



# CASE STUDY | PRINCE ALBERT BRIDGES THE DIGITAL DIVIDE WITH LOCAL YOUTH

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## OVERVIEW

The Communities Building Youth Futures initiative leverages the core tenets of the Collective Impact framework to build both community-driven and national strategies for supporting youth to successfully navigate transitions from high school through graduation, post-secondary, training, and employment. Thirteen CBYF communities launched their initiatives in June 2020 in the middle of social distancing due to the pandemic. From the beginning of the initiative, access to technology, internet and the ability to use technology were thus prominent barriers for all communities to grapple with. The digital divide experienced by many youths in these and other communities in Canada had a significant impact on youths' ability to participate and succeed in school, to connect with their peers, and to access opportunities and supports.

[CBYF Prince Albert](#), one of the 13 CBYF communities across Canada, is a city in the centre of Saskatchewan. It has a population of 36,000 with approximately 7,500 youth between the ages of 15-30. There are four high schools in Prince Albert:

- Ecole St. Mary High School
- Prince Albert Collegiate Institute (PACI)
- Wesmor High School
- Carlton Comprehensive High School which has a satellite campus called Wonska Cultural School that provides an alternative approach to education with a self-guided program.

This case study will tell you the story of CBYF Prince Albert's community innovation project and how, through youth engagement approach, access to technology was provided for a youth through an unlikely venue. Equipping youth with the necessary technology to enroll in their educational program helps them continue on their paths to success by bridging the digital divide and overcoming the barrier to accessing Adult Literacy Education. This case study also shows how using

### **Prince Albert's Community Innovation Project - Connecting, Supporting, and Empowering Prince Albert's Youth**

A primary aspiration of the vision of Prince Albert's CBYF Initiative is to provide youth with access to important services and technology to help keep them safe, supported and connected – and to help them find themselves in light of a pandemic.

The main areas of activity were:

1. Provide access to digital devices
2. Provide access to various personal resources and supports
3. Provide professional, cultural and traditional supports focused on youth wellbeing

*\* The CBYF Community Innovation Fund is available to the 13 CBYF communities and is funded through Tamarack Institute's partnership with Employment and Social Development Canada.*

a holistic approach to working with youth helps provide wraparound supports that also contributes to bridging the digital divide. Lastly, a fulsome understanding of challenges and barriers for youth can help identify system and policy barriers that can also be addressed.

The community innovation project originated after youth in Prince Albert provided input that limited access to digital devices and a lack of flexible support options created significant barriers for them to reaching their goals. The design of the community innovation project included flexibility to respond to the changing needs of youth, but the three main types of activities were:

- To provide access to technology
- To offer wraparound supports that enabled youth to be engaged in their community and in education
- To offer programming and connection to services that supports wellbeing

Our approach to the innovation project was to provide holistic, wraparound support that addresses the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of youth and supported the development of their strengths. Our innovation project was developed in response to the requests from youth, including their feedback about what they felt was missing from the community. Youth shared that they often encounter barriers to accessing supports in the community based on strict eligibility requirements and were looking for supports that were more flexible and focused on the holistic view of the youth's wellbeing.

Three youth have been provided with technology that has allowed them to either enroll in or continue in an Adult Literacy Education program, with 4 more youth scheduled to receive laptops for fall enrollment. Approximately 20 youth have been able to access support for their wellbeing such as food hampers, bus passes, cab rides, counselling services, and access to cultural teachings. We have also pre-booked a Mental Health First Aide Course that will be delivered to 10 additional youth once the public health measures allow for in-person training.

## UNRELENTING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

An important consideration before going further into CBYF Prince Albert's work is to explore the approach to youth engagement which has been described fondly as *unrelenting youth engagement*. This iterative approach involves many similar principles as are found in Tamarack's [Guide for Meaningfully Engaging Youth](#), including:

- Affirm the work and contribution of youth as equals
- Meet youth where they are at
- Use continuous feedback loops
- Develop trust
- Be accountable
- Recognize the value of lived experience
- Communicate on the same level

In addition to these, CBYF Prince Albert has been developing our own brand of engagement. In all interactions with youth, there is intentional engagement with youth stories to seek to understand their gifts, strengths, and needs and to see where supports can be provided.

## HOW CBYF PRINCE ALBERT IS PROVIDING RESPONSIVE PROGRAMMING

### *How did the idea for the beading circle come about?*

Beading was identified as a strong interest among youth in our survey, with youth expressing a desire to learn how to bead, and youth expressing their desire to share the skill of beading with other youth. Many youths had also shared that cultural engagement opportunities were important to them and beading is a traditional art form among many Indigenous groups.

Indigenous approaches to counselling and research suggest that building relationships through activities that allow for natural conversations to develop. Beading is a tool that we have been able to use to initiate conversations about topics ranging from feedback about our program delivery to challenges to education and employment during COVID-19.

The Beading Circle was designed by our youth Project Coordinator but was further developed and adjusted based on the feedback from the youth participants. The beading circle is now facilitated by the CBYF youth intern with Beading Circle participants having the opportunity to co-facilitate as well.

### *Can you describe how you engage youth in this project, and in particular how you got to know Hannah\*, her strengths and her barriers? \* (A pseudonym has been used to protect the privacy of the youth)*

Hannah first became involved with CBYF near the end of December by responding to a Facebook post inviting youth to join our virtual beading circles. Hannah then filled out our intake survey to receive her free beading kit. Her survey responses were thorough and gave a very clear explanation of the barriers she was facing and highlighted the strengths she possessed, such as her strong motivation to break generational cycles of trauma, poverty, and addiction for her children.

Hannah reached out to us after joining our beading circle, needing sage for smudging. She shared that she was going through a tough time and that smudging was helping. We were able to deliver her a smudge kit as well as a food hamper in partnership with WFCC to address her food insecurity at Christmas time, which was identified on her intake survey.

Hannah would often log off from our circles if her children were making background noise and would always apologize. We continued to let her know that her attendance was appreciated and that we love seeing her online with her kids and she has nothing to worry about. We invited her to join the beading circles if even just to show us what she has worked on, and that is how her online engagement started. Now, she works through longer zoom calls and stays online even when her kids are making background noise. We have built a trusting relationship with her through positive reinforcement and feedback, encouragement, and reassurance, and meeting her where she is at by providing the beading instruction videos as a way for her to participate when unable to log on.

## IDENTIFICATION/IDENTITY

We noticed on Jan 19 that Hannah responded to a post about getting your Metis card, a piece of identification that identifies members of the Metis Nation of Saskatchewan. Being a member of the MNS is important for cultural identity formation as it is the formal acknowledgement of your membership to the Metis Nation of Saskatchewan. Membership qualifies individuals for a range of supports, available only to registered members of the MNS such as university funding, financial support through COVID, housing supports, grants, and funding for technology. The Coordinator reached out to Hannah to explore the barriers she faced to receiving this important piece of identification.

Hannah shared negative experiences dealing with the local membership offices and was told she could not apply without the birth certificate of her grandfather. Hannah shared that her family struggles with addictions and that she is unable to get her grandfather to get his birth certificate. We called the Director of the Western Region 11 MNS office and was referred to one of their staff, to support Hannah through the process. We shared the frustration that Hannah has felt through the process and explained that this young person needs someone to walk alongside them through this process. The staff agreed and came up with practical solutions for how to overcome this barrier and is now working with Hannah directly on completing her application for her Metis Nation of Saskatchewan membership card.

## EDUCATION AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Hannah applied to an Adult Upgrading program. A prerequisite for the program is to have a laptop and reliable internet connection as the entire program is online. In order to apply for the provincial training allowance, you must also already have a computer and internet connection in place. Hannah messaged us and asked for assistance in overcoming this barrier.

This barrier was a great fit for our 2019-2020 CIF project, to equip her with the necessary technology to be able to pursue her higher learning. Her application to the program was confirmed by Sask Polytech and Hannah has now been equipped with a laptop. Equipping Hannah with the required technology has allowed her to proceed with her application and fulfill the eligibility requirements of the program.

## PERSONAL WELLBEING

Hannah reached out to gain access to a counsellor. We have a strong partnership with PA Outreach who has a resident Elder who does group and one to one counselling, Liz Settee, who is also a member of our Leadership Team. Hannah and Liz have had one counselling session over the phone and we have received approval to facilitate an in-person counselling session here at the office for Hannah and she continues contact with Liz over the phone.

