

Fall 2021

# 2021 Policy Priorities for the Children & Youth Serving Sector

National Alliance for Children and Youth



**NACY**

National Alliance for  
Children and Youth



**ANEJ**

L'alliance nationale pour  
l'enfance et la jeunesse



## Executive Summary

In Spring of 2020 when workers were sent home, programs and schools closed and the children and youth in our communities found themselves disconnected from many of the resources and supports they relied on to thrive, and in many cases – survive. The children and youth sector rallied together to adapt and innovate, creating new ways to connect and support children and youth. Front-line workers picked up their phones, delivered care-packages, learned how to use Zoom and Google classroom and created safe spaces in ways they never had before. This, all at a time when young people were experiencing a deterioration in their overall mental health (Cost, K.T., et al., 2021).

During this time, the absence of strong voices for the children and youth sector at the centre of national policy dialogue became more evident than ever before. Children and youth serving agencies have been there for Canada's youngest generation all along, and will continue to be there every day, learning, growing, and building back better. And yet, they have been the most under-appreciated and under-represented sector in terms of shaping pandemic public policy and delivery services.

In response, sector leaders came together, and the National Alliance for Children and Youth was reborn to help the sector's organizations reconnect, learn from each other, and speak to the priority needs of Canada's children and youth sector. Through a series of consultation, round tables, one-on-one meetings, group meetings and surveys, we identified four areas where the federal government could play a critical role in supporting our efforts.

## Our Recommendations

### **To ensure meaningful engagement with the children and youth sector, we ask:**

- *For the Minister of Youth to engage in meaningful dialogue with the children and youth sector.*
- *To support convening efforts to bring together leaders from across the sector*
- *To engage representatives from the government in NACY events and consultations*

### **To invest in youth-serving organizations, so we can invest in youth, we ask:**

- *For continued investment in the Youth Employment Services to ensure youth serving organizations (YSOs) can provide meaningful employment to youth.*
- *For investment in children and youth-serving organizations to enhance existing employment programs and/or create new training programs.*
- *For funding to develop innovative programming for children K-6 that focuses on recouping the hard and soft skills lost through the pandemic.*

### **To shift the narrative around funding, we ask:**

- *For broader consultation with the children and youth sector on funding priorities and funding reform.*
- *For greater consultation between the sector and federal government in developing new funding design strategies.*
- *To ensure new funding programs value existing programs, infrastructure and expertise as well as provide capacity for innovation and growth.*

### **To increase capacity for mental health supports for children and youth, we ask:**

- *To provide funding for mental health training for staff and volunteers.*
- *To provide funding for children and youth organizations to hire or connect with mental health professionals, social workers and/or elders to ensure an interdisciplinary approach to healing and a continuum of care for children in need.*
- *To ensure funding for staffing includes funding for health benefits, including Employee Assistant Programs.*

"The youth sector has proven and is proving that its services are essential to millions of young people worldwide" - Young People Championing Post-Pandemic Futures (2021)

"Prescriptive decision-making on public policy that affects the nonprofit sector .....made without the expertise of nonprofit organizations, will continue to lead to problems"  
- Imagine Canada (2021)

## **Priority #1: Meaningful engagement with the children and youth sector**

The children and youth serving sector continues to play a pivotal role in supporting young people as they navigate the COVID-19 pandemic. We provide vital support for young people (as well as their parents and guardians and their communities), continually developing new programs and adjusting strategies to support each and every young person and ensure they have the resources they need to survive and thrive.

As we move forward to build back better, our children and youth sector will continue to play a critical role in supporting this next generation. We know our efforts will be significantly enhanced if we can minimize the systemic fragmentation that has occurred within the sector due to jurisdictional issues, and the diverse services we collectively offer. NACY today is a fast-growing collaborative network of organizations from across Canada that provide a unique opportunity for wide cross-sectoral membership and perspective about the issues facing children and youth and their families. Currently, NACY is home to 16 member organizations, serving over 625,000 children and youth each year.

