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The Regional Municipality of Durham Report

From: Office of the Chief Administrative Officer
Report: #2025-INFO-5
Date: January 24, 2025

Subject:

Community Safety and Well-Being (CSWB) Update: Youth Action Group (YAG) Activities and Achievements

Recommendation:

That this report be received for information.

Report:

1. Purpose

1.1 To share information about the activities and achievements of the Community Safety and Well-Being (CSWB) Building Safer Communities Youth Action Group (YAG) that took place from February to December 2024. This work was supported through Public Safety Canada's Building Safer Communities Fund (BSCF) and implemented by the Region's CSWB Secretariat.

2. Background

2.1 The Regional Municipality of Durham Community Safety and Well-Being (CSWB) Plan was adopted by Durham Regional Council on November 24, 2021, in accordance with legislative amendments to Ontario's Police Services Act. The goal of the CSWB Plan is to ensure residents of Durham Region feel safe and have a sense of belonging, and their needs for education, health care, food, housing, income, as well as social and cultural expression are met. The CSWB Plan establishes a collaborative framework for integrated service delivery, working with community partners to encourage an upstream approach in addressing priority risk factors. For more information and to view the Plan, visit the [CSWB Information Hub](#).

2.2 Leveraging the financial support of Public Safety Canada's BSCF initiative, and under the leadership of the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Division's CSWB Secretariat, the Region is continuing to implement a comprehensive, coordinated approach to addressing community violence, particularly youth violence, including gun and gang activity.

3. Establishment and Activities of the Youth Action Group

3.1 The CSWB Secretariat partnered with Durham Community Action Group (DCAG), to enhance their existing Youth Advisory Committee. Through this partnership, the YAG was established. The YAG had the purpose of enhancing the skills and leadership experience of identified Durham Region youth, such that they are empowered to participate fully in decision-making and community governance. YAG members provided strategic advice to the Region's CSWB Secretariat on a Youth Violence Prevention Strategy and associated projects. Also, with mentorship from DCAG, YAG members collaboratively developed and implemented a youth-led community violence prevention project. The YAG project demonstrated the resilience of youth in Durham Region and showcased their talents as ambassadors and leaders in their communities.

3.2 The following outlines key project components:

- a. DCAG engaged in extensive outreach to schools and youth-serving organizations, as well as DCAG's community network and existing Youth Advisory Committee, to recruit and promote the formation of YAG among youth in Durham.
- b. The inaugural meeting of the YAG was held in February 2024. This group consisted of 17 youth between the ages of 14 and 18. After receiving training on models for community governance, the group developed a Terms of Reference, elected co-chairs and adopted a consensus-based approach to decision-making. YAG held 7 monthly meetings, plus additional planning meetings (June to August) related to the youth-led community project.
- c. YAG members received training and participated in workshops on the following topics that they identified were of interest to them and their leadership development goals:
 - Governance models
 - Research evaluation models
 - Civic engagement
 - CSWB approach to community violence prevention
 - Proposal writing
 - Art therapy as a form of healing for victims of violence and trauma

- Youth mental health: dealing with violence and intergenerational trauma

Members expressed the workshops exposed them to new concepts and ideas and helped them develop skills they can incorporate into their post-secondary education and future careers.

- d. YAG members provided strategic advice to the Region's CSWB Secretariat through two facilitated discussions that sought the youth members' insights on: (1) risk factors and protective factors impacting their safety and well-being, (2) the risks they experience of being impacted by gun and gang violence, (3) factors protecting them from the impacts of gun and gang violence, and (4) their suggestions on how to improve protective factors for young people in our communities.
 - e. As part of their training on civic engagement, YAG members participated in a Durham Region 2025 Strategic Plan public engagement event.
 - f. YAG members planned and delivered a youth-led and youth-focused event to address the issue of community violence. They chose to promote anti-violence through an art exhibition. The YAG curated artwork from 23 youth artists, ranging in age from 13 to 21, from across the region. Using a variety of mediums, their artwork promoted anti-violence, healing, resilience, and includes themes of bullying, racism, mental wellness and more.
 - g. On August 1, 2024, in conjunction with Durham Region's Emancipation Day Event, YAG hosted anti-violence awareness activities, including the art exhibition, amplifying the event's theme of "courage from our heritage, empowerment for tomorrow". Feedback gathered from almost 100 of the 250+ community members attending the event indicated the majority of visitors found the exhibition creative and thought-provoking, the healing circle was relevant and beneficial, and the art corner was a fun addition to the event.
 - h. YAG members and the youth artists interacted with community members attending the Emancipation Day Event, sharing their personal connections to the themes of the artwork.
- A YAG member spoke from the main stage during the Emancipation Day event. They shared why the group chose art to convey messages of anti-violence. "When we think of tomorrow, what do we want? The youth action group pondered on this question a lot while planning this event, and the truth is that there is no solid prediction of what tomorrow can look like. But we can take every step to make sure that our future is not one that is shaped by violence. That's why we've got so many young artists out here today, taking a stand through their art. This art expresses fear, anger, sadness, and all emotions that may come from a violent environment. As youth advocates, the future is in our hands. And I'm so grateful to be a part of this group that inspires youth and keeps us in discussions like these, not

out of them. That was our goal for today and we hope that our art, as well as the healing circle that we have set up, encourages youth to get out there and use their voices.”

- A youth artist shared, “All of the art today was created from one sole concept, anti-violence. You see here today how differently that message, and the experiences along with it, mean different things to each person. Through this art, we can see the connection that we can have, and that is required to build a strong and safe community. We hope that events like these, and the support of artists with the power to display messages that are integral to hear, better our community, and those who create it.”
- i. YAG members expressed gratitude for the opportunity to be involved in, and learn from, planning a large community event. They gained valuable skills in proposal writing and reporting, event promotion, planning, volunteer management and event day logistics.
- j. During a debrief session at the conclusion of the project, many YAG members shared that this was the first time they had participated in a committee outside their school or faith community. They had originally joined not knowing what to expect but the consensus was that it had been a very positive experience. They felt that the YAG meetings were a safe, productive, and enjoyable space where they as youth felt welcomed, respected, and valued. Many in attendance expressed appreciation for the \$100 honorarium they received for attending YAG meetings and related activities. This incentive made them feel that as young people, their time and work are valued, they have something to offer, and their opinions and contributions were appreciated and well received.

4. Community Engagement with the Youth Art Exhibition

- 4.1 Due to the positive feedback during the Emancipation Day event and the powerful messages behind the artwork, arrangements were made to showcase the exhibition in multiple locations. The artwork was on display at the Pickering Library Central Branch throughout the month of October 2024 and at Durham Regional Headquarters throughout the month of November 2024. Plans are underway for future exhibitions in public facilities in 2025.
- 4.2 Community members viewing the art exhibit at Regional Headquarters had an opportunity to share feedback. The following summarizes what was shared:
 - a. 100% of respondents said it is important to continue supporting youth leaders and found the artwork was impactful in amplifying the voices of young people in our community.

- b. The artwork led community members to reflect on and share personal experiences related to the themes of the artwork. Their comments included, “Impressive work, we need more displays like this to highlight youth excellence in areas of art.” “Enjoyed every single piece of work that they had put into it.” “Excellent work. Emotion evoked me to tears.” “Amazing artists with impactful statements.”
- c. Feedback included a suggestion to showcase more local artists’ work and engage with the artists at Regional Headquarters at future events.

5. Relationship to Strategic Plan

5.1 The Community Safety and Well-Being Plan is aligned with the following objectives found in the Region of Durham 2020 – 2024 Strategic Plan:

- a. Under Goal 2: Community Vitality Objective: To foster an exceptional quality of life with services that contribute to strong neighbourhoods, vibrant and diverse communities, and influence our safety and well-being;
 - 2.1 Revitalize existing neighbourhoods and build complete communities that are walkable, well-connected, and have a mix of attainable housing;
 - 2.2 Enhance community safety and well-being;
 - 2.3 Influence the social determinants of health to improve outcomes for vulnerable populations;
 - 2.4 Support a high quality of life for all through human services delivery;
 - 2.5 Build a healthy, inclusive, age-friendly community where everyone feels a sense of belonging;
- b. Under Goal 3: Economic Prosperity Objective: To build a strong and resilient economy that maximizes opportunities for business and employment growth, innovation, and partnership;
 - 3.1 Position Durham Region as the location of choice for business

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 The activities and project outcomes of the YAG demonstrate the value of investments in youth mentorship, leadership development and skills training related to civic engagement. YAG members gained experience and confidence in addressing risk factors of violence experienced by youth in their communities through facilitated discussions and project planning. This project created meaningful spaces for young people to contribute to creating safe communities for everyone.
- 6.2 The experiences and ideas shared by YAG members will inform CSWB Plan implementation, including the development of a Youth Violence Prevention Strategy.

6.3 With support from the BSCF CSWB Fund, DCAG is continuing to support youth through a Youth Hub (November 2024 – March 2025), providing after-school activities, workshops, tutoring and homework assistance.

7. Attachments

Attachment #1: Photos of youth artists' artwork on display at Emancipation Day, August 1, 2024 - Esplanade Park, Pickering and November 2024 - 605 Rossland Rd. East, Whitby

Respectfully submitted,

Original signed by

Elaine C. Baxter-Trahair
Chief Administrative Officer

Photos of youth artists and community members viewing artwork at the Youth Action Group's art exhibition during the Region of Durham's Emancipation Day event on August 1, 2024, in Esplanade Park.



Photos of the Youth Action Group's art exhibition on display at Regional Headquarters throughout the month of November 2024.

