New Canadian Youth Connections (NCYC)
Year 1 Evaluation Report
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Prepared by:

CENTRE FOR COMMUNITY BASED RESEARCH

190 Westmount Rd. North
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada
N2L 3G5

Authors:

Janna Martin, Centre for Community Based Research

Rich Janzen, Centre for Community Based Research
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Introduction

New Canadian youth who arrive in Waterloo Region as a Government Assisted Refugee (GAR) are gathering with community members to work on homework, participate in recreation, and build meaningful connections. New Canadian Youth Connections (NCYC) began in the Spring of 2016 as a pilot project, and in January 2019, NCYC received funding from Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) for a three-year term. The program is a partnership between Reception House Waterloo Region (RH) and Community Justice Initiatives (CJI) and it seeks to respond to the social barriers to integration that GAR youth, ages 13-25 face. Government assisted refugee (GAR) youth face challenges to experiencing social inclusion in Waterloo Region. Research has shown that establishing connections outside of one’s ethno-cultural group is important for integration into Canada.¹

NCYC was designed to build upon the strengths of participating youth, their families and community volunteers as they establish relationships and connect to the community. The NCYC program offers three days of programming per week. Two days are Homework Club and one day is Recreation Night. Between 20 and 30 youth attend Homework Club and as many as 60 youth attend Recreation Nights. Recreation Nights provide an opportunity for GAR youth to participate in various activities, including sports, crafts, and occasional outings. Also, at Recreation Night, representatives from community services are invited to facilitate workshops for the youth. Homework Club is a space where youth bring their homework, ask volunteers and their peers questions, and are self-directed to complete their own homework. When youth are not doing homework, they discuss other topics with the group.

While Reception House has previously run Homework Club and Recreation Night, the innovative feature of this OTF funded project was to partner with CJI to adapt their Circles of Support model to augment homework clubs and recreation nights. Circles of Support are intended to build informal networks of support that help people integrate more fully in community life. Within NCYC, GAR youth who are active in Homework Club and Recreation Night are to be given opportunity to meet with one or more volunteers in a Circle. Circles are intended to offer GAR youth ongoing support as they work towards their social, educational, and employment goals (not all GAR youth are expected to join a Circle).

In addition to these activities focused on GAR newcomer youth to reduce their social isolation and increase their belonging and engagement in their community, NCYC intended to carry out supporting activities in the realm of community engagement. These activities include volunteer recruitment and training as well as building community connections through inviting community members to present at NCYC and speaking about NCYC at festivals. The supporting activities are ultimately intended to encourage the broader community to increase their awareness of, and

engagement, with newcomer youth. The NCYC’s complete theory of change is summarized in the program logic model (see Appendix B).

This report is a summary of evaluation data gathered in the first year of this program. The Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR), a non-profit organization located in Waterloo, partnered with NCYC to conduct an evaluation and write this report.

Evaluation Purpose

The aim of this evaluation is to provide the NCYC program with a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the implementation of the program and any outcomes achieved.

The purpose of this evaluation is three-fold: (1) to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the program’s implementation (process), (2) to assess the outcomes (or changes) that were achieved at the individual and community level (outcomes) and 3) to suggest program improvements (future directions).

Three corresponding main research questions will guide the evaluation inquiry.

1. To what extent has the NCYC program been effective in its planning and implementation? (Process)
2. How and to what extent has the NCYC program impacted participating youth, volunteers and the broader community? (Outcomes)
3. How can the program be improved and further developed? (Future Directions)

Evaluation Approach and Design

This evaluation followed a community-based research approach, meaning that researchers tried to ensure that the evaluation was as useful and relevant as possible, encouraged participation of all stakeholders, and was action-oriented with a view of promoting program improvements. Three concrete mechanisms were used to implement this approach: 1) a stakeholder steering committee, made of front-line and management staff of partner organizations, newcomer youth and CCBR researchers, helped guide the evaluation process and provide input into evaluation plans, 2) NCYC staff received evaluation training by CCBR to help implement evaluation activities, and 3) regular evaluation feedback was provided for ongoing program learning via three annual cycles.

