

A Knowledge Series about Integrated Youth Services

GROUNDBREAKERS LIGHTNING TALK

BRAEDEN LEVAC & ERVIS MUSA

Ervis:

Good afternoon everybody, and thank you for being in attendance today. My name is Ervis Musa (he/him)

Braeden:

and my name is Braeden Levac (he/him).

Ervis:

We are both so pleased to be here in front of you all as we embark and discuss topics that will dictate the future of youth, families, caregivers, and all other members that may be involved. To start off, we want to begin by sharing a bit about ourselves and our connection to the realm of integrated youth services. After hearing about the depth of need, numerous factors that impact IYS integration, and responsibility to improve the system through specifically addressing the battles and prevalent barriers that young adults and caregivers face within our community, we recognize and emphasize solution-based design systems for topics surrounding substance abuse, addressing issues associated with a lack of access to medical health professionals, accessible resources, and substandard integration of health services. Over the past two days, we have gained the tremendous opportunity to participate in this discussion and gain many insights from multiple unique lenses and perspectives. Given this, we hope to take the time to focus on some key areas of prioritization for the future, and what we can do moving forward. The Integrated Youth Service practice is a special individualized experience. It is an opportunity for persons to gain connections, guidance, and support – but it is still developing and likely will always be in development, given the nature of the complex system that is the healthcare system. We, as advocates and leaders, must use our voice to enact real change that is responsive to youth demands.

In this space, I am bringing the expertise as a youth advocate, actively involved in every community I become a part of, and as a youth with lived experience, with experience in mental health support services. My passion for mental health research and related activities extends multiple realms through previous experience as a CrisisTextLine Responder, research focused on mental health and sleep, numerous mentorship projects, and many community-building initiatives at Queen's University.

Braeden:

And from my end, I am bringing the expertise as a youth ambassador and advocate in the developing mental health and substance abuse field across Canada. Through my academic and research background, I aim to consider and implement my lived expertise when exploring themes related to standards and pathways of care. My passion for mental health and research has driven me to become involved in the National Youth Ambassador Foundry

program, Eastern Champlain Youth Wellness Hub, numerous Knowledge Mobilization projects, Bell Let's Talk initiatives, Queen's University Student Wellness program, and Frayme's Groundbreakers program!

Ervis:

Now, before we dig a little deeper into some of the conversations that have occurred the past few days, we want to extend our congratulations and thank those who have taken the time to prepare their presentations and for doing such a wonderful job doing so. Day one of the IYS forum was eventful all around touching on a variety of topics such as the importance of finding ways to mitigate inadequate and underfunded services for eating disorder treatment, understanding youth must be part of conversations pertaining to youth, and individualized program designs to suit community demands.

Braeden:

Day two dove a bit deeper into targeting issues and topics of conversations surrounding elements that will shape our future to create a better tomorrow - all revolving around the need for – and challenges with – collecting, storing, mobilizing, sharing, and transforming youth mental health services on the basis of data.

Ervis:

Starting off, it is vital that the development of integrated youth services are in response to youth demands, specifically focusing on ensuring that services being offered include populations frequently made deprived of highly-impactful services. For the past three years, I have spent a great majority of time within the Bachelor of Health Sciences community at Queen's University to alleviate and reduce common stressors prevalent. I have been able to work with impacted individuals to identify demands from the population of students, and have attempted to implement programs to alleviate some concerns. For example, the MCAT, which is a standardized medical school test that greatly impacts your medical school application, is something noted to be consistently negatively impacting the pre-medical youth and student community. I created a mentorship program developed to alleviate this stress, focusing on connecting individuals with MCAT experience with those who have not gone through this process yet. The reason I bring this up is to demonstrate the upstream intervention taken before stressors become prevalent. Through open-communication with youth and data assessment, we will be able to identify common trends experienced by youth, for which we will be able to add meaningful services youth can engage with to prevent the potential onset of undesirable feelings and emotions which has the potential to trigger mental health and substance use concerns, or to educate youth on how to tackle such feelings if they arrive. It is important that we do everything in our power to assess and address factors that may influence one's mental health before they arise.

Relating to the topic of incorporating high-impact services for deprived populations, Braeden may be able to provide greater insight in the realm of mental health and high-performance athletes.

Braeden:

I grew up competing in numerous high level sports at the national and international level throughout my childhood, adolescence, and early adult years. Most recently, I spent my last two years playing soccer for the Varsity men's program at Queen's University, where I was able to gain invaluable insights and life lessons through my direct experience as a student-athlete. Over the years and thousands of hours of practice, there have been some key themes that have resonated with me that will never be forgotten. Nonetheless, the most successful teams I have been a part of have consistent values, such as having a strong team core where everyone can feel included and heard. Parallel to the mental health system, players on the field see the game in a different lens than the coaches, scouts, and spectators. However, take away any of these groups or silence their voices, and the game has been completely transformed. Reflecting on my experience, I can say that I took many services and essential resources for granted. Was it because I was a student-athlete that certain resources were provided or was it because these services were essential to all students? Relating to the mental health field, we, as a system whole, need to create universal programs that remain accessible to all and equal the playing field.

