

# Family and Natural Supports:

*A Framework to Enhance Young People's Network of Support*

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**FAMILY & NATURAL SUPPORTS**

**A WAY HOME**  
VERS UN CHEZ-NOUS  
CANADA

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homelessness



**MAKING  
THE SHIFT**  
youth homelessness  
demonstration lab

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# About this framework

This framework introduces and provides an overview of Family and Natural Supports (FNS), a preventive approach to addressing youth homelessness. FNS is a key component of a larger systemic shift in responses to homelessness, away from emergency service provision and instead toward the prevention of youth homelessness. This framework explains FNS, its core principles and guiding philosophy, presents considerations for implementing FNS in communities, and provides case examples of what this work can look like in practice. It also addresses the need for early interventions (including Family and Natural Supports) and the compelling reasons to shift to prevention as the new prevailing response to youth homelessness.

The FNS framework builds on the foundational work of the Change Collective's **Working with Vulnerable Youth to Enhance their Natural Supports**. The FNS framework was co-developed with practitioners from the Making the Shift Demonstration (MtS DEMs) sites in Toronto, Calgary, Edmonton, Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, and Red Deer. The framework is also informed by preliminary qualitative data and lessons learned from the eight demonstration projects in Ontario and Alberta that are testing the FNS principles laid out here. This guide will be updated based on ongoing research emerging from these projects, including developmental, implementation, and summative evaluations.

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# INTRODUCTION

## The word family can provoke mixed feelings for many youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Family may bring up past sources of pain as a result of conflict, neglect, or even abuse and separation. Unfortunately, a large number of young people enter into homelessness because of challenges they experienced with their parents and family. The **Without a Home Study** – the first national survey of young people experiencing homelessness in Canada – found that 77.5% of youth cited an inability to get along with their parents as a key reason they left home (Gaetz et al., 2016). What’s more, 63.1% of youth reported having experienced physical, sexual, or other forms of abuse as a child or adolescent, and 57.8% had some kind of involvement with child protection services (Gaetz et al., 2016). Given these staggering numbers, it is no wonder that service providers and front-line staff supporting youth experiencing homelessness want to protect young people from the source of these traumatic and harmful experiences.

But the word family can also prompt positive associations as well, of a person’s first experiences of love, attachment, and care. Although many young people flee abusive and otherwise problematic family situations, the Without a Home study also found that a majority of youth surveyed were in contact with a family member at least once per month and that 77.3% would like to improve their relationships with family (Gaetz et al., 2016). These facts speak to the compelling presence of family and other important relationships in young peoples’ lives, despite past conflict or harm. For those providers supporting youth at risk of or going through homelessness, then, it is important to recognize the crucial role that such relationships play in personal development and to find ways to support youth in understanding, navigating, and strengthening these vital connections.

*“Traditionally, in shelter settings, there’s been this thing that young people are fleeing bad situations from their home environments and that’s true to a certain extent. But it has kind of led to people feeling that family is bad.*

*You know, I need to protect the young person. And, I think the FNS program has really shifted that thinking about, maybe things weren’t great when the youth was eight, ten years old. But, now they’re 20 and, maybe there’s a chance to, you know, revisit that family situation.”*

*– Key Informant of the Toronto Family and Natural Supports program*



The Family and Natural Supports (FNS) approach begins with the idea that relationships are the basis of a person’s sense of self and well-being, which in turn provides the foundation for a person to thrive. For most young people, there is at least one adult – maybe a parent, grandparent, aunt/uncle, sibling, neighbour, teacher, tutor, Elder – who is important and cares about them. Strengthening these relationships through counseling, mediation, and/or skill-building may be the support that a young person needs to prevent them from experiencing homelessness, keep them connected to community and school, and create a network of support they can draw upon throughout their life. When family reunification is not a viable option for a range of reasons including physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, finding and strengthening caring adults outside of the family unit – what are referred to as natural supports – can be an alternative strategy for achieving housing stabilization.

## What is a Family and Natural Supports Approach?

A truly effective response to youth homelessness must consider the important role the family and community connections can play for any young person. The goal of a Family and Natural Supports (FNS) approach is to strengthen youth’s relationships with family as well as other natural supports including meaningful adults in their lives. What actually constitutes a “family” is variable, based on individual experience (growing up with grandparents, for instance) and cultural contexts and should be defined by the young person.

By supporting youth to mediate conflicts, strengthen and rebuild relationships, and nurture natural supports, they are better able to move forward with their lives, stay in school or access training and employment, and transition successfully into adulthood. Family and Natural Supports targets young people between the ages of 13 and 24 who are at risk of or have experienced homelessness. This age range is consistent with the **Canadian Definition of Youth Homelessness** (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2016) and is informed by the fact that 40% of young people in Canada who are currently homeless had their first experience before the age of 16 (Gaetz et al., 2016).

FNS work is based on the understanding that young people cannot – and should not have to – rely solely on professional supports to provide a sense of belonging and social inclusion. While the relationships that young people form with service professionals are no doubt transformative and may endure beyond a particular program or service, it is important that youth establish longterm connections in the community if they are to flourish in the wider world. Although done with the best of intentions, certain practices within emergency shelters, group homes, and other services can create patterns of

dependency. Young people require opportunities to develop and practice the necessary skills of creating and maintaining healthy and positive relationships. Without these skills, young people may encounter challenges in their interpersonal relationships. Even when connecting to family is possible, consideration and effort needs to be given to ensuring that young people have other connections in the community.



## Why Enhance Family and Natural Supports?

Youth experiencing homelessness said that enhancing family and natural supports was an important goal on their journey:

- 71.6% of youth surveyed were in contact with a family member
- Young people who reported positive relationships with friends were much more likely to report high levels of self-esteem. Likewise, those who are in regular contact with family members (more than once a month) and who value family connections also demonstrate higher levels of self-esteem (Gaetz et al., 2016).

There is promising research on family strengthening efforts. Studies conducted in the United States and Australia demonstrate the strong protective and health-promoting influence that family members have on young people (Harper et al., 2015). Thompson and colleagues found that youth who returned home to live with their parents after shelter use experienced a range of short-term positive outcomes, including decreased runaway episodes, improved school status, higher self-esteem, and improved relationships with parents relative to youth discharged to other locations (Thompson et al., 2000). A number of studies found that family-based interventions for youth experiencing homelessness show positive results for behavioural health and risky behaviours, particularly in substance use behaviours (Morton et al., 2019). Unfortunately, there is limited evidence on the effectiveness of family-based interventions in other domains, such as housing stability (Morton et al., 2019). Future research should prioritize the impact of FNS interventions on housing stability and other domains so that decision makers can be confident about what programs are effective and how.

# FNS as a Philosophy, Practice, and Program

Because Family and Natural Supports (FNS) proposes a shift in thinking about the importance of permanent relationships, it can be taken up as a philosophy, a practice, and/or a program, depending on the needs and strengths of the community.

## AS A PHILOSOPHY

The FNS philosophy can inform a range of services and programs within a community and/or youth-serving agency, such as residential and housing services, treatment for mental health and addictions, connection to culture, health-related interventions, and justice and legal services. The core principles of the FNS philosophy can guide the way a community, organization, program, policy, or practice addresses youth homelessness, from prioritization and assessment to housing and evictions prevention, data collection, and better integration between services and systems. Organizations can ask how they are currently viewing family and natural supports in existing services and think about ways that they can identify and encourage service providers to view youth's relationships as undiscovered strengths. This can take on variety of forms, such as creating organizational policies that require staff to ask a young person about their existing and desired network of support during intake. Regardless of the method used, all service providers should inform youth about Family and Natural Supports work and give them the option of participating. By considering the importance of a young person's network of supports, communities and organizations can transform the experience that a young person has with systems and leverage the support that a youth may already have.