There were three methods of primary data collection that were used in this first evaluation cycle: 1) A focus group with youth (8 participants), staff (4 participants) and two focus groups with volunteers (9 participants), and 2) completion of a survey by past volunteers (5 respondents). The focus groups were qualitative and semi-structured. The staff focus group was conducted by

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CCBR researchers. The one youth focus group and two volunteer focus groups were conducted by NCYC staff who were trained by CCBR. The volunteer survey was sent to all 19 previous volunteers that are not longer active in the program. The third method of data collection was a survey provided by OTF, to be filled out by program participants as they enter NCYC. The OTF survey data was not included in this report, as the data was submitted directly to OTF and not available for CCBR’s data analysis.

Project Implementation

This section of the report summarises the evaluation data gathered about the extent to which the NCYC program has been effective in its planning and implementation. Evaluation data shows that some program components are more active than others, which therefore contribute more strongly to overall program effectiveness. The most active NCYC program activities, were Homework Club (72 youth and 35 volunteers, twice a week) and Recreation Night (82 youth and 13 volunteers, once a week). The less active activities were Circle (informally tracked), Volunteer Training (44 active and trained volunteers), and Community Connections (12 community presentations and 11 NCYC presentations to the public). The strengths and weaknesses below are more informed by the active activity components than the less active ones.

Strengths

The main strengths of program implementation as discussed by the evaluation participants include: 1) youth take initiative on their homework, 2) NCYC is a safe space, and 3) volunteers feel their time at NCYC is rewarding.

1. Youth take initiative on their homework: Volunteers in the focus group commented that the youth are hard workers, and their role as volunteers is to support the time youth have dedicated to completing their homework. Youth are responsible for bringing their own homework and they get to choose which homework they ask for help on. The staff explained that youth appreciate the informal space of homework club, having volunteers as a supportive presence rather than authoritative presence is helpful for youth. A volunteer in the focus group commented that Homework Club is a low-pressure environment. This may reflect the structure, that it’s not up to the volunteers to create a plan, but it’s up to the youth to be self-directed.

2. NCYC is a safe space: Youth in the focus group discussed how the volunteers “support us and push us.” A volunteer remarked that when they are all sitting at the table, there is no hierarchy. A staff reflected that Homework Club provides a natural conversation component to it. Volunteers don’t act as teachers, they offer friendship. A staff commented that NCYC creates a safe space for youth to ask questions they may not be able to ask at home or at school.

3. Volunteers feel their time at NCYC is rewarding: The strongest theme to emerge from the volunteer focus groups was that volunteers feel their time at NCYC is well spent. Most past volunteers who filled out the survey recorded that they were satisfied with their volunteer experience. One volunteer emphasized throughout the discussion that he feels he is able to meaningfully contribute to the lives of the youth at NCYC. He explained that education has been
important in his life, so working to remove barriers to education for others is fulfilling for him. He explains his role as the following:

“It’s not just about homework, but you know, the students that I work with are mostly in high school so they are considering college. So I am just glad that I can share my experience going to college, what field to pick and all that.”

4. Other strengths: Several other strengths of the program implementation were mentioned, but not discussed in detail. For example, volunteers in the focus group reported that the training was helpful. Staff discussed how the summer camp did a good job of blending recreation and learning activities. Some evaluation participants mentioned that youth are not just relying on the volunteers, they are teaching each other.

Challenges
The main challenges of program implementation that the evaluation participants identified include: 1) location accessibility, 2) low participation in Recreation Night, and 3) forming Circles

1. Location accessibility: Homework club recently changed locations from St John’s Church to Reception House, and participants talked about how they have to take more busses to get to Reception House. They were not happy with taking more busses, but they said that they like the new facility better. One survey respondent mentioned that Homework Club is now further away from their workplace, so they are no longer able to volunteer.

2. Low participation in Recreation Night: The staff discussed how Recreation Night used to be just soccer, but youth were getting too competitive and creating teams based on ethno-cultural ties. The program changed to include a variety of sports that the youth may not be familiar with, and as a result, some youth no longer attend. The staff talked about how it is difficult to get youth excited for trying new sports and sometimes it is difficult to convince their parents that their child could benefit from Recreation Night. It is also difficult to recruit volunteers for Recreation Night, because according to the staff, volunteers do not see how recreation has as tangible results as Homework Club.