Our members come from all sectors of the child and youth arena: health, education, social services, recreation, family support and child development. Organizations big and small, from all parts of Canada, including those with national, provincial, regional and local mandates, are welcome to be part of NACY. This allows us to facilitate comprehensive and inclusive national dialogue about child and youth issues, and not be bound by sectoral or geographic perspectives.

We recognize the federal government's important contributions to the sector through the course of the pandemic and its intentional efforts to support and engage youth in public policy. The delivery of the State of the Youth Report early this year, the addition of non-profits as part of the wage-subsidy program, and the announcement of the Community Services Recovery Fund in Budget 2021, show us this government understands the role young people play in our society and the importance of the children and youth-serving sector in supporting them. We see the Prime Minister's Youth Council as an important tool for ensuring there is a strong youth voice guiding the decision-making process at a federal level, however a consistent and coordinated consultation with those with the hands-on experience and responsibility of service delivery is still largely absent from the dialogue.



This sector is full of creative and innovative minds, with knowledge and expertise on the needs of children and youth in their communities, as well as the challenges and constraints in meeting them. The relationships that are built every day on the frontlines provide service providers unique insights into the changing faces of the children and youth in our communities and it is for that reason, that we ask you to continue to strengthen this relationship by inviting NACY to the table when discussions are being had and decisions being made that impact the health and wellbeing of the children and youth sector.

As a sector, we acknowledge the role we play in ensuring and meaningful relationship with government and encourage you to work with us to create a framework for dialogue, possibly in parallel to the work of the PM's Youth Council, that would provide an ongoing opportunity for policy development to meet the evolving needs of children and youth.

## **Recommendations:**

- *Ask for the Minister of Youth to engage in meaningful dialogue with the children and youth sector.*
- *Bring leaders from the children and youth sector together in tandem with the National Youth Summit to share their expertise in supporting young people in Canada.*
- *Involve representatives from the government in NACY events such as Roundtable and NACY's inaugural Annual National Conference to be held in Spring 2022.*
- *Funding to ensure continued opportunities to convene as a sector.*



## Priority #2: Shifting the narrative around funding

Over the course of the pandemic, the youth-serving sector has gone above and beyond to meet the changing needs of young people. While organizations have been innovating to adapt their programs, COVID-19 has also made them more vulnerable. Continuing lockdowns, work from home orders and changing restriction have resulted in cancelled fundraisers, galas, programs closures, and a reduction of individual and corporate donations. While revenues have decreased, the role our organizations play has never been more acute. For many children and youth, our organizations are a place for added support and inspiration beyond, or sometimes instead of, home or school, to help them to reach further to meet their full potential. This was the case before the pandemic, needs grew during the pandemic, and demand is expected to be even higher as we look ahead to pandemic recovery. And yet, many organizations are at their weakest, having depleted any reserve funds available, strained staff and volunteer resources, and made efforts to accommodate increased demands (Imagine Canada, 2021). Our organizations require more funding to stabilize existing programs as well as support innovations that best meet the rapidly changing and growing complexity of needs of children and youth in a post-pandemic era.

Times have changed, and so has the sector. The rapid pivot to online programming meant quick thinking and a steep learning curve for everyone involved. From this grew a movement where youth programs were able to cast their nets further than they ever had before. Programs that once only had the capacity to connect with urban youth were now providing programs and services to participants in rural and remote communities. Staff in remote communities were able to connect with other members in the sector as we learned and grew together. Elsewhere, youth who weren't able to attend programs due to transportation limitations or family commitments, were suddenly able to show up each week to connect with their community. We have learned too much to go backwards. Online programming was not just a COVID stop-gap. In future, a mix of online and in-person programming will be an integral part of any organization's program planning. As we return to in-person programming and reconnect to those we lost because Internet was limited or inaccessible, we don't want to leave behind what we have learned, or the children and youth audiences we have gained in the process.

"We are  
solid actors  
in this  
partnership  
...have trust  
in us"  
-  
Consultation  
Participant



A continued shift to short-term, issue-specific and/or project-based funding that emphasizes pre-determined outcomes places continued strain on organizations. This type of short-term funding detracts from the critical work organizations are doing as they are often found to be time-intensive and challenging to navigate. The decentralized approach to children and youth programming across multiple government departments is a barrier to many organizations without the administrative capacity to navigate the complexity of grant application processes, and yet, service delivery and outcomes for most of these programs could be more efficient by accessing the broader network of locally run children and youth-serving agencies.

Long-term core funding allows organizations to focus their energy on measurable, long-term impacts for the programs they are offering by ensuring rents are paid, lights are on, organizations have the appropriate and relevant technology, there are enough staff available to do the work, and those working are paid a living wage and have access to physical and mental health benefits.

For there to be a recovery in which all young people are thriving, we need to take a holistic approach that is culturally relevant and supports children and youth at all levels of development, including basic safety needs, as well as tutoring, mentorship, counselling and skills development, and civic engagement. For organizations, this means programs are built on long-term and sustainable funding that delivers results, and creates capacity to anticipate and design innovative programs to efficiently respond to government priorities and the changing needs of the next generation.

## Recommendations

- *Consultation with the children and youth sector on funding reform.*
- *Consultation between federal government departments and agencies with the sector on new funding design strategies*
- *Ensuring new funding programs value existing programs, infrastructure and expertise as well as provide capacity for innovation and growth.*



### **Priority #3: Invest in youth-serving organizations, so we can invest in youth**

Canada's children and youth organizations have the skills and expertise to deliver quality and efficient supports and programming that will ensure children and youth are better prepared for the uncertain future they face. We encourage more investments in children and youth programming that aid in developing both the hard and soft skills they will need to thrive in the world today. We also want to ensure there is targeted funding to support children and youth managing additional barriers to employment such as children and youth in care, those with disabilities, women, gender-diverse youth, marginalised and racialized youth including, but not limited to Black and Indigenous youth or youth who identify themselves through their religious expression and those who are disadvantaged as a result of systemic racism.

As the long-term effects of the pandemic continue to ripple through our communities, young people across the country continue to be disproportionately impacted by the loss of employment, essential services, disruptions to their education and training in conjunction with the increased feelings of physical and social isolation and anxiety about the future. The disruption of education and loss of employment opportunities will likely continue as we begin the long journey through recovery. Youth are more likely to experience delays in financial independence and security, fall into poverty and will have negative impacts on their mental health. The devastating effects of the pandemic will not only affect the lives of young people today, but of the generations yet to come.

Financial investment in the children and youth sector means support for the young people today and the lives of the young people in the future. Investments are needed in mentorship, employment and training. It is important to note the children and youth sector employs a significant number of young people across Canada. Within the NACY membership, organizations employ over 3,100 young people (under 25) across Canada. These are meaningful jobs where young people gain the transferable skills and work experience needed to develop long-lasting careers in a range of sectors. In addition to employing significant numbers of young people, organizations in the youth-serving sector have the experience and knowledge to deliver culturally appropriate employment and training programs, providing mentorship opportunities and supporting youth to build strong networks in the field of their choosing.





Despite tremendous efforts on behalf of teachers, inconsistent schooling for children kindergarten to grade 12 has resulted in significant learning loss. While we are still learning the true impact of two years of disrupted learning, we do know that early data shows that students suffered a strong decline in mathematics, this was more so prevalent in low-income areas (Chetty et al., 2020). We recognize that formal or traditional education rests in the hands of the school systems and that they, too have been adapting and innovating in more ways than we ever thought possible. We also know that to ensure the best outcomes for children and youth in our communities, it will take a village. The role of afterschool tutoring, mentoring, physical literacy and drop-in programs play in taking a multi-pronged approach to closing the gaps created by two years of adapted learning is crucial. There is a place for the federal government in supporting the broader development needs of young people, and it can be fulfilled through greater investment in the children and youth-serving sector.

