**2SLGBTQIA+ Toolkit**

**YMCA Sprott House Case Study**

**Who**

**YMCA of Greater Toronto.** Sprott House is operated by the YMCA of Greater Toronto, which has been building healthy communities for over 164 years. The City of Toronto is our partner on Sprott House; it contributes to program and evaluation funding and other support.

**Program Summary**

**What is YMCA Sprott House?** Sprott House is a transitional house where LGBTQ2S+ youth experiencing homelessness reside for up to two years. At Sprott House, twenty-five young people (ages 16-24) live together at a time, in a safe, welcoming home in the Annex neighbourhood of Toronto, and work to achieve housing stability and a healthy adulthood with the support of trained staff and the community. Everybody is welcome at Sprott House, regardless of gender identity and gender expression, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religious heritage, class, and/or ability. Opened in 2016, the House continually operates at full capacity. As of the 2018-2019 fiscal year, 67 young people experiencing homelessness who identify as LGBTQ2S+ have called Sprott House home.

**Participants.** LGBTQ2S+ youth living at YMCA Sprott House form a diverse community according to our formal first-year evaluation. The majority (84%) are non-White, including 23% who identify as Black and 16% who identify as Indigenous. Over two-thirds describe their gender identity using more than one term (e.g. non-binary and transgender).

**Why**

**Why it Matters: LGBTQ2S+ Youth Experiencing Homelessness.** Young people who identify as LGBTQ2S+ and experience homelessness have varied and unique needs and face an increased risk of trauma, physical and sexual exploitation, substance abuse, and self-harm. They face widespread homophobic and transphobic violence and discrimination, and even often feel safer on the streets than in shelters. 1 in 5 youth in City of Toronto shelters identify as LGBTQ2S+.

**Intended Outcomes.** Our intended outcomes are to support LGBTQ2S+ youth as they identify goals, acquire independent living skills, navigate established systems, and strengthen their mental health and wellbeing. We also aim to support them as they develop their sense of self and a sense of inclusion within the LGBTQ2S+ community, and in developing their personal network (including friends and other people they consider family).

**Obstacles**

Challenges faced at Sprott House are often related to the level of need that participants may bring. In the early stages of their residence in the program, youth are working to acclimatize to the space, which often comes with some euphoria at finally having a safe place to live. After two to three months, more mental health challenges may emerge, which may not have been touched on at intake. Staff work hard to support participants where they are at, using a trauma-informed approach to care, while still working towards the case plan, which usually requires collaborative adjustment over time as goals shift between addressing emotional needs and the more practical needs of housing and employment supports. It is important that we always use an intersectional approach to this work in order to maintain awareness of the complexities of individuals’ lives and needs.

Another challenge relates to participant engagement. Once settled at Sprott House, it can be difficult to encourage participants to get involved in programming. Staff address this by reminding them that this is a requirement of the program, and that programming is directly related to their case management goals. We work hard to offer a varied and dynamic program that speaks both to participants’ interests and enjoyment as well as practical and emotional needs. Food is an important factor in engagement, and by hiring a permanent staff specifically to run the Sunday Food Program, this alone has provided the continuity and quality of service required to more than double attendance!

**Service Delivery**

**Activities and Supports Provided.** Sprott House offers youth a variety of activities and supports, including counselling around employment, education, mental health, and substance use; help navigating medical services, government programs, and public transportation; workshops on skills such as managing a budget, finding housing, cooking, nutrition, various other life skills and regulating emotions; free YMCA gym membership, and group social activities. We also offer LGBTQ2S+ youth the privacy of their own bedroom and bathroom, something they tell us is very important to them.

**Approach**. Using a Strengths-based approach, we focus on what youth have to offer, not what they are missing. We also work to help them overcome barriers, and emphasize the importance of strong social networks, a key determinant of health. We create an environment where young people can live their true identities, and are guided by our Y’s overall values: caring, health, honesty, inclusiveness, respect, and responsibility.

**What’s Working.** Our first-year evaluation, undertaken by Alex Abramovich (CAMH), showed youth appeared more empowered and said they felt safe and more socially connected after living at Sprott House. Several described an improved sense of mental health. Trans youth reported feelings of safety and belonging they had never felt in other living situations.

*“Other programs I’d be really scared to go into. So, it’s really nice that you don't have to pretend to be someone else and you won’t get hurt if people know who you really are. It’s definitely safer.”* - YMCA Sprott House Participant

**Contributors**

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