

Time for Change: Gang intervention program report

Overview

Since 2015, Time for Change (T4C) has provided specialized services to adults, young adults and their families who are impacted by gang involvement. The goal? To support the individuals involved and to make Ottawa a safer place to live. The program is now entering its fifth year. Known as the 'gang exit program,' T4C provides services to hard-to-serve, complex individuals with serious criminal involvement. Services and supports include community engagement, counselling and health, education and training, employment, family reunification, mentorship, and safety and stability.

The project operates in partnership with the John Howard Society of Ottawa and Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization (OCISO). T4C is funded by Crime Prevention Ottawa, with the Ottawa Police serving as an important referral partner.

Time for Change case study

The following case study builds on the experiences and testimonials of T4C case workers and their clients. To maintain anonymity, we have created a composite story based on more than one individual.

We first met 22 year-old Armand at the Ottawa Hospital, hours after he'd been shot. Armand was a drug dealer, caught up in a dispute with other dealers over an unpaid debt.

From a young age, Armand's life was in constant chaos. Abandoned by parents who had struggles of their own, he bounced from foster family to foster family to a life of intermittent homelessness and couch surfing.

Armand gained his acceptance on the streets, where he both made a living and struggled to survive. He knew he needed a better life. Getting shot convinced him it was time to look at his options. Within days of meeting with a case worker, he agreed to take part in the T4C program.

It wasn't easy. Armand faced daily challenges, like shutting out the only friends he's ever known to find a new life with positive influences. It was a constant struggle against the temptation of drugs and alcohol, but he knew he needed to get clean to start fresh and hold down a real job. Even worse, he lived in a state of constant fear and anxiety.

With the support of a T4C case worker, Armand made small steps towards a new life. He learned to open up, talk about his rage, focus on his priorities, reconnect with his family and find meaningful employment. He now works full time in a role that uses his skills and offers opportunity for advancement.



“Without T4C’s support, I probably wouldn’t have taken any steps. They helped me get things done. I have been able to see concrete results,” explains Armand. “They helped me look for jobs and go back to school. If I didn’t have the support of the John Howard Society, I probably would have been back to selling drugs.”

He credits the constant support from his case worker with motivating him to continue down his current path. With an 8 to 4 work week, his case worker schedules meeting times that work for Armand and meets him close to his job. He also says the program has given him the tools and advice he needed to push forward.

“The range of guidance I have received over the past 8 months has been amazing – from basic advice like setting goals to complex discussions regarding panic attacks or coping with the loss of a loved one. They taught me coping strategies so that I could better deal with the anger and darkness inside of me. It is safe to say that I have greatly benefited from the T4C program,” says Armand.

He now takes part in a weekly volleyball league and is continuing his education to get certified in his field. He acknowledges there is still a long road to travel, but for the first time ever, Armand has hope for his future.

Designed for success

The John Howard Society attributes T4C’s significant success rate to the program’s flexible approach and proactive outreach to this high-risk, hard-to-engage demographic. T4C’s success factors include:

- Innovation in partnership
- Comprehensive and complex case management
- Persistent and targeted outreach
- Success with clients

Innovation in partnership

Innovation is at the heart of the T4C partnership, and it all starts with the program’s Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Ottawa Police Service. Rather than wait for a gang-involved person to seek help, the MOU enables police to refer individuals to T4C so case workers can connect with clients at strategic times in their lives – events that open the door to change such as being taken into custody, expecting a child, recovering from a shooting, or immediately after a close friend or family member is shot, for example. This is a first in Canada with this particular focus and client population.

With OCISO as a key partner, outreach and engagement with clients from immigrant families is much more tailored to their needs. This includes information sharing about integrating into life in Ottawa, outstanding immigration issues and the role of family in diverse cultures. This partnership enriches their work and the perspective that case workers bring to the T4C program.



Comprehensive and complex case management

T4C is also unique in how it manages individual client cases. The program is both flexible and personalized to each individual. Supports for clients are designed to help them with their comprehensive and complex needs.

Case workers offer flexibility to meet clients at locations and times that work, such as local coffee shops, in the community, in institutions (Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre or federal penitentiary, for example), or elsewhere to reduce barriers to access to service and supports. It's all about building trust and being there when a client needs help.

Supports for clients include talking through issues such as finding a job, building a new circle of friends away from gang influences, and dealing with anger and other challenges. It also means connecting them with services such as addictions counselling, health and mental health resources, housing, job placements, mentorship, training and education, and spiritual and other supports.

"We work with T4C clients to develop a case plan, which leverages their existing strengths, while targeting contributing factors for their street-level involvement. While involved with T4C, we help them realize that options for change exist – options they may never have known about or believed they had a chance to attain."

Laavanyan Selvendren, Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization

Persistent and targeted outreach

Success comes through persistent, targeted outreach to individuals involved in street-level violence. For case workers, this means making multiple phone calls and sending text messages, as well as being available to meet in person. T4C does not give up easily on clients, which is something that is often new to these individuals, who have often experienced a lifetime of people giving up on them.

While T4C partners make referrals, case workers proactively monitor the news for weapons or drugs charges, then reach out directly to affected individuals. Case workers may go to the hospital or meet with them at provincial detention centres after a violent weapon crime.

This outreach might also begin when a person is incarcerated. A T4C case worker will visit federal and provincial jails, talk to potential clients and follow the course of their time through the system. The case worker will connect with them three months prior to their release date. It's this active approach that keeps clients engaged and leads to better outcomes.



Success with clients

Working with a client means focusing on what the person wants to address in their life, such as finding a job or going back to school. This helps build rapport and trust. Most T4C clients have huge barriers and obstacles to overcome, so success means setting goals and supporting them every step of the way. It means talking to them about making better choices, choosing who they spend their time with, and finding out what supports will help them reintegrate into society. It's about taking a consistent, proactive and client-focused approach, with the goal of moving them away from the lifestyle and ultimately contributing to community safety.

“Yes, our clients engage in harmful behaviour. Without service, they will continue to make poor decisions that impact our community. We see a different side of our clients. They are still people and we're here to support them.”

Kim McCalpin, T4C Project Lead

T4C has made impressive strides in reaching and serving people involved in the gang lifestyle. Over the period from the program's launch in 2015 to April 2019:

- 394 people have been referred to T4C
- 108 people have or continue to participate in the program
- 33 people received short-term intervention support and achieved at least 1 goal
- 32 people are actively engaged in ongoing services

Many were referred to other services. Those who did not accept services or were incarcerated know that help is available when they are ready for change.

Of the 108 clients involved in the program since it started:

- 37 gained legitimate employment
- 8 completed training courses
- 6 were/are enrolled or attending post-secondary institutions
- 30 connected with specialized health and counselling services
- 35 engaged in a positive, prosocial leisure activity

T4C continues to proactively engage this hard-to-reach population to help them move towards a more safe, stable and prosocial way of life. This work contributes to making Ottawa a safer city for all residents.

“Time for Change is an important initiative of the Ottawa Street Violence and Gang Strategy. The strategy's focus on Neighbourhood Cohesion, Prevention, Intervention, and Enforcement and Suppression aims to build healthier, safer communities across the city through its holistic approach.”

Diane Deans, City Councillor and Chair, Crime Prevention Ottawa

