



Youth Service Canada

Youthworks II Project

Final Report

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1.0 Introduction

On a cold January evening, 1996, 17 Aboriginal youth graduated from the Youthworks II program coordinated by the Edmonton Social Planning Council in partnership with the Ben Calf Robe Society.

For most of the youth who graduated that evening this was their first graduation from any institution or program. The speech each youth gave as they accepted their diploma and an Eagle's feather (a symbol of great power within the Aboriginal culture) was testimony to the struggles that they had overcome in their own life journeys, and to the support and training that they had received throughout the program. Invariably, their speeches talked of renewed hope and new beginnings, of new commitments and new found friendships, of new dreams for their own futures and the futures of their families and communities

The elder who gave the graduation prayer reminded the youth that their life journeys from this point on would need to be guided by the same wisdom, love, and discipline that had allowed them to complete this program successfully. He gently cautioned them that, although they had succeeded in the current program, there would be new challenges ahead, and asked them to draw upon their new found skills and understandings as guides in the journeys that lay ahead.

The following final report summarizes the journey of these youth through the program. It outlines the successes and also notes the challenges that the participants, staff and funders shared throughout their time together.

2.0 Project Background

In May 1994, The Edmonton Social Planning Council was selected as one of 67 'lead sites' under the Youth Service Canada (YSC) program - one component of the federal government's Youth Employment and Learning Strategy announced in April, 1994. The goal of this new program was to address the critical issue of youth employment, with each of the lead sites undertaking to meet the career and employment needs of participating youth in an innovative and creative way.

The Council's success in this initial phase of the program, working with twenty youth who had been 'in trouble with the law', led to the submission of a second proposal, with input from the Regional Human Resources Development, Canada office, which built on the foundations laid in the first.

As with the first successful project, the target population for the second program was marginalized youth who either have had or who are considered at-risk for some involvement with the criminal justice system. Unfortunately, the realities of Prairie city life

dictate that well over half of these youth are of Aboriginal heritage. The Edmonton Young Offenders Centre (EYOC), for example, currently houses some 250 youth, well over half of whom are Aboriginal. Youthworks II was thus 'born again' as an Aboriginal program for Aboriginal youth.

The life stories of these youth invariably bear the same indelible marks of family violence, drug and alcohol abuse, often sexual abuse and limited educational opportunities. The average grade level for youth in EYOC is grade 7, approximately four years below the normal for that age group, with many having already foreclosed on their own hopes and dreams for the future.

In today's increasingly competitive job market the career prospects for many of these youth remain bleak. With the rate of youth unemployment hovering around 16 to 17 percent, finding and maintaining employment seem impossible goals. When youth are released from EYOC they typically have few if any community supports to fall back on, and little chance of integrating into a healthy lifestyle. Reentering or continuing their education is not often an option, while employers reasonably look with suspicion upon youth who have a criminal record and who possess little or no job skills or career preparation.

Frequently, such youth find themselves caught between 'a rock and a hard place': a lack of career and educational training on the one hand and limited job opportunities on the other. The results are often further marginalization and a growing entrenchment in lifestyles that lead to further self alienation and a loss of contact with mainstream communities and opportunities.

3.0 Project Goals and Objectives

The overall project goal was to prepare Aboriginal Youth for their future career and educational experiences.

Four objectives supported this goal:

1. To provide youth with an environment within which they could find the hope, healing and skills necessary to begin the process of integration into the community.
2. To provide youth with community development and learning opportunities through the completion of team-based community service projects.

3. To provide youth with personal growth opportunities with an emphasis upon Aboriginal values (Tulu), through personal development activities, interactions with elders and Aboriginal mentors as well as community service workers.

4. To provide youth with career counseling and planning, and to help them develop their own short term and long term career plans.

4.0 Project Implementation

The design and implementation of the project was a complex undertaking. The final project structure differed considerably from that initially proposed, reflecting the changing needs of the youth in the project, the nature of local community partnerships and the demands of placing youth in community service activities. The following narrative outlines the major project phases and supporting administrative structures.

4.1 Project Structures

Advisory Committee

An Advisory Committee was struck at the beginning of the project to guide the evolution and development of the program. The committee included representation from local agencies and organizations:

- Big Sisters and Big Brothers Society
- Edmonton Parks and Recreation
- Ben Calf Robe Society
- Edmonton Young Offenders Centre, Alberta Justice
- Edmonton Social Planning Council

Within this Advisory Committee structure, Ben Calf Robe Society took on the further role of project partner. Ben Calf Robe staff and resource personnel met with the project staff on a weekly basis, and provided important insights into the program structure and the youth's potential for participation. Approximately one third of the youth were known to Ben Calf Robe Society staff prior to their participation in the project on account of their previous involvement in programs or services provided through the Society.

