



YSM

YONGE STREET MISSION

**ENDING CHRONIC
POVERTY**

Together, we are the solution

Close your eyes.

Take a moment and bring to mind a person, place or thing that helped to mould you into who you are today. What do you see? Where are you? Who is there with you?

For most of us, pausing to recall our personal journey involves the right combination of people, support networks and opportunities presented to us in moments and ways that worked to propel our lives forward and help form our future.

Now imagine if those people, places or things hadn't been there. How would your story look instead?

Consider how your story would change if your family's economic circumstances forced you to choose between the things you wanted and the things you needed, just to survive. Or, if your family immigrated to a country where you had to learn a new language and build a support network from scratch. What if a traumatic life event got in the way of your plans and forced your whole world and outlook to change in an instant?

Where would you be today?

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UNDERSTANDING POVERTY IN TORONTO

When reflecting upon your personal story, it's likely easy to see how a variety of circumstances played a role in your journey to stability or success. It could be the family into which you were born, or the country in which you grew up, or the mentor, teacher or coach who took you under their wing and taught you to believe in yourself. One thing is certain: you didn't do it alone.

For many of the people served by YSM, their stories are often missing the very thing that bolstered our progress – the people, places and things that helped us achieve our goals and aspirations. As you read this, thousands of low-income Torontonians are struggling to survive, lacking many of the basic things we take for granted while facing challenges that were not experienced by people in decades past. Today, families who are struggling to make ends meet are navigating an outdated social system that has resulted in lacking affordable/appropriate¹ housing and meaningful jobs with benefits² in addition to a rising cost of living that is borne disproportionately by those in greatest need³. Today's reality for struggling neighbours has sadly shifted focus from working to create a better future to working to simply survive⁴.

Modern society and an antiquated social welfare system have also played a role in isolating our low-income neighbours. We assume that “the system” is looking after people taking for granted the rapid changes happening all around us and how the rising cost of living may be impacting individuals as well as the system designed, in theory, to support them. While social services play a vital role in providing a solution, they cannot carry the ever-growing burden alone. The time has come to take a long hard look at the root and systemic causes of poverty in Toronto today. And for all of us to work *together* to address them.

YSM's goal is to end chronic poverty in Toronto in this generation – that is, eliminate **the type of poverty that results from systemic barriers at the root of poverty today.**

Now in the sixth year of our strategic plan aimed at eradicating chronic poverty in our city, we are well on our way to achieving our aspirational goal. Learn more, and discover how you can get involved.

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1. Toronto is the most expensive major city in the country in which to live, and critical costs that are disproportionately born by those in low income, including newcomers, youth, and racialized populations, are growing much faster than overall inflation, such as rent, transit, child care, and tuition. (Source: <https://torontofoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/VitalSigns2019.pdf> Pg.12)
 2. Over the last decade, temporary jobs grew five times faster than permanent jobs, self-employment grew three times faster than permanent jobs, and part-time work grew two times faster than full-time jobs. Immigrants, racialized populations, and newcomers disproportionately work in these more precarious jobs, contributing to a lack of income growth for these populations over the last 30 years. <https://torontofoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/VitalSigns2019.pdf> Pg.13
 3. Toronto has the highest child-care costs in the country, presenting huge barriers for parents to go back to work and contributing to high child poverty, particularly among newcomers. <https://torontofoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/VitalSigns2019.pdf> Pg.13
 4. Among Toronto's food bank clients, 43% earn minimum wage or less and of those working, 67% are working in precarious part-time, temporary or contract positions, with 73% unable to access any dental, medical or retirement benefits. <https://www.dailybread.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Whos-Hungry-Report-2020.pdf>[AS1]

YSM AS A STARTING POINT

The alleviation of chronic poverty in Toronto today is complex, impacting the lives of almost 500,000 community members struggling to survive, raise their families and realize their goals. They include men, women and children who want greater safety in their neighbourhood and access to networks and economic opportunities that will move them forward. While such things as a safe neighbourhood, affordable childcare close to home, meaningful work with benefits or training and advancement opportunities are things we might take for granted, they pose barriers for those experiencing poverty in our city who find them to be out of their reach.

