

Innovation for Youth with Complex Needs

EVALUATING THE BOREAL AS A PILOT PROJECT



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Innovation for Youth with Complex Needs: Evaluating the Boreal as a Pilot Project

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This article details the pilot program of The Boreal, a supportive housing program for eight youth with complex needs, that provides wrap-around supports and intensive case management in lodge-style housing. It tells the story of the young people who participated in the Boreal's first year of operations, each of whom have cycled through multiple systems, including Children's Services, justice, health, and disability. Their lived experiences represent a collective inadequacy of multiple systems, which are unable to work together to address their needs and keep them safe.

The Boreal is a place where youth have been stable long enough to be assessed and participate in complex health and recovery processes. While at the Boreal, youth were also able to connect and re-connect with other supports that will be crucial to their long-term success. This positionality of the Boreal – as a safe and reliable place for stabilizing and then transitioning – has been one of its biggest successes. Youth's measurable progress, as captured by the Youth Strengths Scale, and youth's shift away from emergency systems and toward proactive engagement with systems like health and justice, point to the overall success of the Boreal model.

BACKGROUND

In 2021, Trellis Society for Community Impact (Trellis) identified a small group of youth who were repeat-shelter users with complex needs and who had had persistently unsuccessful Children's Services (CS) placements, high public systems use, and deep entrenchment in street life. In response to this, Trellis partnered with Home Space and the Government of Alberta (Ministry of Community and Social Services) to launch a unique demonstration project called the Boreal.

Program Operations and Practice Framework

The Boreal is a supportive housing program for complex youth, operates with 24/7 double-staffing, and delivers on-site supports like harm reduction services, therapy, and cultural connection. For each youth, the goal is to:

- Achieve a period of stabilization (including medications, physical health, substance use, etc.),
- Thoroughly understand their needs (including assessments and required appointments) and personal hopes and goals,
- Support them in stages of change and recovery, and,
- Ultimately plan for an appropriate long-term placement for the young person's flourishing.

The Boreal's program approach is grounded in dignity and is non-judgemental. Staff prioritize relationship-building and trust (including welcoming friends and family into the space) as tools for engagement before building social skills and emotional regulation, connecting to community resources, building relationships with natural supports, and crisis support through a teaching model. This approach is hyper-tailored to each youth's specific strengths, needs, and stage of recovery.

Evaluation

Trellis partnered with the University of Calgary (Dr. Katrina Milaney) to complete a program evaluation on the efficacy of the Boreal. The research included stakeholder interviews, team meetings, and youth interviews, as well as a review of administrative files. In total, nine Boreal residents participated in the study. All were between the ages of 17 and 23.

Participants were told that their participation in the evaluation was voluntary to minimize any pressure to participate, and that they could skip questions, take breaks, or stop the interview at any time. All participants provided consent. This project was approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board.

RESULTS

Qualitative Reflections by Staff: Youth Trajectories

Despite participants' varied experiences, Boreal staff have observed the following patterns. Typically, youth require 5-6 months for their initial period of stabilization. This period involves stays at the Boreal, but also at their previous residences (encampments, couching with peers, etc.), and intense experiences of mental health and substance use. Meanwhile staff focused on relationship-building. Several youth tested boundaries with staff during this period, and expressed past traumas about being kicked out of program for "acting out" and other risky behaviours. Repeatedly demonstrating that staff are available, caring and compassionate developed safety during this period.

Once youth established their sense of belonging in the space, experienced more regulated emotions, and began to trust the Boreal as a place for them to grow and recover, youth move into a period of personal reflection, growth and goal-setting. This involved a very wide-ranging set of tasks – as fundamental as getting ID and as complex as bloodwork and diagnostics, or engaging in opioid replacement therapy. Youth's goals complement the long-term planning for their eventual transition (i.e. establishing the appropriate income supports, getting assessments for developmental disabilities to support access to PDD, etc.).

The throughline across all these periods of recovery is building a sense of safety and engagement with natural supports. The open-door policy for family and natural supports at the Boreal has led to a real feeling of belonging and connectedness, including shared meals, cooking and baking for one another, celebrating birthdays and achievements, and spending quality time together. This sense of connectedness is one of the most critical components to the success we are seeing with youth and their recovery.

When describing their experiences at the Boreal, supports they receive and what features of the Boreal have been most helpful, youth commented in interviews:

"I've been given...a whole bunch of services [at the Boreal] I never had until I have known - just like, it's pretty good. And I've been recommending some of the services to my friends who were struggling with homelessness and all that."