This transitions into day one's theme of creating a democratic system in continuums of care that relies on the input of all members within the Youth Mental Health and Substance Use system through redesigning the system and structures involved. Over this past summer, I had the opportunity to work with many elite athletes at one of the top concussion labs in the country. Through my direct experience in high-level sport, I contributed to leading research by extending the conversation through reference to my experience running at top-speeds, quick shifts in direction, psychological and mental fatigue, and injury prevention. But how does this have any relation to the future direction of mental health? Well, without integrating the perspective of persons with first hand experience, how can we maintain equality and more importantly uphold equity across systems? We aspire to resolve the current power imbalance within the mental health system by engaging in utilizing foundational approaches to youth education, health, re-skilling, training, and employment; all components that are and should be in Integrated Youth Service sites. We believe that it is a necessity that youth voices be central in policy-making. As the future of this country, it is vital to be involved in decision making and undergo the experience. By focusing on the journey, and addressing each step along the way, we will be able to more clearly see "the light at the end of the tunnel" in this qualitative field and subjective times of darkness. For organizations and systems, all groups of society need to be included. Youth want to be engaged in forming an influence on their lives and those of their closely related peers.

Ervis:

Thank you Braeden. As an individual with personal experience in the research realm, I can understand how underlying and innate biases may drive professionals to reach certain conclusions that may not directly align with youth interest or perspective. Braeden makes the excellent point of the importance of a client-centered approach in comprehensive care, however, what does this look like? How do we structure a system and framework which considers youth perspective beyond simple story sharing? How do we empower youth to get

them involved in areas such as conducting research? Does this look like workshops? Does this look like training sessions? Currently, in addition to our association with Frayme's Groundbreakers, we are also members of the Foundry Youth and Family Ambassador program, focused on building effective, youth-focused and integrated services for mental health, substance use and related issues. Our Foundry team of 6 individuals with lived expertise has been tasked with developing a research proposal in the world of mental health, for which, we are currently investigating the impact that the transition to online counselling from in-person counselling has had on clients. This youth-led initiative will use a much different lens during data collection and survey creation than if curated by a current health researcher. It is important that we have individuals with lived expertise lead and organize such initiatives as we are going directly to the source for information. I think the easiest way to fully grasp what I'm saying is this:

If you want to know how to bake, you ask a baker. If you want to know how to play basketball, you ask a basketball player. Following the trend, if you want to know how to create the most impactful services for youth, you ask youth.

Moreover, as we transition into the future of IYS and next steps for the sector, it is vital for us to recognize how youth can be better served and how our current models can be improved. It is vital that we maintain a central and aligned vision; one voice that considers our national agenda and health learning system goals. Through taking a collaborative and codesigned approach, we can work together on an even playing field and build off the expertise of each other as well as the professionalism, knowledge, and experience brought by each person. After all, we are all on the same team working towards one common goal.

Braeden:

Now, you may be asking how this can happen and where will we start? The current answer is that there is no one right answer or one-step solution to creating change. In order to create national system based change, the first step must be to begin creating change at the individual level. Although this is no small effort, it can be achieved through extensive collaboration across those with lived experience, service providers, researchers, policy makers and funders. Nonetheless, as the field of mental health is extremely individualized and cases remain subjective, we must work towards creating universal objective outcomes that are both context-dependent and can be measured within the subjective context itself. This can be done by the sharing of data among organizations and ensuring proper services are set up to make them work, rather than solely focusing on outcomes. I believe it is crucial to understand and embrace the diversity within our country and the fact that required services differ among communities, where a solution for one area may not work for the next. Information and resources need to be made simplified, effective, and accessible through mobilization, focusing on applying what we have learned and discovered over the past two days. By also focusing in on our own personal strength, we can each embrace our lived expertise and create tangible and achievable outcomes for reference in our drive forward to creating change within the system. We want to uphold and emphasize the unique

perspectives and contributions from all involved in the system to create a co-designed process through addressing issues from the ground-up. We believe that it remains crucial to consider the revolutionary age that we currently live in and the amount of technological and medical advancements that have solely come within the last ten years, especially in the research field of neurology, psychology, and mental health. With the recent surge of advances, we must continuously adapt to supporting seminal research and emerging themes that arise parallel with our progressive society through constant reflection. In the light of continuous societal advancements comes a great deal of hope in determining novel treatments and uncovering both medical and sociological answers to complex discussions.

Therefore, funding is another key area of focus that must consider all stages of each individual step in the mental health journey to growth of and empowerment of access to integrated youth services across Canada. To the funders in the audience, we hope this message resonates!

With this being said, we can effectively work together through the incorporation of a shared network of data among organizations. We need to build off of one-another to create a strong foundation that outlines our country's future goals and aspirations built upon fairness, stability, and inclusion. This will allow for adaptation in the future rather than redesigning policy based on people's new needs. Youth necessities must be taken into consideration as Youth make up one-third of the Canadian population. Without support, progress will eventually slow down, and youth will feel disempowered and even hopeless. As the country's principal resource for future growth, innovation, and opportunity, system change agents must consider and support the ideas and needs of younger generations.

Ervis:

As we wrap up, we wanted to extend our thanks to you for your attendance and attentive listening. With your help, we can and will continue to shape the future of integrated youth services in a manner that aligns with youth desires. Thank you.