Those who YSM serves every day come to us seeking means to make their lives better – through services to bridge immediate gaps – yet sadly and all too often they find themselves continuously facing challenges that seem impossible to overcome.

At YSM, the starting point in our goal to ending chronic poverty is how we serve low-income and struggling people in our community through our ***RISE Model of Care**, which meets an individual *where they're at*, by providing immediate relief services as an entry point to our more comprehensive supports and services. We also continually evaluate the services we offer to determine what is working – and what isn't – in order to intentionally focus on which programs are making the biggest impact. We even use a measurement and evaluation tool we created, called TIMES™, to make sure community members are advancing with positive moves forward toward establishing stability and reaching their goals.



RISE Model

Respond

YSM provides no-cost, low barrier access to urgent support services, including meals, food bank, warm clothing, hygiene kits, walk-in counselling and emergency mental health interventions, and emergency housing supports - all in a welcoming and inclusive environment.

Invite

Aimed at gently introducing individuals to engage more deeply in our programs and services through relationship and trust building, YSM offers workshops and programs on mental health, addictions and anger management, financial literacy, goal setting, self-esteem, collaboration and teamwork, establishing boundaries, and more.

Support

When ready, wrap-around care management is available for individuals and families longing to overcome the barriers keeping them in crisis through individualized goal setting, creating a learning plan, introduction to a mentor, specific “hard skills” training to achieve goals, employment readiness, and more.

Engage

Once stabilized, we invite community members to step out into their local areas of influence by entering the workforce, securing stable housing, volunteering in the community, becoming community influencers, leaders and mentors for others in need.

YSM IS ONE PART OF A COMPLEX SOLUTION

Meet Steve. He and his wife Mara work to support their growing family. They each have minimum wage jobs to help pay for their \$1400/month, one-bedroom apartment in Toronto. Every dollar they earn is spoken for, from rent, food and bills to after school care and their TTC passes. They put in as many shifts as possible to make ends meet and have a little over at the end of the month to put into savings. While they do not want to rely on a food bank to put food on the table, there are months where that is the only option for them. They don't want their children to miss out on school field trips and birthday parties because they can't afford these extra expenses.

Steve is struggling with some health issues but he can't afford to take any days off to deal with them. He is now living with chronic pain which is impacting his ability to perform his best at work. This adds more stress to the situation and is starting to take a toll on his mental health. Thankfully, YSM has a walk-in mental health program that he can access free of charge and it's helping him get through the day, but it's not enough to change his situation. He's thought of getting a new job, one with more benefits and sick days, but he hasn't got the time to search for one and, quite frankly, it isn't going to solve the bigger issue – life is getting more and more expensive. Steve and Mara need to work harder to just have the basic things they are already working hard to maintain. Steve keeps thinking of his kids. What can he do today to create a better future for them? He feels stuck and the truth is, he is.

Toronto is one of Canada's wealthiest, resource-rich cities filled with the people, places and things needed to create the changes necessary to eradicate chronic poverty for people like Steve and Mara. **YSM's plan invites all of us to the table to become part of the solution.**



Our Strategic Milestones for the Next Five Years

YSM's RISE Model of Care is working to move people forward in their lives but we have learned over the decades that social services alone are not the ultimate solution to poverty we are seeking. As the gap between rich and poor grows in our city, we know we need to do much more. At YSM we believe it will take the hands, minds and hearts of many individuals and agencies in our city to tackle the barriers that prevent people from exiting poverty. From governments to agencies, business leaders to everyday people like you and me, the solution lies with all of us – *the people* – offering the resources we have – *places or things* – which will make the needed difference to really change people's lives and help build their futures.

For the past five years, YSM has been building relationships with industry partners who have already joined us on this journey. We have taken the time to build the tools required to unite us in our work and begin sharing common goals. Looking forward, the next five years will build on our early work towards achieving the next four *strategic milestones:

- 1.** The development of a comprehensive network of relief service providers to provide a full complement of relief services for each population group disproportionately impacted by poverty in Toronto.
- 2.** The adoption and sharing of YSM's measurement and evaluation tool, TIMES™, to better understand how holistic care supports meaningful income pathways for each population group disproportionately impacted by poverty in Toronto.
- 3.** Increase the capacity of YSM's backbone support team, and share the tools needed to successfully achieve a city-wide network working toward common poverty reduction goals.
- 4.** The advancement of 2-3 advocacy initiatives, in partnership with others, to substantially improve people's ability to move out of poverty, especially as we transition out of COVID and aim to build our city back better.

YSM's strategic milestones are designed to inspire collaboration across our city to combine the efforts of all to serve and support people like Steve and Mara. It begins by listening to the very people impacted by barriers and challenges out of their control and working together to find creative ways to overcome them.

*These strategic milestones were established by our board of directors before the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic. While they haven't changed, the Pandemic may impact our ability to fully deliver on each of these goals in this 5-year period.

WE CAN'T WAIT FOR CHANGE. ACTION IS NEEDED TODAY.

While many of the struggles facing people in our community are the result of broken systems and policies, there are practical ways in which we can creatively support people today while we tackle the root and systemic causes. People like Steve and Mara can't wait for the system to change. They need immediate help now. Their situation is real and without a practical solution today, their future will only get more difficult.

With our firm belief that collective action is a vital part of the solution to poverty, YSM formally established its Community Development program in 2016. For the past 5 years, we have brought engagement and collaboration to life in Toronto's Regent Park area.

Practical Solutions Making A Difference Right Now

Established in 2005, the city's strategic vision for Regent Park was to create a "diverse, mixed-income community in an open and integrated neighbourhood." The intention was to evolve a cohesive community of both market-rate and low-income residents, blurring the lines between the socio-economic differences existing between them. In September 2007, City Council adopted the Regent Park Social Development Plan (SDP), including 75 recommendations that provided a plan of action for managing the proposed changes. The plan was revised in 2019, based on the feedback from residents who had been living through the redevelopment of their neighbourhood in real-time. Their lived experience led to the development of four main areas that needed focus: Community Safety, Employment and Economic Development, Community Building and Communication.*

With YSM's Community Development team firmly planted in the neighbourhood, they were in a position to help residents and stakeholders dig into these focus areas. The experiences of Regent Park residents over the previous 12 years made it clear that revitalizing a neighbourhood would take the hands and hearts of many diverse people and groups working together. Engaged residents and agencies in the community began to convene to understand the existing talents, assets and opportunities that exist in the community, and began working to build the relationships necessary to unite these groups and bring the vision for Regent Park to life.

With this focused approach, caring members of the surrounding community soon became more aware of the struggles facing their low-income neighbours. Like Steve and Mara, many residents were concerned with the rising cost of living, exacerbated by low wage jobs, minimum benefits and long commute times.

This begged the question: despite the many employment support services and social programs available in the neighbourhood, why were residents continuing to struggle financially? While new businesses were popping up in Regent Park every day, it became apparent that Regent Park residents were not connecting with them. It was important to understand why not. In seeking to understand the gaps and barriers facing people in the community, YSM's Community Development team aimed to get to the root of the problem.



The Employment and Economic development working group* was established and a network of support, including the needed people, places and things, emerged.

The *people* included diverse resident volunteers, community agencies (including but not limited to YSM), and local business leaders. The *places* included safe public spaces for meetings provided for free by YSM and others. The *things* included the assets and expertise which the involved people and places could offer to help this diverse group of neighbours collaborate and seek out viable solutions. Positive outcomes have now emerged from this diverse group of caring individuals coming together.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN FOCUS AREAS*

COMMUNITY SAFETY:

To create the reality and the positive image that Regent Park is a safe space for everybody.

EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:

To increase sustainable employment rates and entrepreneurial opportunities for residents.

COMMUNITY BUILDING:

To create accessible informal and formal spaces, events and groups that bring residents together by removing social and physical barriers; build bridges between market and Toronto Community Housing residents, as well as between residents and agencies/institutions.

COMMUNICATION:

To make information easily accessible for everyone in the community.



THE SOLUTION: PEOPLE, PLACES AND THINGS

Murwan is a Toronto Community Housing resident of Regent Park. A natural leader, Murwan has a deep understanding and love for his growing community. He was concerned about the safety of the neighbourhood and created a local business with a social purpose – training local youth, women and newcomers for careers in security services.

Murwan met Gail, a market-rate resident in Regent Park and the owner of an alcohol free pop-up, home-based bar in Regent Park. Gail is an active volunteer who finds ways to give her time where it best matches her skills and passions.

Murwan and Gail met YSM's Paula Garcia, the manager of Community Development whose job is to bring people in the neighbourhood together with a shared purpose. Together they co-chair the Employment and Economic Development Working Group. Their work began by identifying the businesses and employment opportunities that were popping up in the revitalized Regent Park *and the reasons why residents were not connecting to them*. Barriers to employment bubbled to the surface: English as a second language, lack of training, racism and Islamophobia, a lack of computer skills and even ageism were all identified as barriers facing Regent Park residents when seeking meaningful employment.

The data they collected revealed many of the barriers facing their community could be easily removed, with the right people, places and things built into the solution. This led to the working group's next steps: inviting neighbourhood agencies and community stakeholders to be part of the solution - to design the right programs and create partnerships to break down barriers to employment and economic development opportunities for all. They are now:

- Recruiting volunteers willing to spend time with newcomers to help strengthen their English-language skills
- Inspiring community business leaders willing to help residents apply for available jobs, providing resume writing support and help filling out complicated applications
- Inviting skilled neighbours to help write grant proposals for training and professional development workshops
- Encouraging local agencies to create workshops and programming intentionally designed to address the specific barriers identified by the residents (as opposed to offering programs they believe to be helpful).

Today, residents are connecting with the Employment and Economic Development Working Group to get help navigating the complex landscape of employment services with greater success and positive outcomes than if they were doing it alone. They have the people, places and things they need to move their lives forward.

“YSM’s involvement has been one of the best across the board - I don’t say that lightly. They understand the nature of the work and their role in supporting it. I got the chance to learn from someone who’s a professional at this kind of community work.” – Murwan

INVEST IN THIS SOLUTION

Anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Gail and Murwan are proof that this is true. Gail and Murwan are engaged volunteers but with that comes risk. As with any volunteer-led initiative, there is always a chance of turnover and a lack of reliable resources that can stall good work in advancing.

Each year, philanthropic investments fuel YSM’s RISE Model of Care, changing lives and building community. Our donors and funders enable our Community Development Team to be a steady backbone in the community working to:

- **Identify community leaders like Gail and Murwan**, with the desire and ability to be the resident voice(s) at the table and provide coaching and mentoring to build their skills, confidence and effectiveness over time.
- **Provide training and development opportunities** to residents, preparing them to be their own advocates for change, be it at the local or municipal level.
- **Support the entrepreneurial aspirations of residents** by providing business mentorship, coaching, skills development and social enterprise opportunities for members of the community.
- **Collaborate with other community-based agencies** to adapt programming to meet the specific needs of people in their specific catchment area.
- **Connect residents from across the neighbourhood** with skills and assets to share, facilitating introductions, connections and opportunities to create social cohesion and strong networks.

Without such backbone support, volunteer-driven initiatives can become vulnerable and often not meet their goals. Life goes on as usual and vulnerable neighbours do not access the real support that they need, allowing the cycle of chronic poverty to continue.

I know firsthand how YSM is supporting advocacy and economic groups in my neighbourhood. I see the focused partnerships YSM is building between agencies, city services, and residents. And I’ve come to believe in the power of connected communities. That’s why I’m also a donor.

– Mary H., resident of Regent Park

JOIN US: THE SOLUTION TO POVERTY IS COMMUNITY

Everyone across our city has the ability to become the person, provide the space or offer the thing that can contribute to the practical solutions that are working to change the lives and futures of people like Steve, Mara, Gail and Murwan. Here are a few ways you can take action today.

Watch a YSM Webinar and learn more about the barriers facing vulnerable Torontonians today.

Donate your time, your professional skills or your financial resources to advance our important community building work.

Get to know your neighbours. Visit your local community centre. Take the time to understand the unique challenges facing people in your community.

Call us! Let us know what you have learned and / or what you have to give and we'll try our best to mobilize you in the way which will help you make the biggest impact.



We invite you to consider joining us in building stronger communities by investing in YSM's life-changing work today.

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