"The [staff] here, they all fit. They're all very, very strong people, in the sense that they can handle all of this, and that they're there, and that they're emotionally there for us.... it's really nice to have people who genuinely do care, and will come up to your door and make sure that you're good. Because I think that they really understand that a lot of us do struggle with depression, or psychosis or something, and it's just difficult to feed yourself sometimes, or just difficult to do anything. So they'll put a little laundry in for you if they need to. They do really well in that caretaker aspect of it, if you need it."

Quantitative Outputs: Participant Systems Use

Each of the nine youth profiled represent a complex service history. Taking their information as a cohort, and noting that this is *solely* information known by Trellis (so is likely missing some significant systems usage), they represent a total of:

- 28 years in foster care
- 1602 days in group care
- 678 days at Avenue 15 shelter
- 119 days confined at PChAD
- 45 days in hospital
- 125 days in treatment
- 87 days at Secure
- 118 days at CYOC

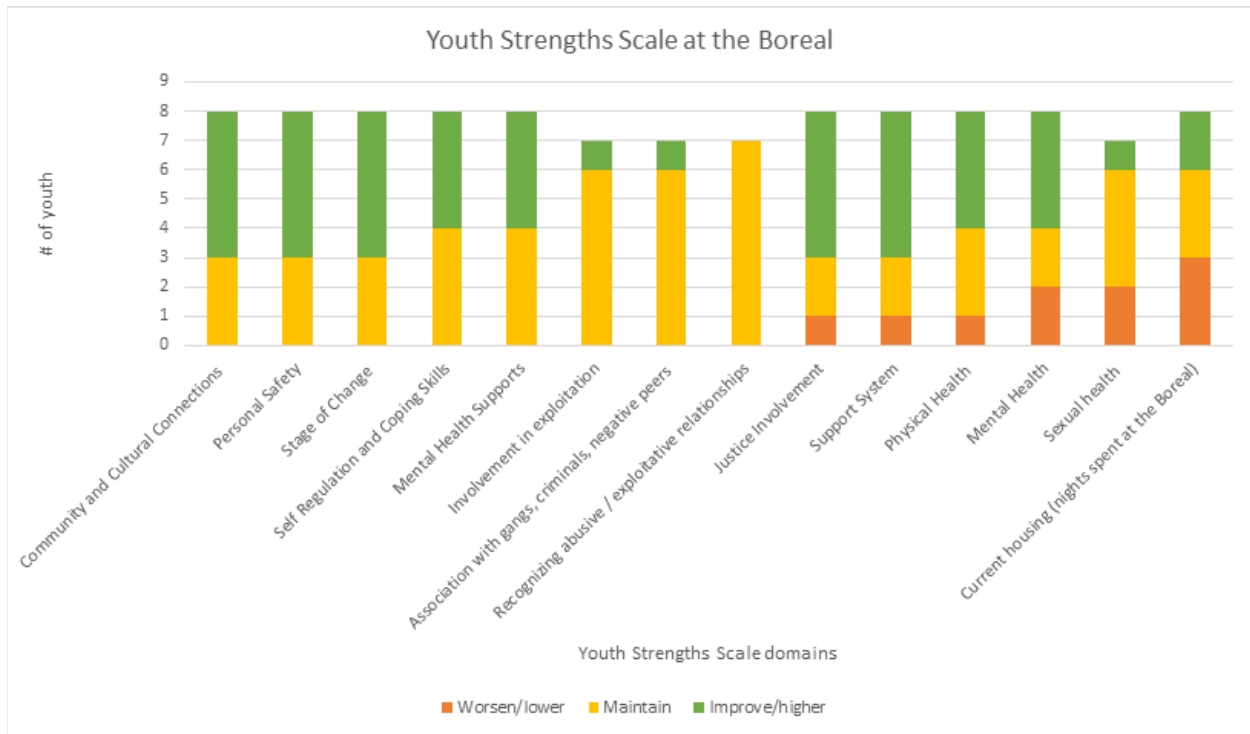
During their stays at the Boreal, we have tracked:

- Over 30 counselling sessions with Trellis clinicians
- Over 100 positive health systems interactions, including:
 - Assessments and diagnoses
 - Medication stabilization
 - STI testing and other bloodwork
 - Vaccinations
- 15+ positive justice interactions, such as court proceedings
- 8 positive relationships begun or re-engaged with partner teams
- 2 youth starting opioid replacement therapy

Quantitative Outcomes: Youth Strengths Scale

The quantitative findings of this evaluation indicate remarkable progress as measured by the Youth Strengths Scale (YSS). The YSS is a worker-rated assessment used at Trellis (based on multiple strengths and needs assessments, including Quality of Life tools and the Arizona Self-Sufficiency Matrix), which measures a youth’s trajectory across multiple domains.

