

YSSN, Anishinaabeg Outreach expand outreach to York Region's Indigenous community

The Aurora-based Your Support Services Network (YSSN) teamed up with Anishinaabeg Outreach last year to launch a program aimed at building life skills, resilience, and emotional wellbeing through Indigenous ways of knowing and now they're aiming to expand their outreach with some help from Magna International.

YSSN and Anishinaabeg Outreach's (AO) AO Nest virtual program is one of 10 York Region organizations and initiatives to benefit from this year's Magna Community Fund.

The YSSN, which empowers individuals of all ages facing mental health challenges, developmental disabilities or crises by connecting them to supports they need, aims to use their share of the pot to build upon their various online learning modules and courses with AO and eventually create a formal Centre for Healing administered by AO and located at YSSN's base on Edward Street.

"It's a learning management platform that offers a number of different learning modules and courses that can help people on the journey to healing as we move forward on the path to reconciliation," says YSSN Service Director Gary Whetung. "For Anishinaabeg Outreach, AO NEST is a really important part of that vision through personal healing and growth, and as we spoke with AO about it, YSSN realized that we really wanted to be part of that.

"During that [first] foundational year in the launch, we've engaged 250 people in use of the system, accessing 99 courses with over 190 different video lessons provided as part of it. It was a starting point and something AO was planning to build on over time. What we've seen is that they've followed through with that and, as they've done that, we've been able to help the people we support take advantage of some of those courses and programs. The most popular courses are those that pertain to emotional intelligence, managing anger, managing anxiety, ADHD, overcoming intrusive thoughts, and boundaries. People have been doing that through accessing the system on their own, through one-to-one support with the case manager, or through group work."

When they first started working together, YSSN envisioned their partnership with AO as just the beginning of a strong alliance and that has certainly proved to be the case. Now that they have seen success, they can formalize their partnership even further. This could even include a future position to help them "identify the needs and priorities of Indigenous people here in York Region, and it would also help us explore how we can address those in collaborative and creative ways, especially through strong community partnerships. "

"I could see a number of priorities being identified. We know housing and homelessness is a concern in most communities across the province, so that's a challenge that has a lot of energy behind it from our municipal leaders, from housing and shelter services, and certainly from non-profit organizations," says Whetung. "I also think that we could be looking at other things too, including how do we support employment or other goals that people may have and that we identify as we undertake this work on a centre of healing? As we do that, I think we'll also be able to develop an evaluative framework that will allow us to test some of the ideas and concepts that we work on, identify what's worked well and what hasn't, and then share that learning with others across the province. There's a lot of good stuff happening out there across the country. I think the more we can share what we've learned so that we can see the really positive effects of those initiatives play off in other parts of the country. We want to be part of that learning.

"When I look at the AO NEST itself, I think a lot of people think that the focus is primarily on mental health, and certainly that is a big focus of it?but I think there's also much more that's part of this system as well. There's some great information and tools on foundational relationship skills ? boundaries, conflict resolution, bullying. There are some great courses on essential life skills, which speak to employment, health life skills, personal life skills, prosperity life skills, and actually, one of the things that I've seen AO Nest develop around has been spirit building ? very much Indigenous themes.?"

For more on Your Support Services Network, visit yssn.ca.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter