

CREation Grant

Youth Led / Dirigé par des Jeunes*

Please briefly explain how your project and group are youth-led. (youth defined as aged 15-29) (3-4 sentences)

Our current Board of Directors/Community Council has a member who leads our Youth Council. This young man is 18 years old and working on finishing his last semester of high school. He has spearheaded this initiative by designing programming split into two age groups, one group for youth under 19 and another for 20-29 years of age.

Tell us about your group / Parlez-nous de votre groupe*

When was your group formed? What projects/work have you done in the past? If you are a newer group, tell us about the skill set and experience of individual members.

Our registered non-profit organization went live on April 01, 2024. Our First Council was officially formed in May, and soon after, we recruited Nathaniel Thompson to lead the Youth Council.

Nathaniel formed the Youth Council and has been granted creative freedom to build it as he and the youth themselves see fit as he is active within the community and his school board. He had created an Indigenous youth group to bring together youth from his school and throughout the community. He is also actively involved as a student rep on the FNMI Education Council for the Catholic Board of Education. For a young man of his age, he is experienced in event planning and fundraising.

Randy Freese, one of our founders, has previously created programming as a music-based deterrent from crime and recidivism that was youth-oriented, and there was hope that one day, it would be youth-led as well.

Our program's initial participant began the intake process while awaiting trial on house arrest. He has been used as our case study as we followed and kept in contact with him throughout his court process, sentencing, parole, and to the current day. With help from our letter writing to the parole board, he was able to secure an early release to a halfway house, secure employment, and soon after, an apartment to live in upon his final release. Throughout this time, we maintained contact with regularly scheduled meetings that would not interfere with his requirements and restrictions of parole and curfews. He continued to write and create music with some guidance and development. However, time and distance did not allow him to get into the studio until after his final release.

This non-profit is a branch of Freeze Flame Productions Inc., a for-profit business since 2006. This non-profit has been created to include a more overarching yet still Indigenous worldview and lens. During the mid-2000s, with the implementation of the Youth Criminal Justice Act, Freeze Flame introduced programming that took into account the long-term vision and needs for community supervision that was lacking from YCJA legislation. This programming would help Probation & Parole Officers who were already overburdened.

Participant Reach / Accès aux participants*

Please specify how many Indigenous youth participants (aged 15-29) you expect your project will reach.

Throughout our region, and further beyond in Southern Ontario to begin, we hope to engage upwards of 2450 youth over the next few years. We will be impacting these youth by having them serve on our Youth Council and by being program participants. Outreach for the programming would be done through visits and speaking opportunities to group homes and other institutions throughout Southern Ontario.

Non-Indigenous Youth / Jeunes non autochtones

If you are working with non-Indigenous please specify how many non-Indigenous youth participants (aged 15-29) you expect your project will reach.

We are prepared to take in 50 non-Indigenous youth aged 15-29.

Initially, our programming plan is meant to engage Indigenous youth. As the program and involvement increase, there will be an application process for non-Indigenous youth going through similar issues.

Non-Indigenous Youth Identities / Jeunes non autochtones identités

What will be the identities of the other non-indigenous youth? For example: newcomer youth, Black youth and POC youth

Initially, our programming plan is to engage Indigenous and “othered” youth from the BIPOC communities. We do understand the need within the larger BIPOC communities and many families are also mixed, including these focus groups.

Younger youth participants / pour les participants non-jeunes

How many community members will you reach who are 0-12? You should include children participants, etc /

We hope to reach at least 20 youths in the age range over the first few years of programming. There may also be some overlap depending on personal situations. For example, if there are younger siblings in need of support. However, at this time, the hope is to involve school boards within Indigenous programming to guide these youth to our programming as a transitional area of focus once it is needed or when they become aware of it.

Non-youth participants / pour les participants non-jeunes

How many community members will you reach who are 30+? You should include participants, parents, Elders, facilitators, etc. /

Most of our Council is beyond the 30+ range, but have lived experience in these areas of focus. These members of our Council will also be supporting the program as facilitators. The idea is one of “Growing Our Village,” in a sense, to provide after-care support and mentorship beyond the maximum age of our core program. Many board members are themselves aged-out foster children who understand there are access issues to further life skills assistance, and they can seem to be beyond reach after a certain time.