During the initial phases of the project the Advisory Committee met on a monthly basis to provide project staff with support and direction.

Program Staffing

Three staff were initially involved in the project:

- Project Manager - drawn from, and funded through, the Council's core staff;
- Project Coordinator - recruited for the project; and
- Project Assistant - also recruited for the project.

These primary staffing positions were supported by administrative staff drawn from the Council's core staffing contingent. Additional staff and resource people were contracted throughout the project as the project needs and activities dictated. Within the final phase of the project, the original Project Assistant position was complemented with the addition of a second assistant position the responsibilities of which centered on career preparation and planning.

With the exception of the Project Manager position for the second half of the project, and the administrative support staffing positions, all of the staff assigned to the project were of Aboriginal heritage.

Project Staff Roles and Responsibilities

In brief form, individual project staff assumed the following roles and responsibilities.

Project Manager - The project manager assumed overall responsibility for the design, delivery and evaluation of the project. All staff assigned to the project reported either directly or indirectly to the project manager. The project manager undertook both to promote the project with actual and potential partners and also to liaise where necessary with the project funder.

There were two project managers assigned to the project. The first manager oversaw the design and set-up of the overall project before leaving in September. The second project manager oversaw the development and introduction of the community service activities.

Both project managers were senior staff drawn from the Council's core staff with considerable experience and expertise in the design and delivery of complex services and programs. The first project manager was of Aboriginal heritage.

Project Coordinator - The project coordinator assumed responsibility for the day-to-day operation and management of the project, and reported directly to the manager.

The coordinator remained responsible for the planning and monitoring of daily program activities, preparing monthly project summaries and the collecting and reporting of

financial data. The coordinator also networked with local agencies and organizations on behalf of the project. The eligibility of youth to remain in the program was determined by the coordinator.

Two project coordinators were involved with the project during its operation. The first coordinator worked during the first two months of the program to ensure its successful implementation. In this capacity, the coordinator assisted in the recruitment of youth, the design of curricula and program materials, field trip planning and preparation, and the identification and invitation of guest speakers and other resource people.

The second coordinator, who began work at the end of August, worked extensively with the youth and a network of local community representatives to arrange and coordinate the community service placement activities.

Both project coordinators had previous experience in the planning, design and delivery of career preparation programs and services. Both were also of Aboriginal heritage.

Project Assistant Coordinator - The assistant coordinator worked under the direction and guidance of the coordinator in the planning and delivery of project activities and curricula. The assistant coordinator worked closely with the youth during all phases of her work, and served as an essential channel of communication between the project participants and the other staff.

The assistant coordinator Co-facilitated group and training sessions, and provided the youth with counselling and referrals as their needs dictated.

Three project assistants were involved with the project. The first assistant worked to ensure the successful implementation of the project, helping the participants adjust to the demands of a full-time program while dealing with a range of personal issues in their own lives. The second and third assistants came on in the final phase of the project to provide the youth with cultural teachings and specific career planning and job search training. All three assistants involved in the program were of Aboriginal heritage - with one assistant an elder and ceremonial pipe carrier.

Administrative Support - Two administrative staff drawn from the Council's core staff provided part time administrative support to the project and the project staff. The duties of these staff included the preparation of project financial statements, the disbursement of participant stipends and the maintenance of personnel records. Both staff combined their involvement in Youthworks with their work in other Council projects.

Additional Staffing Resources - In addition to specifically designated project staff, and Council staff involved in the project on a part time basis, additional staffing resources were assigned to meet the needs of specific activities or program requirements. To this end,

a senior Aboriginal staff member from the Ben Calf Robe Society met with the youth on a weekly basis to facilitate the cultural learnings part of the program - delivering a weekly healing circle - and providing the youth with individual interventions as needed.

An Aboriginal summer student with the Council, as well as several other volunteer staff, also supported the youth and the project, helping both to plan and deliver specific activities including drama coaching in preparation for one of the community service activities, and support and counselling on the issue of teen suicide. All of the staff who provided this additional support to the program were of Aboriginal Heritage and experienced in working with youth.

Project staff worked using a team model. Staff met daily to discuss issues and concerns relating to the project, with the project coordinator delegating specific tasks to individual team members depending on their work load and respective strengths.

4.2 Project Participants

At the beginning of July 1995, 20 Aboriginal youth were accepted onto the project. The group comprised 12 males and 8 females. All of the youth were of Aboriginal heritage and ranged in age from 16 to 24, with an average age of 19. Only seven participants had completed grade 12, with six having a grade 9 education or less. All of the youth had either limited or only some work experience, primarily in short term temporary positions many of which had been in the service industry. One participant had completed part of one year of training at the post-secondary level. Two of the participants had dependents.

