Mental Health Commission of Canada

Commission de la santé mentale du Canada

Roots of Hope

A Community Suicide Prevention Project

Roots of Hope Case Study

Innovative/Flexible

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Innovative guiding principle: **Attempt, evaluate, and share creative and innovative ideas to advance suicide prevention efforts globally.**

Flexible guiding principle: **While standardization is important when comparing communities or tracking progress over time, be sure that selected interventions can be tailored to the community for which they are being implemented**.

INTRODUCTION

While the guiding principles should be viewed as a whole (to ensure coherence and a standardized approach and allow comparisons between communities over time), each offers important considerations for how a community designs and implements their local initiative.

The **Innovative** guiding principle encourages projects to undertake "safe fail" experiments that help create never-before-offered approaches to suicide prevention.

The **Flexibility** guiding principle challenges project leads and community partners to use an evidence-informed approach that can adapt and experiment with the best ways to tailor strategies to the local community's unique realities.

Project leads identified four key themes in connection to these two principles:

1. **Create the conditions for innovation** — Project leads play an important role in creating the conditions that help innovative thinking thrive.

2. **Recognize that innovation and program delivery are different** — Creating something new is quite different from implementing a proven program or approach. Innovation has more risk, and many of us have little experience with it.

3. **Sow many seeds** — Because there's rarely a single solution to suicide prevention, experiment with different options and learn from them.

4. **Embrace a lexibility mindset** — A desired outcome can usually be reached in different ways. If one path is blocked, consider alternatives.

This case study explores how project leads integrated these two principles and the insights they offered about their benefits and challenges.

ABOUT THE CASE STUDIES

Roots of Hope is a Canadian community-led suicide prevention model. It draws on strengths and expertise within communities to design and implement tailored local initiatives. Using a collaborative approach across many sectors, it seeks to reduce the impact of suicide in each participating community.

We developed Roots of Hope with experts and communities from across Canada and around the world. Its five pillars and 13 guiding principles provide a framework that each community can adapt to their own needs.

The seven Roots of Hope case studies in this series reflect the wisdom and experience of project leaders from Early Adopter communities across the country, who represent diverse populations in a range of urban, rural, and remote settings. The series focuses on what project leads found to be effective in tailoring and implementing Roots of Hope in their communities. While each case study highlights up to three guiding principles, every project leader interviewed stressed the collective value of all 13.

The work to create and test something new is very different from implementing a proven program. We would therefore like to acknowledge Early Adopter project leads for their courage and willingness to pilot a new approach with us. We would also like to thank them for so generously sharing their wisdom and insights, which will make the work of future communities easier and more effective.

CREATE THE CONDITIONS FOR INNOVATION

Insight #1 The power of engaging diverse perspectives

Collaboration between diverse community stakeholders (another Roots of Hope guiding principle) has a direct link to innovation. That's because each person has a different vantage point on the issues you share. When given the chance to talk and learn from one another, diverse stakeholders can help create a richer, more nuanced understanding of the opportunities and challenges they face.

> *The new ideas generated by bringing different perspectives together is powerful.*

This kind of collaboration is particularly important for an issue as complex as suicide, which is affected by a variety of dynamic and changing factors. How each of us sees things influences the options we perceive, which in turn, affects what we act on. So the more deeply we see and understand an issue, the more potential actions we have.

In addition, diverse perspectives allow more effective engagement, outreach, and implementation because each stakeholder is a *trusted messenger* with established relationships across an array of sectors and groups in the community. They are "force multipliers" for advancing your initiative.

Insight #2   Creating connection and building trust

Richard Harwood, the founder of The Harwood Institute, believes that trust for community change efforts is built by focusing on relationships, building a track record of results, involving citizens as builders, and working collectively toward the common good. In an excerpt from *Getting Real About Building Trust*, he says, "Our actions, over time, are the ingredients for trust. And trust is the glue that enables communities to work. . . . Trust is a fragile commodity. It dissipates much faster than it is formed, and it takes time and concerted effort to create." Recognizing the importance of building and maintaining trust with the community, one Roots of Hope project lead offered this advice: "The project may not be able to be fully implemented as planned. Project leads need to feel comfortable shifting or changing plans based on what is and is not resonating in the community."

> *"The guiding principles were helpful to me, how I thought about my work, and provided considerations in the design."*

Relationship building between and among the diverse stakeholders is essential. Successful innovations require that everyone who cares is involved and plays a role. In fact, these interactions often serve as generators of innovation through the "between" aspects of relationships. Listening, sharing stories, learning from one another, and being curious and humble all help create and nurture the strong relationships that are a foundation to effectively implementing a local initiative. As one project lead noted, "One of the most important things I discovered was the value of one-to-one conversations with key partners. It allows us to share our personal connection to suicide, not just our professional role. Doing this reinforces how important our work is and highlights the emotional impact on us as people. It was essential."