## AS A PRACTICE

FNS can be used as a practice—like a tool in a service provider's toolbox—when specific activities are incorporated within a program that is compatible with the FNS philosophy. In the case of FNS as a practice, staff (e.g., counselors, case managers, clinical consultants) are hired to work within an existing program to offer dedicated services to youth and their network of supports based on FNS principles. These individuals support young people and families by providing intensive case management, family mediation, and counselling, all of which are designed to strengthen ties to family and natural supports. This can be useful for some organizations or communities that don't yet have the capacity to create a distinct program, or in which a distinct program is not needed within that community. As a practice, FNS is central to the work of Youth Reconnect



programs<sup>1</sup> as well as **Housing First for Youth** (HF4Y). The former intervention is an early intervention program that targets young people and their families in the community, through addressing the root source of the young person’s housing precarity, enhancing connection to school training and employment, and strengthening family relations. In the case of HF4Y, FNS is an important component in assisting young people to remain stably housed once they exit homelessness or as a tactic to support shelter diversion.

## AS A PROGRAM

FNS can be considered a program when it is operationalized as a standalone service delivery model or set of activities provided by an agency or organization. Such a service delivery approach involves dedicated resources and staff that support youth in enhancing their relationships with chosen family and supports. In this context, FNS programs can be standalone services for young people who are at risk of, are experiencing, or have exited homelessness. For example, Covenant House Toronto, a participating MtS DEMS site,<sup>2</sup> operates an FNS program designed to offer intensive clinical and case management support to help young people reconnect with family members in a safe and supportive way.

Whether employing FNS as a philosophy, practice, or program, it is important to consider that this represents a different approach to working with young people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Conventional responses to youth homelessness often leave the family out of the picture in an attempt to offer a protective space for young people: “The orientation of many, if not most services, is to assume that because young people are fleeing damaged family situations, in order to move forward with their lives they must leave that world behind.” (Winland et al., 2011, p. 8). FNS takes a different approach by placing an emphasis on enhancing family relationships and connections to meaningful adults as central to working with youth experiencing homelessness. It also means reframing who is the client of the service – in many cases it is not just the young person (which is traditionally the case with youth homelessness services) but also family members and natural supports.

This guide offers an overview of how a community can incorporate FNS principles into an integrated systems response, how an organization or agency can incorporate FNS practice into existing programs, and how a community and/or organization can deliver a comprehensive FNS program.

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1. For more information about Youth Reconnect, see pages 80-84 of Gaetz, S., Schwan, K., Redman, M., French, D., & Dej, E. (2018). *The Roadmap for the Prevention of Youth Homelessness*. A. Buchnea (Ed.). Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

2. **The Making the Shift Demonstration Lab** (MtS DEMS) is a multi-year, collaborative project that is working to develop and test approaches to support the prevention of and facilitate sustainable exits from homelessness. Currently, MtS DEMS has implemented three demonstration projects at 12 sites across Ontario and Alberta.

# CORE PRINCIPLES

The core principles of Family and Natural Supports are adapted from the Change Collective's **Working with Vulnerable Youth to Enhance their Natural Supports: A Practice Framework** as well as data from the MtS DEMS FNS Demonstration Projects. They are also aligned with the **Housing First for Youth** core principles and other youth-focused interventions, such as the **Wraparound Initiative** (Bruns et al., 2004).

## The FNS core principles are:

- Connection First
- Youth and Family at the Centre
- Autonomy and Accountability  
Go Hand in Hand
- Skill-Building that Leads to Growth
- Individualized, Flexible,  
Non-judgmental Practice

## 1. Connection First

Based in a human rights approach, the first core principle holds that relationships are as essential as physical needs, such as food, shelter, and clothing. These connections provide a sense of identity, belonging, and inclusion, which are vital to the emotional and psychological well-being of youth (Change Collective, 2019). Practically speaking, social and emotional needs will take longer to address than basic physical needs, but the principle of connection first is that FNS can begin exploring these needs right away – from the first moment a young person starts interacting with a service provider – and determining how service providers can support youth in meeting their needs.

Additionally, this principle recognizes that all young people have a right to access services without preconditions or having to demonstrate that they are “ready” for service. To this end, it is crucial that organizations remove barriers that may cause situations in which young people cannot access available services that support them in connecting family members and natural supports so that they are able to participate in the intervention as quickly as possible. Organizations should review and revise policies and practices that may present barriers to young people engaging in Family and Natural Supports. For example, a mandatory group held on Mondays may prevent a young person from visiting with family. Programs need to be mobile (requiring staff to travel to young people and their supports) and flexible in terms of when the meetings occur (meetings in the evening or during the weekend).

Finally, young people have a right to change their mind. If they decline to accept the offer of support on one occasion, the door should be left open in case they decide that they want and are ready for support later on.

## 2. Youth and Family at the Centre

FNS is a youth-focused intervention that supports the whole family (as defined by the young person), meaning that family members and natural supports who consent to receiving services are also considered participants. Work with families should take a strengths-based approach that recognizes and supports existing family strengths and resources. There may be times when case work with a family takes on a life outside of the young person (e.g., a parent requires individual clinical support). In these cases, referrals and supports will need to be made for family members and natural supports outside of the relational work that is done with the young person.

**While FNS takes an unbiased approach towards youth and their supports, it is essential that youth lead the identification of and engagement with meaningful relationships.**

- **YOUTH DETERMINES WHO IS FAMILY:** For Family and Natural Supports to work, young people need to be the ones who determine who their family is. This could be a parent, grandparent, other family member, or an adult that the young person shares a connection with.
- **THE YOUNG PERSON LEADS THE WORK:** It is important that FNS services are voluntarily accessed by youth and that staff follow the lead of the young people they are working with. The involvement of family members in FNS work should be decided by the youth, who should be encouraged to make their own decisions, identify goals, and decide who they consider as family. Once family members and chosen supports are acknowledged and included in the work, FNS staff may be required to hear and understand multiple perspectives on the same situation. In working with youth and their family members together, however, this may seem easier said than done – especially when there has been conflict in the relationship. In this situation it is essential that FNS workers are encouraged to take a non-judgemental approach that is accepting of family members' perspectives, while also maintaining the youth's voice. Although this may be challenging, centering the youth's voice does not exclude creating space and acceptance for the family member's voice.
- **YOUTH VOICE:** It is critical that young people with lived experiences of homelessness are engaged in program design, ongoing program evaluation, and enhancements.

## 3. Autonomy and Accountability Go Hand in Hand

FNS respects the autonomy of young people, their families, and their natural supports. This means giving youth and supports the freedom to make decisions, which also comes with responsibilities. Because the goal of FNS programs is to enhance a young person's natural supports, it is imperative that staff work alongside young people to determine the best path forward.

In practice, young people should be supported to make choices and learn from their mistakes. This requires that they have enough information to make informed decisions. It is also important that family and/or natural supports have the required information to make informed decisions about participating in the program. The program and service delivery must be structured and designed in a way that empowers youth and families to build resilience and strength to achieve their goals. For example, a goal might be to reduce the number of angry outbursts or improve communication between youth and family members. Youth and chosen supports should be held accountable for these goals by doing small activities on their own, such as written reflection and practicing new communication skills and behaviours.

## 4. Skill-Building that Leads to Growth

Given that permanent relationships are important for mental health and well-being, FNS believes in the importance of building skills to develop more positive relationships and encourage emotional growth. The FNS model employs a “positive youth development” orientation – a strengths-based approach that focuses on building assets, confidence, and resilience, while addressing risks and vulnerabilities that young people may face. FNS supports youth, families, and natural supports to find, build, and maintain meaningful relationships so that they can rely less on professional supports. This support includes skills to problem-solve and work through conflict, improve communication, regulate emotions, find healthy coping habits, and provide education about mental illness and learning disabilities, adolescent development, and parenting.

FNS programs also include referrals to external programs that meet the full needs of the family. Examples of these external programs may include: additional mental health supports, substance use programs, housing stabilization supports, legal supports, and educational or employment programs. There is no time limit on participation in Family and Natural Supports programs. Service providers should use goal-planning strategies to assess when a youth is ready to finish their time in the program. That being said, staff should provide young people and their supports the opportunity to follow up after they have graduated.

## 5. Individualized, Flexible, Non-judgmental Practice

FNS is based in family systems theory and anti-oppressive practice, which means viewing the individual holistically within the context of family dynamics and systems of power. Family systems theory is based on the assumption that all behaviors are better understood in context, and that often the most useful focus may be on how family relationships are structured, rather than on individual pathology (Nichols, 2013). In consultations with youth, family members, and service providers from the Toronto FNS MtS DEMS project, youth spoke about the need for FNS workers to be consistent, flexible, accessible (easily able to be contacted), and responsive in short time frames (Sage-Pasant, 2018). Families and young people identified that one of their biggest concerns about engaging in Family and Natural Supports work was that workers would judge them and blame them for family breakdown. For these reasons, it is very important for workers to ensure that they engage their clients in a non-judgmental, empathetic, and compassionate way.

Many youth and families who have experienced housing instability come from marginalized identities and communities, which can be stigmatizing and isolating. The following cohorts of young people often experience heightened social isolation: LGBTQ2S, Indigenous, racialized, and newcomer young people. FNS programs and the physical spaces they occupy need to be inclusive and welcoming for all young people. It is important that staff are trained in cultural competency and are able to connect young people with culturally appropriate supports. It must be acknowledged that the FNS philosophy is not new for many Indigenous and non-Western communities and that principles like these have existed in some communities for centuries. The Definition of Indigenous Homelessness, for example, identifies Cultural Disintegration and Loss as one of the twelve dimensions of Indigenous Homelessness. This dimension refers to the dislocation and alienation of “Indigenous individuals and communities from their culture and from the relationship web of Indigenous society known as ‘All My Relations’” (Thistle, 2017, p. 11).

*“Family reconnection may be especially important for Indigenous youth, whose ability to maintain and strengthen ties with their families, kin, and communities is key to their well-being, as well as broader reconciliation.”*

*– Gaetz 2018b, p. 19*



# CONSIDERATIONS FOR PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING FNS

In delivering a Family and Natural Supports as a program or practice, the following are some key points for consideration.

## FNS as a Framework for Community Planning and Coordination

Family and Natural Supports programs can play a major role in community plans to end youth homelessness in the following ways:

- **PREVENTING YOUTH FROM EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS:** when applied upstream (before a young person becomes at risk of homelessness), Family and Natural Supports programs can prevent young people from ending up in the shelter system by ensuring family and natural supports are considered an alternative housing option to avoid a stay in shelter.
- **PREVENTING A RETURN TO HOMELESSNESS:** Family and Natural Supports programs can work with young people to acquire the supports and skills necessary to secure and maintain housing without potential recurrence, and potentially act as social and emotional support in times of need.
- **ENDING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS:** by supporting youth and their families/natural supports to reduce family conflict and avoid a situation in which a young person feels compelled to leave home.
- **PREVENTING ADULT HOMELESSNESS:** ending youth homelessness and making housing stabilization programs a priority to help communities to reduce the number of young people who age out of the youth sector and “graduate” to the adult homelessness sector.

FNS programs are most effective when they are an outcome of community planning and coordination. Community planning and coordination can start with a few agencies working together that eventually expand into a larger and more integrated network of services, also known as a System of Care.



A System of Care is an approach to systems integration that is client-centred and ensures that young people get access to the services and systems they need in a timely and appropriate way. At the local level, this means effective and seamless partnerships between youth serving organizations and mainstream institutions and services. In other words, as opposed to a fragmented collection of services, each with their own intake and assessment, communities work towards an integrated systems response involving coordination at every level, including policy, intake, service delivery, and the tracking of client flow. The best integrated service models are client-focused and driven with supports designed to ensure that the needs and strengths of young people and potentially their families are considered in a timely and respectful way. It is important that Family and Natural Supports programs are mobile and follow the young person if they migrate through the local service provision system.

## **FNS SPOTLIGHT**

### **TORONTO FNS CHAMPIONS AND THE YOUTH INTERAGENCY SHELTER NETWORK (YSIN)**

In many places, community tables or networks can be leveraged to introduce and integrate prevention programs. In Toronto, the Youth Shelter Interagency Network (YSIN) is one such community table in which Family and Natural Supports work was introduced. During the planning of the program, leaders at Covenant House convened with the YSIN to make the case for launching an FNS program in Toronto. From there, they established an FNS advisory group that oversaw the program's design and how it would operate, in close consultation with youth and family members. It was important for FNS program staff to work out of the shelters in order to deepen outreach efforts and build rapport with young people. To support these efforts, FNS advisory members were asked to identify one person at each of their organizations to take on the role of liaison between their agency and the FNS program. The FNS Champions, as they came to be known, played a crucial role in the program's success by brokering the relationship between FNS workers and the shelters. As such, they advocate on behalf of the FNS program and help FNS workers embed themselves into the shelter system. The FNS Champions are helping mobilize early intervention efforts across the homeless sector.

*“What does it look like for another shelter to have someone from another organization coming in and delivering a service? That doesn't happen very often. So having more of an integrated partnership model with some embedded advocacy is critically important. [...] That really shifted it from being a Covenant House program to being a program that's serving the sector.”*

*– Key Informant of the Toronto FNS Program*

## SHIFTING TO AN FNS APPROACH IN YOUR ORGANIZATION

Shifting to a new way of viewing family and natural supports is no easy task. The table below (Change Collective, 2019) can help organizations transition from a traditional approach to working with young people to a Family and Natural Supports approach.

<b>STATUS QUO APPROACH</b>	<b>FNS APPROACH</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Our first instinct is to meet every need with a professional support.</li> <li>○ We attend to basic physical needs first (food, shelter, clothing), and consider relational/socio-emotional needs later.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ We actively seek out and draw on resources and assets within the youth's support network.</li> <li>○ We treat the need for connection with the same urgency as physical needs (and we can meet that need ourselves).</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ We protect youth by limiting their exposure to those who could hurt them.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ We recognize the limits of our power, and know that youth will often maintain a connection with people that we do not consider positive or healthy. Instead of forbidding contact, we build youth capacity to set boundaries and keep themselves safe.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ We focus solely on the youth — their needs, their perspectives, their goals.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ We work with youth in the context of their natural supports, seeking to strengthen the capacity of those within the network to support the needs and goals of the youth.</li> </ul>

## Creating Inclusive & Welcoming Spaces

The following cohorts of young people are particularly vulnerable to experiencing homelessness:

- Newcomers to Canada
- Racialized youth
- Young parents
- Indigenous youth
- LGBTQ2S youth
- Low income individuals and/or families
- Youth accessing Group Homes or emergency shelters
- Youth involved in the criminal justice system
- Youth involved with child protection authorities



Family and Natural Support programs need to create inclusive spaces for youth and their families. This involves using an anti-oppressive approach that practices respect for individual choice and cultural diversity. Case management tools and documents need to be open enough for young people and their family members to self-identify. For example, intake forms should allow for young people and their supports to select their gender identity, pronoun, and name they want to be called, instead of copying this information from identification.

In addition to tools and documents, the service delivery model must be inclusive. Staff need to practice cultural curiosity and humility and recognize the privilege and power imbalance inherent in the therapeutic and/or case management-client relationship. It is highly recommended that all organizational staff are trained in cultural competency/safety.

Effective family intervention work requires flexibility. Family workers must be able to ‘join’ with a wide variety of family cultures if the work is to be effective. Workers need to both lead and follow the family. Using a harm reduction approach, young people and their family/natural supports are met ‘where they are at’ (in a non-judgmental and accepting manner even if staff don’t agree with their values/actions). A parent who is struggling to accept their LGBTQ2S child may not accept suggestions or make shifts until their relationship with the worker has been established. It is important that the worker makes the parent feel respected, listened to, and not judged. Once rapport has been established, the worker can begin supporting the parent to accept their child. It is important that the worker balance this effort with the need to make spaces inclusive and the young person feel welcome.