The majority of youth reported living with family and/or friends, with a smaller number living in some form of institutional setting. Almost all the youth lived on the north side of the city.

Fourteen youth had a history of involvement with the criminal justice system.

4.3 Program Site

The Youthworks project was housed in two sites in the northeast part of the City. Program participants and staff spent the first two months of the project in donated space in Borden Park provided by the City of Edmonton Parks and Recreation Department. The program moved to the Eastwood Community Centre at the beginning of September.

Both program sites were selected with a number of factors in mind. First, both were readily accessible by public transit - an important feature given the participants' reliance on public transit to travel around the City. Second, both sites provided the program with a distinct and private space for its use which would enable sharing circles and ceremonies to take

place without the fear of interruption or disruption by competing premises users. Third, both sites were in close proximity to other municipal resources and sites, and situated in the northeast portion of the City closest to the homes of the participants.

4.4. Program Description

Youthworks II remained from start to finish an Aboriginal program. The philosophy underlying the program, its orientation, structure and staffing model were all informed by traditional teachings and ways.

The reason for this focus was clear. To succeed and grow Aboriginal youth need first to regain their own sense of self-esteem and dignity. This may best be achieved through a rediscovery of their own traditional culture and ways. At the start of the project, the majority of participants had little understanding of their own culture and traditions. This was especially true for those youth who had been raised in non-Native foster families or who had spent their formative years in group home environments.

Most of the youth starting out in the program demonstrated a lack of self-esteem, a lack of belief in themselves, and a general sense of foreclosure on their own futures. The initial goal of the program was, therefore, to instill within the youth a sense of pride and self-esteem through a rediscovery and celebration of their traditional cultural heritage. It was reasoned that without this sense of pride and self-esteem the youth would be less likely to remain involved in the program, and much less likely to transfer the lessons and teachings learned there to their continuing life journeys in the competitive worlds of work and further education.

The project activities can be broadly arranged into five major phases.

Phase One: Program Set-up

Under the funding agreement with Youth Service Canada, the initial weeks of the project were allocated for program set-up. The activities compressed into this relatively short time period included staff recruitment, curriculum and programming research and development; brochure design, site selection and set-up, program promotion, and participant recruitment and selection.

Building networks within the community was a major focus within this initial phase of the project. Program staff made contact with youth serving agencies - especially those with an Aboriginal focus - developed contacts with elders and Aboriginal resource people and guest speakers, and connected with key local agencies who would serve as partners in the project.

Youth were recruited for the program through job postings made available to youth serving agencies, Aboriginal organizations, and alternate school sites throughout the City. Youth interested in the program were required to complete an application form, which was used as a preliminary screen for admission interviews (Appendix One).

A total of 30 youth were considered eligible for the program of which 20 were recruited. The ten youth not accepted onto the program were referred to other Youth Service Canada projects and/or other agencies serving youth.

Applicants for the program were interviewed by the project staff team and ranked based on their performance in the interview. A waiting list was maintained for candidates eligible for the program but unable to be accommodated due to a lack of space.

Phase Two - Cultural Orientation

The second phase of the project set out to help the youth discover their own cultural heritage and sense of identity. During the first five weeks of the project, the youth took part in a series of cultural teachings and learnings which provided them with an immersion within traditional Aboriginal culture.

Each program day began with a sweetgrass ceremony and daily greeting followed by personal growth exercises. A weekly sharing circle provided the youth with an opportunity to get know and trust each other - and to share their own pains, hurts and discouragements with their new friends and family.

Guest speakers and additional resource people both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal were invited in to complement and build upon these traditional learnings. These speakers not only provided the youth with further teachings on Native spirituality and culture, but also addressed the more specific program concerns of career planning, interviewing skills, and job searching.

During this initial phase of the project the youth also took part in a 'Career Day' in which presenters from the Edmonton City Police Force, the law profession, and educational fields came in to speak to the youth about their own journeys to be successful in their particular chosen fields of study and work. Each of the presenters in the Career Day was of Aboriginal heritage and so provided the youth with real-life role models of Aboriginal people who had succeeded drawing on their traditional culture and heritage as a basis for their success.

To complement the emotional, intellectual and spiritual teachings of the first five weeks of the program, youth also took part in a series of physical outdoor activities - nature walks and hikes; scavenger hunts; softball games and outdoor sharing circles.

This second phase of the program was operated in conjunction with the delivery of a Summer Youth Service Canada program aimed at Aboriginal youth 14 to 18 years of age. The older Youthworks participants were given the opportunity to learn mentoring and leadership skills by working with the younger participants under the guidance of the project staff. These leadership and mentoring skills were further refined and developed during the third project phase.

