personality unless they're willing to change... It truly brings... trauma to the youth."

Emotional Competence and Skills (1)

Youth described developing patience and emotional regulation, particularly as they learned to interact with peers who have different triggers, temperament, and stress responses. The diversity in how youth reacted to frustration created opportunities to practice, empathy, adjust their own behavior, and understand perspectives different from their own. At the same time, many connected over shared experiences of reacting quickly, or growing up in environments where conflict escalated easily. Through group interactions, youth learned to slow down, understand other feelings, and carry this patience back into family relationships and daily life.

“My patience [has improved] ... everyone’s going through their own thing... before I would snap easily... but now... I want to be a lot ... more patient...”

Learning About Others (1)

Youth reported learning new information and reshaping beliefs about substance use due to the programs harm reduction approach. Youth came from diverse backgrounds, from households with strict anti-drug messages to those where substance use was common. This diversity helped them see substance use through different lenses. The common ground of witnessing addiction in their communities or families made the learning personally relevant. Through open discussion, youth developed more nuance to understanding of harm reduction, safety, and the social realities of substance use.

“I still had judgement from growing up... but when I came here, substance use was open, with a harm reduction space to make sure you’re safe... People overdose on the street because they don’t have safeguards.”

Achieving Their Goals (1)

Participants reported significant life changes such as securing their own housing and beginning or returning to education. These achievements reflected personal stability and forward momentum, often following periods of homelessness, family conflict, or instability. While youth reached these milestones through individual effort, they also shared a common desire for safety, independence and long-term growth. The program offered encouragement and practical support that helped them celebrate these accomplishments without comparison, recognizing that the path of each youth looks different.

“Now I have my own place, and I started studying... made a bigger achievement in my life.”

Pride (2)

Youth expressed pride in their creative accomplishments, especially when selling artwork or receiving positive feedback. Discovering that others valued their work was particularly meaningful for youth who struggled with self-doubt or lacked recognition in the past. This helped validate their creative identities, boost confidence, and spark aspirations for the future.

"When I sold my photos... I felt like it was one of the biggest accomplishments I've ever made in my entire life."

"I realized... people like what I make, and I have an actual market to bank off it. It was [a] very enlightening experience for me. There was an actual competition for my art, and it was very surprising."

Personal Growth (1)

Youth described employment gains as significant achievements, particularly when overcoming patterns of short-term work, burnout, or feeling dismissed by employers. The diversity of their work histories contrasted with the common ground of wanting fair treatment, stability, and meaningful progress. Through employment services and personal persistence, participants secured roles that improved financial stability and strengthened their sense of capability. These achievements also helped youth imagine future career pathways, such as entrepreneurship.

"Landing my most recent job... a one-year contract... I found that achieving in my eyes... it opened my mind because I realized I could be my own boss [and] chase after dreams."

Youth Engagement (3)

Youth expressed pride in community events where their voices, ideas, or labor contributed to positive impact. Whether speaking at youth events, assisting in public clean-ups, or participating in awareness-raising challenges, youth found meaning in being active contributors. Their diverse perspectives shaped their contributions, yet they shared a common ground in feeling seen, valued, and included in community-level conversations. These achievements strengthened their sense of agency and belonging.

"That [University] Ottawa thing... I didn't think what I'd say would impact anybody... but I got to have a voice..."

The 24-hour challenged... gives me an opening to speak when I'm frustrated.... The mental-health support has been game-changing."

"I did a community sweep on Arlington... got to clean up Bank Street... every little bit counts."

Personal Growth (3)

Youth also described achievements that extended into their personal lives outside the program, such as improved relationships, healthier boundaries, and emotional expression. While their family dynamics diverged widely, they found common ground in discovering that they deserved respect and emotional safety. Recognizing unhealthy family patterns, sharing experiences with friends, and setting boundaries all represented significant personal achievements rooted in increased self-awareness.

"I... have something to talk [about] to my friends... I want to share my experiences."

"This program allowed me to realize my family relationship was toxic... I realized I could finally get that boundary and distance."

"Being able to come here and talk to staff... not be called crazy... it's a relief to share something."

Recommendations for Program Improvement

Access to Resources (15)

Youth emphasized that meaningful participation is impossible without stable housing. They expressed concerns about city wide affordability, eviction practices, and the lack of youth-specific housing options. Their recommendations reflected personal experiences with housing insecurity and a shared understanding of the systemic barriers facing young people. They called for expanded housing units, organizational leasing of large buildings, and increased access to safe, sustainable placements.

"Getting more, mass release and options for housing... sustainable, affordable housing is always a priority."

"What happens to the people who are evicted? ... we [end up] on the street like everybody else."

"Purchasing leasing rights [for bigger buildings] ... so we have more space to house more youth..."

Food insecurity and lack of access to clothing were identified as major barriers. Youth articulated how rising prices, inconsistent food supports, and limited clothing options affected their wellbeing and ability to participate confidently. These recommendations stemmed from diverse personal histories of poverty and they showed a shared desire for dignity, stability, and access to necessities.

"A crisis of putting food on the table... high grocery prices."

"Getting more access to food... food insecurity."

"Clothes donations... I never really got to have nice clothes... I was picked on for that."

