

Community Conversations Continue: ASCO and NACCA Deepen Dialogue with Black Youth in York Region

Following The Auroran's earlier coverage of 'Community Conversations,' we continue to follow this important initiative as it gains momentum across York Region. The project, launched in partnership by Addiction Services Central Ontario (ASCO) and the Newmarket African Caribbean Canadian Association (NACCA), aims to design a culturally relevant mental health and addictions program for Black youth, built directly on the voices of those it intends to serve.

At the heart of the initiative is a simple but powerful goal: listen first. 'We need to hear from the Black Community and provide them with a safe space to ensure they can speak freely,' said Penny Marrett, Executive Director of ASCO. 'We want to make sure that the Black Community has a say in what they need and want.'

ASCO provides services across York Region, North York, and South Simcoe, supporting individuals aged 12 and up with concerns around substance use and gambling. Programs include individual and group counselling, peer support, case management, addictions medicine, non-medical withdrawal services and housing support services. The organization. Programs include individual and group counselling, peer support, case management, non-medical withdrawal services, and housing support. The organization also runs court support programs, including one specifically for individuals convicted of impaired driving or those with two roadside suspensions.

'We work hard to ensure that individuals coming to us for service have the best service possible,' said Marrett. That commitment to quality and community-informed care led ASCO to apply for funding to develop a Black-focused youth mental health and addictions program. But rather than start planning behind closed doors, they knew community input had to come first.

That's when the partnership with NACCA was born. 'The partnership made so much sense,' Marrett explained. 'We knew we needed strong community partnerships to do this effectively and to ensure culturally safe services.'

NACCA is also leading the Community Conversations Collaborative Steering Committee, which brings together key organizations to guide the initiative, including 360°kids, the Markham African Caribbean Canadian Association, York Hills Centre for Children, Youth and Families, the York Region Alliance of African Canadian Communities, and Anchor (the African Canadian National Coalition Against Hate, Oppression, and Racism). The program is proudly funded by Ontario Health.

The first round of Community Conversations, hosted on August 16th, used a participatory, identity-based, scenario-centred approach that invited residents to co-create solutions for stronger community supports. This collaborative process placed Black identity at the core while generating actionable insights to guide the design of programs and systems of support.

As the initiative progresses, The Auroran will follow its journey, amplifying the voices leading the way.

To take part in the conversation, visit naccacommunity.ca and click on the 'Black Community Consultation' tab.

By Brittany GrencoLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter