

Final Report



“Active Community for Employment and Housing Support” Supervised Apartments Project

Espace Vivant Living Room Youth Shelter



Canada

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“ACTIVE COMMUNITY FOR EMPLOYMENT AND HOUSING SUPPORT” SUPERVISED APARTMENTS PROJECT

The Espace Vivant Living Room (EVLRL) youth shelter presented a project called “Active Community for Employment and Housing Support” to the Government of Canada's Homelessness Partnering Strategy's Innovative Solutions to Homelessness. For this initiative, EVLRL launched a project that consisted of four transitional apartment spaces in the municipality of Saint-Jean, in collaboration with the Maison des Jeunes le Dôme in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu.

This activity report details the results of the pilot project and is divided into the following sections: introducing the proponent organization, the project's origins, goals and results, the project's other successes, and obstacles and recommendations. A tool developed during the project is also included in the appendix.

Introducing the Proponent Organization

The EVLRL organization is a voluntary-basis shelter for francophone and anglophone teens, between the ages of 12 and 17, who are experiencing familial, school-related, social and personal difficulties. EVLRL has an alternative approach that aims to provide housing, support and accompaniment services during short-term stays (60 days or less), with the goal of helping teens find concrete ways to reintegrate their environment. The shelter opened its doors in 2008 in the town of Cowansville and became a member of the Groupement des Auberges du Cœur du Québec that same year.

EVLRL's main goals are to:

- Deal with the severe shortage of **voluntary-basis** youth shelters in the Brome-Missisquoi, Haute-Yamaska and Haut-Richelieu regions;
- Prioritize teens returning to their homes when possible by working with them and their parents together;
- Encourage teens to stay in school or complete their degree by providing homework support and study periods;
- Helping teens gradually enter the workforce.

EVLRL welcomes approximately 50 teens a year, some of whom are from underprivileged backgrounds. Moreover, since July 2014, EVLRL opened new transitional apartment spaces. Under the supervision of a youth worker, six youths between the ages of 16 and 22 can live in an affordable, furnished apartment and work at tackling life goals, such as going back to school to obtain their diploma or becoming self-sufficient. Unlike at the shelter, the “Vers mon Espace/Towards my Space” supervised apartment residents can stay for up to two years.

The Origins of the “Active Community for Employment and Housing Support” Project

The Haut-Richelieu region has a population of over 100,000 residents, but no shelter services (aside from a women's shelter). Therefore, EVLRL has always been open to welcoming teens from the region and to try and find ways to address their needs directly in their environment. EVLRL welcomes a dozen teens from the Haut-Richelieu area annually. Moreover, EVLRL holds a seat on the St-Jean-sur-Richelieu youth roundtable and has built connections with certain organizations, notably the Maison des Jeunes le Dôme

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in St-Jean. Much like EVLR, the Dôme works with youths who have a Service Canada “Skills Link” project.

EVLR and the Dôme came together to design a joint project and help the community’s youths facing the greatest difficulties. The “Active Community for Employment and Housing Support” project allowed youths with precarious housing situations, who were also experiencing employment issues, to receive intensive community support to help them develop self-sufficiency and gain relevant, positive work experience. The project hopes to involve youths participating in the “Skills Link” program (Maison des Jeunes le Dôme in St-Jean-sur-Richelieu) who have also been accepted into one of EVLR’s affordable supervised apartments.

The “Active Community for Employment and Housing Support” project touched on three of the funding program’s goals (Innovative Solutions to Homelessness – Contribution Project):

1) Intervening with specific populations: The project is aimed at youths who are at imminent risk of becoming homeless and meet the criteria of Service Canada’s “Skills Link” program. Since its official opening in 2008, EVLR has served the St-Jean region, and this project opened four supervised apartment spaces to youths in the St-Jean territory. By combining the two programs (Skills Link and HPS), EVLR and the Maison des Jeunes hoped that the most vulnerable youths would apply for both employment and housing. This opportunity would provide them with an innovative framework adapted to their reality (low income, lack of work experience, need for support, etc.) that is ideal for getting out of negative environments and finding a job.

2) Strategic partnerships: The Maison des Jeunes le Dôme, a 30-year-old community organization, has developed several projects with the “Skills Link” program and had the expertise to carry out this type of collaboration. EVLR has managed a building for their project “Vers mon Espace/Towards my Space” for over four years. Moreover, an agreement was made with the Maison des Jeunes to set up an office for the youth worker in charge of the “Active Community for Employment and Housing Support” project.

3) Improving socio-economic outcomes: Reaching youths who were imminently at risk of becoming homeless, who qualified for both the “Active Community for Employment and Housing Support” project and the “Skills Link” program would prove helpful in preparing them for employment opportunities. Along with creating a shelter project in a region where this type of resource does not exist, youths could count on in-depth support from youth workers who could help them with their personal and financial self-sufficiency (through the “Active Community for Employment and Housing Support” project and “Skills Link” program, respectively) for several weeks.

In early October 2017, the collaborative project “Active Community for Employment and Housing Support” began.

The Project’s Goals

Here is a list of the project’s goals as they are stated in the agreement between EVLR and the Minister of Employment and Social Development Canada: For the “Active Community

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for Employment and Housing Support” project, EVLR tested an intervention model to prevent homelessness in at-risk youths. This intervention model pairs EVLR’s range of services with the Maison des Jeunes le Dôme’s project “Skills Link Employment and Social Development Canada.” This combination allows youths experiencing difficulties in various realms, as well as precarious housing situations, to receive in-depth community support and help them work towards self-sufficiency, gain relevant and positive work experience, and find housing.

The project had the following goals:

- Supporting vulnerable youths between the ages of 16 and 22, who are imminently at risk of becoming homeless, in their process towards living in an apartment;
- Supporting youths in their pursuits or monitoring the goals they set when signing up for the “Skills Link” program (finding an ongoing job, for example) or going back to school;
- Preparing youths for job opportunities and providing them with support to help them directly with their personal and financial self-sufficiency (the “Active Community for Employment and Housing Support” project and “Skills Link” program, respectively);
- Securing a work team for the duration of the agreement;
- Sharing the results of this intervention model’s trial period across Canada.

Results

The first result mentioned in the agreement was about the number of participants for the duration of the “Active Community for Employment and Housing Support” project. The initial prediction was that five youths would be helped. EVLR had four available spaces, but thought they would be able to help a few additional youths, since the length of stays could vary from one person to another. Moreover, the framework provided in a service like supervised or transitional apartments is meant to be flexible. Residents do not sign leases with a landlord (leases were signed between EVLR and the owner), and the agreement can be broken quite easily by the youth or by EVLR (if the youth does not respect the code of conduct). Since this is the first experience of living in an apartment for most residents, this framework allows them to accept the supervision provided by the youth worker in charge of the project on a voluntary basis. If the youths feel they have used this support system enough, they are free to pursue new opportunities (living with friends or going back to live with a family member) without lease obligations.

In the end, EVLR welcomed seven youths (four boys and three girls), as opposed to the five participants originally predicted for the project. The goal was met and, though no indicators were in place to chart the length of stays, some were rather short. For the boys, the average stay was of three months, while for the girls, it was of approximately seven months. Rent payment was more problematic for the girls, and it was their main reason for leaving. Despite proposed alternate solutions, the girls were approximately two months late with payment (which is the maximum tolerated by EVLR). The boys were more impulsive in accepting new opportunities to live with other people, and they averaged payment delays of less than one month.

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Of the seven participants in the project, four were from the Maison des Jeunes le Dôme’s “Skills Link” program. The initial target was four youths (three boys and one girl). The average stay length for these four youths was of approximately five months. The youth worker in charge of the project conducted 15 other selection interviews for future candidates (seven interviewees came from the Maison des Jeunes’ program and eight were referred by resources in the field). The reasons for which these youths did not complete stays varied widely:

- Lack of space (to avoid conflicts, EVLR insisted on keeping boys and girls separate in the apartments, the youths did not choose their roommates and some participants were minors);
- Voluntarily declining stays after the interview (the youth decided to go with another option. Towards the project’s end, some candidates preferred finding other options, since they knew it would be over in a few months.);
- Considerable problems not followed up on by an external resource (for example, daily drug use, which is an element in the code of conduct that must be respected).

As for other expected results detailed in the agreement, eight group workshops touching on the self-sufficiency required for living in an apartment were to be carried out. Among other subjects, these workshops touched on cooking, budgeting, being aware of the community, institutional resources in the field and conflict resolution. EVLR carried out six workshops. The topics covered during these workshops were healthy life habits (time management and physical activity), creating a small cookbook (two workshops), tips for setting up your apartment (like how to paint correctly), the impact of substance use, communication and conflict resolution. Workshops were decided upon by the residents and the youth worker in charge of the project.

EVLR therefore carried out fewer workshops than originally planned. It was more difficult to establish the correct setting in which to carry out these workshops. As a comparison, EVLR runs a building of supervised apartments in Cowansville. It is easier to organise workshops in this setting, since all the residents are in the same place, whereas for the “Active Community for Employment and Housing Support” project, the two apartments involved were very far away from each other. The two youths living in the same apartment therefore had to be willing and able to carry out a workshop together—the opportunities for this were rather rare. Even though this target was not met, EVLR is still satisfied with the work done here.

Another series of workshops was foreseen in the expected results. Five workshops hosted in collaboration with the Maison des Jeunes le Dôme were supposed to take place. The participation of the youth worker in charge of the “Active Community for Employment and Housing Support” project was not meant to be restricted to the youths staying in the supervised apartments—it was also meant to involve other participants in the “Skills Link” program. Without completely excluding the youths’ input, workshop subjects were rather decided upon by the Dôme youth worker to ensure they would be in keeping with the approach taken by the Dôme with their own group.

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Over the course of the project, seven workshops were carried out with participants in the “Skills Link” program, in collaboration with the youth centre. The subjects of the workshops varied and included: the foundation of good communication, workplace conflict, cannabis laws, drug addiction prevention, job searching (two workshops) and knowing oneself. The participation of the youth worker in charge of the “Active Community for Employment and Housing Support” project was not solely hosting the workshops. He also accompanied participants in the “Skills Link” program, notably in their job search (handing out CVs) or going to interviews with potential employers. If we combine the group workshops with those put on in collaboration with the Maison des Jeunes, EVLR carried out 13 workshops, which was the number planned for in the agreement.

As for another expected result, EVLR committed to continuing its support for the transitional apartment residents after their stays. This post-stay approach remained on a voluntary basis and was therefore not mandatory. Youths who wished to keep with certain goals set during their stay in the supervised apartments could seek help with the youth worker. Of the seven youths who completed stays, four of them (three boys and one girl) made use of the post-stay service—they were incidentally the same four youths who came to the project from the “Skills Link” program. The main reasons why these ex-residents sought help were for:

- Psychosocial support (listening, looking for solutions, getting referrals to other organizations in the field and seeking help with all steps relating to personal difficulties, such as substance use and anxiety);
- Help related to self-sufficiency (amending a budget that considered the youth’s new reality, providing information about going back to school or obtaining a driver’s license);
- Accompaniment (for handing out CVs during job searches and attending important hospital or court appointments).

EVLR has agreed with ex-residents seeking support after the project to call the youth shelter. Maintaining connections with youths remains key for EVLR.

Finally, the youth worker in charge of the project had to attend two training courses. These training courses needed to have a relevant connection to intervention with troubled youths. EVLR was lucky enough to have a youth worker who was attending university part-time. He was taking courses for a certificate in substance abuse prevention and attended a training course organized by the Regroupements des Auberges du Coeur on hypersexuality, as well as another on anxiety management offered by an organization working in mental health. Therefore, the target was met.

Other Project Successes

EVLR would also like to list the other successes of the “Active Community for Employment and Housing Support” project in this activity report. Firstly, the success of a project often depends on people’s involvement. EVLR hired a single youth worker for the duration of the project, and this youth worker proved to be an important part of the project’s success. Stability in terms of human resources is precious, both for the organization promoting a project and for the relationships established with its participants. EVLR did not need to

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train many people or fill periods during which there was no supervision. Therefore, the results expected from the agreement with the Minister of Employment and Social Development Canada were more easily met. Moreover, youths could count on the same person for the entirety of their stay in the transitional apartments, and the resulting connection proved to be stronger.

Collaboration with organizations in the field was another success. EVLR obviously worked closely with the Maison des Jeunes le Dôme in St-Jean for recruiting residents, hosting workshops and borrowing or sharing resources (like an office for the youth worker in charge of the project). However, EVLR’s involvement with other organizations was not limited to the Maison des Jeunes. EVLR has a seat at the Haute-Richelieu homelessness roundtable. The youth worker in charge of the “Active Community for Employment and Housing Support” project was deeply involved with the organization committee for St-Jean-sur-Richelieu’s first edition of the Nuit des Sans Abri (Night of the Homeless). He also made himself available to street workers to perform the provincial count of homeless people on April 24 of last year. These various actions helped EVLR obtain the budget to extend the project until March 31, 2019. Also, as was mentioned previously, 15 interviews were conducted without the candidates completing stays in the apartments. Many of these youths came to the project via the “Skills Link” program, but half of them were referred by other organizations in the field, such as Youth Protection, the CLSC and street workers. Since funds were non-recurring, EVLR promoted the project rather conservatively, but the need for this type of service is quite real.

As a final success, the youth worker in charge of the project developed certain intervention tools during the project, such as the workshop template, a small cookbook drawn up with the youths and a chart to establish life goals during a resident’s stay. You may consult the chart in the activity report’s appendix. These tools will continue to be useful for the “Vers mon Espace/Towards My Space” supervised apartments in Cowansville. Without the Innovative Solutions grant from HPS, EVLR would not have had the opportunity to create these intervention tools.

Obstacles and Recommendations

EVLR also faced certain obstacles during the project, grouped here into three categories: obstacles with technical methods, issues surrounding intervention and collaboration challenges. Recommendations and observations will also be brought forth here. Obstacles with technical methods could not have jeopardized the project, but they proved to be irritating components. Helping troubled youths is a hard sell for a building owner. After a few attempts, EVLR was able to find an open-minded owner who accepted to sign the leases. However, the two apartments obtained were quite far away from each other, and it proved to be complicated to host group workshops with more than two people. In a framework where a supervised apartments project would be permanent, it is recommended for the apartments to be much closer together if possible. EVLR owns a building in Cowansville, which is helpful for certain things, such as the proximity of the tenants and so-called spontaneous intervention. However, living alongside all sorts of people (not just other youths with whom connections are established) reflects the reality of living in a regular apartment. Another technical component that was adjusted was the number of hours devoted to the project on a weekly basis. Thirty-five hours a week was too much, which is why EVLR requested it be lowered to 30 hours. It was difficult for the

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youth worker in charge of the project to work seven-to-eight-hour days. The youths were not always present and, on many occasions, the youth worker went to a resident's apartment only to find that nobody was there. The youth worker accepted to work more, shorter days per week. EVLR feels that six spaces could have been provided instead of four. Another element to consider is that, without the financial support granted for the project's costs (see the HPS budget grid), the “Active Community for Employment and Housing Support” project is a financial risk for a non-profit organization. The turnover of youths is too great, which means there are periods when the spaces stay empty (leading to no revenue). Raising the price of the youths' rent could help the organization financially, but the economic advantage of the apartments is an asset for this type of project (see below). EVLR would never have launched the project without the financial support allocated for its costs. Finally, as the last technical obstacle, EVLR was unable to recruit a candidate as of the month of September, as it was mentioned that the project would be over in approximately six months. Many people told the youth worker that the project was interesting, but that the time limit before having to move again was rather short and that they preferred to pursue other options. This obstacle would not exist within a continuous service with recurrent funding.

Issues regarding intervention are more complex. The youth worker must build a connection with each youth, ensure that the code of conduct is respected, support the youths in their life goals, as well as collect the rent. This last element is not always easy to manage. EVLR noticed that, when a resident had issues with paying their rent, it was more difficult to interact and intervene with them. Meetings that the youth worker planned in advanced were postponed without warning, which made it more difficult to supervise these residents. And yet, rent prices offered by EVLR (with electricity, heating and appliances included) is below the average apartment rate, and many youths still had a hard time keeping their payments up-to-date. Ideally, the supervised apartments youth worker would no longer oversee collecting rent, which would prevent the connection with the youths from being weakened. Another impediment to participant recruitment is cohabitation. Since residents do not chose their roommates, many youths reconsider and prefer opting for a standard apartment. On the other hand, in EVLR's opinion, offering an affordable apartment for a single person is not in keeping with the reality that most of these troubled youths will be confronted with. We should remember that these are supervised apartments, and we must not confuse shelter assistance services, transitional apartments and permanent housing. All three types are important, but also come with their unique set of challenges. This duality between youth worker and rent collector, along with imposed cohabitation, are the very challenges presented by transitional apartments, obstacles for which more affordable rent prices may compensate.

The challenges tied to collaboration are mostly related to recruiting participants for the “Active Community for Employment and Housing Support” project. It is important to specify that the collaboration with the Maison des Jeunes le Dôme was excellent and, given the novelty of this type of housing assistance in the Haut-Richelieu region, it is normal for organizations to sometimes refer youths who do not meet the admission criteria. The point raised here refers to better cohesion when recruiting participants for the “Skills Link” program, in connection with the supervised apartments project. During the selection interview, it was mentioned to candidates that they could potentially have access to transitional apartment services, though selection did not focus on recruiting youths looking to participate in both programs (“Skills Link” and the supervised apartments). In

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this respect, EVLR recommends that, despite the project’s success in its current form, it would be interesting to select youths looking to partake in both the “Skills Link” program and the “Active Community for Employment and Housing Support” project. In a similar vein, it might be simpler for a single organization to manage everything (finances, human resources, intervention and participant recruitment) for both components (employment and housing) of a single project.

In conclusion, the “Active Community for Employment and Housing Support” project was a success. Over a longer period, adjustments could have been made to better achieve the goals of the HPS, which are to help people who are at imminent risk of becoming homeless and to get them out of their precarious situation. The municipality of St-Jean-sur-Richelieu has mobilized around this issue like never before. A roundtable on homelessness is already very active, and the supervised apartments initiative was a concrete action in the field that directly targeted the population affected by this problem. Given their broad scope, projects that touch on shelter or housing assistance can take a long time to come into effect. Since the call for new projects for the HPS – Designated Communities 2019-2024 was postponed, it is a shame that the momentum garnered by the “Active Community for Employment and Housing Support” project was somewhat broken, since the St-Jean homelessness roundtable was looking to present a project.

Appendix



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“Towards My Space” Transitional Apartments: Goals of the Stay