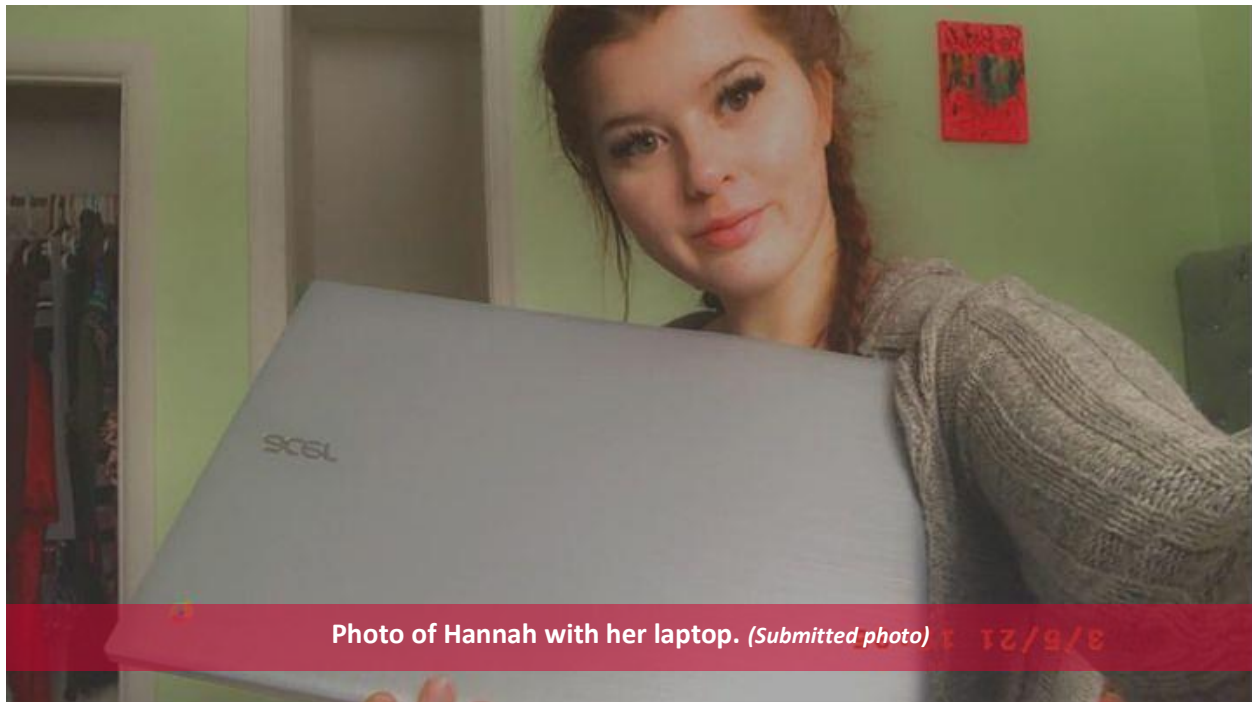
Hannah has engaged in almost every event and program that we have offered, including attending 5 beading circles, watching our online tutorials and completing 5 beading projects, our virtual cultural programming which began on Mar 3, our poetry contest, and is a member of the YLC and has provided valuable insight into what makes a safe space for youth.

***Can you describe your approach to providing supports to Hannah and other youth and the impact this has had?***

After reading Hannah’s survey responses, we realized that she was needing support. Hannah’s determination, motivation, and perseverance inspired the team to look at how we can best support youth in similar situations. The team continued building a relationship with Hannah, sharing opportunities with her, asking for her feedback, and checking in regularly about the steps she was taking to reach her goals. Hannah has taken the supports/opportunities and conversations we have shared and used them in a manner that works best for her – she is fiercely independent and values the fact that we see her as competent and able to make her own decisions once she has the best information.

