Photo by Colt, a youth from the Fort McKay First Nation community

# YOUTH VISION & VOICE in Wood Buffalo

Youth Ideas for Resilient Communities after the 2016 Horse River Wildfire Disaster

*November 2018*

RESILIENCE BY DESIGN Innovation Lab

#YouthVoicesWB

Royal Roads UNIVERSITY
School of Humanitarian Studies

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# YOUTH VOICES RISING

*Wood Buffalo youth Lucas, Zen, Zoe, JD, Kaylun, Sarah, Jake, Mariam, Greg, and Clifford* designed and named the #YouthVoicesWB social media campaign at an Ideas Incubator in May 2017. The campaign launched in September 2017, with youth creating arts-based content in the months prior (Photos by Tamara, RbD Lab).*

## "When you're actually heard, it makes you feel like you can make a difference." *(youth, age 16)*

Youth in Wood Buffalo are creative, innovative citizens with a vision for vibrant, resilient communities. The *Youth Vision & Voice* report values their concerns, ideas, views, and experiences as they recover from the 2016 Horse River wildfire disaster, and further enhance their individual and collective resilience. This report offers insight from a 2017 social media campaign and Creative Action Research project, designed for and by youth ages 14-24,[1] that prompted more than 350 unique concerns and ideas for vibrant communities. It also includes compelling youth voices from interviews—conducted by young research assistants—with 20 youth who created and shared media content as part of #YouthVoicesWB.

With local support for the social media campaign, youth created original songs, photography, artworks, poetry, talks, art installations, dance, drawings, sticky notes, storyboards, and other media. They offered their ideas for building resilient communities that take their views, rights, and needs into account. This report is dedicated to all youth in Wood Buffalo, as well as the dynamic diversity of youth-centric and youth-serving organizations across the region.

** To acknowledge youth contributions, this report uses youths' first names with their permission, and parental/guardian permission for youth younger than age 18.*

The #YouthVoicesWB campaign and research study, led by the ResiliencebyDesign (RbD) Research Innovation Lab at Royal Roads University (RRU), is part of the *Youth Voices Rising: Recovery & Resilience in Wood Buffalo* project funded by the Canadian Red Cross (www.resiliencebydesign.com/yvr).

### Engage Youth in Reducing Disaster Risk

In 2015, Canada endorsed the *United Nations Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015-2030).*[2] The framework encourages a whole-of-society approach to reducing disaster risk that specifically recognizes youth as both a population disproportionately affected by disasters, and as a powerful stakeholder in reducing risk and building individual and community resilience. The Framework invites governments and other decision makers to "engage with relevant stakeholders, including women, children and youth […] in the design and implementation of policies, plans, and standards" through "inclusive and accessible" action.[2]

# FORWARD

## "I want to be part of the solution to the challenges our community faces."

*Aishwarya Gurumurthy, age 19*

Hi, I'm Aishwarya Gurumurthy, a 2017 high school graduate from Westwood Community High School in Wood Buffalo. I believe it's crucial to listen to young people's ideas and issues. We are the future and the next generation who are going to be living in this community. I believe that youth should be given a chance to voice their concerns and be involved in the decision-making process. Since they are growing up in the current generation with technology advancements, they could come up with new, creative, and innovative ideas to address the current issues. I always had this belief. I want to be included and valued in my community; I want my opinions to be heard and considered.

Growing up I have always heard from my mentors and teachers that "Youth are the future leaders and they can make a difference in the world," which motivated me to share the issues we face in the community as youth. I moved to Fort McMurray in 2010. I was amazed to see how diverse and multicultural this community was. Wood Buffalo welcomed many immigrant families like mine with open arms. I am proud to be part of this wonderful community and call it my home.

In 2017, I was hired as a Research Assistant for the *Youth Voices Rising (YVR)* project with the RbD Lab at Royal Roads University. In the role, I helped in planning and executing a social media campaign called #YouthVoicesWB. The campaign helped bridge the gap between the youth in the community and decision makers. In my experience, this was the first time I saw the youth in the community were given a platform to share their thoughts and to have a voice. I also interviewed youth, videotaped the 2017 RMWB Mayoral candidates, and participated in a youth-focused podcast.

As a Research Assistant, I especially learned a lot by supporting two photography workshops in First Nation communities. It was empowering being part of these workshops, experiencing their culture firsthand, and learning the process of how the media and stories are created. The workshops taught me the value of creative arts for hearing different perspectives. For instance, I learned that what us youth in uptown want and value is quite different from what youth in other communities want. It is pivotal to listen to youth in all parts of Wood Buffalo to make our community better and suitable for future generations to come. During the community photo showcases, I saw the youth with smiling faces showing their friends and families their photographs. I realized bonding with your community after a disaster like the wildfire is crucial to the recovery and rebuilding process. It creates a sense togetherness and assurance that there are people in the community who can support them.

Seeing that I have taken a step in the right direction and working towards the goal of making a concrete change in the community helped me with my recovery. These experiences made me feel more connected, and my bond with the community grew stronger. I felt more valuable after having my voice heard, and being recognized for my views, beliefs, and opinions. It is the sense of satisfaction that I have contributed to making my community better that helped me in the wildfire recovery and rebuilding process. From my personal experience, I realized all it takes is recognition and support for the individual's talents from the community for new innovative ideas to emerge. This is when positive change can occur both personally for the youth and in the community where they live.

Aishwaryaa.

# LISTENING TO YOUTH

## "It feels really good. It's like I am for once being taken seriously and not like a child; and my ideas matter." *(age 16)*

*Youth Vision & Voice* champions youth as they imagine safe, vibrant, and resilient communities after the 2016 Horse River wildfire disaster; offering their own definitions of what this means to them. It respects youth voices as valuable in decisions that affect them, their friends and families, and the wider community. Too often, youth in the study said they feel their concerns and ideas are set aside, criticized, or passed over; and they want a change, as a youth explained:

"We are the future of Alberta and Canada. I feel the Mayor, people in power, the Municipality, even all the way to our government representatives, they should listen to us. We're looking to you for guidance as you know how to solve these problems… to make things better for us. I think if we just work together, things will get better" (age 16).

Youth said they want ongoing dialogue over one-off consultations; and for their views to be valued: "It's hard for a kid to be the teacher, but there's things adults just can't really understand coming from a kid's perspective, like is it okay to talk about mental illness and stuff like that" (age 18). Youth in the study were honest about the challenges facing their lives—discussing issues like self-harm, addiction, bullying, racism, and the need for better access to places where they feel like they can belong and be authentic. These conversations highlighted the importance of creating safe opportunities and spaces for youth to share their stories and connect to available support systems *(an approach the study adopted in its activities and interviews, as guided by RRU ethical review).*

"Growing up adults would always tell me things like 'Oh, you are not old enough to be stressed out yet. You are not old enough to do this.' It's like, well, that's not really how it works." *(age 17)*

Many youth have ideas that make sense to them in tackling challenging issues, but said they often feel marginalized in being able to participate on their own terms where engagement opportunities match with their unique skills, schedules, locations, ways of communicating, and interests that are varied, creative, evolving, and individualized. Youth said they want to be recognized as authorities of their own experiences with important insights to share when given the chance.

For instance, youth often asked for adults to do more than listen. They said they want adults to take action on their ideas and to create the change they want to see for them *and* with them. This was articulated by a youth who said age should not determine whose voice matters: "You could be as wise as possible and be younger than most people… It's not up to adults to choose who's equal with who" (age 18).

Another youth agreed: "Creating a culture of listening is something that is going to be beneficial to the generations to come because you hopefully can only grow forward… It's something that should be more of a focus; almost like making sure that specifically younger people are heard" (age 20).

NOTE REGARDING THE YOUTH WILDFIRE STORY, PAGE 6-7

If stories from the wildfire make you feel sad in ways you are not ready for, consider skipping to page 8.

Youth, like the adults in their lives, can experience a range of feelings in response to the trauma and stress of a disaster, evacuation, and long process of recovery. The stories youth tell on page 6-7 remind us of the importance of creating safe spaces for youth to share their experiences, get support when they need it, and be part of the ongoing conversations required of a community as it recovers.

# THE WILDFIRE: *IN OUR OWN WORDS*

## "Sometimes it feels like it was a dream." *(age 24)*

*An estimated 10,000 youth[3] throughout the Wood Buffalo region experienced the wildfire disaster evacuation and its aftermath. To honour and remember their uniquely individual experience, this section blends excerpts from youths' own stories about the 2016 Horse River wildfire. The experience is told by 20 youth interviewed a year-and-a-half after the disaster—using their own words.[4]*

## "We had to go." *(age 17)*

I heard there was the fire going on and one of my friends was like freaking out. I was just like, 'It's okay' and trying to calm him down (age 16). In Fort Mac, we get wildfires. That's not abnormal… But then, slowly the evacuation kept getting bigger, bigger, bigger. And now it was like, 'This whole area is evacuating' and 'This whole area is evacuating now.' It's like, 'wow!' And then it was like, 'The whole city is evacuating' (age 18). There were so many parents, [my mother] had to park a couple blocks away from school and walk up to the school and get us. Then we ran back to the car because we needed to get our stuff (age 15). There were no buses to get home so I got a ride from a random stranger who was nice enough to drop me off (age 17). When we were going up Beacon Hill, the fire jumped across the highway right in front of us to the other side. Yeah, it was kinda scary. The paint on our car bubbled a little bit (age 15). They told us to go north… We could only stay there for one night since there were workers flying to Fort McMurray the next day… So we had to go south again (age 17).

