

UNITED WAY

> ACTION

4 steps to reduce youth violence

United Way tackles underlying causes of the problem across the GTA

CAMILLA CORNELL
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Most kids don't dream of growing up to perpetrate or be the victim of violence. But when there are seemingly insurmountable barriers to success within a community, violence may follow.

United Way research has consistently highlighted neighbourhoods in Toronto where poverty and inequality has cemented itself. People are chronically unemployed or under-employed and there are "gaps in social services," according to Nation Cheong, vice-president, community opportunities and mobilization for the United Way.

"Poverty and lack of opportunity leads to marginalization," says Cheong. "People feel disconnected from the traditional pathways to success and that can lead to desperation. In a small percentage of cases, violence may result."

With a commitment of \$1.94 million in investments over the next three years, the United Way has a four-step approach to address the underlying causes of youth violence across Toronto, Peel and York regions. **Developing skills for high-demand industries.** Today's job market is tough for any young person. But United Way's Career Navigator program specifically aims to give youth impacted by violence, past involvement with the criminal justice system, disabilities and other barriers to employment, the skills to succeed.

"Career Navigator is designed for young people who may not follow traditional pathways to



NAOMI HILTZ FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Nation Cheong attends United Way's Career Navigator session hosted by the Labour Education Centre's Tradelinx pre-apprenticeship program. It gives youths hands-on practical experience.

success," Cheong says. Partnering with agencies and employers, it provides education, training, job placement, soft skills and wrap-around support services specifically geared to the high-demand construction, retail, hospitality, IT and health and social services sectors.

It takes a village to snag a job.

"Our data shows us that if two people were to graduate today with the exact same marks from the same institution, the individuals who have an uncle or a neighbour to vouch for them have a significant advantage when entering the workforce," Cheong says. The United Way's netWORKS program

aims to level the playing field by connecting young people to individuals established in the workplace "who can open doors for them" as mentors, coaches and advocates.

Kick-starting businesses that aren't all about profits.

The United Way's Toronto Enterprise Fund helps fledgling social enterprises, whose goal is not only to sell goods and services, but to provide training and opportunities for people who have trouble breaking into the job market.

Timely intervention. When a family or individual is in crisis (perhaps police are called or they're referred to a social ser-

vice agency), often a number of things have gone wrong with their lives. Unfortunately, most social service agencies are limited to providing specific services (say housing, or support navigating the courts). They aren't set up to handle multiple problems. The United Way's FOCUS program aims to get immediate help for complex cases, potentially preventing things from going further off the rails.

Through its targeted, four-pronged approach, says Cheong, the United Way continues to address the issues that make young people vulnerable to violence, creating stronger, more functional communities.

NETWORKS PROGRAM HELPS BOOST CONNECTIONS

When Abdi Mohamed, 29, graduated from York University with an MA in economics in 2016, he felt certain he would easily get a job. But, says the Somali immigrant who arrived in Canada from Kenya, "when I finished school, that's when the struggle started." Mohamed sent off about 10 resumes a day, working nights to pay his bills. But after six months with no results, "my self-esteem went down," he says. "With a graduate degree in economics and statistics, I was working in a warehouse doing manual labour."

Then an agency Mohamed approached for help honing his resume suggested he explore the United Way netWORKS program that connects eager applicants with professional networks to help them find jobs. Mohamed was initially skeptical, but gave some of the networking events a try and met diverse groups of employees from organizations such as CPP Investment Board and the big banks. They offered encouragement, as well as concrete advice.

One advised approaching a staffing agency that would be able to refer him for jobs. The concept was new for Mohamed, but it worked. A year after graduation, Mohamed snagged a short-term contract as a policy analyst with the provincial government, following up with a full-time federal government position in 2018.

"For me the netWORKS program was hope inspiring," he says.

> COLLABORATION

Responding to crises with a total team effort

'Situation tables' each week help the FOCUS program provide immediate help to families and individuals

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The FOCUS program — a joint effort of United Way, Toronto Police Service, the City of Toronto and 90 community partners — aims to bridge the gap between social service agencies and families or individuals in crisis.