Where will your project take place? / Où votre projet aura-t-il lieu ?*

Please specify community, town, or city. If your project takes place in more than one area, please list all.

As we currently reside in the Guelph/Wellington area, this is where we will begin our focus, with overlap into the Kitchener/Waterloo region, and then further outreach will be done in Southern Ontario at a later point.

Province & Postal Code

Ontario N1H 7H5

Project Summary / Résumé du projet*

Tell us about your project. Why is this project needed, and what is its purpose? For example, are you going to run a series of youth harm reduction workshops, provide a space for youth and Elders to make art together, or coordinate a teaching circle? (Keep this to 500-1000 words and use at least 2 citations)

KisKinohtahiwewin Youth Mentorship Program is an Indigenous lead, focused, youth-oriented, musically-based deterrent program as reincarceration and recidivism rates have led to disastrous effects in our communities and urban centers, including homelessness, drug abuse and mental health issues.

Originally, the program was written to be a deterrent program for youth caught up in the courts, legal, jails, and group homes. It was then expanded to include adoptees and foster kids in care to facilitate the transition from aging out of the care system and potentially, hopefully, avoiding the prison system. The program achieves this through music.

The idea for a music-based deterrent program came from our founder, Randy Freese. He spent much of his youth caught up in the criminal justice system as a young offender. From there, he was shuffled around to group homes and other institutions such as treatment facilities. He had noticed that there was always a common theme among inmates and residents; everybody loved music. Some of them so much so, that they begin to take part by using their talents to pass the time. As inmates, instruments were not allowed, so it came down to banging a beat on a table and freestyling their lyrics, or gathering in small groups, known as a Cypher, with one or two beatboxing and others again freestyling their lyrics.

Although group homes are in the community and may have access to some resources to participate together as musicians, not every place has the same access to instruments and/or equipment.

Our program will customize music education for those in community in need and provide opportunities for our individual participants to express themselves through music. This can look like one-on-one in-home sessions, sessions delivered remotely, or we hope to eventually have funding to host classes at the local community center.

Participants who are signed up for our program will go through an intake process first. This determines where their interests are, and how to determine where they are in their journey. Once this process is complete, we will discuss the programming options, how they work together with one another, and how they can integrate into their life now to change their path for the better or otherwise prevent what we sometimes refer to as the “School to Prison Pipeline.”

There will also be a time and commitment requirement that needs to be met to remain in the program. This is determined by a reasonable commitment and level of engagement in the initial steps of the

programming intake process. The program is not built to be a get-out-of-jail-free card simply by signing up. Participation and completion may also go towards sentencing reports, like Gladue, if it is already too late to prevent participants from entering the criminal justice system.

Prevention, ultimately, is our long-term goal as many community members and their families experience intergenerational trauma from the 60's Scoop and Residential Schools which has led to the high incarceration rate among Indigenous youth (Kassam, 2017). Providing support and guidance is where we start, so we are not opposed to doing the work to help young people create positive changes in their lifestyles and the paths they choose along the way.

Freeze Flame Productions Inc., began life as an artist management company trying to make up-and-coming artists' lives easier by securing opportunities. It later evolved into a studio and independent record label with a focus on Hip Hop Music and Culture, something Randy himself attributes to saving his life and giving him the motivation to turn his life around.

It is designed to reach out to troubled youth in the community, the justice system, and foster care. Looking for connection or reconnection, giving them a way back, a new focus, and hope for something positive in life. This organization is a healing way forward. As many youth come from homes where family members have either passed away or have not been involved, youth gravitate to activities that may put them at risk, justifying it by telling themselves, "I am doing it for my family."

Since opening up to our Community Council and Youth Council, ideas have come up that will now be included: things like a focus on the broader use of creativity, as well as other areas such as internships, mentorships, motivational/public speaking, and artist development, as well as access to traditional teachings and eventually some land-based programming.

We have pinpointed these areas as crucial for growth and social development within society and its standards. With proper guidance and assistance youth may be able to develop necessary life skills to get them beyond the point of their first police contact safely and unharmed. Not every artist is a musician, singer or rapper either, so we now have expanded to those who have talents in other mediums, like visual arts and writing, for example.

Since expanding these concepts, a decision was also made that participants did not necessarily need to focus solely on one area, and the programming may be used for youth participants to progress through, and eventually be a training ground for future facilitators, bringing us back to the concept of "Building Our Village." In this way, our programming also becomes preventative at a certain point, by also utilizing the "Pay It Forward" mentality. For example, the Building Our Village concept is a way of thinking that would benefit oneself and their community in the long term. The idea is to help each other get ahead by being better and doing better. Supporting the larger community with one's small actions, setting examples for the next generation as well as your next-door neighbour.

This is not a new concept in Indigenous communities, but it has been heavily corrupted by settler colonialism and its paternalistic ideals for what society should be and look like, in turn, creating a survival of the fittest mentality rather than supportive and uplifting environments where people can thrive together. By lifting each other up to be better for ourselves and our communities we also become stronger, self-determining, and self-sustainable. This can lead to generational health and well-being going forward, breaking down barriers set in place by systemic inequalities and policies.

Any of these areas of focus may be used in combination or singularly. The entire hope of creating a deterrent programming plan is to engage youth before the bad choices take hold, although we understand all too well that many of our youth fall through the cracks in the system, the draws to streetlife, and other forms of activity that lead to risky behaviours in vulnerable youth.

The idea is to bring hope, awareness and choice into their lives and reveal the underlying joy that should be available to our youth. They will be able to reconnect with culture and teachings that will guide them through tough times, and also gain skills that will allow them to become entrepreneurial with their art and other talents.

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/sixties-scoop>
(Sinclair et al., *Sixties Scoop* 2016).

'This is very much reminiscent of residential school systems ... and we will pay the price for this for generations to come.' - Jane Philpott

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/04/indigenous-children-canada-welfare-system-humanitarian-crisis>
(Kassam, *Ratio of Indigenous Children in Canada welfare system is 'humanitarian crisis'* 2017).

Project Activities / Activités du projet*

Please list all activities that will be a part of your project. Include details like the activity title, number of sessions, approximately how many youth will participate and a brief description of the activity. (Example: Medicine Walk - 10 sessions - 50 youth - Youth will go on the land with Knowledge Keepers to learn teachings around medicines in the area, including harvesting and uses.)

Many of our activities are planned to be skills-based and work around developing those skills. Initially, the program was to revolve around giving youth an outlet such as music to act as a deterrent to life in the street and turning to crime to support themselves. This worked well with our first client. He expressed interest in being an artist and recording. However, to do this, we first needed to develop his communication skills within a legitimate business setting, so we decided to expand the programming to include an aspect of internship or mentorship.

Throughout the process of this program's development, some ideas came up as to how we could expand at some point. This included creative ideas beyond just that of music and entertainment but into other creative and artistic expressions. Some youth need mentors, and some are at a point where they also want to contribute to giving back. Instead of limiting this to a finite number of sessions or a length of time, we decided that this would be ongoing regardless of funding.

By first interviewing and assessing their level of commitment and figuring out what they wanted to accomplish in the long term, we could come up with shorter-term solutions:

Ex: One young man was trying to escape street life and prison time, he was a talented writer and had musical ability. Ultimately, he didn't have much direction beyond wanting to record. Once that process

started he was a flood of questions and curiosities. He wanted to know every detail, what the equipment was for, and how we built the studio. He had ideas of being a business, so we decided to integrate that aspect and take him into the company as an intern and mentor him as much as he was willing and wanted. When he met him he was on house arrest awaiting sentencing, we were able to keep him motivated once he went away, kept in contact with him, and supported him through the parole process. Through our letter-writing, he was granted an early parole and continues to be a part of the company's activities.