## "The wall of fire got 50 feet in the air in Abasand. I was very confident I wasn't getting out of here alive." *(age 24)*

It was scary, for sure. We didn't really know what was going on… it looked like a scene out of *The Walking Dead* (age 24). We had to drive through the smoky city and there were cops everywhere. It was black smoke around outside our car. It was the worst experience of my life (age 17). The best way I can describe it, since I'm a *Lord of the Rings* fan…I honestly felt like I was in Mordor (age 20). Everyone was just kind of in a scramble (age 18). My brother was really asthmatic so we had to make sure he had all the different types of inhalers that he uses, and it was so bad that we had to carry him out (age 17).

## "It was like an apocalypse happened within our city, and it was heart-breaking." *(age 24)*

We were affected; we had ashes out here, we had ashes falling (age 22). My dad was driving; we were all wearing masks (age 17). We had 20 kilometres left once we got out of town in our tank. We weren't sure what was going to happen and we came upon a mobile gas unit on our way on the side of the road. They filled up our tank and charged us nothing and gave us cold bottles of water because it was about 30 degrees at 9 o'clock (age 24). I always had these thoughts of 'Okay, one day I'm going to go somewhere and my friends are going to go somewhere and we're going to be apart and we're not going to see each other again.' But for it to actually happen out of nowhere and to kind of force us out of our home and to go somewhere… It was a really crazy kind of experience; it was really life changing (age 18).

If you're being evacuated, you don't really know what's going to happen to the town that you're being evacuated from. So it's really weird thinking, 'What happens if everything that I've known for my entire life disappears?… What am I going to do?' (age 20). I was incredibly afraid. I didn't know what to think when we had to leave (age 18). Everybody was traumatized. A lot of our community was split up. Some were in Lac La Biche, some were in Edmonton, some went elsewhere (age 22). At first, we stayed in school gyms (age 17). Once we were out of town everything was fine (age 16). We tried our best as a community to help everyone

### SUPPORT

If you, or someone you know, are experiencing trauma, abuse, depression, or any other overwhelming emotion, people are here to help:

- SOS Crisis Line
  (780) 743-4357 (local)
  1 (800) 565-3801 (CA)
- Addiction & Mental Health
  1 (866) 332-2322 (AB)
  1 (877) 303-2642 (AB)
- Child Abuse Hotline
  1 (800) 387-5437 (AB)
- Stepping Stones Youth Shelter - (780) 750-2252
- https://thelifelinecanada.ca/resources/teens

*Photo by Tamara, RbD Lab*

(age 22). We stayed in a really safe place with very nice people that let us stay in their basement (age 16). Our living conditions changed because we were living from hotel to hotel to hotel (age 14). I decided to do summer school in Calgary (age 17). We just took it one day at a time (age 16). I would get so many messages, 'Oh the gas station blew up… your house is gone, I'm so sorry'… but then to hear that it's not. It's crazy for that while until you get the chance to go home and see if it actually is there. It was a constant guessing game (age 18). A lot of people came into depression during the fire… I had a hard time (age 14).

## "My house didn't… burn down, so there was no big trauma there. But it was still pretty bad; we felt lost." *(age 20)*

It was exciting being able to go back. I just wanted to be home and go back to school; be with my friends (age 16). I can't say that I'm sad that I'm back in Fort Mac. Fort Mac is my home. It's always been my home. It's going to be my home… You've just kind of gotta go with life and whatever happens, happens (age 17). Personally I lost my house and the things that were in there. I mean everything is fine now, but still… (age 18). It was sad to come back here and see all of them [my friends] go through what they had to go through (age 18). We were missing the colour and the cheerfulness of the community (age 17).

I had a real heavy case of survivor's guilt and my depression was really high for friends of mine that lost their homes (age 24). Getting jobs was even harder (age 17). We take our school life very seriously, so we were concerned: Are we even going to graduate? Are we even going to make it? (age 17). Some of the kids were worried about school, worried about their homes and families. So I think it is dependent on who you ask because everyone went through it differently (age 16). People were like, 'Well what's wrong?' and I was like, 'I am trying' (age 17).

## "A lot of people here had their friends to support them." *(age 20)*

At school… I feel like everyone just wanted to move on (age 16). Some people wanna talk about it and some are like, 'No.' Some people were like joking about it… but I never joke (age 20). My brother has really bad PTSD. He has really bad panic attacks and anxiety attacks and as soon as we came back he couldn't leave my mom ever… I have gotten slightly more anxiety than I had before because I am afraid something is gonna happen (age 15).

I remember mental health services offering counselling and being able to go somewhere and talk. But I didn't see any specifically for youth (age 16). You could sign up for counselling, but I wish we had more community activities which could gather the youth back again, like to the way it was (age 17). I wasn't really quite sure how to get involved with the recovery process… I just kind of sat back on the sidelines and let things happen (age 18). We all volunteered at certain things (age 16).

## "It made me feel really good because even though after the devastation, all these people care about Fort McMurray and they are helping to rebuild it." *(age 16)*

The wildfire brought everyone together and [they] wanted to work together as a community to make things better. But as time went by, that kind of died down 'cause it wasn't as needed. But now I think it's needed (age 16). Now it's time to move forward and make the city better than what it was (age 18). I think that we are getting stronger, yeah (age 16).

# YOUTH & RESILIENCE

## "Everyone has their own way of coping. Feeling like you matter is a big part of that." *(age 24)*

When youth from Wood Buffalo returned after the wildfire evacuation, for many their world had shifted. A large number faced daily life in unfamiliar neighbourhoods, homes, schools, or social situations; some youth lost the company of friends whose families decided not to return or lost easy access to places they frequently visited as they moved to new communities; others struggled from post-disaster trauma. Despite how they are often portrayed and talked about, however, youth are not a homogenous group. They are diverse and have a range of experiences shaped by opportunities and barriers associated with gender, ability, race, culture, ethnicity, socio-economic status, age, sexual orientation, language, location, access, and interests. While many youth faced loss and change, others said they returned to the places they lived and immediately immersed themselves in the familiarity of school, work, friends, and activities with little impact on their daily lives. With thousands of youth experiencing the evacuation,[3] every youth has a unique story and their own ideas of resilience that connect to how they personally feel, and what recovery means for them and their peers, families, and communities. This report honours their diverse experiences, and promotes engaging in multiple strategies that support the short- and long-term process of recovery and resilience-building.

*RESILIENCE: The capacity of individuals and communities to anticipate, face, and survive a threat, and maintain or transform the structures and systems that support daily functioning and recovery.*[5]

For the youth in the study, the notion of *resilience* reflected two key themes: *connection* and *action*. They discussed feeling resilient when people "came back together" (age 20) and supported each other to get back "to how we were, and better than how we were" (age 16). Such connection reinforced a sense of belonging, as reflected by a youth who said, "I'm thankful my hometown is still here for me" (age 22). Resilience also related to actions that they were taking in their lives, such as "being up for change and knowing that things will get better" (age 14); and "not letting things have an effect on your everyday life" by "taking one day at a time" (age 18). This is where you "hold on to what makes you happy" [like a horse]. "If it tries to buck you off, just hold on even tighter" (age 22).

*Photos by Tamara, RbD Lab*

# RECOVERY

"There's something about this town that nobody sees. No matter what tries to bring you down, you can't be beat. And the fire that burnt down all your hopes and dreams. You came back twice as strong ready to take on anything. If I could do something to make this place any better, I would bring back the people that stuck together. Our hearts stayed strong. We'll carry on forever. It's all a part of our recovery."

*'Recovery' by Shekinah (age 15) written for #YouthVoicesWB*
*www.thedistrictstudio.ca/youthvoiceswb.html*

*Photo by Azaria Photography in Fort McMurray*

"We just have to get through the tough times and focus on the good things," a youth (age 15) explained. "We just don't give up just because things happened. You can't dwell on it; you have to start making yourself better, and your community better" (age 17). We need to remain "hopeful, but realistically hopeful. So not cheesy, empty hopefulness… like feeling the pain, but recognizing things will change" (age 16).

"Recovery is more how you heal from an event. Resilience is how you are and act after the event." *(age 21)*

In discussing resilience, youth said they appreciated trauma counselling support after the disaster for those who needed it. However, many wanted to put the wildfire experience behind them. This appeared difficult at times as youth mentioned triggering events still impacting their lives, such as sirens, seeing smoke, or evacuation memories; which is not uncommon after disaster. Youth discussed heightened stress, depression, and anxiety after the wildfire—feelings some said they shared sparingly with friends, family, teachers, or youth workers, as one youth explained: "I lied a lot of the times. I wanted folks to think I was okay so that I could continue to do things, even though I wasn't okay" (age 24). A few youth in the study described how being able to express themselves through creative arts helped them recover: "Songwriting or writing of any sort is always a good process to work through your own junk" (age 21). For others, personal relationships offered invaluable support. For instance, a youth (age 24) shared an experience about a triggering event. "I had a real heavy case of survivor's guilt and my depression was really high for friends of mine that lost their homes. A week before [the fire] I was watching movies with a friend of mine in his home in Abasand. [After the fire], he brought me up on Canada Day 2016 to the pit were his house was. Something inside me broke that day and it launched me into a season of depression. That was a really, really serious season and a really low point of my life." For the youth, faith and the support of family helped in overcoming suicidal thoughts, and getting through the darkest moments.