Access to Resources - Continued

Youth expressed the need for onsite laundry services due to high costs, broken machines, and the logistical challenges of locating washers and dryers elsewhere. Their discussions revealed shared frustration with structural barriers such as rising wash/dry fees, prepaid care requirements, and machine repairs that increased prices. Despite differing home environments, participants connected over the difficulty of maintaining clean clothing, which affected comfort, self-presentation, and daily functioning.

“Getting laundry services... good washers and dryers.”

“Washers and dryers would definitely be an advantage... an extra space if we need laundry done.”

“They raised the price from \$1.50 to \$1.75.”

“My loads are \$3.50 for a dry and \$2.75 for a wash.”

“The thing that sucks... a minimum limit of \$10 [to load the card].”

Youth asked for designated quiet or study rooms, especially for youth in current programming or those who struggled to find calm environments at home or on campus. Their recommendations reflected a diversity of learning needs and neurodiverse experiences and shared challenges such as overstimulation and difficulty focusing. Youth explained that quiet spaces would support academic work, emotional regulation, and sensory needs.

“Study rooms... I have a hard time doing my work at home... no quiet places at school.”

“Sensory rooms... sensory toys.”

“Having peace and quiet too.”

Youth expressed a clear need for sensory friendly areas, including dimmable lighting, decompression spaces, and sensory tools. These recommendations reflected individualized experiences with overstimulation and a collective desire for inclusivity. Participants identified environmental triggers that make participation difficult and suggested practical adjustments to improve accessibility for neurodivergent youth.

“A quiet room where [autistic] youth can decompress or avoid breakdowns.”

Final Reflections and Overall Program Experience

In their closing reflections, youth shared sincere expressions of gratitude, connection, and hope for the program's future. These final thoughts revealed the depth of their emotional investment in the space and highlighted how meaningful consistent support and community connection, are for the smooth transition into adulthood for them. Although each young person brought a unique background and set of experiences, they shared common ground in valuing the program's welcoming environment, accessible staff, and long-term commitment to youth wellbeing. Their reflections also included suggestions for program growth, showing that appreciation and improvement can exist together, both informed by lived experience.

Connection to Community (3)

Youth expressed strong appreciation for the program, acknowledging its impact on them and the broader youth community. Their gratitude reflected diverse experiences of support, housing stabilization, emotional safety, mentorship, and belonging, within the common ground of being cared for and included. These reflections conveyed how crucial, consistent, relational support is in fostering trust and long-term wellbeing.

"I'm grateful for everything OCH has done... for many youth who access [it] often."

"I've always looked to this service quite fondly... I hope it continues for the next few years and next few decades."

Participants emphasized how quickly and deeply they connected with staff and peers. These relationships, fostered safety, belonging, and personal accomplishment. The diversity of youth experience created a rich, social experiment, while the common ground of seeking acceptance and encouragement make connection possible. Feeling welcome was described as meaningful and affirming.

"The staff are super chill... I've only been here a couple of months, but I really feel like I've connected with a lot of people."

Inspirational and Hopeful (1)

Together with their appreciation, youth expressed hope for continued development, stability, and longevity of services. They acknowledged improvements already being made, while offering suggestions that reflected their evolving needs and aspirations. Regardless of background, participant shared a collective desire for the program to remain strong, accessible, and offering resource for future generations of youth.

"No matter what I could say, it's already being improved on... I'd like to see more service hours and more funding for entrepreneurial [programs]."

Meaningful (1)

Youth praised the importance of transitional programs that helped bridge the gap between adolescence and adulthood. Their experiences highlighted how essential it is to maintain support, even after ageing out of certain services. Although each young person experienced entering adulthood differently, they shared common ground in valuing continuity, stability, and a gentle transition rather than a sudden cut off from support systems.

"The REACH program... You still get to access help... A slow three-year period to transition out... is nice."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The second year of reporting at Operation Come Home (OCH) highlighted continued progress in supporting youth as they pursued their educational and personal goals. Participants demonstrated a strong commitment to completing high school, with many already in grade 12 or recently graduated. The reflections highlighted that the program is meaningfully enhancing their confidence, decision-making abilities, and openness to new opportunities, which are key indicators of healthy personal development.

Youth consistently emphasized the importance of stable funding and accessible mental health support in maintaining their overall well-being. They expressed deep appreciation for the counselling services available to them, noting that empathetic staff and regular access to therapy, played a significant role in helping them manage stress, build resilience, and navigate difficult life circumstances. These supports were viewed as beneficial and essential to their success and stability within the program.

The insights shared by youth reinforced the value of continued collaboration and shaping program improvements. Youth were interviewed about their experiences in programming, and their perspectives have directly informed ongoing improvements, as well as their hopes for future enhancements. Youth expressed genuine appreciation for being invited to share their experiences and for feeling heard without judgment, which is a meaningful contrast to past experiences where their voices were overlooked. However, youth have not been engaged in interpreting these findings. Sharing the feedback and results back with them would be beneficial, as it closes the communication loop, reinforces transparency, invites youth to confirm, deepen, or nuance the meaning behind the themes identified. This process strengthens, trust, supports youth agency, and demonstrates clearly how their insights continue to shape the program in tangible ways.

These findings will serve as an important reference for strengthening the program. By maintaining its commitment to youth-driven feedback, mental health support, and educational achievement, the program is well positioned to continue empowering young people and fostering a community where they feel supported, capable, and heard.