Here's how it works: The police and representatives from various social ser-

vices agencies — from city housing, to disability support, mental health and Boys and Girls Clubs — attend weekly "situation tables." Any of the participating agencies can refer a family or individual they deem high risk of anti-social or criminal behaviour (either as victims or perpetrators). Frequently, those referred have multiple problems to address, sometimes including addiction,

mental health and homelessness.

The agencies then decide on a concerted response to the family or person in need, and intervene with help within 48 hours. As of June 1, 2018, FOCUS handled 290 complex cases, connecting 85 per cent of the people involved with agency assistance.

Here's how the various parties work together.



Brian Smith, detective with Toronto police's Community Partnerships and Engagement Unit

What is your role with FOCUS?

I am the police co-ordinator for FOCUS Toronto. We bring in 55 to 75 per cent of the referrals to the situation tables, largely because we're on the streets 24-7 and we see people in times of crisis.

What do you think makes the program so impactful?

When Toronto police receive a 911 call, they may quickly realize that the disturbance arose from stresses in the household. Maybe the family is being evicted within days, the father is unemployed, or the mother has an addiction.

In the past, often these needs were not within our power to fulfil. We could refer people to an agency, but accessing help can be very challenging for people in need. Sometimes there are language barriers or mental health barriers. Now, with their permission, we can refer their situation through FOCUS and they can get immediate assistance.



Evon Smith, manager of FOCUS Toronto

What is your role with FOCUS?

I go to all four situation tables in the city to bring order and collect data. I'm always on the lookout for systemic issues and I try to generate higher-level conversations about those.

For example, crystal meth use is a huge issue right now because users often become aggressive or disruptive. They may be kicked out of detox centres or shelters, and hospitals and jails hold them just a few hours and release them.

What do you think makes FOCUS so impactful?

In one meeting, we can get help for an individual or a family right away. All the services at the table are required to respond within 48 hours. Sometimes we're knocking on doors to offer help the very same day. And we're able to take a holistic approach. Often there's not just one problem to deal with — there are many. We can connect people with a whole host of services. As a side benefit, we've been able to break down the silos between various agencies.



Sabrina Samsudeen, manager of community outreach for East Metro Youth Services

What is your role with FOCUS?

At East Metro Youth Services, we work in partnership with 16 agencies to help young people navigate and connect to the services they need. That might be help finding employment, applying for housing, benefits or a student loan, or help with mental health or addiction.

What do you think makes FOCUS so impactful?

In my eyes, the true impact of the FOCUS table is the collaboration and coming together of services. For example, we had a case recently where a young girl was facing a legal charge. She was also suspected of being part of a gang and she was potentially drug trafficking. And the home she lived in with her two siblings and her mother had been shot at multiple times.

We were able to provide the girl with help navigating the justice system, and some of the other agencies were able to get the family moved out of their unsafe apartment.



Dan Breault, manager, community safety and well-being unit, City of Toronto Community Crisis Response Program

What is your role with FOCUS?

I sit on the FOCUS co-ordination committee. I'm responsible for all of the tables, including staffing them with co-chairs from the city and determining the overall direction and expansion of the program. FOCUS gives my workers a tool to deal with situations of high risk that require a co-ordinated service response.

What do you think makes the program so impactful?

There are sometimes barriers associated with attaching services to a person who needs them. It's up to us as service providers to reach out and close those vulnerability gaps. With FOCUS we're able to deal with dozens of cases in the time it would take to deal with one client using a traditional case-management approach. FOCUS situation tables are very much action oriented and there's accountability built right into the process.



Rhona Zitney, service resolution, justice co-ordinator, Fred Victor Mental Health Court Support Services, Old City Hall

What is your role with FOCUS?

I collaborate on interventions, but I can also help people navigate the legal system. When appropriate, I've helped people traverse to the Mental Health Court where they can access more resources and potentially a better legal outcome.

What do you think makes FOCUS so impactful?

One of the most important things for me is having the police there to be co-facilitators and partners. I see a willingness to acknowledge that people get into trouble because of the major issues they're facing, including homelessness, addiction and mental health issues.

We've known for a very long time at the Mental Health Court that support for people with mental health and addiction issues tends to be disjointed and there's no continuity of care. I think FOCUS is helping to highlight that issue in the community.