This tool is used to identify the assets, protective factors and strengths of a youth that can be used to guide service delivery. The following analysis represents the period from intake (the majority of files had intakes in May 2022) to January 31, 2023.



When the team reflected on these findings, they noted that youth with recent intake dates are showing short-term worsening as part of their stabilization period, which is expected. The Current Housing domain reflects their expressing a desire to live independently, starting to take risks about sleeping other places while being supported by the Boreal, and working on their relationship boundaries in that context.

Collectively, the progress of the young people captured above is astonishing. Similar tools have been used to measure progress in Trellis group care placements, and it is rare for youth to have such steady, universal progress in so many domains. These quantitative findings are empirical proof of some of the key successes at the Boreal.

Discussion

Prior to moving to the Boreal, all young people had long, complex and troubling histories of childhood trauma. Their stories include violence, unsafe substance use and sexual exploitation as part of their pathways into homelessness and then a continuation and worsening of these traumas while in homelessness. All had multiple confinements, inpatient psychiatric stays and/or substance treatment programs. Existing models of housing and support were unable to meet their needs.

Specifically, youth and Boreal caseworkers reflected that young people were not successful in existing systems and interventions for a number of similar reasons, including:

- Substance use and related risk of overdose, and need for harm reduction supports (including trafficking in substances)
- Unmanaged or undiagnosed mental health conditions, co-morbidities, or psychosis, including unstable medications or medication non-compliance, etc.
- Entrenchment in exploitation and active sex work, including related guest management issues
- Interpersonal relationships such as romantic partners/intimate partner violence, high-risk peer groups etc.
- Physical violence, threats and other criminal activities (both being victimized and perpetrating)
- Lack of supports designed for developmental and cognitive disabilities and related needs like FASD

Staff cite the following factors for making the big difference as to why the Boreal is succeeding where previous placements have not:

- Staffing ratios / number of clients, where a small-scale program and low ratios allow for the prioritization of relationship-building to create safety and trust
- 24/7 double-staffing allows staff adequate time and resources to manage interpersonal risks, navigate guest management issues, support safer substance use on-site
- Lodge-style housing with private spaces for each youth
- A harm reduction lens applied to all spheres, including substance use and sex work
- Pro-active and collaborative guest management that is flexible and youth-centered
- Zero discharge policy
- No nights-in-building requirements or AWOL language – youth are able to come and go, encouraged to sleep in the building but not penalized while away and encouraged to stay in touch for supports even while not in the building
- Stability that results in other, complementary services being able to be delivered (i.e. successful meetings with probation officers, FAP workers, PACT teams, etc.)
- On-site service offerings like access to a clinical therapist and cultural support (Circle Keeper)

- Open door policy to family and natural supports, encouraging visits and time in program

Living at the Boreal leads to housing stability for young people who have typically “blown out” of previous placements. The housing in conjunction with intensive and trauma-informed 24/7 support from a multi-disciplinary team creates time and space for young people to begin to address issues they could not address previously because they were in constant crisis. Staff reflected that despite knowing several of these youth for many years, they saw emotions emerge in a new way once youth were staying at the Boreal and had their own space to express and process feelings with privacy, safety and support.

Transitions for youth at the Boreal have been and will be unique to each participant, but some themes have emerged. All youth have experienced traumas related to abrupt transitions, so support with a warm transfer (3-6 months) that leverages logistical opportunities and community supports that align with a youth’s expressed desire to transition. Some youth at the Boreal will transition to scattered-site housing with case management. Some youth with intensive developmental needs will require additional time for assessments and stabilization, and then could be supported to transition to place-based, congregate, supportive living, but will not be able to live independently in a scattered site model. Other youth will transition to living with natural supports.

The relationships, skills and stability that the youth have gained have no doubt changed their trajectories and the Trellis team is confident that they will continue to thrive and heal to a point where, at the right time for them, they can safely transition to more independent living, creating space for more youth to access to the program. The Boreal has had life changing impacts on the residents and is a critical intervention to the homelessness system of care for youth.