These stories imply that the ways youth become more resilient post-disaster requires multiple responses ranging from professional trauma counselling to creative arts to initiatives that build on the connections youth already have with supportive people and safe places. A holistic approach requires designing recovery strategies, plans, and activities for and with youth that fit the local culture and context, and address youths' diverse experiences and needs. Engaging youth as key decision makers in planning not only aids in their own recovery, but can cultivate long-term resilience so youth can more readably cope with loss and change throughout their lives.

# YOUTH ARE RESILIENT

In the summer of 2018, youth from the Chipewyan Prairie Dene First Nation and Fort McKay First Nation created photos and stories that show how Elders, nature, tradition, community connection, friends, and sports positively impact their lives. Explore their photography exhibits online through the eyes of youth.

TOGETHER WE ARE STRONG: Strength can come from within but when we stand together we are stronger.

LITTLE BIG LAKE: The lake is so peaceful and quiet.. It grounds me in who I am, and who I want to be. *(ReShauna)*

EDGE OF THE WATER: You can't cross the river by standing and staring at it. *(Lanita)*

Summer Walks

SUMMER WALKS: No matter what happens in life, life is always worth living for. *(Colt)*

# We Are Resilient

## Chipewyan Prairie Dene First Nation Youth Exhibit

http://resiliencebydesign.com/janvier-youth-showcase-community-strengths

# Through the Eyes of Youth

## Fort McKay First Nation Youth Exhibit

http://resiliencebydesign.com/fort-mckay-photo-exhibit

Shawna Black from Sekweha in Janvier introduces the youth photo show at the Interlake Reserves Tribal Council Emergency Management Preparedness Conference in Winnipeg in September 2018.

# YOUTH & LEADERSHIP

The *Youth Voices Rising* project found that throughout Wood Buffalo, young people are stepping into leadership roles as youth workers, mentors, and educators. Jessica Read from the Sekweha Youth Centre in Janvier reflects on what it means to be a young leader working with youth *(written at the YVR "Building from Strengths" workshop focusing on youth and community resilience. Used with permission).*

*Jessica Read, Sekweha Youth Centre*

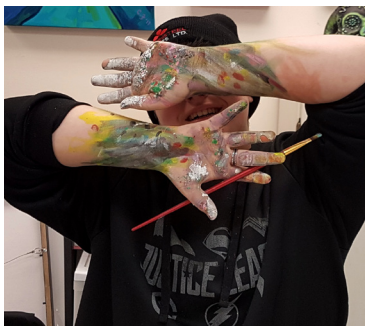
## MY LEADER

Every day it is a blessing working with the youth. Knowing that they taught me what I've been through or going through, was a learnt experience that made me who I am today. Being young, you always feel that you have to "adult" and watch what you do. But being a kid, you were fearless, always up to learning new things; being able to be yourself; never afraid of what you were gonna do.

You don't have to be an adult to be a leader, but you have to be fearless, open-minded to learn, experience new things, and guide yourself in the right path of life. Kids always think they only learn from me, but really I learn from them every day. They are our next leaders in the future and knowing they already are on the road (path) makes me that much more excited to want to learn from them. They are the ones that make me want to better myself and the community. Getting help by them to better anything in our path is a better journey to better my path.

We are all open-hearted and want to create things that need to be created. There will never be a time we will back down; we always move forward. Learning is what life is about. Everyone needs the guidance to move along in the journey of leadership.

# #YOUTHVOICESWB



*Youth create feathers at The Art Foundry illustrating their vision for making their communities even better. The feathers contributed to the campaign, as well as part of a colourful angel wings art installation. (Photos by Tamara, RbD Lab)*

The #YouthVoicesWB campaign was unique in that it combined creative arts activities led by local social profits and the RbD Lab with a social media campaign. Youth engaged online and offline to share their views; choosing the methods and modes they wanted to communicate their ideas. For instance, photography workshops in Janvier and Fort McKay resulted in youth photo stories for the online campaign that highlighted their talents and perspectives; as well as community photo exhibits and knowledge reports on youth priorities.

#YouthVoicesWB aimed to not only highlight what youth want for more resilient communities after the wildfire disaster, but to also build peer networks and connect the diversity of youth ideas to responsive action.

"It introduced me to a lot of people… It made me become more aware of what's going on here for the youth." *(age 17)*

Youth across the region interpreted and answered the campaign question designed by youth: "What would you do to make your community better?" by contributing more than 350 concerns and ideas in photos, art, song, etc.

They directed their ideas to the people they saw as having the most power over decisions that directly impact them: the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB ), the Mayor; their local Chief or Council, the School Board, their parents, and/or social profits. Many youth were clear about

*Jordan Cree performs at a #YouthVoicesWB talent showcase hosted by the District Studio and 91.1 The Bridge. Hear the songs at [www.thedistrictstudio.ca/youthvoiceswb.html](www.thedistrictstudio.ca/youthvoiceswb.html) (Photo by Azaria Photography in Fort McMurray).*

*Hannah reads her poem 'Shattered Vase' in answer to how she would make her community better. It includes this advice to her peers: "You aren't going to be in school forever and yes the real world is cruel. But you will know the ropes already. You will be able to face the demons a little more easily this time. They cannot break what has been broken. The shattered vase is back together and nothing will penetrate its surface. You are unstoppable." See and hear her full poem at [www.facebook.com/YouthVoicesWB/videos/509798172715773](www.facebook.com/YouthVoicesWB/videos/509798172715773).*

who could affect change, but shared that they often felt a lack of control in influencing that change. An analysis of the youth responses resulted in identifying five key youth-generated priorities for their communities post-disaster: 1) transportation, 2) health & wellbeing, 3) education, 4) volunteerism, and 5) participation and activities.

## "It was like 'Wow, I'm not the only one that sees this.'" *(age 16)*

Youth also raised concerns that adults sometimes listen to what they have to say about what needs to change, but fail to include them in identifying solutions and taking action; shutting down youths' innovative solutions as being too ambitious or complex. They pointed out that adults sometimes miss that youth clearly understand that bold action comes from both small and large steps forward, and even backwards. Youth were equally as clear that they cannot move ideas ahead unless they are included in decision-making processes and community conversations as active, respected citizens whose views are valued and have influence.

Youth in the study explained that they want to understand the complex challenges they face; and are interested to explore and enact solutions alongside adults as equal and active partners in improving their communities and their world. This is why each of the five thematic priorities in this report not only give voice to the experiences and issues of concern to youth in Wood Buffalo, they also provide youth-centric possibilities for youth and adults to explore and undertake action together.

## #YouthVoicesWB "was really cool because everybody has different ideas; and it's good that they're taking them into consideration, even if we're young." *(age 16)*

# TRANSPORTATION

## "If you ask five youth between age 18-24, I can promise you four out of five will say they use public transport." *(age 16)*

## Youth experience

In the #YouthVoicesWB study, youth identified improving public transportation as a top priority issue that affects many of them on a daily basis as they navigate getting to and from school, work, and socializing. Youth said changes in transportation resulting from the wildfire disaster directly impacted youths' mobility and access to places and services that support their recovery and resilience: "Things have constantly been changing; especially after the fire," one youth said (age 17). Another (age 17) explained that changes to the bus routes after the wildfire negatively altered their transit times where a 20-minute trip now takes 40 minutes. The key challenges youth said they face with public transit are:

1) full buses and/or overcrowding,
2) long waits due to inconvenient or unreliable schedules (especially in cold weather),
3) inaccurate information between the municipality website and reality, and
4) inaccessible or unsafe routing (which some youth said puts them at risk when walking to the bus stop or their destination).

### "Before the wildfire, transportation was on time." *(age 16)*

A youth described their experience taking public transit to go to school: "They are way too crowded and we can barely fit in, especially during winter with jackets and backpacks. The driver yells at us to get back; like, there's no room in the back. Where can we go?... Once the bus is full, they won't let other youth get on. So, we have to wait there for another half an hour or hour to get on the second bus, freezing out in the cold" (age 17).

After a disaster event, the loss or reduction in independent mobility for youth can lead to negative consequences, such as reduced opportunities for social, emotional, and cognitive development[6] valuable in recovery and resilience processes. For instance, in the Wood Buffalo region, youth reported that disruption and displacement caused by the fire created difficulties in being able to easily access youth-friendly organizations and places that held meaning for them due to post-disaster public transit routing and changes. Limited or unavailable access to reliable and affordable transportation can disrupt social relationships and opportunities for engagement, which has important implications for youths' sense of belonging and attachment to their community and environment.[7] Independent mobility for youth—including public transit, cycling, and walking—allows youth the freedom to access places that serve as resources for resilience and promoting healthy wellbeing.[8]

*Youth created art for #YouthVoicesWB and answered the campaign question on sticky notes.*

The four areas youth identified as concerns about public transit align with similar results from a RMWB youth study released in 2016,[9] with some issues being magnified due to route changes following the wildfire. For instance, one youth (age 17) described how prior to the fire, their main concern was overcrowding on buses. For them, this issue was intensified after the wildfire disaster: It "became worse in the sense that a lot of people moved out of the city, that's true. But they cut down on the routes—as in they combined two routes together—making it a longer bus ride to school." Other youth shared these concerns and described not understanding how the new routes accounted for the post-disaster changes in population distribution or movement to different areas. This led to their transportation experiences being unreliable and confusing.