## Recommendations:

- *Continued investment in the Youth Employment Services to ensure Youth-serving Organizations (YSOs) can continue to provide meaningful employment to youth.*
- *Specific investment for children and youth-serving organizations to enhance existing employment programs and/or create new training programs.*
- *Program funding for YSOs to develop innovative programming for children K-12 to that focus on recouping the hard and soft skills lost through the pandemic.*

"Canada must provide immediate solutions that help all young workers re-enter the labour force today, such as job programs and skills development services...as well as long-term policies that promote resiliency in youth employment"

- Preventing a Lockdown Generation (2021)

## Priority #4: Grow capacity for mental health supports within the sector

Canadians know too well that the pandemic has had a devastating impact on the mental health of children and youth. According to a 2021 CBC article, youth admitted for medical support after a suicide attempt tripled over a four-month period, and youth admitted with substance use disorders doubled, this is in addition to a 90% increase in referrals to McMaster Children's Hospitals Eating Disorders Program. The mental health of our young people is a serious, generational concern. Increased mental health resources were identified as a priority before the pandemic. We expect this to continue to be the case for the foreseeable future as children and youth deal with long-term post-pandemic traumas and stresses, as well as ongoing concerns related to climate anxiety and economic uncertainties.

Throughout the pandemic many of our organizations have experienced increased pressures to support a dramatic rise in health and social service needs. Our organizations will continue to play a critical role in connecting young people to resources and supports to improve their mental health. It is vital that more financial resources be made available to train and hire front-line staff to support these additional needs, as well as create connections with broader health and social services in our communities to ensure a quality and timely continuity of care.

In order for the children and youth sector to continue to innovate and adapt, resources are needed to ensure that those working and volunteering on the front-line and have tools needed to ensure children and youth are not simply surviving, but also thriving. Funding for trainings such as Mental Health First Aid and ASIST for everyone working in the children and youth sector will mean that young people can be sure that the person greeting them at the door will be taking a trauma-informed approach to supporting them in a time of potential crisis.

Additionally, we are at a unique time in history where every child and youth are facing some of the same challenges of their counsellors, support workers and mentors, many of whom are youth themselves. The result of this, is an increase need to mental health supports for those working and volunteering on the front-line. For organizations this can look like ensuring front-line staff have appropriate training to support clients, that those in senior positions have training to support their teams and that everyone has access to counselling supports, are paid a living wage, have paid vacation and benefits.

"...mental health is a major part of our well-being and it is imperative to give it the attention that it needs."  
- State of Youth Report (2021)

Children and youth sector employees are often among the most trusted allies, and most frequent first responders in identifying concerns and supporting the health needs of our children. The programs delivered by a range of youth-serving organizations offer an intergenerational understanding of healing that addresses the root causes of many of the challenges and traumas facing young people today. In order to ensure that these programs are delivered at the highest caliber possible, resources are required to ensure the mental well being of everyone in the sector, from those accessing its services to those delivering them.

## Recommendations

- *Provide funding for organizations to provide mental health training for staff and volunteers.*
- *Provide funding for organizations to hire mental health professionals, social workers and/or elders to ensure an interdisciplinary approach to healing.*
- *Ensure funding for staffing includes funding for health benefits, including Employee Assistance Programs.*



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## **NACY Members**

BGC Canada	Pathways to Education
Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada	People for Education
Children's Aid Foundation of Canada	Students Commission of Canada
Experiences Canada	SHAD Canada
Junior Achievement Canada	UNICEF Canada
Kids Help Phone	United Nations Association In Canada
Live Different	Voices Manitoba
Muslim Association of Canada	Wisdom2Action

## **NACY Partners**

Frontier College  
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## **NACY Staff**

Laura Kathler



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## Contact Information

Laura Kathler  
Executive Director  
National Alliance for Children and Youth  
202-2148 Carling Avenue | Ottawa | ON | K2A 1H1  
Ph: 431-688-5441  
E: [laurakathler@nacy.ca](mailto:laurakathler@nacy.ca)