



## “Frontline Systems of Support” (F-SOS)

F-SOS was a Community Mobilization Award Initiative funded through the Provincial Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health at CHEO.

### WHAT WE ENVISIONED

The **vision** of F-SOS project is to create systemic changes within the youth-serving sector that holistically address frontline workers’ ongoing grief and trauma, allowing them to better serve youth and their communities.

For too long, frontline workers have not had appropriate safe spaces to speak freely about organizational systems and institutional hierarchies that hinder healing, perpetuate grief and trauma responses, and act as barriers to accessing support. This “silo” effect in the youth-serving world also limits the opportunities for youth workers to connect for support, share wisdom, or express their vulnerabilities. This project was developed with the aim to create that space.

The **mission** of the F-SOS project is to develop a better understanding of what programs and services currently exist to support frontline workers’ grief and trauma and what has existed in the past.

### WHAT WE DID

- Literature review
- Environmental Scan with 9 Key Stakeholders
- 7 Focus Groups across Toronto, with a total of 45 participants

### WHAT WE LEARNED

- **Grief and trauma impact physical health-** 100% of respondents said they suffer negative health impacts.
- **Grief and trauma causes mental suffering-** 96% of respondents stated they suffer mental health distress.
- **What we deal with all day (and some nights) has an effect on our personal relationships-** 80% of youth workers reported problems in their relationships.

- **There is very little we know of to help us-** 29% of participants stated they were not aware of any supports, or that there were none available to frontline workers in their organizations.
- **We know that the systems we work within are part of the problem-** 92% identified changes to organizational practices, with time off and managers/supervisors who understand and want to help them were the most common “asks.” 46% wanted to see a plan that would change what happens in their organizations.
- **We also know what we need-** 58% of youth workers wanted counselling, of which 71% wanted individual counselling and 29% group sessions. 54% of workers wanted to speak with others who have had similar experiences, with 21% directly asking for peer support type models.
- **We know what stops us from getting help-** Cost was a barrier for 42% of workers, 30% mentioned discrimination or stereotypes, culture (particularly helping professionals from privileged groups) the most common concern (83%).

#### WHAT WE READ/HEARD:

*“It has become a numbing experience. Because so many youth have passed away that I have had direct contact with, I have become desensitized to the occurrence of death.”*

*“Currently I am unaware of any supports that exist within my agency which is odd considering that they are a mental health agency.”*

*“I worked someplace before where the E.D. said that is was unprofessional for me to grieve a client/youth’s death because they were not related to me – of course I had to quit that job.”*

*“Many workers are suffering from PTSD/acute anxiety and vicarious trauma. They are unaware that there need for destructive behaviour ie, binge drinking, partying all night with no sleep, and work without clear boundaries is all a symptom of trauma. This is becoming such an issue that workaholics are the champions of our work.”*

*“If there were a support team for grief and trauma it might be better if it was an independent agency that served all youth workers. That way you could talk freely without worrying that you might be talking to someone that had a connection to your co-workers or supervisor.”*

#### WHAT WE WILL DO NEXT

- We are piloting a process that invests in community leaders/healers. The facilitated peer-support program called Community Healers Project (CHP) will focus on creating space for participants to feel supported, connected and validated in their personal and professional experiences.
- We want to share our findings with people who can make change happen!
- We will use our findings to continue to advocate for systemic and organizational re-structuring and non-traditional supports!