3. Forming Circles: Staff and volunteers discussed how forming Circles is challenging for a variety of reasons. Circles are happening informally, as youth ask for help with homework outside of Homework Club. The staff commented that Circles so far have not formed out of Recreation Night. When a youth asks a volunteer to meet outside of NCYC program, the volunteer tells the staff, an informal Circle is created, and the volunteer can choose if they still want to attend NCYC programming days.

The informal Circles are not being closely monitored by staff, because the volunteer and youth have not committed to meeting regularly, and the staff do not think it makes sense to force that commitment. Volunteers are already giving their time on NCYC program days, asking for another day of the week for Circle may mean that the volunteer will drop out of the programming days. Volunteers that are university/college students are the best candidates to
volunteer in a Circle, because the age gap is less between and them and newcomer youth. There is a power imbalance between a youth and older adult volunteers that might make meeting outside of the program awkward. Explaining to parents why their child is meeting with an older adult outside of NCYC program days may be difficult to sell. When asked in the focus group, what volunteers think about forming a Circle, a volunteer responded that he does not think he would be much help with building their social skills. Relying on young-adult volunteers to form Circles, is not always realistic, because they are often more short-term, only committing to the program for a semester.

4. Other challenges: The youth in the focus group seemed to agree that they would like Homework Club to be longer. Some mentioned that they would like it to start earlier so that they could come directly from school. Staff mentioned that finding speakers who are refugee informed in Kitchener-Waterloo is sometimes difficult. Lastly, staff and volunteers mentioned that a challenge for newcomer youth is the cultural bias in the education system.

Outcomes
This is the first year of a three-year evaluation, so it is expected that intended outcomes are just at the beginning stages. Still, there are early indications of immediate and intermediate program outcomes. The main outcomes of NCYC to date that the evaluation participants discussed include: 1) NCYC provides comfort which makes youth feel less isolated, 2) increased confidence in school, 3) increased confidence in social skills, 4) volunteers have learned from the youth, and 5) community connections.

The anticipated outcomes that were not discussed in this report include 1) youth gaining more awareness of community opportunities, 2) community learning how to better support refugee newcomers and 3) outcomes related to Recreation Night and Circle. This gap in the data does not necessarily mean that these outcomes are not being achieved. It may be too early in the program to make a strong connection of how community level outcomes are being achieved. Also, as outlined earlier, evaluation participants were more familiar with Homework Club than the other program activities.

1. NCYC provides comfort which makes youth feel less isolated: This theme of comfort connects to the theme in strengths of project implementation, namely that NCYC is a safe space. Evaluation participants described how the safe space of NCYC allows youth to build connections with the people there, which helps them transition to life in Waterloo Region.

During the focus group, staff discussed how over time, as youth and volunteers continue to show up for Homework Club, youth become familiar with volunteers’ faces. Youth that attend NCYC are new to Canada, and meeting many new people, so having a place to come where there are familiar faces may be comforting. When volunteers continue to come back and interact with the kids “it forms that connection, you can see it in their faces.”
Volunteers explained that youth are less shy than when they first met them. Youth help each other, they figure things out now by themselves, and recommend volunteers to each other. A volunteer described:

“Once you sit with them, and they trust you, they will come back to you again and again. They keep homework to work with a particular volunteer which means they built a connection.”

An evaluation participant reflected that NCYC helps bring comfort to youth who are transitioning to life in Canada. They observed that a youth’s first two years in NCYC helps them build familiarity with people, which is significant to overcoming obstacles and building relationships. An evaluation participant commented, “I think this is a great program to break barriers and respect the diversity.”

Staff described that having a program just for New Canadian youth is significant, because many settlement services are provided to adults in their family – youth may feel they do not have a space. NCYC is geared to give them safe space to express themselves, empowering them and providing community to lessen their feeling of isolation.

The youth in the focus group spoke about how they appreciate the volunteers, and think the volunteers are doing a good job, but they did not speak in much detail about if they are experiencing less isolation. The youth evaluation participants reflected that they have learned about life in Canada at NCYC. A youth commented that “if there was no NCYC, we would not know anything in Canada.” And another youth added, “ya, especially in school”.

