



Annual Report

2023 - 2024



project step

project step is a community-wide initiative that ensures young people and their families have access to **support, treatment, education, and prevention** of harms related to substance and technology use. *project step* partners deliver addictions counselling, prevention education, and family support in every publicly funded high school and in five community-based schools in Ottawa. The partnership also provides live-in treatment at two centres—one in each official language.

Addressing substance and technology use challenges early is key. If we stop the cycle of addiction before it begins, we set kids on track for a healthy life with stable employment, housing, and social connections.



BECAUSE OF PROJECT STEP...

- Youth have ready access to addictions counselling in any of the publicly funded high schools in Ottawa, and in several community agencies focused on helping young people.
- Teachers and school staff receive presentations and workshops to help them identify youth experiencing challenges with substance use or addictions, and connect those students with *project step*.
- Parents with children experiencing challenges with substance or technology use can access counselors to help them support their kids on the path to their success or recovery.
- Young people receive education on substance use health and mental health. They also receive information on how to support their peers and where they can turn to for help with their mental health, or if they are questioning their relationship with substances or technology.

SINCE 2007
project step
HAS HELPED:

17,080 +	students access school-based counselling
235,250 +	students receive education sessions
16,057 +	parents receive the support they need



THIS YEAR'S ACTIVITIES

2024 CALENDAR YEAR

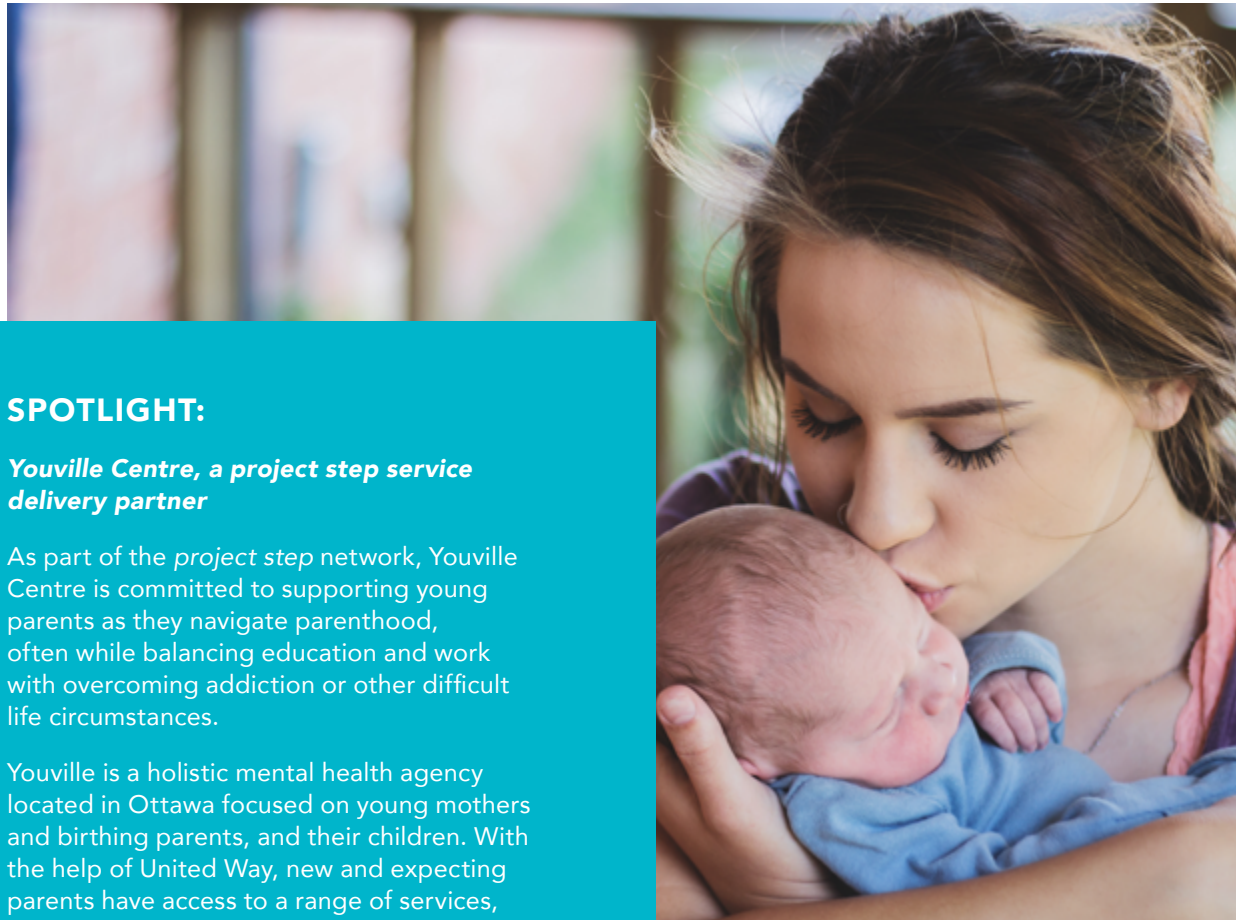
Hosted project step's Annual Stakeholders Meeting