## Staff Roles

There are several ways to staff a Family and Natural Supports Program. Deciding on the right composition and size of team comes down to the needs of the community and the local resources that are available. Below is an overview of typical FNS roles and staffing needs. There will be variations in job titles, roles, and responsibilities depending on community and program adaptations.

### **PROGRAM MANAGER/COORDINATOR**

The program manager oversees the day-to-day operations of the program and is part of the organization’s leadership team. This position is active in program fundraising and reporting functions, program outreach, supervising program staff, and keeping staff informed of organizational issues and trends. They also facilitate the intake process of new youth and families and assign cases to the staff team according to current caseloads.

## **FAMILY AND NATURAL SUPPORTS PROGRAM STAFF**

FNS program staff positions fall into two categories, depending on whether the program offers a therapeutic component. It is important to note that regulation of clinical support varies by province and territory in Canada. Below are brief summaries of the two roles.

FNS staff offering non-therapeutic support do not need to be registered professionals and have a caseload of 15–25, depending on complexity. If young people and families have high needs that require clinical expertise, appropriate referrals should be made. The position provides individual and group coaching, assessment, case management, advocacy, and works collaboratively with other agencies and community groups to identify ways youth and natural supports can explore, activate, and/or strengthen their connections. FNS case managers also assist youth in increasing their social capital and locating appropriate community referrals to promote a positive and successful transition to adult self-sufficiency.

Service providers offering therapeutic support are typically registered professionals (except in jurisdictions where therapy is not regulated) and have a maximum caseload of 12. In addition to offering the services mentioned above, this position brings a clinical understanding to the situation of youth and their natural supports, provides group and individual counselling, and provides mental health and other referrals that only registered professionals can provide.

In both roles, FNS program staff can be mobile or based in a shelter or drop-in agency. If based in an agency, they are integrated members of the shelter or drop-in team. For example, FNS staff may facilitate interactive workshops, discussions, art activities, and movies in the host agency to build rapport with youth. They also work with the program manager to advocate in the community for the significance of family in preventing and addressing youth homelessness.

## **CLINICAL SUPERVISION**

For FNS programs that are delivering therapy as part of their service activities, clinical supervision is recommended. This position, which may be offered by an external consultant or within an organization, provides monthly individual supervision reviewing all casework and clinical practice. Qualifications for a clinical position generally includes: Registered Marriage and Family Therapist, Registered Social Worker, and Registered Psychotherapist.

### **Typically, the purpose of clinical supervision is to:**

- Create a space to critically examine the work,
- Build systemic formulations and hypotheses,
- Strategize service plans,
- Clarify goals,

- Bring attention to workers' bias and blind spots and potential issues of transference and countertransference,
- Identify opportunities for training and professional development of staff, and
- Encourage self-care of staff.

The clinical position reviews and guides the work of the Family and Natural Supports program and in most cases reviews case notes, proposed formulations and service plans, and assists the planning of the next several sessions. Clinical supervision is not a required component of Family and Natural Supports programs.

### **SHELTER DIVERSION**

Shelter diversion occurs in a homeless shelter context and may be the first point of contact for many young people and their chosen supports. The purpose of shelter diversion is to assist youth in returning home when it is safe to do so or find alternative housing. This may involve interim housing in the short term while more permanent housing is being arranged. The caseload for Diversion Workers is usually between 15 and 20. The role focuses on assessment and identifying potential referrals for more intensive work. The goal is to divert the young person from entering the shelter system. This means connecting the youth and their supports to the community resources they require.

## Staff Training

**Effective service provision demands ongoing training and support for staff in the following areas that are key to Family and Natural Supports:**

- Positive youth development and strengths/asset-based service
- Trauma-informed care
- Harm reduction
- Shelter orientations (for staff who work in shelter settings)
- Family therapy training (for registered therapists only)

Training in these areas should be a requirement.

## Evaluation

Evaluation is a crucial part of a program's development and also in understanding the impacts of the program itself. Evaluation allows program managers, staff, and researchers/evaluators to observe and inform how the program is working at different stages of its development (e.g., planning, implementation, sustainability); to provide important information about whether or not a program's activities are being implemented as they were intended; what parts of the program are working well, and what parts of the program can be improved; and to measure the impacts and effectiveness of the

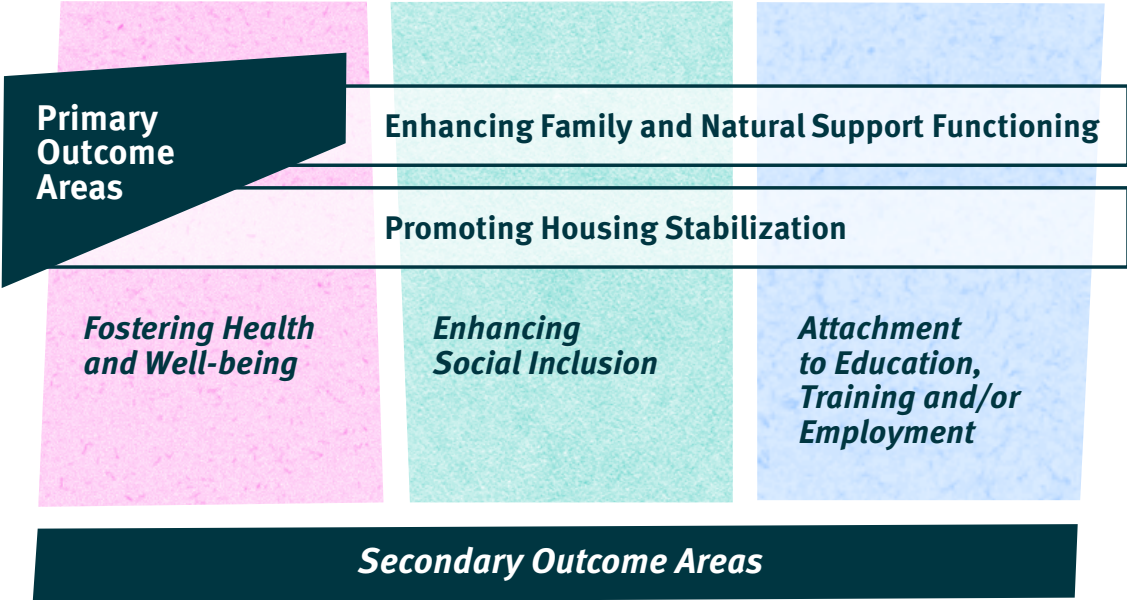
program. There are various types of program evaluations, which can include developmental, implementation, and outcome evaluations, all of which can be used to evaluate FNS programs. Developmental evaluations are useful while your FNS program is under development – and can be helpful to construct the program’s key components, theory of change, and logic model. Once the program is underway, implementation evaluations can be useful to determine whether or not (and in what ways) the program is being implemented as it was intended, and can include conducting fidelity assessments. Outcome evaluations can be conducted once your FNS program has stabilized, a clear theory of change has been established, and your program is being implemented according to the FNS program model.

**DEFINING INDIVIDUAL AND PROGRAM-LEVEL OUTCOMES**

Program outcomes must be tied to the objectives and the philosophy of FNS. In fact, these objectives should sit at the heart of the service delivery model and be used when evaluating the impact of the program. At the individual level, it is important to track how participants’ lives are improving as a result of the intervention (e.g., mapping the number of new connections a young person can draw upon in times of need). Participant level outcomes provide insight into how the services should be modified and tailored to meet the unique needs of young people. Taken together, program and participant level outcomes are useful for measuring program performance, improving service delivery, and linking practice to desired outcomes.

For FNS programs, we have identified two primary outcome areas and three secondary outcome areas that can be measured to track individual and program progress.

**FAMILY AND NATURAL SUPPORT OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK**



**EACH OUTCOME AREA IS FURTHER DEFINED BY PROGRAM OBJECTIVES:**

**1. *Enhancing Family and Natural Support Functioning***

- Enhanced connections with family and other natural supports
- Improved communication among youth and meaningful others
- Decreased conflict among family and natural supports
- Increased positive interactions with family and natural supports
- Decreased stress in relationships with family and natural supports

**2. *Promoting Housing Stabilization***

- Maintained housing with the family or natural support
- Support in a return to the family or natural support's home for those who have left
- Support in accessing a housing program such as HF4Y if return is not possible
- Enhanced knowledge and skills regarding housing and independent living
- Reduced stays in emergency shelters

**3. *Fostering Health and Well-being***

- Increased mental health well-being
- Increased overall well-being
- Enhanced access to services and supports
- Enhanced personal safety
- Improved self-esteem
- Enhanced resilience

**4. *Enhancing Social Inclusion***

- Keeping young people in place in their communities
- Enhanced connections to communities of young person's choice
- Strengthened cultural engagement and participation
- Engagement in meaningful activities

**5. *Attachment to Education, Training, and/or Employment***

- Established goals for education and employment
- Enhanced participation in education
- Enhanced educational achievement
- Enhanced participation in training
- Enhanced labour force participation
- Improved financial security

## **DATA MANAGEMENT AND SHARED MEASUREMENT**

Underlying our approach to data management at the program and organization level are shared measurement and data management systems, which are key to supporting individual case management as well as broader social change. Having agencies and services use common assessment, service provision, and outcomes measures requires not only agreement within the sector but cooperation from funders.

All of this works most effectively if there is a data management platform or system (in Canada, HIFIS or HMIS) with a data sharing agreement where all agencies input data and individuals can be tracked as they go through the system. While respecting privacy, data sharing means that young people can be tracked as they move through the system, and that they don't have to repeat an intensive (and potentially intrusive) intake every time they encounter a service. The benefits here are many. First, it can support the alignment of program philosophies, activities, and outcomes across the sector. Second, it can contribute to enhanced collaboration, systems integration, and a rethinking of how to collectively respond to the problem of youth homelessness through Collective Impact. Third and most importantly, it can potentially lead to better outcomes for youth, as they get access to the services that are most appropriate, enables more effective flow through the system, and holds the sector accountable for better outcomes for youth.

In order to measure progress and the effectiveness of systems approaches, performance indicators and milestones must be set at the community, provincial/territorial, and national levels. It is important to note that integrated systems work necessarily requires a broad cross-sectoral approach and working with key stakeholders that are outside the traditional homelessness sector.

### **Turner identifies that the goal of such a systems-focused performance management process is to help the local community or government:**

- Evaluate system's impact on priority populations;
- Articulate what the system aims to achieve;
- Illustrate the level of performance expected of all services;
- Facilitate client participation in quality assurance activities at program and system-levels; and
- Promote service integration across the sector and with mainstream systems (Turner, 2015).

The key challenges for communities to engage in this important work comes down to resources, training, and capacity to collect and manage data and to engage in data analysis and reporting that can contribute to a better understanding of their client base, service level performance, and can lead to continuous improvement. Here, higher levels of government need to fund and support communities to do this work if they want to see outcomes.

*Developing and implementing efficient performance measurement processes begins with a collective understanding of performance measures and targets and systems and processes (including data management tools and shared measurement discussed above) in place with support.*





# SERVICE DELIVERY

Service delivery of FNS programs and practices must be individualized and client-driven, meeting the needs of young people and their family or natural supports. The program and service delivery should be structured and designed in a way that empowers youth to build resilience and strength to achieve their own goals as they relate to improved relationships. Because the main objective of FNS programs is to enhance a young person's natural supports, it is imperative that staff work *alongside* young people to determine the best path forward.

## Positive Youth Development Approach

FNS service uses positive youth development, which is a strengths-based approach that focuses not just on risk and vulnerability, but also youth's assets.

### A positive youth development approach:

- Identifies the youth's personal strengths in order to build self-esteem and a positive sense of self
- Works to improve the youth's communication and problem-solving skills
- Enhances and builds natural supports, including family relationships
- Assists the youth in personal goal setting
- Helps the youth to access educational opportunities and identify personal interests

## Harm Reduction Approach

Harm reduction is “an approach or strategy aimed at reducing the risks and harmful effects associated with substance use and addictive behaviours for the individual, the community, and society as a whole. [...] Recognizing that abstinence may be neither a realistic nor a desirable goal for some users (especially in the short term), the use of substances is accepted as a fact, and the main focus is placed on reducing harm while use continues” (Gaetz, 2015). Harm reduction emerged in response to the growing awareness that abstinence-only requirements presented additional barriers for people seeking services. Moreover, such requirements were holding people who had experienced trauma to an unfair and unrealistic standard that had the unintended consequence of encouraging substance use in other places (Gaetz, 2018).

When young people experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of experiencing homelessness use substances (to cope with violence and poverty, for example), we want to reduce the harm that this substance use may cause to themselves, their families, and



their communities. Harm reduction does not focus solely on a young person’s substance use but also considers factors that may have led to or resulted from their substance use. In this way, the young person is seen as a whole individual, with their substance use not seen as failure but within the context of their experiences. The central idea behind harm reduction is to meet young people “where they are at.”

Using a harm reduction approach is important because it reduces the judgement that youth and their families may feel from workers. FNS takes a harm reduction approach in every facet of the work, including educating shelter staff on why some youth engage in such behaviours. For some, abstinence may not be possible or desired at all, yet they still need support to reduce harms that may occur from their substance use. Harm reduction in Family and Natural Supports programs is about more than substance use. It is also about working with young people as they navigate their relationships, especially ones that are challenging or unsupportive.

## Outreach

Outreach happens with staff from other organizations and programs, as well directly with young people. The Making the Shift demonstration project partners have shared that combining outreach with food is a successful practice to connect with young people.

### Outreach should occur in the following spaces (but are not limited to):

- Schools
- Shelters
- Young people directly in shelters and other programs that work with young people experiencing homelessness
- Hospitals
- Bail programs
- Mental health agencies
- Parent support groups
- Community tables/networks that focus on young people
- Youth hubs
- Any other place young people may convene

Program outreach should be included in the intake process of other programs. For example, during shelter intake, the housing worker should mention the Family and Natural Supports as one of the programs available to young people.

Many young people have a distrust of systems (Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services, and Indigenous Affairs, 2008). This distrust comes from a variety of places, including involvement in child protection services (CAS), justice, and mental health systems. Young people may also have distrust of service delivery organizations and workers: “This mistrust is often reflected in underutilization of formal services. As many have been exploited and victimized by adults, including members of their own families, they may be extremely distrustful” (McManus & Thompson, 2008). For this reason, it is critical that FNS service providers spend a longer period of

time than usual engaging and building rapport before intaking a young person. Family and Natural Supports workers are often engaged in the community. This means the worker is present in common areas and community activities in shelters, youth hubs, or any other place young people may convene. Workers often connect with young people about other topics or issues. For example, workers may host a monthly movie night, facilitate groups, or sit at a table with art supplies and wait for young people to approach them. These activities help young people and the worker to start to build rapport.

## Referrals

Family and Natural Supports programs rely on established relationships with community partners for referrals and supports. Program staff actively seek to connect with organizations that serve young people.

**Youth can be referred to a Family and Natural Supports program through a variety of ways:**

- School staff who identify a youth is at risk
- A family member who contacts a shelter inquiring about accessing a bed for their youth or a family member who arrives at the shelter with their youth inquiring about accessing a bed
- Self-referral
- A family member who contacts the program directly
- Shelter intake staff
- External organization (schools, shelters, hospitals, bail program, mental health agencies, parent support groups)

## Case management and service provision

The case management approach is participant-led, holistic, and supportive of self-empowerment and self-advocacy. The intensity of the service is determined on a case-by-case basis and shifts according to needs. The worker engages each participant to understand the situation, explore individual strengths, interests, and goals. The worker provides ongoing coaching and modelling for both the young person and their support. Participants receive individualized, flexible support that is tailored to needs identified by the young person.

**The work is generally regarding the life areas of:**

- Family/interpersonal conflict;
- Parenting (especially for young parents);
- Mental health and addictions;
- Housing and homelessness;
- Financial issues/basic needs (food bank, social assistance); and
- Education and employment

Most importantly, service delivery should be guided by the FNS philosophy, program objectives, and desired outcomes. At the individual level, case managers and the service delivery team can track how participants' lives are improving as a result of the intervention (e.g., mapping the number of new connections a young person can draw upon in times of need). Details on FNS program outcomes can be found in the evaluation section of this guide.

## WHO IS THE CLIENT?

Youth homelessness services are typically geared to working with young people as individuals. Moreover, in many contexts, service providers often want to protect the young person, and family can be seen as a problematic part of a young person's past rather than a current or potential resource.

“Our understanding of youth homelessness is very much framed ... by the notion of the family as a ‘problem’; that family abuse and conflict are at the core of the young person's experience of homeless. The fact that such a high percentage of street youth leave homes characterized by violence and abuse should give one pause to consider whether reuniting alienated youth with their families is desirable, or even possible.” (Winland et al., 2011, p. 20).

Engaging in Family and Natural supports work requires a reframing of who is in fact the client and the nature of relationships between young people and their “families” broadly defined. FNS staff support both the young person and their chosen family members and natural supports towards improved relationships and greater understanding of one another. Family, and how it is constituted, is defined by the young person: for some, it may refer to their biological family, for others, their adoptive family or the people they were connected to while in care (e.g., a foster family) or a chosen family (e.g., people who share a similar background or community connection). Natural supports are defined as the personal relationships that support youth in their daily lives and may include family, friends, romantic partners, neighbours, coaches, co-workers, team-mates, and other relationships or associations that comprise our social networks. A large part of FNS work entails educating youth and chosen family members on a range of topics and areas of focus that have been previously misunderstood or have become sources of conflict, for example, a family member's mental health problems. While contact must always be driven by the young must always be driven by the young person, FNS workers must approach chosen family members and natural supports as integral components of their work and should do so with a great deal of compassion and empathy.

*“When we started doing family reconnection work it changed the way we thought about “who is the client?” Before that, we were clear that we were working with young people – they were our clients. After, we began to think of young people AND their families as the client. This changed everything – how we think about our work, and what kind of staff we need to do the best work we can with both young people and their families.”*

*– Kim Ledene, Director of Youth Housing & Shelter at Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary.*



## **TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE**

Family and Natural Supports service should be provided with a Trauma Informed Practice lens. Responses to trauma are very individual and vary from seeing trauma as a minor hindrance to having a debilitating response. Trauma may cause people to experience “anxiety, terror, shock, shame, emotional numbness, disconnection, intrusive thoughts, helplessness, and powerlessness” (Arthur et al., 2013, p. 6), which may manifest in symptoms or adaptations like chronic health issues, substance abuse disorders, and mental health disorders. In children, early trauma can negatively impact developmental progression. Trauma informed practice in Family and Natural Supports work can help workers avoid misdiagnosing client behaviour and help provide a basis for compassionate treatment planning for both the young person and for their family/natural support (Arthur et al., 2013).

It is also important to remember that for many families trauma can be historical. In particular, Indigenous families experience intergenerational trauma as a result of historical racism and genocide, and contemporary forms of racism and discrimination can perpetuate this historical trauma. Cultural awareness with regards to trauma is important in the work because the context of family relationships may differ between different cultures. As well, traumatic stress may be expressed differently within different cultural frameworks, so it is important for organizations to develop cultural and linguistic competence (Hopper et al., 2010).

## **SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE**

FNS work begins when a young person who is at risk of homelessness or is experiencing homelessness identifies that they would like to reconnect with family, strengthen existing relationships, and/or establish new relationships. The first step in the service delivery is the intake process, which involves explanation about confidentiality, the limits of confidentiality (e.g., duty to report, risk to self or others), the completion of paperwork, and ensuring that everyone understands how the program works and what is expected of each person. Intake also includes conversations to establish the goals for young person and their chosen support during the program. Decisions are also made about when and where the meetings will happen.

The primary purpose of FNS service delivery is to identify and support young people’s goals as they relate to the engagement with and connection to family members and natural supports. These goals may entail past, present, and future experiences with family members and natural supports and should support young people to develop supportive relationships and a sense of belonging outside of professional services (Toronto Family and Natural Supports Service Provision document).

**The MtS Toronto FNS Program shares the following as possible goals that a worker might identify with the youth in the program:**

- Building closer and happier relationships with family/natural supports who they currently have contact with
- Reconnecting with family/natural supports who may have been a part of the youth's life previously
- Connecting with family members/natural supports who may not have been involved in their life previously
- Increasing connection to cultural, community, faith based, and/or social recreational activities and groups
- Working one-to-one with the FNS Worker to talk about, process, and gain a new or enriched understanding of family relationships and experiences
- Maintaining contact with family/natural supports now they've left home
- Setting healthy boundaries in existing relationships

*These materials were developed by Covenant House Toronto as part of the Making the Shift Demonstration Lab.*

**SUPPORTING FAMILIES AND NATURAL SUPPORTS**

All engagement with family and natural supports should be youth-led. Once a young person chooses to engage a family member or natural support, the youth and FNS Worker decide how that person is to be invited to participate. The youth may want to do this themselves or the FNS workers may make the first contact, typically by phone. FNS workers explain why they are making contact and communicate the young person's desires. Responses from contacted supports varies: sometimes they are happy that the youth has reached out; other times, they may convey sadness, anger, or suspicion. In order to reassure them, FNS workers must recognize that these are understandable reactions and communicate to the family member or natural support that they are there to support them in reconnecting or strengthening their existing relationship and that they will strive to maintain an unbiased approach in achieving these goals.

Once engagement happens, FNS service providers work with the youth and their chosen supports to identify strengths of their relationship and areas that could benefit from program supports. As work progresses, youth, families, and FNS staff continue to refine the needs and goals of all involved and work towards fulfilling and achieving these needs and goals.

### Activities that support this work include:

- maintaining engagement
- encouraging identification of holistic, agreed upon, family goals
- goal-focused interventions (coaching and skill-building, coping strategies, etc.)
- systems navigation (referrals, accompaniment, advocacy)
- other activities that strengthen the youth's relationships with family members and chosen supports

The long-term goals of the FNS program are that youth have avoided or exited homelessness, have established stronger relationships, can rely on supports outside of professional services, and can problem-solve effectively so that they can maintain housing stability.

## Caseloads, Graduation, and Follow-up

### Caseloads for staff working directly with youth and their families and natural supports are as follows:

- Shelter diversion workers have a caseload of 15–20 families.
- Family and Natural Support workers offering non-therapeutic services have an average caseload of 15–25, depending on the complexity of needs; Family and Natural Support workers offering therapeutic services have a caseload of 8–12 families, depending on the complexity. It's important to note that each worker should have a balance between higher and lower complexity cases.
- Length of service is determined collaboratively by the clients and the worker in relation to their stated goals along with clinical judgment. There is no time limit for services or cap on the number of sessions. Programs continue to work with young people and their chosen supports for as long as needed.

Closing a file, also referred to as graduation, occurs once youth, families, and supports have met their goals and feel more confident in their abilities. There may be times, especially soon after graduation, that the young person and/or their chosen support requests a check-in appointment: “For some programs, reunification is the primary goal and services taper off quickly thereafter. This can leave youth and their families without the support they need to implement the conflict resolution strategies they have learned” (Pergamit et al., 2016: 46).

It is considered a good practice for programs to have a six-month transition plan once families have met their goals. This helps them have a connection to the program staff (open file) to support their stability. Choices for Youth in St. John's has a six-month period after completion of the program that the young person or natural support can contact staff for follow up support.

While long-term follow up is often not possible, it is important that programs try to keep in touch with young people and their support person for several months after graduation, as a program measures success. What is happening 3 months after graduation? Is the young person still living in the family home or have they been able to maintain their independent housing? What is the status after 6 months? The ability for follow up is also important for program evaluation work.

## Challenges

### **SAFETY**

It needs to be stated that unlike Child Protection Services, Family and Natural Supports programs are voluntary, and there is no risk of the young person being taken into custody by program staff. Safety is a primary focus of Family and Natural Support work. One of the first things that staff need to do is to assess the safety of the young person to return to the family home, if this is desired by the young person. Staff should work with the young person to develop a safety plan for visits to the family home.

The location of meetings with families and youth are mutually agreed upon locations. Some families prefer a neutral location like a counselling room at the organization's office. Others may invite the family worker into the family home for the sessions. Because the young person and family member or natural support are requesting to participate in the program, meeting in a private residence is an option.

Organizations that have meetings in family homes may want to implement a home safety audit prior to having sessions in the family home. This audit would be conducted by two staff members. The issue with home audits is that they can send a message to the family or natural supports that program staff do not trust them. It is important that staff conducting sessions in family homes keep their colleagues aware of their location.

### **UNSUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS**

There will be times when young people will want to connect with adults with whom they have unsupportive/unhealthy relationships. In these situations, case work should honour the young person's choice in a way that is safe and trauma-informed: "Research suggests that 90% of youth who have transitioned out of care are in touch with their biological families, and up to half choose to live with them. Even when they're fraught with conflict, those relationships obviously provide something terribly important – important enough to endure the negative aspects that might accompany them" (Change Collective, 2019, p. 16). By using an approach that reduces the risk of potential harm, workers support the young person to connect in the safest and healthiest way. It is important that workers support young people to navigate unsupportive relationships. The worker can assist the young person to create a safety plan for themselves and also process the interactions that occur with unsupportive relationships.



## PROTECTION VERSUS CONNECTION TENSION

Traditional thinking has been that for youth experiencing homelessness (and especially those who have had involvement with child protection services<sup>3</sup>) any connection to family is potentially harmful. The goal of the protection approach is to protect children and young people from negative family dynamics by removing them from the full family.

Work to maintain and improve family and natural supports connections seems to contravene this thinking. The objective of Family and Natural Supports work is to maintain a connection between young people and some members of their family, when it is considered safe and in the best interest of the young person. This work is responsive to the needs and desires of the young person as per the Core Principles outlined earlier. Emphasis needs to be placed that this work is done with family and natural supports members that the young person has identified wanting to have a connection with and the depth of the connection is based on the young person. For example, when a young person does not want to return to the family home, this is not a goal of the intervention.

A tension sometimes emerges when Family and Natural Supports programs place the organization in conflict with individuals and other organizations that prioritize protection over connection. This conflict can also occur within the organization with staff who have not accepted the Family and Natural Supports approach. This conflict is often due to a lack of a full understanding of Family and Natural Supports work. This tension can undermine the work and efficiency of Family and Natural Supports programs and needs to be addressed. There is a positive in this tension in that it requires Family and Natural Supports programs to be careful with connecting youth with family and natural supports and ensure that safety protocols are in place for youth in the program. Organizations and communities that have decided to implement a Family and Natural Supports approach need to dedicate time and resources to support change management activities. It is important that Family and Natural Supports organizations are able to reduce this tension by educating skeptics of connection work by having them understand the program objectives.

## DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WORKING WITH FAMILIES AND NATURAL SUPPORTS

Working with family and natural supports is about deepening connections in a structured and supportive manner. The focus is on developing and building positive relationships. These skills are transferable to new relationships that the young person will build. They are important because they support young people as they strengthen their community relations and decrease social isolation.

There are important distinctions when working with families and natural supports, as the type of relationship will influence the work. Working with families may involve more consideration of past challenges, and the reconciling of these past conflicts.

3. One of key findings of the [Without A Home](#) study was that almost 60% of youth who completed the survey indicated some kind of involvement with child protection services in the past.



**There are times when young people cannot reconnect with their families. These include, but are not limited to:**

- young person is a newcomer without family in Canada;
- young person no longer lives in the same community as their family;
- reconnection to an immediate family member is not possible.

Working with natural supports can be more future-focused and look at how to build and sustain relationships between the young person and chosen supports. Unlike family relationships, this work does not usually entail a long history of issues that need unpacking. Instead, the focus is often on how best to move forward and less on how to resolve past challenges. FNS workers support the youth by identifying the limits, boundaries, and expectations that they have of these relationships. Though natural supports relationships are well meaning, sometimes they can disrupt or complicate family strengthening efforts. It is important to be aware of this possibility as FNS workers support youth in their goals.

# FNS SPOTLIGHTS

Covenant House | Toronto, Ontario  
Justin Sage-Passant

**WHO:** Covenant House helps youth ignite their potential and reclaim their lives. As Canada's largest agency serving youth who are homeless, trafficked, or at risk, we offer the widest range of 24/7 services to about 350 young people each day.

As a national leader, we educate and advocate for long-term change to improve the lives of vulnerable youth. This includes influencing public policy, leading awareness and prevention programs, and continually building and sharing our knowledge. As a learning organization, we strive for excellence and programs with impact. More than a place to stay, we provide life-changing care with unconditional love and respect. We meet youth's immediate needs and then we work together to achieve their future goals. We offer housing options, health and well-being support, training and skill development, and ongoing care once youth move into the community. Thanks to our donors, who contribute almost 80 per cent of our \$33-million annual operating budget, we are able to deliver these comprehensive programs and services. Since 1982, Covenant House has supported more than 95,000 young people.

**THE FNS PROGRAM:** The FNS Program, in partnership with shelters and service providers across Toronto, helps youth at risk of, or experiencing homelessness, find and/or strengthen connections with family and chosen supports. The goal is for all youth to have supportive relationships that are separate from, and will continue after, their homelessness and service provision experiences. What does "family and natural supports" mean? Different people have different ideas about what "family" means, so we use "family and natural supports" to describe any group of people who care about each other. The FNS Program respects each person's beliefs, culture, and life experiences and will follow the youth's lead in who they say is their family.

**WHY FNS?:** It is well recognized that family conflict is a main reason youth experience homelessness. We also know that despite challenging experiences, youth often maintain contact with family during their experience of homelessness. Recognizing this reality, we want to support opportunities, when appropriate, to resolve conflicts and reconcile relationships. We also want to support youth navigating challenging relationships in safe and healthy ways, or find and connect with other family members and chosen supports to strengthen their network of supportive people.

*"People put things off, wait a week, then a month, then longer. If you wait too long, it becomes too difficult. Everyone will regret not connecting with family if they do nothing,"*

*– Youth Consultant  
to the FNS Program*



At the core of our FNS approach is the belief that relationships are important; non-professional supports promote resilience, positive self-identity, and well-being. We believe that when youth have supportive people in their life, their experience of homelessness is more likely to be brief, and they are less likely to return to homelessness.

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, we see belonging and connection as a basic human need that provides a platform for success in other areas of youth's lives.

**SERVICE DELIVERY:** The FNS Program is a voluntary service where the young person decides what the plan is and who is involved. FNS Workers provide “hands on” support to both youth and their family members to mediate conflicts, reconcile or strengthen relationships, and help youth and families access resources they might need.

### FNS Workers provide integrated services in three areas:

1. *Coaching and skill building;*
2. *Family and individual therapy;*
3. *Systems navigation support.*

FNS Workers have flexible schedules and can meet with clients at locations convenient to them. FNS Workers can continue to support youth if they move shelters or move into housing. Service delivery is implemented using an anti-oppressive approach that practices respect for individual choice and promotes cultural safety. All services are provided from a trauma-informed practice lens, not only for the young person, but also for their family/natural support.

