



# EVALUATION NEWS

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## Formative Evaluation of the Public Health Unit Youth Engagement Initiative

### Introduction

Welcome to the second newsletter in the series on our evaluation of the Public Health Unit Youth Engagement Initiative, funded by the former Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion and Sport (MHPS).<sup>1</sup> This newsletter reports on key findings from a formative evaluation of how the Initiative has been implemented in public health units across the province.

### Youth Engagement and Public Health in Ontario

In 2010, MHPS funded the Public Health Unit (PHU) Youth Engagement (YE) Initiative as part of Smoke-Free Ontario's prevention programming. The Initiative promotes the adoption of youth engagement principles across PHU programs and supports the recruitment of core youth leaders to engage in community health promotion about the risks and harms of tobacco use and other health topics, and undertake advocacy on

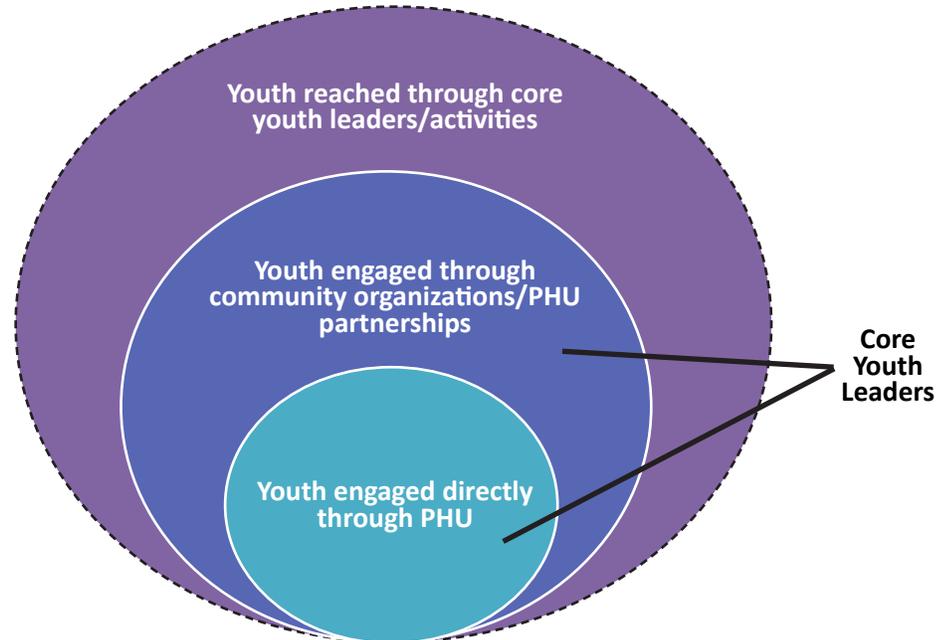
tobacco control policy. Core youth leaders volunteer directly with PHUs or through youth-serving community organizations (see Figure 1).

The Initiative also provides training on principles of youth engagement, funding of youth-led

health promotion activities and opportunities for peer networking and learning.<sup>1</sup>

Implementation of the YE Initiative is supported through funding of a Youth Engagement Coordinator (YEC) position in each public health unit.

Figure 1: Structure of Youth Engagement in the PHU YE Initiative



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## Our Evaluation Study

This formative evaluation study focused on learning from both successes and challenges in the early implementation stages to identify areas for improvement in advancing Initiative implementation. We also began to assess perceived early and anticipated impacts of the Initiative at youth and community-levels.

Key questions that guided the evaluation included:

- How has the PHU YE Initiative been implemented?
- Who is being engaged by the Initiative?
  - What are the characteristics of the core youth leaders?
- What are the early and anticipated impacts of the Initiative?
- What are the facilitators and challenges to Initiative implementation?

## Methods

From March 2011 to March 2012, we conducted a series of provincial and local level data collection activities to assess progress, facilitators and challenges in implementation:

- Key informant interviews with provincial stakeholders (n=12)
- Survey of YE staff across the PHUs (n=27)
- Survey with core youth leaders volunteering in PHUs (n=124)
- Case studies with six (6) PHUs across the province
  - Key informant interviews with staff and community stakeholders
  - Focus groups/interviews with youth leader volunteers
  - Site visits
  - Document analysis

## Results

### How has the Youth Engagement Initiative been Implemented in PHUs?

At the time of the study, many PHUs were at different stages of implementation. While capacity building for YE generally occurred at early stages, PHUs used different approaches and ways to recruit core youth leaders. Recruitment methods

included: employing youth leaders, providing honoraria, hosting school and community grant competitions, providing co-op placements, and/or using word of mouth and social media.

### Types of Youth Engagement Activities

During the study period, core youth leaders were planning and implementing a variety of activities within PHUs and in the community. Types of youth-led activities included:

- Campaign development and implementation (e.g., i-THINK and smoke-free movies)
- Community events (e.g., smoke-free movie nights, safe parties, speaking events, flash mobs)
- Social media (e.g., websites, Facebook pages, videos)
- The development of peer health education resources on tobacco and other health issues relevant to youth (e.g., posters, health promotion displays/booths)
- School-based initiatives (e.g., cessation contests, youth summits, educational activities/events in high schools, and colleges/universities)
- Research (e.g., photovoice research projects)

Overall, youth-led activities generally focused on tobacco-specific topics included:

- Tobacco industry denormalization
- Smoke-free movies
- Tobacco-free sports, parks and recreation
- Smoke-free spaces/environmental pollution caused by cigarettes
- Chewing tobacco
- Smoking cessation for youth

Core youth leaders were also working on projects beyond tobacco, including topics such as media literacy, substance misuse, mental health, sexual health, and sun safety.



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## Youth-Led Activity Example: Smoke-free Movie Night

Core youth leaders from one PHU hosted a smoke-free movies night to raise awareness about smoking in youth-rated movies, product branding, and to 'have some fun'. Given the holiday season, the youth leaders screened a Christmas-themed youth-rated movie that did not depict smoking. Popcorn, hot chocolate, door prizes, trivia and free t-shirts contributed to the friendly, welcoming, supportive and enthusiastic atmosphere.

The level of youth participation was high as the youth leaders took the lead in planning and running the event. Three adults from the health unit were also present and provided support when needed.

About 90 youth from the community attended the movie night along with a handful of parents; the room was at capacity. The youth in attendance were engaged throughout the movie as well as during the brief opening and closing remarks made by the core youth leaders. For these short presentations, the youth leaders spoke about research they had done on smoking in movies and the need to change the ratings of movies depicting smoking to 18A.

The youth in attendance seemed to enjoy and absorb the messaging from a two minute video that preceded the movie. This was a video core youth leaders created to show the presence of product branding within society.

At the end of the night, youth and parents had the choice to sign postcards to demonstrate their support for the smoke-free movies campaign.

## Who is Engaged? PHU Core Youth Leaders

Survey results from a sample of 124 core youth leaders volunteering with PHUs show that they:

- Are primarily youth in upper high school grades and post-secondary
- Have high levels of self-efficacy and empowerment to become engaged in health promotion in their communities.

Key informants in PHUs noted that they were engaging diverse youth leaders from different ethnicities, geographic regions, neighbourhoods and schools.

However, beliefs on the definition of 'at risk youth,' and whom the Initiative should be targeting were mixed, as many key informants felt that all youth are at risk for tobacco use.

## Preliminary Perceived Impacts

Many core youth leaders are passionate about tobacco-related issues and are very motivated to engage with their community. These youth possess and are further developing important traits and skills, such as confidence and self-efficacy, which are important assets to resist and prevent tobacco use and other unhealthy behaviours related to increased chronic disease risks.

Also, many youth-led activities and projects were planned and implemented in the community as a result of the Initiative.

*I held a major campaign...and I had a booth at my school every day at lunch and then... we would go out to the... smoking area at our school and we approached many of the people that this campaign would affect and we tried to get them involved...we did a lot at our school...it's always rewarding. Youth leader*

Perceived early impacts of the Initiative at the community-level include increased media coverage of activities/events, the development of community partnerships, and increased community and PHU staff awareness of YE Principles.

*...The incredible feedback we got from how awesome [YE event] was from...families and... how much positive press... [for] our health unit... very strongly positive things. PHU Key Informant*



## Facilitators and Challenges to Implementation

The process of Initiative implementation is reportedly influenced by a variety of facilitators and challenges (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Key Facilitators and Challenges to Implementation**

Facilitators	Challenges
High organizational support and management buy-in for the Initiative	Limited guidance and direction from Ministry on Initiative goals and outcomes
Strong legacy of YE programming within PHU	Low organizational support and management buy-in for the Initiative
Provision of a dedicated YEC position and positive adult-youth relationships	Limited resources/funding
	Challenges engaging youth on the topic of tobacco control
	Geographical challenges

## Key Areas for Initiative Improvement

While a number of challenges need to be addressed for implementation to advance, the limited capacity with which to conduct YE work remains a key challenge for a number of PHUs. Capacity for YE varies across PHUs and this largely relates to the extent of organizational support and previous experience with the YE approach at the PHUs. Suggestions to overcome this and other challenges include:

- Clearer communication from the Ministry on Initiative goals and outcomes
- Clear guidelines for implementation to help those PHUs with less YE experience
- A vision for Initiative sustainability to enhance organizational support and investment in the Initiative
- Training on YE at upper levels within the PHU (e.g., boards of health, managers) to increase organizational support for YE
- Enhanced infrastructure for resource-sharing on YE across PHUs

## References

<sup>1</sup> Kirst M, Borland T, Schwartz R. Evaluation of a youth engagement initiative to promote healthy choices. *Evaluation News*; Vol 4; 1. April 2011. Available at: [http://www.otru.org/pdf/newsletters/OTRU\\_news\\_vol4no1\\_web.pdf](http://www.otru.org/pdf/newsletters/OTRU_news_vol4no1_web.pdf)



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