Phase Three - Cultural Camps

The third phase of the project centred on the Youth's attendance at a cultural wilderness camp. For the Youthworks participants the purpose of the cultural camps was two-fold:

- to provide each of the youth with a traditional, wilderness experience, and
- to give them the opportunity to learn and demonstrate leadership skills and abilities.

Youthworks participants acted as leaders, and mentors at the camps for younger Aboriginal students taking part in the Youth Services Canada - Summer placement program. These new found responsibilities helped many of the youth start the process of building their own senses of worth and value.

In preparation for the camps the Youthworks participants received basic first-aid training through the St. John's Ambulance, and some instruction in the art of tipi construction and outdoors survival. Two cultural camps were scheduled - one for the male participants and one for the females. Both camps ran for five days and were set up in the Rocky Mountains west of Hinton at the Brule Community Campground.

Traditional teachings and ceremonies informed all aspects of the camps design and implementation. Elders guided the camp activities and provided the youth with daily teachings, while program staff and Aboriginal resource people helped ensure the smooth operation of the daily activities. In accordance with medicine wheel teachings, youth took part in activities and ceremonies that helped them explore and begin to meet their own intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual needs. In an environment of sharing, respect and mutual support, the youth learned first hand about the values of faith, honesty and discipline.

At the young women's camp, the elders put on a feast for the spirits of friends and family of the participants as a traditional way of helping the youth come to terms with their own feelings of loss. The preparation for the feast, and the sweatlodge that followed, unfolded over one full day of the camp, and gave all the youth who participated an

opportunity to learn traditional ways of dealing with the modern urban challenges they faced.

The younger students involved in the Youth Services Canada - Summer placement program graduated at the end of August in time for their return to school at the beginning of September. Youthworks participants remained to complete the final two phases of the program - community service activities and career planning and job preparation.

Phase Four - Community Service Activities

The fourth phase of the project centred on the planning and delivery of the community services activities that were to form the core of the program.

Starting at the end of August, the youth began, under the project staff's guidance, to explore possible community service activities. To assist in the identification of these activities the youth went through a series of brain-storming and discussion exercises to determine their own interests and skills - matching these with possible community service projects.

The initial interests of the youth were perhaps, not surprisingly, eclectic and diverse. Within these broad interests, however, there remained a decided focus on communication, art related projects, family issues or helping activities. Participants' interests in these creative and service oriented fields reflected their earlier comments made at the time of their interviews for entry into the program.

Armed with these broad areas of interest, and supported by their preliminary drafting into projects or possible community service activities, the project Advisory Committee met to review possible community service projects, and their individual contributions to these projects. One challenging requirement brought forward by the participants was that, wherever possible, they be given the opportunity to work together as a group of 17 rather than smaller groups of 5 or 6 as originally discussed in preliminary project meetings.

The youth's request for this larger scope of joint involvement and participation reflected their overall closeness as program participants; although it did present possible project sponsors with a dilemma as how to accommodate such a request. Prior to the youth's request for this larger working group or team, individual Advisory Committee members had made offers of possible placements for smaller groups of 4 or 5 participants - numbers that could be more reasonably supported within the confines of existing agency structures and operations.

Based on further consultations with local community partners, participant discussions and guidance from the federal funder, two specific community service projects were selected:

- the outside renovation, and design and production of two murals on the Eastwood Community Hall; and
- the production and delivery of a dramatic production for local youth with supporting forum focusing on family violence.

The two projects were scheduled to run in sequence with the outside mural project beginning first to be followed by the dramatic production.

The initial mural phase of the project proved to be a good test of participants' abilities to work together as a team on a large scale out of doors project. The painting of the outside of the community hall facility was a physically demanding and somewhat repetitive activity - although the addition of the two murals gave the youth the opportunity to draw on their own creativity. The initial community service activity was complete by the middle of October.

The second community service activity served more to stretch the creative skills and capacities of the youth. Production of the dramatic presentation began with a request for help and blessing from the Elders. This duly received, work begin in earnest on developing and staging the production with specific attention paid to the many tasks involved in getting a successful production off the ground:

- Concept and story definition and refinement;
- Script development;
- Production marketing and performance schedules;
- Rehearsals, set and costume design, lighting and sound system development;
- Play production and follow-up discussion forums.

The original concept for the dramatic presentation was generated through a story telling exercise in which each youth presented a story - fictional or non-fictional - drawing on their own life experiences. The final play theme was selected from the various stories offered and drew closely on the real life experiences of the program participants. To assist youth in the scripting and production of the play, Margaret Mercredi an experienced Aboriginal Actress and drama coach volunteered with the program.

After two months of intensive planning and preparation, the Youthworks II dramatic production 'Any Other Night - A Family Divided' was performed in four local area Junior and Senior High schools to a total audience of over 700 students. Audience response to the production was very positive - and often emotional. The forums following each of the performances generated further discussion and sharing around the complex factors that contribute to family violence as well as the pain and suffering that almost inevitably follows the long slow recovery process.

Phase Five - Career Planning and Job Preparation

The fifth and final phase of the project centred on the vital tasks of assisting youth in the preparation of their individual career plans and the enhancement of the youths' job readiness and employability.

Although the career planning and employment preparation themes remained central to almost all facets of the program, they received intensive focus within the final six weeks of the project. To support this intensive focus on specific job searching and employment related skills, a second project assistant was hired with career guidance and job searching skills and experience. Under the guidance of this assistant, youth took part in a series of workshops and seminars focusing on career planning and job searching techniques. Youth not only had the opportunity to learn about these techniques and skills, but were also given the opportunity to try out their new found skills and confidences in role playing situations and actual contacts with potential employers or future educational opportunities.

At the conclusion of the project in the beginning of January, 1996, 17 youth completed the final career planning and job preparation phase of the program. In accordance with the program requirements, all 17 prepared and submitted a career plan to guide their future life journeys.

5.0 Project Evaluation

Project evaluation activities were integrated within the daily routines of the program. Evaluation data were used both formatively, to provide ongoing feedback on the project, and, summatively, to assess the overall outcomes directly and indirectly attributable to the project.

Three specific evaluation methods were used:

- Each youth kept a daily journal in which they recorded their experiences in and thoughts on the project. For many youth the opportunity to record their thoughts and experiences in this way provided them with a basis for self-reflection and

evaluation as well as an opportunity to capture their views for sharing with the wider group.

Youth were invited to share excerpts from their journals in the form of personal testimonies on their participation in the program at the end of the third phase of the project in August. These testimonials were forwarded to project staff, advisory committee members and the project funders.

- Participants and staff all took part in weekly sharing and healing circles. These circles gave the youth and staff a chance to share their experiences within the program. The circles were introduced by a prayer in keeping with Aboriginal teachings and customs. Discussions and ideas brought up within the circle were not shared with those outside of the circle, but rather used to effect positive changes between the various parties involved.
- In the final phase of the project, youth completed a short survey that reviewed their overall involvement in the project and asked them to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the program (See Appendix Two, for a copy of the instrument).

The major evaluation findings are summarized and presented in *Section 6.0* in the form of project strengths challenges.

At the completion of the program, six participants had found either full or part time work (two whom also planned to return for further schooling), seven had enrolled in further education programs, and four had applied for further education and/or training to commence in the fall of 1996 (See Appendix Three, for a complete list of participant placements).

6.0 Project Strengths and Challenges

The 17 youth and 7 primary staff who took part in Youthworks contributed much to the successes of the program and also shared in the challenges encountered along the way. The graduation of 17 participants from the program is one measure of success, as is the quality of the learnings and experiences they acquired while participating in the project. The project was not without its challenges, however, and it is critical that both the successes and challenges be clearly stated to provide a firm foundation for similar future initiatives.

6.1 Project Strengths

i) Traditional Aboriginal Culture

The historical relationships between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal society are scarred with the legacies of colonialism, assimilation and discrimination. While the popular headlines of the day concerning Aboriginal peoples continue to focus on the political issues of land claims, treaty rights and self-government, the economic conditions of urban Aboriginal peoples continue to present major barriers to their full participation in daily community life.

Around 60 percent of the Aboriginal people who call Edmonton home live in poverty in neighbourhoods with the lowest per capita incomes, the highest crime rates and the greatest degrees of social dislocation. Without some significant form of economic development current and future generations of Aboriginal peoples will remain unable to claim their own place in society.

The small body of research which examines the experiences of Aboriginal peoples living in urban settings sketches some broad areas of consensus surrounding the major issues Aboriginal people face, but little specific detail on how solutions may be framed and implemented. Although detailed profiles of aboriginal peoples living in urban areas are not available, the limited findings clearly in place point to the disadvantaged status of most urban Aboriginal peoples. Viewed as a whole, urban Aboriginal peoples have lower levels of education, employment and income, and higher levels of social dislocation, transiency and destitution.

Recent solutions to these complex problems centre on the need for Aboriginal peoples to begin their recovery through a rediscovery of their traditional teachings and ceremonies. Individual self-esteem and pride in their Aboriginal heritage are seen as the essential foundations for a more general improvement in the economic status and social well-being of Aboriginal youth, their families and communities. While the start of healing and growth often involves freedom from addictions, the framework provided by a renewed cultural heritage and reaffirmed sense of identity helps provide youth with the teachings and new sense of direction and purpose they need to succeed in all aspects of their lives including career planning and job search.

The incorporation of Aboriginal teachings and ceremonies within the Youthworks II program was the essential glue that held the program together, and ensured the youths' continued participation in and commitment to the project. Youthworks II remained an Aboriginal program for Aboriginal youth. This characteristic was paramount in all aspects of its design and delivery.

ii) Group Dynamics

From day one program staff helped build a sense of teamwork and camaraderie among the participants. It was realized from the start that for youth to succeed in the program they would need the support of a family style structure. Many of the participants in the program come from dysfunctional family units. As a result, they frequently lack the everyday supports and encouragement that other youth take for granted and rely upon when times get tough. At the beginning of the program a specific emphasis was placed on trust building and relationship development, given the youths' inexperience in bonding and frequent distrust of people they did not know. In this way, the cultural camps scheduled during the third phase of the project helped the youth learn both to accept support from others in a non-dependent way and to be a support themselves for those in need.

One sustained legacy of the program is the new and continued friendships and support that youth found in their fellow program participants. Indeed, relationships forged within the program continue to provide participants with the support they need to succeed.

iii) An Investment in Youth

The Youthworks program was not a standard employment or training program in either its structure or intent. The starting point for the program was a belief in the youth as valuable members of the community and potential contributors to the advancement of community goals. The lion's share of project funds were directly 'invested' in the youth themselves through weekly stipends, with the remaining funds used to support program activities. Youth's participation in the project was voluntary, and the activities introduced built around their individual and collective needs. Youth received from the program what they contributed to it. While specific skills, training and support were provided all were delivered in such a way as to support the participants' ownership of the program and their input into its design and delivery.

Youth were encouraged to view the program not simply in terms of what they could gain from it, but also on the basis of what they had to offer. They were challenged to find their own links to the broader community of which they were part, and supported in their efforts to make their own contributions.

In the broadest sense, the program was based on the premise of investment. Investing in youth was seen as the critical first step in starting a larger process of community development. Quite literally, the future of urban Aboriginal peoples was seen to lie in their youth, and their successes and failures. For many of the youth in the program, this was the first time that they had considered their role or possible contribution to the broader community of which they were part. Most had low self-esteem and a lack of self-

worth at the outset of the program and did not consider themselves valuable resources to those around them.

The prior involvement of 2 out of 3 of the participants with the criminal justice system and other service systems had left them with a limited view of their own worth. They commonly had little understanding of how they could become contributors to the communities of which they were part, rather than problems to be dealt with by them. The program's investment in the youth themselves helped them to turn around their view of what they might achieve, and what they could indeed accomplish. Instead of a cost to the community, they began to see themselves as assets or contributors.

iv) Program Cost-effectiveness

The costs of youth unemployment are both social and economic. While any training program inevitably involves initial set-up and delivery costs, these can quickly be retrieved through longer term improvements in participants' involvement in employment and career related activities. In preventive terms, the shift of youth from consumers of services to contributors of resources through their participation in the wage economy has far-reaching social and economic rewards.

Determining the cost-effectiveness of any career preparation program model is difficult: and this is especially so in cases where the model differs considerably from traditional programs and services. There is an obvious dilemma of how to quantify, in dollar terms alone, the value of preventive employment related initiatives which serve, amongst other things, to foster within participants a better sense of self-esteem, to encourage freedom from drug and alcohol dependency, and which help reduce youth participation in crime and delinquent behaviours. These difficulties aside, the following cost comparisons serve to highlight the cost-effectiveness of the current program model.

Total project costs were in the region of \$125,000, of which \$73,250 was made up of income support costs in the form of weekly stipends dispersed directly to the participants. Staffing, program and overhead costs accounted for the remaining \$51,750.

The average program cost per participant (based on the completion of 17 youths) was \$7353 made up of program costs of \$3044 and income support costs of \$4309. Youth who graduated from the program were eligible for a final completion bonus of \$500.00 as well as a further completion grant in the value of \$1800 once they taken one of four subsequent steps along their career paths: returning to school, finding a job (minimum of 30 hours per week for a period of six months), starting or purchasing a small business, or for the repayment of a Canada Student Loan.

Cost comparisons to other similar programs show the cost-effectiveness of the Youthworks program model. HRDC community-based training projects in 1993-4 operated at a total cost of \$449 million and served some 38,000 participants. The average program cost per person was \$7,237 with the related average income support cost \$4,579 (Source: *Improving Social Security in Canada - Employment Development Services: A Supplementary Paper*, Government of Canada, 1994).

Equivalent program costs for participants in the Canadian Job Strategy between 1986-7 and 1990-1991 who were welfare recipients (and likely to face some of the same employment barriers as the Youthworks participants) were around \$8,020 per participant (*Evaluation of Employability Initiatives for Social Assistance Recipients (SARS) in CJS*, Government of Canada, 1993).

As a further pertinent comparison, the direct costs of incarceration for adult offenders are between \$60 to \$70 per day or around \$11,800 for a six month period. These costs can be doubled when the associated police and court costs are included.

With youth unemployment and poverty major contributors to youth crime related behaviours the economic and social benefits of training and career based programs aimed at youth considered 'at-risk' for involvement with the criminal justice system are considerable.

v) Community Support and Participation

Throughout the project, the staff and participants drew on the support and guidance of a long list of resource people. These resource people were involved in the program in a variety of ways and often gave the youth the benefit of their own experiences and understandings. While most were of Aboriginal heritage a number were not.

The major involvements of these resource people with the project were three-fold.

- ***Spiritual Guidance and Ceremonies***

Nine elders were involved in the program providing the youth with spiritual guidance through daily prayers, healing circles and sweatlodge ceremonies. Before any major decisions were made regarding the operation of the program elders were consulted to receive their blessing and support. In addition to the work of the elders, two further resource people and one staff member guided the youth through sharing and healing circles scheduled on a regular and *ad hoc* basis throughout the project.

• *Guest Speakers and Presenters*

Eleven speakers and presenters shared their own stories and insights with the participants. These speakers included representatives from the employment services industry, local Aboriginal organizations, Band Councils and a former MLA. The roles of individual speakers differed as did the nature and content of their presentations. The primary goal of each speaker, however, remained the same: to share with the youth some insights and knowledge that would help them as they continued their own life journeys.

• *Program Support*

Over 50 agencies, organizations and individuals from the government, private and not-for-profit sectors similarly committed their time and energies to help make the program a success. These individuals included representatives from the City of Edmonton Police, a small group of local high and junior high school principals, church staff, and local businesses in and around the Eastwood community.

Although the involvement of these individuals varied, the contacts they each developed with the program helped provide the youth with the resources they needed to succeed on the one hand, while giving the project a higher profile and greater sense of identity and validity within the local community on the other.

As part of the continued legacy of community participation, the program participants have, with the support of the Ben Calf Robe Society and the Edmonton Social Planning Council, received further sponsorship to stage a series of additional performances of the drama developed as part of the project. Youth involved in the program have taken responsibility for arranging and delivering these performances.

6.2 Project Challenges

The Youthworks program, although successful, was not without its challenges. Indeed, a number of specific challenges were encountered in delivering the program which relate both to factors intrinsic to the project itself as well as factors outside. Briefly, these challenges may be discussed under the following broad headings.

i) The High Needs of Participants

Almost all of the youth in the program had one or more significant life issues with which they had to deal on either an ongoing or intermittent basis. For some this centred on the constant battle against addictions, while others struggled with the pain and suffering

that comes from abuse, as well as the basic problems of finding somewhere to live and having money to live on.

The specific youth targeted for the program were youth who already had some involvement with the criminal justice system and/or those at risk for such involvement. The successful participation of these youth in the program necessitated the provision of a number of additional resources and services. Two participants attended a drug and alcohol treatment program during the course of the project and trained facilitators were brought in to conduct workshop sessions on conflict resolution and dealing with grief and loss. Program staff and resource people were further available to the youth on an ongoing basis as supports in times of need - a role, which, regardless of its necessity, placed additional demands on the staff and program resource people.

Meeting the collective needs of all participants and responding to the more individual needs of others on an ongoing basis placed program staff under a great deal of pressure. The close and daily interactions between staff and youth contributed to a relationship which extended beyond that of instructor and student.

Where possible participants were encouraged to work together to solve interpersonal and relationship challenges, although the ability of the youth to do this varied considerably depending on their own level of maturity. More often than not, program staff and resource people were called upon to provide the required assistance. Although such interactions did not directly impact on the quality of the delivered program, they did at times serve to limit the group's progress toward more immediate employment related goals.

In the final analysis, the program staff were required to juggle the dual responsibilities of providing individual support to specific participants on the one hand - to encourage their continued participation in the project - while still moving the collective group forward toward the agreed project goals on the other. This was not always readily achieved.

To help address tensions that periodically surfaced, and the associated disruptive behaviours and attitudes attached to them, three students were suspended each for a one week period. All three students returned after their suspensions with improved attitudes and increased attendance.

ii) Staffing Changes

Changes in the core staff involved in the program presented numerous challenges to the new staff who entered the project in 'mid-flow', to the staff who remained, and to the youth who had built up relationships with the staff who left.