*“Having someone who is positive about you makes a big difference. It can motivate you, lift you out of it. In the harder times, you remember the positive things people have said about you,”*

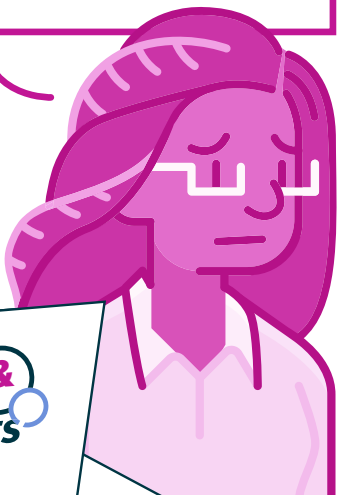
*– Youth Consultant to the FNS Program*



*“I can't do school if my mental health is not good. My mental health is not good if my relationships aren't good,*

*– Youth Consultant to the FNS Program*

**CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES:** Traditionally, in the homeless sector in Toronto, family has been viewed as a problematic part of youth's past. This has resulted in a view of family as something youth should be supported to separate from. This view is further reinforced by programs and services that focus on building skills in youth so that they can be “self-sufficient” and “independent.” Knowing this, it is not unexpected that there has been some apprehension and uncertainty about connecting youth to a service that focuses specifically on youth's relationships to family. To help with this challenge, the FNS team regularly attend staff meetings to answer questions and share information and examples from their work.



Most recently, we distributed a survey to gain further insight into staff teams' level of understanding of the FNS Program. As a result of this survey, we were then able to produce and distribute an FAQ about the FNS Program.

Our FNS Program works in partnership with 7 other agencies, with integration at 11 different sites (7 emergency shelters, 1 drop-in program, and 3 transitional housing programs). FNS Workers have scheduled hours onsite at the different sites where they run activities, engage with youth and staff, and are available for appointments. This approach has resulted in FNS services being accessible and available to many more youth than if we were only integrated at one organization. Supporting this approach has been the work of the FNS Advisory group and the FNS Champions group. The Advisory is comprised of representatives from each of the partnering organizations who help inform decision making. The Champions are staff members from each of the sites where the FNS Workers are integrated. Champions directly help with the coordination and implementation of the FNS Program at their site.

# FNS SPOTLIGHT

Boys & Girls Clubs of Calgary | Calgary, Alberta  
Kim Ledene

**WHO:** Boys & Girls Clubs of Calgary (BGCC) was formed in 1939 as a community-based organization. We are proud of our track record for implementing change in a timely and expedient manner to keep pace with the evolving needs of our clientele. With the goal of helping homeless youth gain the skills to return to their families or to live independently in the community, BGCC's Youth Housing and Shelter programs offer a comprehensive support system to help youth permanently end their experience of homelessness. We work to prevent youth homelessness through specific initiatives in support of vulnerable young people and their families. We offer referral and assessment, emergency and transitional youth shelter, community and family outreach and prevention, and housing.

**THE FUSION PROGRAM:** Fusion offers support and case management to vulnerable youth aged 14-24 and their families and Natural Supports. Fusion's goal is to support youth to transition more successfully to adulthood by supporting them and/or their natural supports to enhance their relationships. These natural supports might be family or other adults who the youth identify as important. Fusion guides youth and their natural supports through case management, including assessment, coaching, referral, system navigation, and advocacy during the years when youth are transitioning to adulthood. Fusion Coaches use guiding principles to help in improving or creating connection and opportunities for positive interactions. Coaches support these individuals in negotiating the context of relationships including roles, responsibilities, and boundaries; establishing respectful lines of communication; problem solving and conflict resolution skills; and increasing understanding in areas such as family conflict, adolescent development, and mental health and addictions.

**WHY FNS?:** When the 10-year plan to end homelessness in Calgary was launched, BGCC began to take a serious look at our services for youth experiencing homelessness and the outcomes. We started to ask this question for every youth we served: "What would it take to end this youth's homelessness with this experience?"

In asking this question, we wondered whether for some youth family and natural supports was part of their solution. We asked the youth who were staying in our low barrier shelter if they had contact with a family member on the day of their stay. On average, 30% of them said yes. So we asked ourselves, could family strengthening divert these youth from homelessness? Through our housing programs, we began to see youth were able to reunite and re-establish relationships with their family once they were housed and supported in accessing community resources. With the right strategy could we have prevented these young people from ever entering the system?

Although we started to see more and more youth ending their experience with homelessness, our shelter numbers remained steady. Youth were exiting the system, but there was at the same time a constant flow of new youth. If we really want to help end youth homelessness, we needed to shut the front door. We finally started to see family and natural supports could be part of the solution. We began offering prevention services to families who contacted our youth shelter. We learned that many youth were able to remain at home with the promise of support, that nobody wants to be a bad parent, families don't want to kick their kids out, but they believe they are out of solutions. Fusion was created to test a natural supports approach along with two other projects through the United Way's Vulnerable Youth Strategy. The group then evolved into the Change Collective which included much of the youth sector in Calgary and resulted in the **Natural Supports Framework**.

**SERVICE DELIVERY:** Youth who are experiencing a range of challenges (risk of homelessness, addictions, mental health issues, family disconnection, developmental trauma, limited social supports) are supported by professionals who are relationship-focused, responsive, humble, and led by the needs and priorities of youth and their natural supports.

#### **The specific strategies that are used include:**

- Intensive trauma-informed case management
- Facilitated referrals, system navigation and advocacy
- Assessment and measurement tools that provide youth and their natural supports with positive, strengths-based data
- Family mediation and reconciliation
- Life Skills Coaching
- Parenting Skills Coaching
- Support to identify, reunify, develop, and/or sustain a network of natural supports
- Support to connect to a variety of housing opportunities

**CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES:** In the beginning of the program, the majority of staff were youth workers. As such, they were trained to be advocates for youth and often saw family and natural supports as obstacles. At the same time, the family workers in the program were advocates for families and often labeled youth behavior as "bad." It became clear that supporting youth to connect with family and natural supports requires staff who know how to connect and engage vulnerable and often street-entrenched youth, but who also have the ability and credibility to work with parents and other adults. We learned that the program needed to overcome these silos by finding and retaining staff who can bridge this divide and take a systems approach to the work.

We also struggled with not putting ourselves in the centre of the youth's life. We had to consciously create space for youth, family, and natural supports to participate and provide solutions. We refer to this as "taking off the cape": we are not there to rescue people but rather to support them in creating a network of support that they can rely on. We recognize that by being at the centre of a youth's life and doing everything for that youth, we don't leave any room for the youth to do things for themselves or any space for non-professionals to support them.

# CONCLUSION

**In reimagining how to respond to youth homelessness, there is a need to reconsider the role of building and strengthening relationships between young people, their families (as they define them), and other meaningful adults in their lives. This approach moves away from framing the family as the problem, which youth must be protected from.**

Enhancing Family and Natural supports as a philosophy, a practice, and/or a program refocuses this work in a positive way – one that views families as valuable assets that can, with the right supports, contribute to youth well-being. FNS should be a key focus of youth homelessness prevention work. It can also bolster attempts to help young people exit homelessness in a way that enhances their housing stabilization and allows them to move forward in their lives.

The Family and Natural Supports Framework clearly defines the approach and is a guide for those individuals, organizations, and policy makers who wish to implement this work.

**If you or your organization is interested in exploring how to implement FNS as a philosophy, practice or program, here are three things you can do to get started:**

- **1.** Audit how your organization currently approaches connecting clients to family or natural supports. The Change Collective, with support from Burns Fund, **published an FNS audit template to** assist organizations in conducting a review of their current practices, values, and approaches to FNS work.
- **2.** Take part in the Making the Shift FNS training. To learn more or register, email us at **[info@awayhome.ca](mailto:info@awayhome.ca)**
- **3.** Share this guide throughout your network. And send us what you are learning so the FNS framework can be updated over time.

The FNS framework presented here re-frames our understanding of the problem of homelessness and the solution: a focus on well-being, connection, and belonging can reduce the likelihood that any young person will wind up on the streets or experience chronic homelessness as an adult.



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