SOW MANY SEEDS

Sharing lots of specific proposals with key stakeholders and community members increases the odds that one of your ideas will sprout.

Insight #3   Offer a mix of targeted and universal projects

It's highly unlikely that you'll discover a "magic bullet" to address the issue of suicide. For that reason, many local initiatives have launched an array of different proposals. Some were intended for the community overall, while others were tailored for or co-developed with specific priority populations. Given Roots of Hope's experimental nature, having a variety of ideas and projects

helps determine and ensure that your project will generate success. As one project lead noted, "The team used art in mental health to break social isolation and reduce stigma. A very popular initiative was a cultural mediation mosaic project with an artist. After its success, a presentation was made in 11 other communities." Another respondent said that, initially, it was challenging to find a niche that

added value to the community and the various stakeholders they had engaged. Ultimately, this project lead shared that, "We finally found our value-added contribution with an emphasis on grief. Unresolved grief and loss are important risk factors for suicide.

So, while we serve the community, this work builds awareness and understanding on the impact of healing and grief, which community partners don't have the bandwidth to address."

RECOGNIZE THAT INNOVATION AND PROGRAM DELIVERY ARE DIFFERENT

Insight #4 Innovation is the work of paradigm pioneers

Producing a novel solution is quite different from implementing existing programs and services. Project leads described their work as needing to focus on two things at once: (1) building community partnerships and infrastructure to support their project, and (2) designing and implementing it. As a new innovation, implementing Roots of Hope involves a high degree of uncertainty.

That's one reason many project leads value opportunities to meet with, learn from, and borrow ideas from each other. As one respondent shared, "I connected with a project lead from Newfoundland and Labrador at a face-to-face meeting in Ottawa. We now have a standing meeting where we can mentor and be colleagues without any agenda. Having this mentorship without 'the power of a pink slip' has been invaluable. We both wish we'd started it a year earlier." Another project lead noted that, "The drop-in calls hosted between pilot communities were real innovation drivers and facilitated relationships of support that were invaluable for implementing our initiative. They also made it easier to share good ideas from other communities and put our own local twist on it!"

"Peer learning networks are key to supporting this work. They also support us in finding and implementing 'best practices.'"

EMBRACE A FLEXIBILITY MINDSET

Several project leads spoke of flexibility as a way of thinking that's important to successful implementation of local initiatives. It requires project leads and partners to be unwavering in their focus on the outcome of their initiative while remaining open to the fact that achieving it will require many paths, likely woven together. A flexible mindset is also essential for finding alternative solutions when one pathway becomes blocked. As one project lead said, "Teams should expect to be flexible in their planning and confident about tailoring the initiative to meet their community's unique needs — and also be willing to change course if their initial plan isn't resonating." Another respondent offered this advice, "An upstream focus helps us identify where work may be possible or a group might be receptive."

Insight #5   Periodically check and adjust your focus

Because Roots of Hope initiatives unfold in communities that are dynamic, it's important for project teams to step back periodically and adjust their plans in response to the changing landscape or unexpected challenges and opportunities. One respondent mentioned that a question their team regularly asked itself was, "Given today's context, where can we add value, what should we focus on? And when we've met objectives, to reflect on where we should redirect our energy and refocus, given what we see as areas of opportunity and need that are unaddressed. Program managers who aren't comfortable adjusting their strategy over time will really struggle with this work."

This perspective was echoed by another project lead who said, "Anyone that couldn't be flexible (especially with COVID) was going to struggle. I'm a firm believer that, with adversity, comes opportunity. When COVID arrived, I was both frustrated *and* intrigued enough by the opportunity to ask myself, 'What *can* I do, and how I can work differently, given the current context?'"

In another project, which was fortunate to have made significant progress on its planned activities, it became important to refine its strategy. According to the project lead, at one point, "We went back to the steering committee, re-grounded ourselves in the desired outcome, and confirmed a new desired output. Thirteen of our 49 completed activities were addressed through additional activities that were complementary to the spirit of the original activity."

CONCLUSION

Roots of Hope offers communities a chance to be creative, coordinate existing initiatives, and experiment with implementing new ones that strengthen their capacity to prevent suicide. While this opportunity to innovate and develop new approaches is attractive to many, some may find initiatives that have not been proven or have no proven pathway to success a challenge. The innovative nature of Roots of Hope means that project leads must simultaneously create a local plan and implement it.

The Roots of Hope model offers communities a roadmap for doing so. Successful projects use the model as a guide, which is taken then adapted to the unique needs of their community. Yet, once a project lead and key stakeholders have determined their strategy, the changing dynamics of communities often make it necessary for teams to reassess and adapt the strategy.

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