The original project coordinator and project assistant coordinator both left during the project. In the case of the project coordinator this departure was anticipated, given his commitment to a previous employment position. As such a transition was feasible. The project assistant coordinator left with little notice, however, during the critical fourth phase of the project and had to be quickly replaced with a temporary staff person and with additional resource people filling the gap.

For many of the youth who had experienced previous instability in their daily lives the loss of these two original staff members, both of whom had developed a strong bond with the program participants, was a considerable hardship. Both staff members had enjoyed a warm relationship with the participants, and so replacing them proved problematic. The new staff members who came on board had the difficult task of not only building a relationship with the participants but also at the same time moving the program forward.

The loss of the original program manager to secondment shortly after the departure of the project coordinator further complicated the process of restaffing.

iii) The Staffing Mix

The need to design and deliver a complex employment and training program while maintaining a supportive and nurturing environment that built on the traditional teachings and ceremonies of Aboriginal culture required a sophisticated and finely balanced mix of staff. While the program approached this critical mix at times during the project, with and without the addition of resource people, it was not sustained for the duration of the program.

The initial staffing mix was weighted in favor of the counselling and support aspects of the program to provide a basis for trust and understanding to be built - a mix that changed with the introduction of a new project manager, and project coordinator. The shift in staffing emphasis, which coincided with the transition into the community service activity phase, left some of the youth feeling a sense of loss. The ensuing decision to recruit two project assistants, one an elder with specific strengths in the area of support and teachings, and a second assistant with a specific training in career and job preparation, was a belated attempt to redress the balance.

The difficulties of recruiting and retaining qualified Aboriginal staff meant that the optimal staffing mix was not sustained throughout the project. The challenges this presented affected all project staff at some time or another.

iv) The Parallel Operation of a Summer Youth Leadership Program

The first three phases of the project ran in parallel with a Summer Youth Leadership program which involved 24 Aboriginal youth 14 to 18 years of age. Although the Youthworks II participants gained valuable experience, and learned a great deal about working with younger youth, this parallel operation of the two programs placed additional demands on the core Youthworks staff - even though an additional assistant position was made available.

Similarly, the graduation of the younger students at the end of August, after the completion of the cultural camps, left the Youthworks participants at somewhat of a loose end; sentiments which further coincided with the transition into the complex and demanding fourth project phase involving the development of community service activities and their successful implementation.

The subsequent departure of senior project staff during this time period served merely to compound the challenges inherent within this reorientation of the project.

v) Project Administration

Challenges in the delivery of the program itself were compounded by broader changes within the context within which it operated. During the project, the two lead agencies both experienced changes in senior executive staff, while the lead agency further recruited and trained two new administrators.

Changes within the executive staff at the lead agency, resulted in the second project manager assuming additional executive roles and responsibilities that in turn placed a greater managerial burden on the newly appointed project coordinator. The new coordinator did not have the appropriate training and skills necessary to address all of those additional demands, especially those associated with the reporting of project activities and the management of project resources.

Parallel changes within the administrative structures within the lead agency meant that the funder received less information on the early implementation phases of the project than might otherwise have been expected. Informal reporting was used to bridge some of this information gap, although some of the information was not conveyed in a timely and effective manner.

While the project participants were not directly affected by these changes, links between the funder and the lead agency were not developed to a level sufficient to allow for informed feedback and support to flow from the former to the latter. This was the loss of a potentially valuable resource.

7.0 Conclusions

The Youthworks II program delivered by the Edmonton Social Planning Council in partnership with Ben Calf Robe Society, through funding provided by Human Resources and Development Canada, made a significant difference in the lives of 17 Aboriginal youth.

Through their involvement in the program, these youth were able to find new hope and new direction for their lives. The teachings they received and the specific training and career preparation they took part in will both serve them well now and in the future.

The major success of the program lay in its ability to engage the youth in such a way that the project became theirs leading them to take ownership of their own futures and their life journeys. At the program conclusion, the youth who graduated were better prepared and better able to not only continue with their own education and career planning, but also to begin to make a contribution to their own communities. Instead of being alienated from the community, they had become part of the larger collective - with a definite and unique contribution to make.

The final word rightly belongs to the youth themselves:

The lessons and support I got here helped me through tough times in my life, and others who have nobody can come here. We grew into a family.

The teachings we have learned helped us a lot. Some of us wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for this program.

Because of the program I have learned how to get myself motivated for the workforce. I now know how to make myself better when looking for a job.

I have a lot more self confidence and self esteem. More self awareness of who I am as a native person in society today.

It gave us the right step into the job world. A lot of information and resources to look into the future.

There should be more programs out there for youth. Maybe there wouldn't be so many young moms, crime etc.,.

When I came here I found people with similar problems and people who were willing to help and support me. The person that I am is a natural counsellor and I returned the compassion that was given to me. I found myself here.