

A comprehensive strategy to support and empower Jewish youth



January 2013

Executive Summary

Background:

Following two high profile suicides involving young Jewish adults in 2011, there was considerable discussion about the possible causes of the suicides and potential preventive strategies. While the initial focus was on the suicides, over time, community discussion broadened to include youth and young adults in emotional distress.

As part of the Federation Planning Council's role to engage in strategic planning and community priority setting, the need to produce a comprehensive coordinated strategy to support Jewish youth was approved by the Federation board in June 2012. To ensure that the recommendations were meaningful and relevant to youth, planning council members decided to gather and incorporate the voices and ideas of Jewish youth in the body of the report. To this end a youth survey was designed and distributed to a random sample of local youth between the ages of 13 – 22 years. Given our limited resources and our knowledge that most young people communicate through social media, we designed an on-line survey using *SurveyMonkey*. The observations and recommendations contained in the report have been informed by the feedback of 185 teens and young adults along with 35 youth professionals and community volunteers.

The purpose of the survey was to find out from youth, themselves, what pressures and stresses they experience, where and how they seek help, their knowledge of Jewish support services and their recommendations for how the Jewish community can support them. To our knowledge, no similar surveys of Jewish youth have been conducted. Based on the most recent (2009) population projections, there are approximately 2000 Jewish youth between the ages of 13 – 22 years old in the Greater Vancouver area. This age range was selected because it incorporates two key transition points for young people, moving from elementary school to high school and graduating from high school. We set a goal of 200 completed surveys. Surveys were distributed through a variety of sources including e-mail lists, Facebook pages, newsletters, youth workers, Rabbis, camp directors, teachers and Jewish and non-Jewish social services agencies. All three residential camps distributed the survey to their counselors and counselors-in-training.

Input was also sought from a broad group of youth professionals. To compare their views with those of the youth, five questions from selected from the survey and presented to the youth

workers. Twenty seven youth workers completed the survey and their results are included for the appropriate questions. We also interviewed three youth professionals and two camp directors in more depth.

What did we learn?

We learned that this group of youth is very busy and finding time to manage all of their responsibilities and activities is creating stress. Concerns about peer pressure, parental expectations and fitting in top their list of issues. Yet, almost half of the participants are worried about school, homework and the future. While some youth do mention bullying and drug use as other challenges, their anxieties about succeeding at school and their plans for the future far outweigh those other issues.

We also learned that these youth are very closely connected to their parents. Over 80% reported that they could talk to their parents about their concerns and that they would seek out their parents' advice first before seeking outside help. This strong reliance on their parents for support has a direct impact on their help seeking behaviours and their use of professional resources. While most (93%) indicated that they knew what resources to access if they needed help, they were less certain about resources designed to respond to emotional distress. Fewer participants (55.4%) knew where to go for help in the Jewish community and only 57% of those who responded indicated that they felt the Jewish community was a safe place to seek help. Those who did not see the Jewish community as a place to get help, listed reasons ranging from gossip and judgment and lack of trust to lack of knowledge of Jewish resources or a preference to seek help from parents and friends. In response to questions about what programs and services they felt would provide more support to young people in the community, the top two ideas were teaching young people about the issues they face and how to get help, and teaching adults about issues that young people face and how they can help. These ideas were closely followed by more opportunities for youth to meet each other and peer-peer support groups. When the youth were asked to offer their own ideas, the most consistent suggestions were more opportunities to connect with other youth, followed by participating in fun activities that do not have a particular Jewish focus, and having a safe space to talk about their problems.

From the professionals who work in non-clinical settings, we learned that they are encountering a growing number of youth who are struggling with anxiety and depression and that the workers

feel that they lack the skills and resources to support them. A number of suggestions were presented including ongoing training to address these issues, the creation of an after-hours crisis response team and access to a team of mental health professionals to provide on-going support to the residential camps and youth groups on an as needed basis.

Where do we go from here?

Although this group of participants did not report that they were experiencing significant emotional distress, they do make reference to their own feelings of anxiety and depression as well as peers who are struggling. It is important that we continue to provide youth oriented support services in the community for those who are in need. While the recommendations from those who work from youth are very helpful in determining **what services** are needed, it is the youths' feedback that is critical in determining **how and where** support services should be delivered. In particular, do we continue to embed counseling programs in our traditional structures or do we need to find less formal and non-stigmatizing ways and places to offer these services? Many youth spoke about their reluctance to seek support from the Jewish community because of their lack of trust and their belief that gossip and judgment are pervasive. These attitudes mitigate against many youth accessing existing community services or programs. The most effective way to overcome these attitudes and build trust is to actively engage the youth in the determination and planning of new resources.

Another consistent message from the youth is that they want to be more informed about ways to help themselves. They are open to involving their parents in the process and they want the opportunity to network with other youth. More importantly, they want to see the creation of a network of caring peers who they can trust, who will support them when they are in need, and with whom they can talk about their problems and be themselves. This speaks to the value of developing a community wide peer-peer support program and actively involving youth in the planning and delivery.

Conclusion:

Seeking out the opinions of young people through the survey has been both informative and intriguing. Their comments regarding their day-to-day pressures and stresses, their attitudes towards the Jewish community as a place to receive help, and their perceptions of initiatives they

consider supportive, confirm some and challenge other adult assumptions. We can make a difference by focusing on those issues that teens and young adults worry about and for which some need support before they are in crisis. By involving youth and youth adults in the design and implementation of the preventive initiatives described in the recommendations below, we have the opportunity to introduce programs and services that are meaningful and relevant to them. By incorporating their talents and skills in the delivery, they have the opportunity to change perceptions of how the Jewish community supports its youth and young adults.

Recommendations regarding programs and services:

1. Respond to youth in emotional distress by:
 - Maintaining Federation funding for existing youth oriented counseling and support services.
 - Heightening the profile of the existing counseling and support services for Jewish youth through the use of social media and posting links to these services on all relevant community organization websites.
 - Funding and piloting an “after-hours” crisis response team of community professionals available to respond in a timely manner to youth, rabbis, parents or youth workers who are dealing with a crisis and require professional advice.
 - Establishing a fund for the residential camps and community youth groups to access mental health professionals on an on call basis to provide support and guidance related to youth in crisis or ongoing emotional distress.
 - Providing ongoing training and supervision for youth workers to increase their confidence and skills to provide consistent crisis intervention and appropriate referrals to youth in distress.
 - Exploring ways to offer counseling and support services in non-traditional and non-stigmatizing locations.
2. Build a supportive network for youth by:
 - Funding the development and implementation of a community wide peer-support program. This will require the development of a separate plan and significant involvement of interested youth to ensure acceptance and overall buy-in. Hillel should be an active partner in the development and coordination.

- Expanding the scope of funded high school supplementary school programming to include other informal education and social programs, as well as tutoring support and homework clubs.
 - Creating an inventory of Jewish professionals and businesses that would be willing to mentor or offer internships to youth or young adults considering a career in particular professions or businesses.
 - Convening a meeting of relevant community organizations, the Youth-at-Risk committee and interested youth to explore the concept of a youth hub. Develop a business plan that includes possible location, scope of programs and services offered, operating structure and potential funding sources.
3. Enhance the knowledge and skills of parents and youth to prevent or manage anxiety and distress by:
- Bring all key youth serving organizations together to collaboratively plan a calendar of high caliber speakers
 - Jointly market the speakers across the community.
 - Explore ways to co-sponsor speakers with organizations in the broader community to leverage resources and promotional capacity.
 - Structuring the events so that there are opportunities for parents and youth to both learn together and have time to explore issues in separate parent and youth groups.

Recommendations regarding process and community coordination

- 4. Involving teens and young adults in all future planning initiatives and program initiatives by Creating a *Youth Planning Council*, or similar mechanism composed of a diverse group of youth and young adults to work with community professionals on the implementation of relevant recommendations contained in this report.
- 5. Maintaining the Youth-at-Risk Committee to facilitate information exchange and community coordination of education, awareness and prevention strategies among community professionals.