Community context / Contexte communautaire*

Tell us about the youth and community that this project will benefit. Who are the youth that will benefit and what ages are they? What are some of the community's challenges and successes? /

Realistically, our core focus was meant to be young offenders and youth in crisis either caught up in the system already, heading in that direction or transitioning out of it in some way. (This could mean somebody getting out of jail or aging out of foster care).

Some of the challenges that come with going through the system, and more so, falling through the cracks within it is that many times, once a youth is in the system they are kind of lost in it, no tracking happens and upon release, many just end up back where they started in the first place. This can create a very quick turnover back into the system that lost track of them in the first place. Issues are similar to aging out of foster care, once they are out, they are completely on their own, most times without much guidance or knowing how to navigate the changes. Our programming is meant to be a sort of resource to prevent this from recurring over and over.

This would put the age range in the 15-19 range That being said, we are trying to keep it a little more open-ended and situational based. Mainly because life is not a cookie cutter and solutions to life's many trials and tribulations cannot be treated in such a manner either. We are also working on programming development that would be geared toward aftercare and member follow-ups for those who have decided to move on to new things.

There are examples of the successes of such guidance and programming, both in my case as well as our first participant. We are not the only ones, but this is our lived experience and how we have come to understand things. With a little guidance and encouragement towards activities and programs that they excel in, youth can build their confidence and believe in themselves to the point of creation. Meaning that once they believe they can change themselves, they may also be able to give back and help others see their own potential.

Expected results / Résultats attendus*

What are your expected outcomes? How will participants benefit from your project? For example, perhaps you anticipate 25 participants will have an introductory understanding of their Indigenous language, that 15 youth form meaningful relationships with local elders, or that you will have produced a thorough feasibility study to support a future community project.

The ultimate goal is to save lives by steering youth away from a life of crime and deterring them from street life, gang involvement, and other potential harms that may come along with those associations. From an Indigenous perspective, this could benefit further generations, as the expectation of the programming as it is currently structured will create an infrastructure to give back by “Paying it Forward.” - In doing so, we are hoping that someday, some of these youth will continue the programming and evolve it as necessary for future generations and take over the operations of the programming entirely. Initially, the programming itself was not specific to Indigenous youth from Canada (FNMI), as we were coming from a lens of Third-World conditions and colonialism, but I felt we could also do more outreach in that sector as well, as I had grown up not only within the system but disconnected from community, culture, and my birth family.

In the short term, goals will revolve around various milestones as we want to create deterrent programming to allow youth to avoid these areas of harm altogether, however, first steps are needed to get there, and things will develop in stages.

Upon creation of this idea, we sought out youth who were already incarcerated or entering into court proceedings. We wanted to gauge the interest in such programming but also wanted to find out where they were at as well. Their level of interest and willingness to commit to the changes they needed to make to get their lives on a more positive path. This was another reason for us to focus more on Indigenous youth, to have a group of youth working towards common goals, and who may share relationships to community or culture in some way.

Support / Soutien*

Which supports do you already have in place for this project to be successful (for example, relationships with local knowledge keepers, access to discounted water filtration equipment, experience in working with youth, etc)? What kind of support would you require to be successful (for example, help with managing finances, facilitation skills, networking, etc)? Please don't worry about being disqualified based on having "too many" needs. We need you to answer as honestly as possible so that we may know if/how we are able to properly support you. /

Supportive infrastructures that would/should need to be in place to make some of these things come to fruition to their fullest potential would be access to a starting space. Currently, we have a small team of individuals who are ready and willing to volunteer their time to help facilitate programming needs. We also have a ready, fully functioning studio space that houses most of our needs for the time being, hence the reason we started with music as a deterrent. At this time, Indigenous endeavours will be held off-site at a local Friendship Center that provides programming in that sense.

Ideally, we would seek out a farm space. It would encompass all of our needs down the road, outdoor space, indoor space, possibilities for water, and fire areas. The building could house cooking facilities and the land could also house farming and food growth in a variety of ways, such as greenhouses and hydroponics, but also in-ground cold storage.

Interim, or short-term solutions could look like any of the above aspects in different places, or smaller places within a city, like a smaller industrial space or an empty lot with a portable housing unit to get

things rolling. Not everything needs to be in person either, now with tools like Zoom and Teams, among others we can accommodate remote environments. As long as participants have internet access.

Other than the space to occupy. People are always important, those who want to contribute and do the good work. This may include volunteers to help run programming, some skills training, facilitators, and Elders would be an added bonus for sure, possibly some educators. But I think where the funding would come in handy is having some sort of health care practitioner available, such as a mental health worker, or counsellor that has specialized training in trauma-informed care, or harm reduction.

Behind the scenes, there would also be a need for technology to have a place as well. To do in-person things, we will always need to have a digital infrastructure to duplicate the model in a virtual space. Whether holding events or running programming this will be necessary for some of the marketing and networking to find future support for the programming.

Youth and Advisory Council Statements:

(each member gave a statement)

As a founding member of our council, I initially wanted to create a Youth council to separate our initiatives. Still, eventually, our views aligned and we joined forces and worked together to build something specifically for the youth in our city and surrounding territory. I spearheaded this initiative with the help of another founding member who had previously worked with youth and designed programming to expand on. I suggested that we add an Indigenous learning element to our programming regardless of the background of the participants. I felt this may create the positive change that we intend, especially for our communities. **Nate T., Co-Founder, Youth Voice on Council**

I was asked to provide insight from my perspective, as I was one of the first clients to go through this program in its infancy. At first, my aspirations were geared towards artist development, as I was an avid writer of my lyrics, and wanted to get into a recording studio. The guys running the program at the time noticed my dedication, not only to my craft but also to my wanting to learn more and spend more time in-house. This became my outlet to change my lifestyle and my path, they later took me under their wing and allowed me to get more involved. After allowing me to record my first album, I was increasingly becoming interested in giving back to the community as well. I approached the staff and council with a few ideas. They have embraced me and allowed me to work on myself along the way, I joined the council late last year, and have been working on implementing and incorporating some of the ideas I brought forward. Truly a life-changing experience.

M.P. - former client, new council member, program development

As a co-founding member, I cannot take all the credit, I did create the initial program, but even that was with the help and input of several people I have interacted with over many years. I grew up as an Indigenous Adoptee and was very disconnected in my youth. This led to both incarceration and bouncing around to various group homes. Only one of those places ever helped us plan for the future and come up with plans beyond the lifestyle.

I noticed that many of us in those days also had hidden talents and skills that we had not yet utilized in legal or productive ways. Many of those revolved around Music and Entertainment. I would also give some credit to my Psychiatrist who encouraged me to build this program and develop it beyond just a dream. He also gave me a lot of background on the history of some of the systemic changes he worked for

over the years. For example, in the years during the Young Offenders Act, he was instrumental in the implementation of sentencing guidelines that included treatment rather than punishment.

This, although mainly in Ontario, made sentencing slightly longer for youth incarcerated at the time, but also gave them opportunities to reintegrate into the community through the school boards and treatment options for undiagnosed behavioural and mental health issues. Unprecedented at the time was the aftercare portion of sentencing that created further programming and outreach through probation terms and beyond. In my case, Once I was diagnosed, I was monitored on and off medications throughout my probation period after my release in 1997. When my probation ended in 1999, I was able to continue in the care of my psychiatrist until his passing in 2015.

When the change over from the Young Offenders Act to the Youth Criminal Justice Act took place in the early and mid-2000s, all this programming, including the aftercare was eliminated. I saw an opportunity to give back and built it into our first business plan that was used to obtain grant money. The grant was a success and allowed us to not only upgrade some of our equipment but also manage the initial stages of getting this programming up and running with our first participant. Reporting requirements were met each month until the grant was exhausted. I have continued to follow our first participant's progress to this day. Just a disclosure, he is also my cousin.

Randy F., Co-Founder, Programming manager

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