## PERSONAL STATEMENT

Hannah has expressed her gratitude to us for our support on multiple occasions, sharing that she often feels lost, alone, and unsupported, but that now she has somewhere she can go to get support in figuring out what her next steps are. Hannah says that being involved with CBYF has “changed my life after becoming a single mom it is difficult, but they help me feel support when I don’t get it anywhere else. They filled my life with positive change! By helping me with stress by dropping off sage and food around Christmas time. Helped me get back into beading which made me feel like I belonged and helped me with my patience. They also helped me get accepted into school by supplying me with a laptop for my courses. They are awesome...! Thanks so much CBYF”



## ABOUT THE INNOVATION FUND PROJECT AS A WHOLE

### ***Could you describe how working with Hannah has impacted the rest of your work***

When Hannah approached CBYF about her barrier of not having access to technology, we were able to identify an opportunity to support many more youth in overcoming this barrier. CBYF contacted the post-secondary institutions that provide the Adult Literacy Education programs to further explore this barrier. Through these conversations, CBYF learned that there are limited financial supports for students in Adult Literacy Education programs and that not having a laptop is a common reason that students are denied entry into the program.

Some institutions can provide students with necessary technology, but in some cases, students' only options, if all the laptops have been loaned out, is to get a \$300 loan to purchase a computer that must be repaid within 2 weeks. Many students are on financial assistance and are unable to repay these loans and it is difficult to find a computer for that price, creating additional barriers for students.

Based on this information, CBYF Prince Albert will be partnering with at least one of these institutions through our innovation fund to address this significant gap in our community.

### ***What other supports have been leveraged because of your work with Hannah and because of the innovation project as a whole?***

- Partnership with Sask Polytechnic, SIIT and GDI post-secondary institutions will provide many open doors to other youth in the future as each institute provides many entry level educational and vocational opportunities.
- Partnership with local cab companies and with the City of PA community services Dept (Bus passes) has opened doors to further access to transportation options.
- Dealing with local merchants in purchasing technology products and services has made them more aware of the needs of youth and has motivated them to accommodate CBYF if any good discounts are available.

### ***What would you say are important lessons that you have learned that others may be able to implement in their communities?***

The most important lesson we have learned that we would like others to takeaway is the importance of establishing a trusting, supportive relationship when working with youth, with a special focus on Indigenous youth. This requires service providers to have a strong understanding of intergenerational trauma, the history of colonization and the resulting systemic barriers that many urban Indigenous youth face, such as Hannah not being able to register with the Metis Nation of Saskatchewan. Another common barrier is Indigenous youth not trusting organizations, businesses, and agencies, because of the history of colonization. For example, merchants may not be aware that many indigenous youths are fearful of exploring what is available for technology or even coming to their business to ask questions as they have been followed and watched when they enter a merchant's place of business – we have discovered this as a huge barrier for youth, preventing them from feeling like they are a valued/trusted part of the community.



To overcome this, service providers must be prepared to meet youth where they are at and to be gentle and supportive in their approaches. For example, if a youth's attendance in a program decreases or they do not attend something they signed up for, instead of removing them from the program, service providers should see this as an identifier that the youth may be experiencing a barrier and use their relationship with the youth to explore the issue and come up with possible solutions. Service providers must be patient in establishing a trusting, professional relationship. Many youths have a lifetime of experiences that have contributed to their mistrust of the systems and it will take time (and follow through) to overcome this. Youth need to feel heard and be given the opportunity to share their feedback; this makes them feel valued and builds trust while receiving feedback that may help improve service delivery.

## CONCLUSION

This case study has been about one youth, but through this youth's involvement and through what we have learned, we have been able to support other youth address similar barriers. We hope that what we have shared will assist you in your path to supporting opportunities for youth.

The logo for Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small Canadian flag icon above the letter "a".The logo for Tamarack Institute, featuring a stylized yellow "T" icon to the left of the text "TAMARACK INSTITUTE" in a serif font.

Initial funding for the **Connecting, Supporting, and Empowering Prince Albert's Youth Project** was provided through a Community Innovation Fund grant provided to [Prince Albert Community Building Youth Futures](#). The aim of [Community Innovation Fund](#) grants is to pilot and scale innovative projects to support better outcomes for youth.

[Communities Building Youth Futures](#) (CBYF) is a five-year, pan-Canadian project to develop Collective Impact, system-wide solutions for youth as they build and act upon plans for their future. CBYF is funded by the [Government of Canada's Goal Getters Program](#) and delivered by the [Tamarack Institute](#).

*The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada*