

## Annual Symposium, Session 2D: Preliminary Findings from the Hub-led Pandemic Adaptations Study

January 18, 2020

### Pandemic Adaptations Study Background

- The purpose of this study is to understand the processes and experiences of Mental Health Promotion Innovation Fund (MHP-IF) project teams as they adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic. The broader goal is to contribute relevant and timely new knowledge about the impacts of the pandemic (as an abrupt and extreme change in context) on mental health promotion implementation processes, on those delivering programs and services, on children and youth themselves, and on the field of mental health promotion. Of particular interest are impacts on equity, access, and cultural safety.
- A story-telling methodology is used to capture project experiences. A first round of conversations with each project is in progress. As of January 15<sup>th</sup>, 18 conversations were completed.
- Conversations were about one hour and, for each project, included the MHP-IF project lead and other project team members who were knowledgeable or involved in pandemic adaptations (ranging from 1-7 project team members per call).
- Preliminary analysis involved NVivo coding for a subset of transcripts and a one hour facilitated discussion with KDE Hub Secretariat members, most of whom were part of the conversations.

### Preliminary Themes

MHP-IF project teams were very open and willing to share the successes and challenges of their pandemic adaptation experiences. Conversations provided an opportunity for project teams to reflect on their efforts and accomplishments during an extremely challenging and uncertain time. Preliminary findings are heartening in parts, and heart-breaking in others. With conversations happening in the past two months (December 2020 and January 2021), there was an overall sentiment of projects having ‘moved mountains’ during the previous 8-10 months. Nine preliminary themes are presented below.

#### 1. Pandemic Adaptations: An Evolving Process

While each MHP-IF project went through their own unique process, most reported moving through a series of common stages since the start of the pandemic.

- **Stage 1:** Projects ‘put on hold’ in the first days/weeks of the lockdown where they focused on immediate needs (e.g., checking-in on staff, providing services for at-risk populations).
- **Stage 2:** Projects took time to re-think, re-group, and re-assess work plans and capacity implications. The one-year funding extension from PHAC allowed many projects to shift into this stage. Some projects remained in this stage longer than others (e.g., some remained in the ‘wait

it out' stage for a longer time hoping the pandemic context would change, while others moved more quickly to the third stage).

- **Stage 3:** Projects made key decisions about how to adapt and acted on those adaptations (e.g., finding online platforms, re-developing materials/data collection methods, training facilitators for online platforms, pilot-testing).
- **Stage 4:** Adaptations continue to evolve as project teams implement these new changes to their programs. Many projects have started to settle into their main adaptations and activities are successfully being implemented.

## 2. Stepping Back to Move Forward

The COVID-19 pandemic was a trigger for many projects to pause and re-think elements of their activities; what components would need to stop? What could continue? What would need to be adapted? How might project components be strengthened? Many project teams saw the gift in some unanticipated time to re-assess the design and development of their project materials, implementation efforts, and evaluation, and were able to complete additional piloting and prototyping. Early perceptions from project teams are that this additional (re)development work has improved many of their activities and will yield promising outcomes.

*"I feel like one thing that comes to mind is that this has forced us to...like despite all of the adaptations and changes, we've actually had to work through the development of this program in, I think, like a slower or more thoughtful way... It has led to more intentional work."*

## 3. Creative Reinvention and Innovation Using Online Formats

Project teams found innovative ways to continue offering their programs in new formats. The shift to online programming highlighted many pitfalls of virtual engagement (e.g., challenges creating personal connection, engagement and 'Zoom fatigue', challenges with language and cultural translations, staff capacity). In the face of these challenges, project teams discovered unanticipated upsides to moving online. Some promising adaptations to address barriers included:

- increasing or maintaining program reach and accessibility (e.g., adapting program content for effective online implementation; projects reaching new sites/locations through virtual programming; using different media platforms to reach youth such as Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, WhatsApp)
- finding ways to increase engagement and relationship-building in an online format (e.g., shifting to smaller group formats, sending kits/packages with program content to end users)

*"So the first time you meet a youth, obviously is a really critical and important moment for you to be able to build that trust and start beginning to build that sort of sense of security with the youth. And finding strategies and ways to do that ... The reality is that doing that over Zoom takes away some of the personal aspects of that."*

## 4. Supporting Project Staff and Partners

A theme that resonated with many project members was how they could best support those who were supporting youth. The first step for many projects once the pandemic hit was shifting their focus to

check-in and care for members of their own project teams and their partners, especially those involved in program delivery. They had to find ways to support each other and adjust their ways of working and expectations due to either personal or professional circumstances. In many cases, pandemic adaptations led to challenges in staff capacity (those caring for children at home; increases in the number of sessions implemented online). This highlighted the importance of ensuring that those implementing projects were well supported so that they, in turn, could successfully support the vulnerable populations who they serve.

## 5. Managing Unanticipated Setbacks

Because the pandemic hit projects in the midst of planning, training, and implementation efforts, some experienced losses as a result (loss of time, effort, data) or they needed to find quick re-adjustments to maintain project momentum.

- Projects half-way through their facilitator/youth training → finding ways to re-think training continuation or maintenance in new formats
- Projects that were only able to collect 'pre' data in their pre-post study → finding ways to capture 'post' data in different formats
- Projects that had secured ethics → re-working ethics applications to address pandemic adjustments

## 6. Unexpected Benefits

While the pandemic brought many challenges, projects also experienced unanticipated benefits. For example, the pandemic forced some projects to implement new elements of programming that were part of their longer-term plan (e.g., having more of an online presence with social media, website design and launch, virtual programming). In many cases, these types of adaptations increased program accessibility and reach, and most projects plan to maintain this type of programming into the future. Other unanticipated benefits observed by some projects included communities returning to their heritage/ core values (e.g., food sharing, increased connection to environment, family connection and engagement) and youth leaders rallying together to help other youth in need.

*"Because we were finding that some parents you know, were interested in joining us for the webinars, but they may not have been available for the time that they were going to be offered. So this way we would be able to reach parents that you know, might want to do it at 8:00 when they have their children in bed or on the weekend, so I think that'll increase our reach, to be able to get a few more people."*

## 7. Addressing Hierarchy of Needs

Some projects were forced to shift their attention to urgently address their target population's most fundamental needs, including food security, shelter, safety, and other social determinants of mental health. This sometimes meant adapting the timing and types of project activities, putting projects on hold, re-purposing staff, and supporting partner and community efforts.

*"Well, COVID created kind of a perfect storm for isolating already isolated or vulnerable individuals... I can always make the case for these things being attached to a project, because when we're talking about mental health it's hard to talk about it without talking about all the other issues, right? Housing, addiction, post... you know, PTSD, you know, those kinds of issues."*

## 8. Amplifying Inequities and Reinforcing the Importance of Mental Health Determinants

Many project teams acknowledged ways in which the pandemic is highlighting the already existing inequities within our society. It is shining a light on those who are most vulnerable in our population and at risk of being left behind. A few key populations include:

- Youth living in unsafe home environments (e.g., abusive homes, lack of privacy, no access to safe space to participate in programming)
- Those with low income or in isolated environments (lack of access to technology, internet)
- Families experiencing food insecurity
- Newcomers/immigrants experiencing language barriers

Project teams had to find creative ways to try to reach these at-risk populations, however, there is a fear that the most vulnerable may still be slipping through the cracks. This theme highlights the importance of the upstream focus of mental health promotion.

*“One of the things that we became really aware of is that some people didn’t live in a space where having a call was even conducive, right? Because there might be arguments happening, or a whole host of things happening in their space where they weren’t comfortable being on a call. So I think that was one of the-- kind of the big key pivotal learnings, was just kind of taking for granted that everyone exists in the same world where they’re able to access the technology, have a house or a space where it’s safe to talk.”*

## 9. Mental Health Coming Further Out of the Shadows

MHP-IF project teams discussed a common silver lining of the pandemic; that it has prompted more open and honest conversations related to mental health both at an individual level (e.g., youth feeling comfortable talking about their mental health challenges) and at a systemic level (e.g., at a population level, these types of conversations are increasing which begins to remove the stigma often associated with mental health).

### Next Steps

- Round one of conversations with projects, and data analysis continue.
- The study’s design team and projects will have an opportunity to discuss results. Findings from this initial set of conversations will then be shared within the MHP-IF community and publicly.
- Ways to build on these initial pandemic adaptation stories will be considered, informed by project interest and ideas that were explored in the initial conversations, and by further input about the most relevant and timely contributions from phase 1 of the MHP-IF.