## Youth ideas

Key youth ideas for change ranged from altering the bus system to better suit how youth travel in the region (including transit to and from rural areas), to providing easier access to more reliable transportation information, to exploring how road rules impact transit timing. The youth participating in #YouthVoicesWB also suggested ideas similar to those identified by the RMWB's 2016 *Engaging Youth* report,[9] including improving bus routes, cultivating greater respect for youth from drivers, improving bus safety, creating warmer shelters, and providing free or more affordable transportation options and alternative transportation systems across the Wood Buffalo region.

> Transit "may be overlooked because it might be the biggest thing for youth, but not for people over 24 because they might have cars." *(age 17)*

Additionally in the #YouthVoicesWB study, some youth proposed more widespread changes to transportation, including adding more bike lanes or car services (e.g., Uber) to improve access and affordability. Youth had suggestions too for soliciting specific ideas from them, as one youth said: "I hope they will have a survey for youth to help build a better bus schedule and route" (age 17).

# HEALTH & WELLBEING

"I got some friends who are scared to share their ideas and I kind of want them to feel free and safe." *(age 15)*

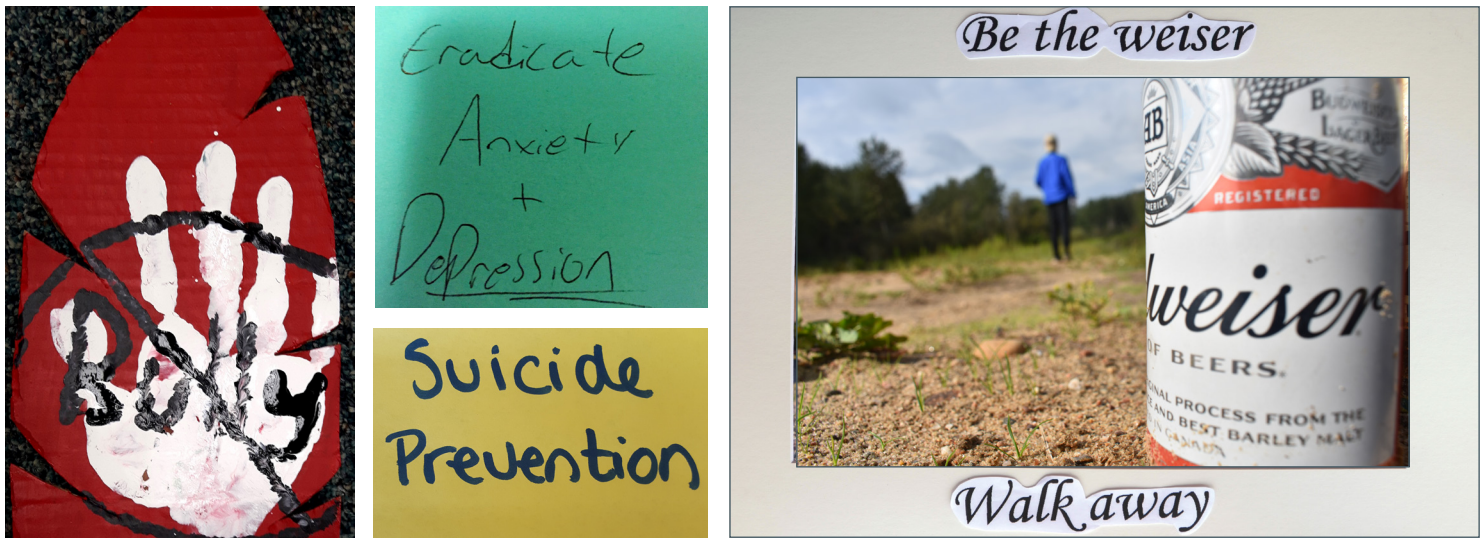
## Youth experience

During the #YouthVoicesWB campaign, youth expressed wanting to "end," "stop," or "lower" actions and behaviours that they found detrimental to their own or others' health and wellbeing. Their concerns focused primarily on reducing or eliminating drug and alcohol abuse; violence; beliefs and acts of homophobia, sexism, racism, and bullying; mental health issues, specifically anxiety and depression; and environmental harm such as garbage, littering, and pollution. Youth often shared their views from a place of personal experience or from seeing the ways in which these issues harmed others. As a youth (age 16) observed, there are LGBTQI+ kids "who don't feel safe going into places." Another youth (age 15) shared similar views: "My friends and I feel about stuff that there should be an end to a hatred of those who are Muslim, black, white, lesbian, gay, etcetera… especially a lot of Muslim girls feel like harmed or unsafe."

"There are issues in this world that are not easily seen. You sometimes have to dig deeper; you sometimes have to look beyond the surface." *(age 17)*

In the youth interviews, more than half discussed their own mental health concerns, or how they've offered support to friends thinking about self-harm. As one youth said, "I don't think it's possible for everyone to just, you know, leap to their feet" (age 18). Many discussed how the wildfire disaster increased depression and anxiety for them and their peers. "I now understand the warning signs and the situations that I need to look at to make sure that I stay healthy mentally. That was a big thing that coming out of the wildfire I recognized," a youth (age 24) said. "So, support for mental health was an important one for me. That was something that I personally think that a lot of young people maybe don't even recognize affects them."

There is considerable evidence to show that youth are at greater risk for developing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following natural disasters. Resource allocation for youth-centric mental health, however, is often overlooked or underfunded.[10] Specific programs that allow youth to connect and discuss their disaster experiences can aid in reducing such symptoms, as well as guide youth in healing and capacity-building.[11] Similarly, empowering initiatives that promote meaningful civic engagement can help youth develop socially and emotionally, improve educational achievement, and reduce behaviours related to substance abuse and criminality.[12] Such endeavours can also strengthen youths' potential as active and engaged citizens well past the disaster recovery phase, which helps build more resilient families and communities long term.




*Youth answered the campaign question on sticky note walls and generated content for #YouthVoicesWB in art and photo workshops.*

Another youth said, "Obviously if someone goes through a traumatic event like an entire city burning down, there definitely needs to be some action taken to help the healing process" (age 20). When expressing their views on mental health issues, youth explained they did so to make the issue of mental health visible, as illustrated by a youth poet (age 17): "Take depression. It's something that's a different experience for everyone. Anxiety is an experience different by everyone. What I want to do with my poetry is bring a light to that. I want people to know the stresses that even people as young as like eight years old go through."

# Youth ideas

In addressing issues of abuse, violence, hateful beliefs and actions, and mental health, youth promoted the importance and value of belonging places—those spaces where youth can go to feel safe and brave, share their stories, and navigate their roles and responsibilities. Such spaces support a positive attachment and connection to place for youth through memories, stories, histories, traditions, religion, spirituality, knowledge, nature, and wisdom.

Youth also talked about the need for more beds and group homes for youth needing respite and shelter, more support options for people with autism, and more safe spaces for LGBTQI+ youth. Youth also referenced their desire for schools to promote more mental health awareness and strategies for support; emphasizing the need for ideas and strategies for supporting friends when they ask for help. They specifically wanted ideas for how to avoid alcohol and drug abuse; and what to do when facing violence or bullying. Youth also offered their own creative solutions to the problems they identified, such as developing an app informed and designed by youth that shares youth-focused, regional activities and links to local crisis support lines.

Youth themselves are especially insightful when offering advice to other youth, which reinforces the benefit of involving them in designing wellbeing campaigns. As one youth (age 18) said: "Any experience that you experience makes your brain that much bigger. So if you're going to continue this habit of something, especially if it's not the most productive or not the wisest habit, you're stopping your brain from developing and experiencing other new things that will make you a better person or a much more wholesome person. So yes, we know that that's an option, but there are other options."

> "There's art out there, there's music, there's photography, so why not make yourself wiser by doing something else." *(age 18)*

Youth were also keenly aware of how friends, family, and a supportive environment helps them be more resilient when facing an array of social challenges, as one youth explained: "My whole community is struggling, right… But I know my community is strong. I know that there's a light at the end of the road for every single person here. We all make sure we're okay and that's what I love about my community. That's why it'll always be my community" (age 22).

# EDUCATION

"If they reach out their hand and we take it, we could make a better community, a better city." *(age 16)*

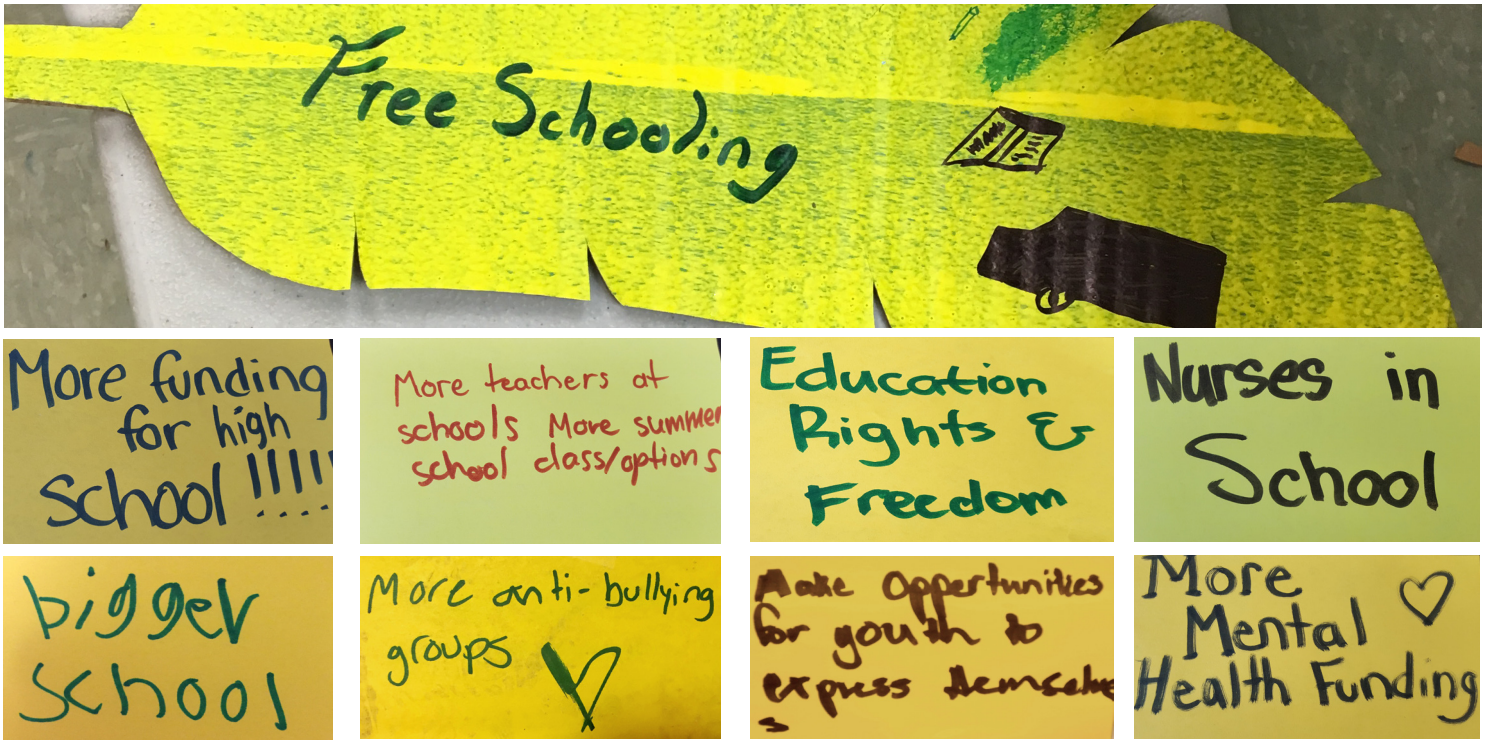
## Youth experience

In the study, youth identified multiple ideas for improving their education that ranged from providing alternative testing evaluations to more summer school options; from improving curriculum quality to offering one-on-one support; and eliminating bullying at school. Additionally, they also placed a large emphasis on having more of a voice and influence in decision-making with the School Board to improve their learning experience and outcomes.

"What I noticed was a lot of adults just deciding what's happening with the youth or our education program. But with us, we don't have our voice in it. Some stuff is starting to get better about it, but otherwise it's just adults… Youth need to have their voices heard." *(age 16)*

Research studies have noted that in a post-disaster context, youth may experience challenges to their perceptions of personal agency and influence.[13] Having psychosocial interventions in school contexts

Because schools play a primary role in the lives of youth, they often serve as refuges and places of support after a disaster. Research shows school-based services as being uniquely positioned to capitalize on factors that support youths' resilience, mental health, and psychosocial wellbeing after a disaster event.[14] Schools are on the frontline of youth wellbeing, especially as positive spaces in the post-disaster context of healing and recovery. Schools can also be places of risk and challenge. A study following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in the United States showed that public school students faced adjustment problems resulting in negative behaviours (e.g., conflict with teachers), higher levels of bullying, and more dissatisfaction among students.[15] Research has also illuminated the challenges teachers can face after disaster as they struggle to manage the stress and logistics of their own recovery, while being expected to provide emotional and practical support to their students.[16] Ensuring students, teachers, administrators, and school staff have additional support in the short- and longer-term disaster recovery and rebuilding process is critical for maintaining their health and capacity for creating and maintaining supportive, safe, and healthy learning environments.




*Youth answered the campaign question on sticky note walls and developed art for #YouthVoicesWB with local organizations.*

post-disaster can promote open discussions that help youth feel more comfortable discussing and seeking help to address grief, loss, and deeply-rooted social issues such as bullying and a lack of self-expression.[17] These issues were raised in many of the responses youth contributed as part of the #YouthVoicesWB campaign and study.

## Youth ideas

During the campaign, youth said they recognized that while they have an array of ideas to improve their education experience in Wood Buffalo, they also need additional knowledge on the resources, funding, or policy changes required to respond to their concerns. Working with youth to improve their understanding of these complex issues, and to create realistic and innovative solutions can help youth grow and contribute as informed citizens to the overall health and excellence of educational and other systems.

> "I am doing not so good in school. So I need a little bit more support and encouragement." *(age 16)*

In the study, youth offered specific ideas for improving education in the region, including more teachers and options for classes, increasing school sizes, having fewer Paessler Certified Program and Provincial Achievement Test exams, and hiring a higher number of school nurses to support the health and wellbeing of students.

> "In schools or after school there should be classes or clubs for students who have been hurt or are in trauma from the fire to learn." *(age 14)*

While some youth responses are clearly linked to the post-disaster context, many of their ideas also align with the *Engaging Youth* report[9] adopted by the RMWB in 2017, where nearly 20 percent of the youth surveyed listed education as an important area for improvement. The RMWB report featured the following list of five key areas of focus: 1) Increasing the quality and variety of educational opportunities; 2) adding educational events, motivational speeches, workshops, conferences, and lectures outside of school and during the summer; 3) having smaller class sizes; 4) having more diverse, creative, and unique classes and programs; and 5) providing better educational and learning systems and techniques that enhance youth skills and talents.

This list and the themes identified in the #YouthVoicesWB study provide a starting point for youth-informed and youth-led activities that they could discuss and spearhead.

# VOLUNTEERISM

## "*Community* is helping each other out without expecting things in return." *(age 16)*

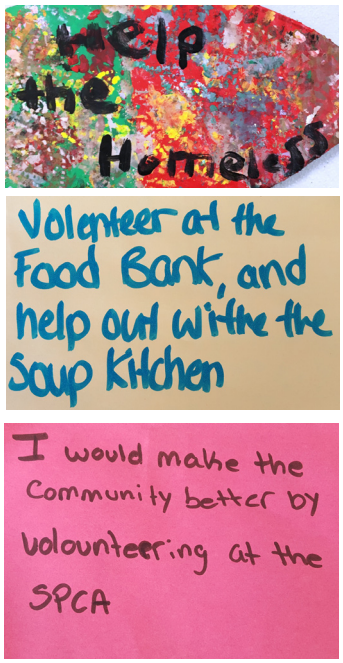
## Youth experience

As part of the #YouthVoicesWB campaign, youth expressed an interest in volunteering as a way to improve their communities. They described multiple places in the Wood Buffalo region they wanted to support, including the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), blood drives, organizations helping the elder population, food banks, soup kitchens, student and youth councils, local events, and clean-up activities such as picking up garbage in town, at parks, on trails, etc.

### "Coming together as a community and helping each other out is very important, especially after the fire. That was the most important thing." *(age 16)*

Of the youth giving input into #YouthVoicesWB, the most popular suggestions for volunteering were either at the SPCA or in helping animals in other ways. During a disaster, youth and adult pet-owners often face high levels of distress due to challenges related to being separated from their pets or the lack of pet-friendly temporary housing options during an evacuation.[18] After a disaster event, not only can a connection to animals be important in the recovery process, it can be beneficial in strengthening

Volunteerism has been shown to provide youth with higher levels of wellbeing and leadership traits than youth who do not volunteer.[19] It has also been shown to boost youth resiliency in disaster-affected communities.[20] Volunteer work can provide youth with the opportunity to build skills related to employment, engage in their community, connect with others, and feel empowered in achieving employment and educational goals.[21] Opportunities or promotion of volunteerism post-disaster therefore holds potential for building social capital (e.g., more connected and caring communities), youth agency, and a more engaged youth population. Optimizing opportunities for volunteering that are attractive and accessible for youth can increase their interest and investment.[22] This may include advertising opportunities on social media, providing flexible opportunities that work with youths' schedules, exploring both face-to-face and online volunteer options, and optimizing volunteer possibilities with and within schools. Further, youth have been found to be motivated to volunteer based on a desire for more social connections.[23] Therefore creating opportunities in which youth can volunteer with friends and be connected more closely to their communities may boost volunteerism rates.



*Youth answered the campaign question on sticky note walls and developed art for #YouthVoicesWB with local social profits.*

youth resilience. Connecting to animals can assist youth in meeting the challenges of developmental stresses, isolation, or mental health problems experienced post-disaster.[24]

Youth often have multiple reasons for volunteering. For instance, a youth who took part in the #YouthVoicesWB *Ideas Incubator* to develop the campaign said they did so to "contribute my ideas" and "learn from others" (age 14). They said they enjoyed it because "it was funny and fun to share our ideas." It also helped them progress in their own development: "I have gained a better understanding of others and I have learned each person is unique. Collectively we are stronger together due to our uniqueness."

## Youth ideas

Youth responding to the #YouthVoicesWB campaign expressed interest in volunteering when the opportunities relate to causes they care about, promote social relationships, offer skills beneficial to their learning or future employment, and are youth-friendly and enjoyable. Being interested in volunteering, however, is not always sufficient to turn that interest into action. Youth said that sometimes they don't know what opportunities are available or don't know how to take the first step in accessing volunteer positions. They also struggle at times to find opportunities that fit with their schedules, access to transportation, ways of working, and financial situations; and also meet their criteria of being both meaningful and fun.

To help solve some of these challenges, youth suggested that organizations provide easy-to-find information about volunteering (especially online or in a phone app) with clear descriptions of responsibilities, opportunities, transportation options, and requirements. This can help them determine which volunteer opportunities they think will be beneficial for their own wellbeing and match with their vision for how they want to contribute. As well, working with youth to understand what they need to participate can assist Wood Buffalo organizations in creating volunteer positions that are both meaningful for youth, and beneficial for the people, animals, and environment they care about.

> "I just want to give back… I think it's nice… If I was in a position where I genuinely needed help, if someone would to come pick me up then why not really?" *(age 17)*

For the #YouthVoicesWB campaign, a youth (age 16) drew a photo of two people holding hands (see above), and explained how it shows the importance of helping others in the community: "If we're helping each other out, we can help each other overcome obstacles, and we can also include people that may feel like they're not included and that don't have any benefits. And they'll learn from you, and they'll be influenced to also help other people."

# PARTICIPATION & ACTIVITIES

"You don't know what goes on at home or what goes on in their community… maybe that safe space can mean the world to them because maybe that's all they have." *(age 16)*

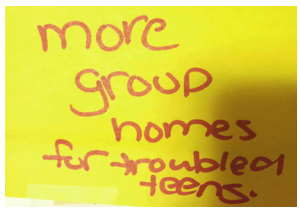
## Youth experience

In envisioning even better communities, youth talked most about connecting to friends, being civically active, and having engaging, enjoyable activities available that suit their unique interests—be it sports, art, music, photography, clubs, skateboarding, going out for live music, etc. They promoted a move diverse selection of activities across the region that are youth-focused, build relationships, and, importantly, are fun. Sport, for instance, was described as a healthy way for youth to connect with their peers and support their own wellbeing, especially for youth living in rural and Indigenous communities. While many youth offered new ideas, others mentioned programs, activities, events, and services that already exist in Wood Buffalo. This suggests that not all youth are aware of available activities or, as indicated previously, they are unable to get to them due to location, financial, or transportation challenges. These are areas organizations might explore further to address barriers to youth participation. As an example, a youth expressed frustration in accessing activities far from home:

"That is all the way downtown and people who live uptown don't always want to go downtown for that." *(age 16)*

In the study, youth also talked about feeling overlooked right after the disaster. This led some of them to disengage and, in some cases, feel more anxious or depressed. Youth expressed

Supporting youth participation in creative arts can contribute to disaster recovery and resilience as it builds connections and agency,[25] and contributes to optimism and positive youth development,[26] subjective wellbeing,[27] and the development of critical thinking skills amongst other things. Engaging youth in sports[28] and play[29] has been specifically linked to enhancing psychological and physiological wellbeing and resilience in youth after disaster. In the study, the connections youth expressed to physical and natural places (i.e., spaces where they could continue or build a sense of belonging) was a common sentiment and is reflected in academic literature. For example, in a study in four disaster-affected communities in Canada, place attachment was found vital for youths' recovery processes.[30] As such, identifying, developing, and supporting places and spaces that can create a sense of belonging for diverse populations of youth is valuable for both recovery and resilience-building efforts.




*Youth answered the campaign question through sticky notes and developing art and photos at #YouthVoicesWB workshops.*

this in how they described the town as "dead" (age 15) and "empty" (age 17) after returning with fewer places and ways for them to connect as before the disaster. Youth descriptions of feeling disengaged with or unaware of social supports is consistent with other communities in post-disaster contexts.[31]

# Youth ideas

The ideas youth have for increasing participation in their communities fall into five categories:

1) Creating new programing tailored to youths' diverse interests;

2) Developing more youth-centric and youth-friendly recreation places (e.g. more affordable, inclusive and safe for diverse populations, specific to certain age groups, accessible, etc.);

3) Creating greater opportunities for youth to find paid employment (alongside opportunities to build the skills needed for occupations in and outside industry);

4) Providing a wider selection of stores to purchase affordable goods; and

5) Ensuring youth activities are promoted in accessible platforms, such as social media or through apps commonly used by youth.

"The things that bring us together are the little things like the dinners, small powwows, and dances… The nature and buildings also bring us together, because we all connect as one under one roof… We share and all talk, and share stories. That brings us closer, young and old." *(ages 14-18)*

Youth had multiple ideas for improving participation in sports and recreation including diversifying the types of sports being played, lowering the age for organized sports (e.g., having a midget hockey league), and creating more cross-region tournaments. Increasing sports and arts programming can strengthen youths' sense of belonging by providing safe and inclusive opportunities for connecting, and being active and creative.

This sentiment was reflected by a local youth worker in the creative field: "A big part of the [#YouthVoicesWB] campaign was people [youth] saying they need opportunities, places where people will listen, places where people will create safe spaces for them; I mean, especially in our field in the creative stuff, places where they have a creative outlet, where they can be encouraged in their creative gifts and talents. I think that's an important thing; really important."

## YOUTH INTERESTS

*Diverse Programming*
- More art-based activities & theatre skills for youth
- Non-sports programing, such as photography and music
- Regional sports tournaments & sports diversity in rural areas
- More culture-specific events, such as Indigenous hand games
- Increased events & services specifically for families, newcomers, single moms, and youth experiencing homelessness

*More Recreation Opportunities*
- Arcade, bowling alley, laser tag
- Skate, trampoline, water parks
- Places for youth to listen to live music and participate
- Places for sports and fitness, especially in rural areas

*More Shopping/Dining Options*
- Costco, Dollarama, Michaels, Walmart Supercentre, Forever 21
- A new mall; fewer franchises

*Employment*
- More babysitting opportunities
- More employment opportunities, including in rural areas year-round

# MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

"Not being heard all your life and now being heard, it's a relief. You're finally being heard; you're finally being recognized. That's a big step into being an adult." *(age 22)*

# WHY ENGAGE

Moving from childhood to being a youth is increasingly understood as a critical time period developmentally. Youth are forging new connections with peers and adults; and in the process exploring social boundaries and identities, and seeking to gain and express more autonomy and a sense of belonging.[32] In supporting youth, the study found that across Wood Buffalo, social service organizations, governance bodies, and educational institutions are strong in not only promoting the value of youth participation as a key aspect of youth development, but as an inherent right (for example, the *RMWB 2018-2021 Strategic Plan* lists engaging youth as a priority initiative).[33]

Creating and sustaining meaningful youth engagement can be a complex proposal, especially when such engagement is understood as youth having: 1) the "right to express their views and have them given weight," 2) the "freedom of expression, association, or religion," and 3) the "right to information."[32] For instance, despite the explicit intention for greater youth engagement in the Wood Buffalo region, youth revealed in the #YouthVoicesWB study that they often felt unheard or unseen by people in power; or unaware how to connect their views to program or policy decisions.

"Youth are "the population of today and the families of tomorrow." *(age 16)*

Youth are often on the receiving end of multiple government and social services—including after a disaster—in areas such as healthcare, education, recreation, and transportation. They are affected by decisions on the environment, climate, housing, employment, and more. As citizens, youth have a right to hold decision makers to account in ensuring those services sufficiently help them develop in ways that are safe, secure, and beneficial. Youth also offer unique and innovative ideas that can help communities' recover, reduce disaster risk, and build back better. Youth in the study were clear in why they wanted their opinions valued. Many expressed that because of their age, they see themselves as the population who will live the longest with decisions being made now, as two youth explained: "The adults that control the actions that they take, that can only affect them for a short amount of time" (age 16). "We are the next generation. We have ideas to be able to make it more better than adults who have been here for a while if it's certain things that deal with the youth" (age 16).

Youth are "the future. They're going to be the next adults." *(age 22)*

Youth shared how their views might differ from adults, as one said: Youth "got a fresher, more naïver version, which I think is good. Because

sometimes you need to be a little naïve to get places; like over-thinking is one thing, and then there's not over-thinking" (age 20). Another explained that youth are "what this city is mainly taken up of… from the people that came in the last couple years to work in the oil sands and everything… The Mayor or anybody really they should especially be listening to the kids (age 16).

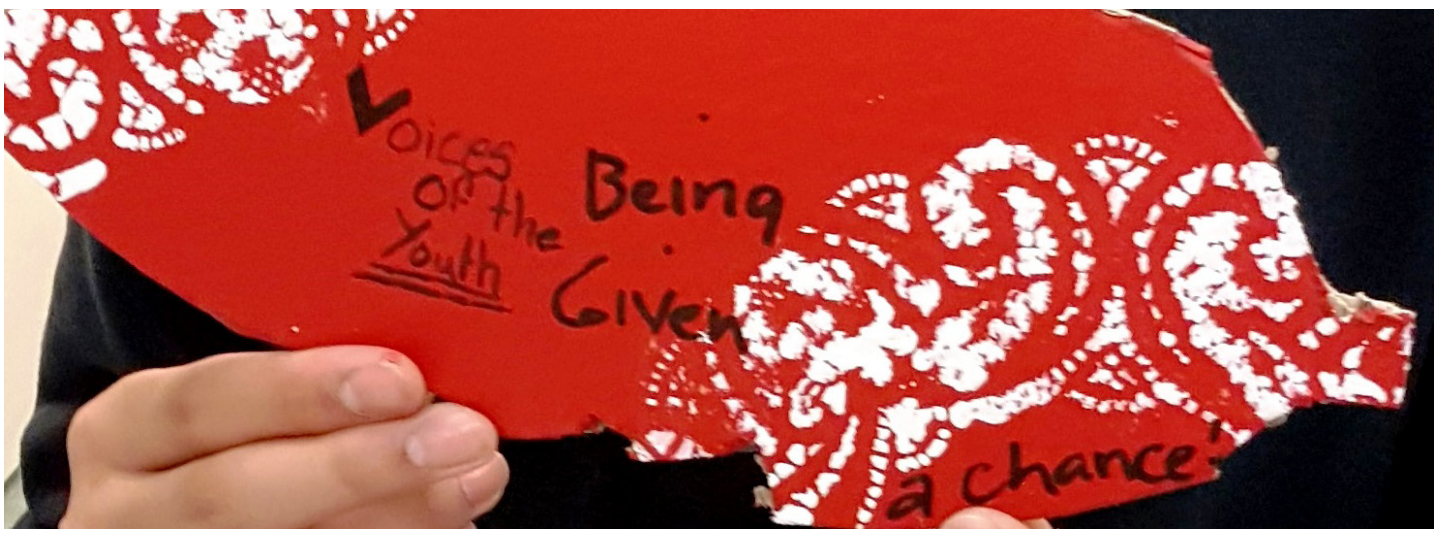
"We believe that the youth have a lot of great and innovative ideas. We want the policymakers to listen to those voices. Not only is it important because they're citizens, but they also have these amazing insights that maybe adults don't usually have." *(age 17)*

*Autumn, Reanna, and Alexis pose for a photo taken at the 2017 Fort McKay First Nation PhotoVoice workshop as part of #YouthVoicesWB.*

Youth offered personal views about why they should be listened to as the "future leaders," including "I'm awesome," "I have things to say," "'cuz I'm a beautiful person," "because I have knowledge as well," "everyone matters," and "my ideas count" (ages 14-18).

Applying youth viewpoints and ideas to recovery, rebuilding, and risk reduction efforts in a disaster-affected community has multiple benefits for youth in increasing confidence, strengthening peer groups, and fostering a sense of belonging.[34] It can also help youth and their communities not only be better prepared for future threats, but better able to identify and enact short- and long-term solutions .

"Youth should have their ideas at least heard, taken into perspective, and be taken seriously." *(age 16)*



"I feel as if the youth [voice] isn't always heard. When we do attend conferences and meetings and all these different things, [adults] have a tendency of asking us the same questions, but they never really give us any results. So when you go to these kinds of events and you want to make a change and you have this kind of fire that you want to make a change in the community and they don't really take your ideas, the fire fades. [They should] just reach out more in a more productive way instead of just dragging us and bribing us with pizza and stuffing us in a room for two hours and not really listening to what we have to say; because that's not going to make us feel as if you actually kind of care. I feel really strongly about that" *(Pamela, age 16)*. Watch her talk on youth voice at www.facebook.com/YouthVoicesWB/videos/504982143197376.

# HOW TO ENGAGE

In urban, rural, and Indigenous communities across Wood Buffalo, youth are active through youth centres and hubs, faith-based youth groups, sports, after-school programs, events, dinners, arts, theatre, cultural activities, and more. However, as the #YouthVoicesWB study shows, youth want more opportunities to contribute to and influence decisions that directly and indirectly affect them. But how do groups go about reaching all youth, so those who have traditionally been the least heard have opportunities to influence programs and policies that affect them? And how can efforts reach youth who chose not to participate or disengage?

The study found that youth responded most when activities and events were easily accessible and fit into the local culture and context; where they could have fun, connect with friends, be authentic, be creative, learn new skills, and feel a sense of belonging. Additionally, successful activities often worked through Youth-Adult Partnerships (Y-APs); and in ways that lowered barriers for youth participation. Examples included providing transportation for rural youth, offering free or cheaper transport, incorporating activities into summer work programs, scheduling events when all youth can attend, providing funding, having events in nature connected to tradition and history, creating activities that respond to diverse youth interests, personally inviting youth, and including youth in decisions.

"A lot of people don't want to stay here because nothing changes. If you give us the time and the ability to want to change some things that will make life better for us, I can promise you more people will want to stay and live here." *(age 16)*

The specifics of how adults engage youth is important, as described by a young person holding a youth worker role: "You make yourself available and nothing happens. It's so easy to be like, 'They don't care! I'm out!' But that's totally not the case. It's like cultivating relationships and showing over time that it's safe for them to talk to you; being persistent and being always available… Down the road where it's just a small conversation off to the side is where they share something big with you and that's so important. We just need to be willing to take the time" (age 21).

These observations highlight the commitment, resources, and energy required to engage youth. Fostering meaningful participation takes time, respect, consideration of difference, and a willingness to listen and be led by youth in the design of strategies and programs that support: 1) diverse activities for youths' unique interests, cultures, and ways of being; 2) spaces where youth can feel safe, resilient, and a sense of belonging; and 3) on-going Youth-Adult Partnerships.

# YOUTH & THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE

An intention of the *Youth Voices Rising* project was to raise the voice of youth through them expressing their ideas for even better communities post-disaster. The project did this by exploring and showcasing youth perspectives in creative ways through the #YouthVoicesWB campaign. With an emphasis on Youth-Adult Partnerships that can connect youth ideas to action, the YVR project promoted that merely creating opportunities alone for youth voices to contribute is rarely enough. Meaningful participation recognizes youth as partners in planning for their own wellbeing.[32] It is active, multidimensional, builds agency, and operates through differing degrees of involvement and influence including consultative, collaborative, and youth-led activities.[34]

Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*[35] articulates that youth expressing and having their views be valued is an inherent right. Research points to four interrelated aspects of meaningful participation for realizing this right where youth are supported in having a *voice* for expression through gaining knowledge, confidence, and agency; *space* to express their views, an *audience* to respectfully listen to and value youth voice; and the chance for youth voice to *influence* decisions (see below).[36] In hearing from Wood Buffalo youth, they offered multiple ideas for how they wanted to be engaged, ranging from informed consultation (that includes feedback loops rather than extractive sessions) to youth-led initiatives supported by adult mentors to creative art activities.

Youth often connected the value of expressing their views creatively to their wellbeing and recovery. For instance, a youth in the study explained how writing and performing music helped them overcome depression. They said that having more creative opportunities available could result in youth feeling "a lot more better, a lot less suicidal" and contribute to "a lot less cutting, a lot less people being in high schools" thinking "why is this so crazy?" (age 18).

Other youth saw value in Youth-Adult Partnerships. Mariam represented #YouthVoicesWB at the 2017 Fort McMurray Human Rights Conference, and said: "Youth are an integral part of society. Empowerment is a journey with many stakeholders. Each stage requires mentoring and support from friends and leaders" (age 14). She added:

"Mentorship and discussion will allow you to not only educate youth, but you will also learn we have a lot to share."

The study highlights that youth want and need reasons to engage that have meaning to them. They also desire pathways that ensure their voices can be heard, which often involves working alongside supportive adults. Effective Y-APs position youth and adults as equal partners in addressing issues of concern. In this way, youth and adults work together to increase youths' influence on programs and policies that directly and indirectly affect them and their communities.

*CONSULTATION - COLLABORATION - YOUTH-LED*

**VOICE**
Agency to express views

**SPACE**
Ability to express views

**AUDIENCE**
Views listened to and valued

**INFLUENCE**
Views effectively acted upon

*Adaptation of elements Lundy identifies as required for meaningful youth participation.*[36]

MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

Supporting youths' *right to be heard* as engaged citizens is more than providing one-off events for them to express their views. Rather, the act of *being heard* is a starting point for respectful and influential exchanges between youth and adults on how programs and policies can be developed and implemented to directly benefit youth.[32]

# YOUTH & DISASTER RISK

## "There should be more discussion on what steps need to be taken to be safe if an event like this were to happen again." *(age 14)*

For reducing future risks and adverse impacts of disasters on youth in Wood Buffalo, it's vital all youth can access the knowledge and skills they need to effectively prepare for such events (from building emergency kits and disaster plans to accessing first aid training). Ensuring safety, security, good health, and wellbeing, however, requires more than preventative measures. It also requires understanding and developing Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) solutions from a youth perspective. This means recognizing and capitalizing on youth capacities to contribute and initiate DRR actions alongside supportive adults able to contribute resources, access to networks and decision makers, and the integration of diverse perspectives and expertise.[37]

## Youth "need unity and being there for each other. And I think that goes for any kind of disaster not just wildfire, just… any hardships that happen in life; having people to be there for you." *(age 18)*

After the 2016 Horse River wildfire disaster, youth in the study said they struggled most with the sudden loss of friendships due to relocation, disruption that affected their education, higher instances of drug abuse and violence in their communities, problems accessing places of fun and refuge, anxiety and depression resulting from the fire evacuation and re-entry experiences, and the unease caused by ongoing disruption and change. Youth were also pillars of strength, supporting each other and their families through tough times.

Being able to add their own solutions to the unique challenges youth face post-disaster can contribute to reducing disaster risk as youth develop awareness, confidence, agency, and the capacities to problem solve in future times of loss and change. For the Wood Buffalo region, more inclusive decisions mean more inclusive policies and plans. With youth as active participants and leaders in DRR planning and activities, their priorities can be better understood and addressed for safer, more resilient communities.

### DISASTER RISK REDUCTION, RESILIENCE, & INDIGENOUS YOUTH VOICE

Indigenous youth have much to contribute in the area of DRR and resilience-building through their strong connection to culture, tradition, heritage, language, land, and environmental stewardship. Hearing, respecting, and responding to Indigenous youth concerns and ideas can strengthen youth programming, self-determination, and reconciliation as called for by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.[38] It also supports the rights of youth to advance their economic and social conditions, as promoted in the *United Nations Declaration of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)*,[39] which Canada adopted in 2016. Importantly, including Indigenous youth voice in local disaster recovery and risk reduction planning[40] helps ensure decisions align with the ways Indigenous youth experience and envision their world as the next generation of adult community members and leaders in Wood Buffalo.

*ReShauna performs a Jingle Dress Dance in Janvier.*

*Art drawn by a youth for #YouthVoicesWB.*

*Photo art created by Richelle at a Fort McKay photo workshop.*

# CALL TO ACTION

The *Youth Voice & Vision in Wood Buffalo* report offers insight into youth ideas for even better communities; and promotes meaningful engagement in decisions that affect youth as they strengthen their resilience post-disaster. It also offers key questions based on learnings from #YouthVoicesWB to ensure youth voice is shared, heard, valued, and responded to.

## 01 How can we support youth to lead in their recovery?

For some people, recovering from a disaster event can be a long-term and even lifetime process. It is important to listen to and involve disaster-affected youth early in recovery planning; to meaningfully include youth in decisions that will affect them and their communities in the long-term; and to support youths' capacities to contribute to shaping the new realities of a post-disaster community.

## 02 How can we build youth leadership for reducing disaster risk?

Keeping youth safe and able to manage future disasters requires not only involving them in efforts that lower disaster risk (such as developing youth-friendly emergency plans), but strengthening their capacities to adapt to and manage change, adversity, and situations that threaten their wellbeing (be it violence, self-harm, bullying, racism, etc.).

## 03 How can we strengthen our Youth-Adult Partnerships?

Creating a supportive environment that provides youth with opportunities to develop as leaders and citizens strengthens their individual agency and their capacity to investigate, navigate, reimagine, and shape the world in which they live.

## 04 How can we better recognize youth diversity and inclusion?

A community's youth population is diverse. Youth participation in post-disaster decisions requires a *whole-of-society* approach that not only includes youth as key stakeholders, but seeks to support and engage the strengths of youth diversity through inclusive representation and participation. It also requires actions that can minimize or eliminate barriers to inclusion based on gender, ability, race, culture, ethnicity, socio-economic status, age, sexual orientation, language, location, access, experience, or interests.

## 05 How can we ensure meaningful youth engagement?

Youth want to feel they belong, have a purpose, and can contribute. Meaningful youth engagement requires a consideration of the "how," "why," "what," and "where" of participation. It requires partnering with youth to understand how they want to be engaged online and offline, what motivates and interests them, and what strengths, skills, and resources they have, want, or need to develop so they can fully participate and contribute.

*Mariam and Zoe craft a photo message for #YouthVoicesWB.*

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report celebrates the active participation, talents, enthusiasm, and insight of the 350+ youth who connected with the #YouthVoicesWB campaign in multiple ways. Our hope is that it not only authentically shares and promotes their viewpoints, but prompts collaborative action between youth and adults for even more resilient communities. We dedicate the report to all Wood Buffalo youth.

We also acknowledge the passion of Dr. Tamara Plush who worked closely with youth and regional partners in exploring and championing youth voice as the ResiliencebyDesign Lab Lead of the *Youth Voices Rising* project and *Youth Vision and Voice* report. We especially thank Dr. Robin Cox, RbD Lab Director and Professor of the Masters in Disaster and Emergency Management program in the School of Humanitarian Studies at RRU, for her guidance and expertise in the area of youth, disasters, recovery, resilience, arts, and Creative Action Research.

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See the youth content at www.facebook.com/YouthVoicesWB and www.instagram.com/youthvoiceswb. Read more about the *Youth Voices Rising* project and access publications at:

www.resiliencebydesign.com/yvr

## CHANGE

The smoke clears the skies;
Birds are flying high.
Small paws make prints in the coals.
The river keeps running,
singing of what's coming.
It's time to return wandering souls.
'Cause there's strength in waiting.
Together we're making a change.
Yeah, there's gonna be change.

*Listen to "Change" by Willi and Genoveve at www.thedistrictstudio.ca/youthvoiceswb.html.*

# ENDNOTES

1 The campaign targeted youth age 14-24, in reference to the age of youth as defined by United Nations, 2018, and inclusive of one year younger. See: United Nations (2018) Definition of Youth at www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf.
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3 RMWB (2015). *The Municipal Census 2015* report, Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, Gordon and Associates, and the City of Airdrie. A 2015 municipal census reported that youth age 15-24 made up nearly 12 percent of the Wood Buffalo population. Thus, it is estimated that nearly 10,000 of the 88,000 evacuees would be in this age range.
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*Youth participate in #YouthVoicesWB activities across the Wood Buffalo region (Photos by RbD Lab, youth of Fort McKay, and Azaria Photography).*

# Be Ready: Emergency Preparedness and Recovery

Youth resilience in facing or recovering from disaster has many dimensions. One is being prepared for future disasters and emergencies. Here are a some ideas to help you prepare, as shared by the Canadian Red Cross at www.redcross.ca/how-we-help/emergencies-and-disasters-in-canada/be-ready-emergency-preparedness-and-recovery.

## MAKE AN EMERGENCY PLAN

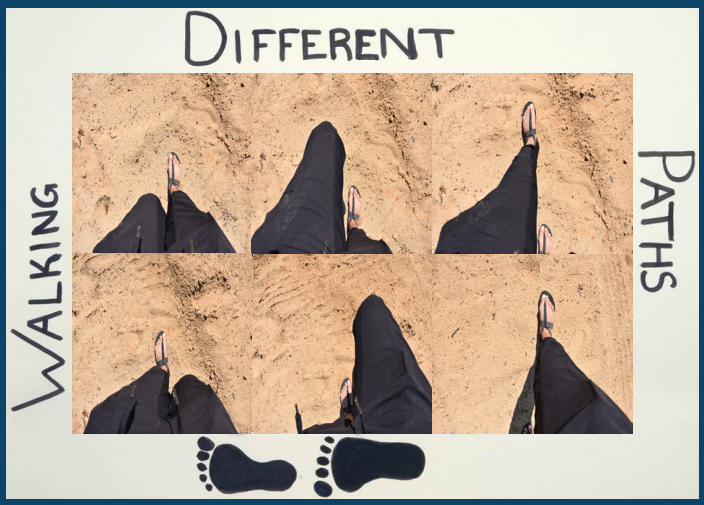
It's important to ensure that the entire family is prepared and informed in the event of a disaster or emergency.

- Determine the best ways to evacuate your home in case of an emergency such as a home fire.
- Make sure adults and youth know where fire extinguishers, water, electric and gas utilities are located.
- Make sure everyone in the house knows the location of your emergency kit.
- Establish a safe place for your family to meet outside your home and outside your neighbourhood.
- Include a plan for evacuating your pets.
- Practice your evacuation plan frequently.
- If you can't evacuate your home, prepare to be self-sufficient in your home for 72 hours (or seven to 10 days in a health emergency).
- If a member of your family has special needs that would require extra assistance, include those details into your family emergency plan and emergency kit.
- Know the plans for your workplace, school, community or centre, etc. if a disaster happens when not at home.

## ESSENTIAL ITEMS FOR EMERGENCY KIT

- Water and food (non-perishable) and manual can opener
- Special needs such as medications, baby needs, extra glasses, etc.
- Important family documents (e.g., copies of birth certificates, passports, licenses, wills, insurance, etc.)
- Crank or battery-operated flashlight, with extra batteries
- Battery-operated or crank radio
- Extra keys, for your house and car
- First aid kit and a copy of your emergency plan
- Cash in small bills and coins
- Personal hygiene items
- Pet food and pet medication

ADDITIONAL ITEMS TO CONSIDER: Change of clothing and footwear for each person, plastic sheeting, scissors and a pocket knife, whistle, hand sanitizer, pet food and pet medication, garbage bags and twist ties, toilet paper, multi-tool or basic tools (e.g., hammer, wrench, screwdriver etc.), duct tape, and a sleeping bag or warm blanket for each member of your household.




## WALKING DIFFERENT PATHS

"We all have different paths we walk; a different path most days, new trails, or the same old one. But it's fine to walk any of them because it's your choice. Don't make anyone tell you different. You are your own person and you make your own decisions. There may be challenging obstacles, but these obstacles do not block the path. They are the path and this twisting path is a journey, but one day you will find the path gets easier and easier day by day. It really just takes time to figure out what makes you really happy and complete and your path so it will get untwisted. You have to do what is right for you; no one walks in your shoes." *(Brina, age 17; Chipewyan Prairie Dene First Nation photo workshop)*

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