2. Increased confidence in school: Staff, volunteers, and new Canadian youth discussed how NCYC has helped with increasing youth’s confidence in school. Nasreen (pseudo-name), a youth reflected on how NCYC has impacted her life:

“This is like having a second teacher, like the first time here, when I was in grade 9, I got nothing, I understand nothing at all. I didn’t even care about it. I just gave up. It was so hard. But when I came here [to NCYC] with my friend... they helped me a lot. Even now math class, is a hard course for me, but like without here, it’s really hard. Now I’m in grade 11. This place is really helpful.”

Another youth in the focus group commented, *she started to be confident.* “And Nasreen replied, “ya, this helps a lot.”

Staff in the focus group discussed how a few youth started college this year after having attended NCYC for three years. Staff believed that NCYC contributed to their success of entering college after only a few years in Canada. At NCYC they were supported to choose a field of study and learn how to complete the application process.

In addition to increased confidence, students are taking more initiative to seek help to complete their homework. A volunteer observed:
“There are two boys that I’m thinking of that were forced to come here. The last year when they were attending, you could tell that they didn’t necessarily want to be there. Now it’s clear that they are coming with intent.”

3. Increased confidence in social skills: Evaluation participants observed that youth are more outgoing with new people after attending NCYC. A staff observed how youth who attend NCYC have now started attending YMCA activities and they are making friends with new people; “the youth were laughing and doing their thing and weren’t overwhelmed. It was really encouraging to see.”

A volunteer reflected, “I can see it really helps them to be more connected to other people. And to gain their confidence. The volunteers help them with that self-esteem.” Another volunteer commented that hopefully NCYC has helped youth develop more confidence. If they are able to write and speak better, perhaps it will encourage them to join clubs at school.

4. Volunteers have learned from the youth: Staff, volunteers, and youth believe that volunteers have learned from the youth about what life is like for youth who came to Canada as a refugee. On the survey, all past volunteers reported that NCYC has been helpful at increasing their understanding of challenges faced by refugee newcomer youth and how to better support them.

A volunteer reflected that “this is not just a place where we can help the students, but also a place where we can learn from them. I can hear and discover different ideas.” It appears that volunteers value learning from new Canadian youth. Another volunteer stated that they have learned about different cultures, languages, beliefs. They have learned the challenges that students face in high school and post-secondary education today. An NCYC volunteer experience also may help people with their career. A volunteer shared that they are going to be a pharmacist soon and now they have learned how to better communicate with people new to Canada.

In the staff focus group, the staff talked about how youth and volunteers are building friendships. The volunteers gain insight into what it is like to be a new Canadian youth and it increases their literacy about other cultures.

A youth recalled that one of the volunteers told her that she did not know anything about refugee newcomers and now she does from NCYC. Not only does the volunteer have an increased understanding of challenges facing refugee newcomers, she invited one of her classmates to volunteer at NCYC.

5. Community Connections: This theme of community connections is a two-way street. Evaluation participants talked about how youth have made connections with settled Canadians and other programs in Waterloo region. In addition, settled Canadians have made connections to new Canadian youth through the NCYC program. The staff suggested that volunteers bring their friends and community connections with them. Youth may learn about how a volunteer
navigates life in Canada and get connected to people and services that the volunteer suggests. A staff observed that once a volunteer has been in the NCYC program some of them are active in the community and become an advocate for new Canadian youth.

In the theme above, a youth told the story of how a volunteer brought her friend to volunteer at NCYC. This reflection by a youth may indicate that youth are being introduced to more community members as volunteers invite their friends to volunteer. A youth in the focus group shared that NCYC volunteers and staff “teach us where to go, like if there are programs.”

Recommendations

Focus group participants had many ideas for the NCYC program, but many of the ideas were said just by one person. Below is a list of recommendations from the first-year evaluation data.

Homework Club

1. Provide more clarity about if volunteers should take initiative with youth on their homework, or if they should allow youth to approach them first
2. Ask youth to help set up or clean up
3. Add a break to Homework Club
4. Add to Homework Club, more information or help on understanding the Canadian curriculum
5. Ask youth if they would like to tutor each other
6. The youth would like to start Homework Club earlier, have it go longer, or make it on more days

Recreation Night

1. Find more volunteers who are excited about recreation
2. Recruit more volunteers that are high school students
3. Ask a youth or volunteer to present or facilitate at Recreation Night
4. Work intentionally to improve aggressive attitudes
5. Create more workshops at Recreation Night
6. Consider doing a parent information night and sell the Recreation Night so they understand how it aligns with their values

Circle

1. If Circle is going to be formally implemented, more Circle training is recommended
2. Create a conversation circle for language learning
Conclusion

This report summarized findings from the first year of the NCYC program evaluation. Findings suggest that youth and volunteers find Homework Club rewarding, some enjoy Recreation Night, but the numbers could be increased, and Circle is happening informally, given the challenges of implementing Circle formally with older adult volunteers and GAR youth. The first-year evaluation indicates that some anticipated outcomes are being achieved, namely newcomer youth have more confidence in school and with peers and secondly, volunteers are gaining understanding of challenges faced by refugee newcomers.

First-year evaluation data indicates that long-standing program activities (Homework Club and Recreation Night) are already demonstrating effectiveness, while the innovative/supportive components (Circle, Volunteer Training and Community Connections) are still developing. Even though Recreation Night has been going on for as long as Homework Club, it took a new turn this year to include a variety of sports (instead of just soccer) and thus the outcomes are currently less clear. Circles is even more emergent, and it is yet to be seen how many Circles will form and what the resulting impact will be. To improve the evaluation next year, more evaluation participants could be recruited beyond Homework Club. Next year, NCYC may also want to focus on further developing the Circle, Volunteer Training, and Community Connection activities so that all program components work in tandem to promote the overall goals of NCYC.
Appendices:

Appendix A: Evaluation Tools

Youth Focus Group Questions

1. Let’s begin by describing your involvement in the NCYC program.

Process

2. What do you like about the NCYC program? (either recreation nights or homework club)
   a) In what ways have staff and volunteers been helpful? Other program participants?
   b) In what way have logistics like the program time and location been helpful?
   c) The overarching goal of the NCYC program is to help newcomer youth feel more connected. What are the positive things in the program that helped people to reach this goal?

3. Is there anything you don’t like about the program?
   a) In what ways have staff and volunteers been unhelpful? Other program participants?
   b) In what way have logistics like the program time and location been a barrier?
   c) The overarching goal of the NCYC program is to help newcomer youth feel more connected. What are the negative things in the program that prevented people from reaching this goal?

Outcomes

4. How has the NCYC program helped you adjust to life in Canada?
   a) How has this program helped you in school?
   b) How has this program helped you find meaningful activities outside of school?
   c) What community activities/resources did you learn about from the NCYC program?
   d) How have the new friends you have made here changed how you feel about your life in Canada?

5. In what ways has the NCYC program impacted the broader community?
   a) In what ways has the program increased the community’s understanding of challenges faced by newcomer youth?
   b) In what ways has the program helped the community understand how to better support newcomer youth?

Future Directions

6. What suggestions do you have for improving the program? (recreation night and homework club)
   a) How else could the NCYC program help you feel better connected in Canada?
b) What community activities or resources would you like to learn more about?

7. We are thinking about starting Circles where you would meet regularly with two community volunteers to help you work towards your social, educational, and employment goals. What do you think the challenges and benefits of this activity would be?

**Staff Focus Group Questions**

1. What is your role in the NCYC program?

2. To what extent has the NCYC program been effective in its planning and implementation?
   a) What are the strengths of the program? (recreation nights, homework club, circle)
   b) What are the weaknesses of the program? (recreation nights, homework club, circle)

3. What has been the impact of the NCYC program?
   a) How has the NCYC program impacted the newcomer youth?
      How has the program impacted the volunteers?
      What impact do you think the program is having on the broader community?
   b) Were there any unanticipated outcomes of the program?
   c) What recreational opportunities and supports do newcomer youth have now that they didn’t have before this program?
   d) How have newcomer youth awareness and attitudes of community opportunities changed as a result of this program?
   e) How have the volunteers’ understanding of refugee newcomer youth changed as a result of this program?

4. How can the NCYC program be improved and further developed?
   a) Thinking back to what you said about the weaknesses of the program, what needs to be changed to address the weaknesses?
   b) What could be added to the program to increase newcomer youth...
      • sense of belonging
      • engagement in community
      • reduce social isolation
   c) How could the program better increase community awareness of and engage with issues facing refugee newcomer youth?
Volunteer Focus Group Questions

1. Let’s begin by describing your involvement in the NCYC program.

Process

2. What do you like about volunteering in the NCYC program? (recreation nights or homework club)
   a) In what ways have the staff been helpful?
   b) In what way have logistics like the program time and location been helpful?
   c) The overarching goal of the NCYC program is to help newcomer youth feel more connected. What are the positive things in the program that helped people to reach this goal?

3. Is there anything you don’t like about the program?
   a) In what ways could the staff be more helpful?
   b) In what way have logistics like the program time and location been a barrier?
   c) The overarching goal of the NCYC program is to help newcomer youth feel more connected. What are the negative things in the program that prevented people from reaching this goal?

4. How did the training prepare you for the program?
   a) Is there anything else you wish was included in the training?

Outcomes

5. What have you learned from volunteering in the NCYC program?
   a) What have you learned about how to support refugee newcomers?
   b) How has your understanding of refugees changed since volunteering in this program?

6. In what ways have you seen newcomer youth changed by this program?
   a) In what ways have newcomer youth confidence in school and with peers changed?
   b) How are newcomer youth getting more involved in community because of this program?

7. In what ways has the NCYC program impacted the broader community?
   a) In what ways has the program increased the community’s understanding of challenges faced by newcomer youth?
b) In what ways has the program helped the community understand how to better support newcomer youth?

Future Directions

1. What suggestions do you have for improving the program? (Recreation night and Homework club)
   a) Are there any other ways that Reception House can support you in your role as a volunteer?

2. We are thinking about starting Circles, where two community volunteers would meet regularly with a newcomer youth to help them work towards their social, educational, and employment goals. What do you think the challenges and benefits of this activity would be?

Volunteer Survey Questions

1. Which New Canadian Youth Connection (NCYC) program did you volunteer in?
   - Homework Club
   - Recreation Night
   - Both

2. How supportive were the Reception House staff in helping you as a volunteer?
   - Extremely supportive
   - Very supportive
   - Somewhat supportive
   - Not so supportive
   - Not at all supportive

3. How well did volunteers work together in making the program a success?
   - Extremely well
   - Very well
   - Somewhat well
   - Not so well
   - Not at all well

4. Overall, how satisfied were you with your volunteer experience at NCYC?
   - Very satisfied
   - Satisfied
   - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
   - Dissatisfied
   - Very Dissatisfied

5. How helpful was volunteering with NCYC in increasing your understanding of challenges facing refugee youth?
   - Extremely helpful
6. How helpful was volunteering with NCYC in increasing your understanding of how to better support refugee newcomers?
   - Extremely helpful
   - Very helpful
   - Somewhat helpful
   - Not so helpful
   - Not at all helpful

7. Why did you stop volunteering with NCYC? (select all that apply)
   - Life got too busy
   - I found another volunteer opportunity
   - I felt like my volunteer time wasn’t appreciated
   - I lost contact with the staff - but I may be interested in volunteering again (click here to get connected again)
   - Other (please specify)

8. Do you have any suggestions for improving the NCYC program?
Appendix B: Program Logic Model

New Canadian Youth Connections (NCYC)

Program Logic Model

Newcomer Youth

- Recreational Nights
  - # of sessions and # youth attending recreational nights
  - # of sessions and # youth attending homework club
- Homework Club
  - Increased educational support for youth
- Circle
  - Increased and more diverse social connections & supports
  - Increased confidence in school & with peers
  - Increased awareness and changed attitudes about community opportunities
- Volunteer Training
  - Program recruitment & training
  - Circle training
  - # of active volunteers
  - # of trained volunteers
  - # of community presentations

Community

- Community Connections
  - Community presentations
  - Festival activities
  - Increased and more diverse social connections between refugee youth, volunteers, and other community members
  - Increased understanding of challenges facing refugee youth
  - Increased recognition of how to better support refugee newcomers

Immediate Outcomes

- Increased recreational opportunities for youth
- Increased educational support for youth

Intermediate Outcomes

- Increased confidence in school & with peers
- Increased awareness and changed attitudes about community opportunities

Ultimate Outcomes

- Newcomer Youth: Reduced social isolation, increased sense of belonging & engagement in services & opportunities
- Broader Community: Increased awareness of, and engagement with, issues facing refugee youth

Flow of people: N = 90-100 youth (age 13-25) per year