On January 15, 2025, project step held an Annual Stakeholders Meeting at United Way East Ontario's office. Roughly 50 attendees came together, representing the education and health sectors, frontline service providers, community members, and youth. The objective was to explore the current conditions, trends, and gaps surrounding youth mental health, and problematic substance and technology use. Two group activities, a PESTLE (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, and Environmental/Epidemiological) Analysis and a System Mapping Exercise, provided insights and perspectives from various stakeholders. A goal for the meeting was to be inclusive and interactive, giving everyone's voice a chance to be heard.

Some high-level themes emerging from the conversation include:

- The rapidly changing context, in all domains of PESTLE.
- Unresolved socio-economic conditions impacting mental health and well-being.
- Concerns surrounding the upcoming election and implications for the social safety net.
- Lack of regulation in advertising, social media, AI, and technology use in general.
- Rural considerations and exacerbated barriers.
- Desire for youth-driven, peer-to-peer, lived experience-led initiatives.
- Additional supports needed for youth, parents, caregivers, teachers, and service providers.
- Need for collaboration and knowledge mobilization across sectors and service.
- Importance of education and safe spaces to address stigma, normalization, and misinformation.

See the [Full Summary Report](#)



SPOTLIGHT:

Youville Centre, a project step service delivery partner

As part of the *project step* network, Youville Centre is committed to supporting young parents as they navigate parenthood, often while balancing education and work with overcoming addiction or other difficult life circumstances.

Youville is a holistic mental health agency located in Ottawa focused on young mothers and birthing parents, and their children. With the help of United Way, new and expecting parents have access to a range of services, including a fully accredited secondary school, mental health therapy, parenting classes, substance use counselling, and a licensed child development program. With on-site childcare, young parents can focus on completing their education and accessing vital support, while their children thrive in a nurturing, enriching environment.

Learn more: [project step helping young parents through mental health and addiction struggles](#)

Watch: [Youville Centre is creating brighter futures for young parents](#)

Practiced meaningful youth engagement

Young people bring invaluable insights and firsthand knowledge of the issues facing youth. *Project step's* Ad Hoc Community Engagement Committee is drafting a Youth Engagement Plan, with the goal of bringing youth into our work as partners and experts through lived experience. The Youth Engagement Plan is a culmination of research and guiding principles to approach this work with respect, accountability, authenticity, and inclusion.

At *project step's* Annual Stakeholders Meeting, one of the goals was to meaningfully include youth. Nine young people attended and contributed valuable insights and wisdom to the discussions. To foster a safe and inclusive environment, organizers hosted a small pizza lunch prior to the meeting, seated the youth together, provided fidget toys, and offered a small honorarium as a token of appreciation. Youth perspectives were acknowledged and integrated into the Summary Report. Most notably, youth highlighted the roles of screen time, social media, and artificial intelligence, on mental health and wellbeing. They also advocated for informal community spaces, youth-driven initiatives, trusted adult allies, and harm reduction strategies for technology and online platforms.

Highlighted 2023 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS)

In Winter 2024, Ottawa Public Health (OPH) released new Ottawa-based data from the 2023 OSDUHS report. The data provided in the OSDUHS reports is crucial to understanding the context of youth mental health, wellbeing, substance, and technology use for Ontario students in grades seven to 12. Some significant trends identified in the data include:

- 37 per cent of grade seven to 12 students in Ottawa reported their mental health as 'fair' or 'poor'.
- The use of alcohol (33 per cent), cannabis (15 per cent), and vapes (10 per cent) in the past year among grade seven to 12 students was similar to 2021, but cough / cold medicine tripled (9 per cent).
- One in five youth reported non-medical opioid use in the past year – which has doubled since 2021.
- 18 per cent of grade seven to 12 students in Ottawa reported thoughts about suicide in the past 12 months.
- 33 per cent of students wanted mental health supports but did not seek it. Their reasons included: students felt they could manage themselves (19 per cent); students were afraid of what others would think (13 per cent).

Access the [reports](#).

Completed Activities with project step Cabinet and Committees

Project step Cabinet is the decision-making body of *project step*, comprised of four standing committees and one Ad Hoc Committee:

- Communications, Marketing and Health Promotion (CMHP) Committee
- Research, Evaluation and Learning (REAL) Committee
- Resource and Planning (R&P) Committee
- STEP Coalition
- Ad Hoc Community Engagement (AHCE) Committee

Over the 2023-2024 year, the *project step* committees accomplished the following:

- The AHCE Committee completed the *Youth Engagement Plan* which will guide how *project step* meaningfully includes young people with lived and living experience as partners, equals and experts.
- The R&P Committee completed a true cost assessment to evaluate the overall cost and deficits related to running *project step* each year.
- The CMHP Committee completed *project step's* plan-on-a-page in English and French.
- The REAL Committee worked to standardize how we measure the effects of our programming. As of Fall 2024, service providers now use similar indicators to measure the impact of their programming, which opens doors for sustainable funding, and gives us a better understanding of what interventions are most helpful.



PROGRAMMING

Project step's school-based programming is delivered by [Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services](#), [Le CAP](#), and [Ottawa Catholic School Board counsellors](#).

Students at every public high school in Ottawa, including alternative schools, have access to addictions prevention, education programming, and counselling. Many intermediate and elementary schools (grades five through eight) also have access to education and prevention programming through *project step*.

School-based substance use counsellors also provide educational sessions, including teacher training and parent-focused events, related to mental health and substance use health.

Project step also ensures substance use counselling services are available to youth who may not be engaged in the public school system, through three community agencies:

- [Youville Centre](#) provides young single mothers and expectant mothers with a full range of counselling and life skills supports.
- [Operation Come Home](#) provides mental health and substance use counselling to street-involved and at-risk youth.
- [Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health](#) provides culturally appropriate mental health and addictions programming for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children, youth, and families.

IMPACT

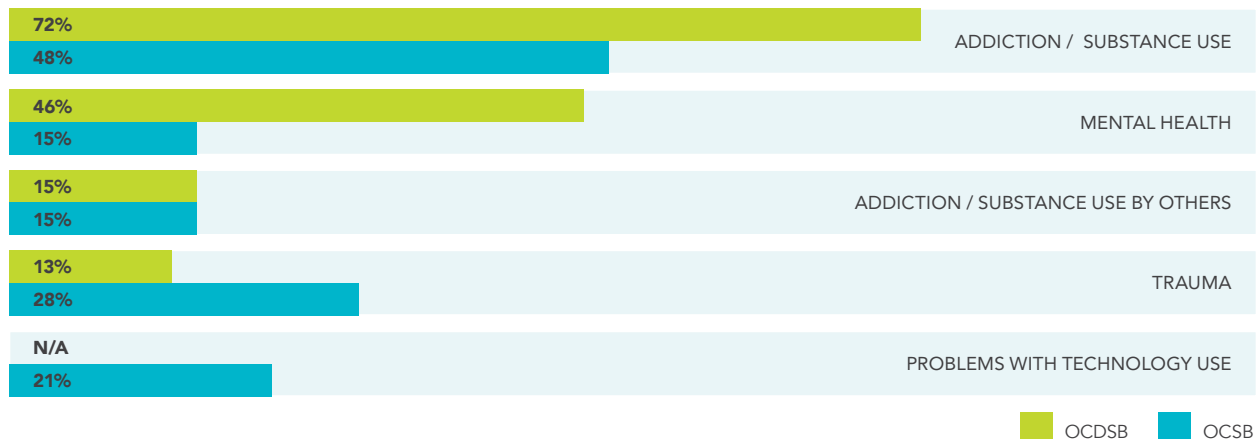
Data was collected during the school year, between September 2023 and August 2024. Some community programming carries over into the summer months. All data recognizes “youth” as students in grades nine to 12, unless otherwise specified.

SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMMING – OUTPUTS

SCHOOL YEAR	2007-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18 ¹	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	TOTAL
Youth engaged in counselling	5000	1,770	1,330	1,420	1,460	1,188	1,114	758	720	771	937	612	17,080
Youth participating in prevention & education	20,000	17,100	15,500	12,310	14,100	22,900 ²	34,597 ³	19,477 ⁴	27,350 ⁵	3,850	22,772	15,294	235,250
Parents engaged in counselling	1900	320	260	200	220	250	172	233	183 ⁶	51	27 ⁷	N/A	3,816
Parent information sessions	110	140	200	3,020	2,420	1,044	2,171	1,364	452	232	962	126	12,115
School personnel attending training sessions	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	88	234	1,398	504	737	20	2,961

NOTE: there is a slight decline in counselling and information sessions from 2019/20, and again in 2020/21 because of school closures during the pandemic.

MOST COMMON PRESENTING ISSUES FOR REGISTERED CLIENTS



¹ The data provided for 2017/18 is incomplete due to reporting issues.

² Includes youth in grades 5-12

³ Includes youth in grades 5-12

⁴ Includes youth in grades 7-12

⁵ Includes youth in grades 4-12

⁶ In 2020/2021, data collection for parent counselling sessions changed. Participation numbers after this year are not equivalent to before the pandemic but are still reflected as outputs towards this effort.

⁷ This number is approximated for privacy reasons

SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMMING – OUTCOMES (OCSB ONLY)

IMPACT OF INTERVENTION ON STUDENT WELLBEING (N=52)	IMPROVED	SAME
Relationship with family	63%	25%
Relationship with peers	78%	11%
School	44%	42%
General mental health	67%	22%
Moving towards goals	89%	11%
Learning about themselves	100%	-

N = the number of students who completed pre- and post-program surveys, a smaller subset of the total number of students who accessed the program.

COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMMING – OUTPUTS

SERVICE DELIVERY PARTNER	INDIVIDUALS SERVED
Youville Centre	58
Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services	44
Operation Come Home	42
Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health	75
Total	269

COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMMING – OUTCOMES

OUTCOMES	TOTAL
Clients reduce substance use	81%
Youth with improved mental health outcomes	84%
Youth with improved connections to family, friends and community	89%
Academic or employment success	72%
Client distress is reduced	81%
Clients achieve counselling goals	86%
Clients equipped with positive coping strategies	72%



WHAT'S NEXT FOR *PROJECT STEP* STRENGTHENING THE COMMON AGENDA

In 2025, Cabinet and committees will set new priorities and actions informed by emerging data and trends, including:

- Rising rates of non-medical opioid use among youth.
- A growing emphasis on prevention, with a focus on younger and transitional-aged youth, particularly those facing vulnerabilities.
- The need to secure additional resources to enhance the capacity of existing services.
- Strengthening collaboration across schools, community organizations, as well as health and social services networks.
- A commitment to championing knowledge and evidence-based practice.
- Supporting youth with lived and living experience to lead and shape meaningful initiatives.
- Aspirations to expand *project step* to rural communities.



HISTORY

In 2007, United Way East Ontario, together with the Champlain Local Health Integration Network (LHIN), Ottawa Network for Education, Ottawa Public Health, four Ottawa school boards and six community agencies launched *project step* to address the need for support, treatment, education, and prevention of substance use issues among youth in Ottawa.

Before *project step*, young people in need of substance use treatment had nowhere to go. They were often forced to leave home, incur costs, and they did not have access to follow-up support. With the leadership of *project step*, Ottawa now has two live-in substance use treatment programs for youth – one in each official language.

Project step also delivers addictions counselling, prevention education, and family support in every publicly funded high school and in five community-based schools in Ottawa. This programming is delivered in partnership with the four school boards and five service delivery partners (Le CAP, Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services, Operation Come Home, Youville Centre, and Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health), and is funded by Ottawa Public Health, the four Ottawa school boards and United Way East Ontario. *Project step* is coordinated by the Ottawa Network for Education and United Way East Ontario.

project step is made possible through the partnership of these caring and committed organizations:

PROGRAM PARTNERS:



SERVICE DELIVERY PARTNERS:



We also thank other community partners who help shape *project step*, including Ottawa Police Service, Dave Smith Youth Treatment Centre, YouTurn, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre, St. Mary's Home, and the Ontario Ministry of Education.

Together, we can change the trajectory of a young person's life – for the better.

PROJECT-STEP.CA

