



MEASURING RETURN

THE OPERATION
COME HOME
REUNITE
PROGRAM REPORT



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Operation Come Home Reunite Staff



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Operation Come Home's Reunite Program is the only national program in Canada dedicated to reuniting homeless youth with their families. Each year, the organisation reunites an average of 75 families and helps hundreds more youth find the services they need in order to overcome significant challenges and move into stable, positive lifestyles.

Over the course of the past two years, Measuredoutcome.org and Operation Come Home have interviewed 127 young people and their families who have made use of Reunite services. This ongoing research has so far revealed that once returned, the majority of youth remain connected with their families, no longer depending on the shelter, social service and criminal justice system. Over the past 40 years, this small but important service has made a positive impact on thousands of lives while representing approximately \$2.3 million per year in savings to Canadian taxpayers.¹

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the families and youth who voluntarily participated in this program, as well as the staff at Operation Come Home, especially Elspeth McKay, Natalie Elliott, Shauna MacLeod and Rochelle Mathurin along with the following Reunite affiliate organisations: Dans la Rue, House of Nazareth, Our Place, and Choices for Youth.

The Reunite Program would not be possible without several private donations and the in-kind support of Greyhound Canada.

Report written by Rebecca Thomas and Stephen Couchman, May 2012.

1. Based on estimates of \$45,600 approximate costs per youth in the shelter system per year. Not including the cumulative impact of youth who remain in the system for multiple years. The Cost of Homelessness and the Value of Investment in Housing Support Services in Halifax Regional Municipality (Cities and Environment Unit, Dalhousie University, June, 2006) Somers, Julian est. al, Housing and Support for Adults with Severe Addictions and/or Mental Illness in British Columbia (Simon Fraser University Centre for Applied Research in Mental Health and Addiction, April, 2008)

BACKGROUND

On any given night, approximately 33,000 Canadians are homeless. Of these, 8,500 to 11,000 are youth.² Most homeless youth do not have the option of living in a viable home. Abuse, addiction and circumstance have left them with few alternatives other than living rough, using emergency shelters, squatting or couch surfing. The more time young people spend in these situations, the more likely it is they will experience deteriorating physical and mental health, as well as become chronically homeless, dependent on emergency services and involved in the criminal justice system. The prospects are grim.

Whether seen from a human rights, community safety or economic perspective, it is important that homeless youth are given the tools to be able to make positive lifestyle choices, secure stable housing, gain regular employment and, where viable, return to their families.

Many services exist to help homeless youth stabilise their circumstances. These include emergency housing, educational programs, job readiness training and addictions counselling, to name a few. It is generally agreed that no single approach is effective for all youth. To successfully transition a young person from homelessness requires many points of contact over time. Ideally, these supports are provided and have an impact within the first six months of homelessness.

It is often the case that once a young person has been homeless for 6 months, the patterns and habits have become well-engrained and young people are significantly less likely to return home. — Elspeth McKay Executive Director, Operation Come Home

2. As compiled by CBC's The Fifth Estate for its March 10, 2004 segment, "No Way Home". April 26, 2012 < http://www.cbc.ca/fifth/main_nowayhome.html >

In a minority of cases, the solution to homelessness may be to go home. For some street-involved youth, if their home is not perfect, it is still better than the immediate alternative.

When a young person with a caring family from Kelowna, BC finds herself in a Winnipeg shelter, there may be a narrow window of opportunity for a skilled youth worker to facilitate her return home. Assisting this young woman, and others like her, to return home is part of the mission of Ottawa-based Operation Come Home. Since 1971, the Operation Come Home Reunite program has been the only national organisation in Canada dedicated to bringing families back together. In 2011, the Operation Come Home Reunite Program made it possible for 60 young people, aged 16 to 19, from across the country to be reunited with their families. The program also provided referral and counselling services for 112 young people.

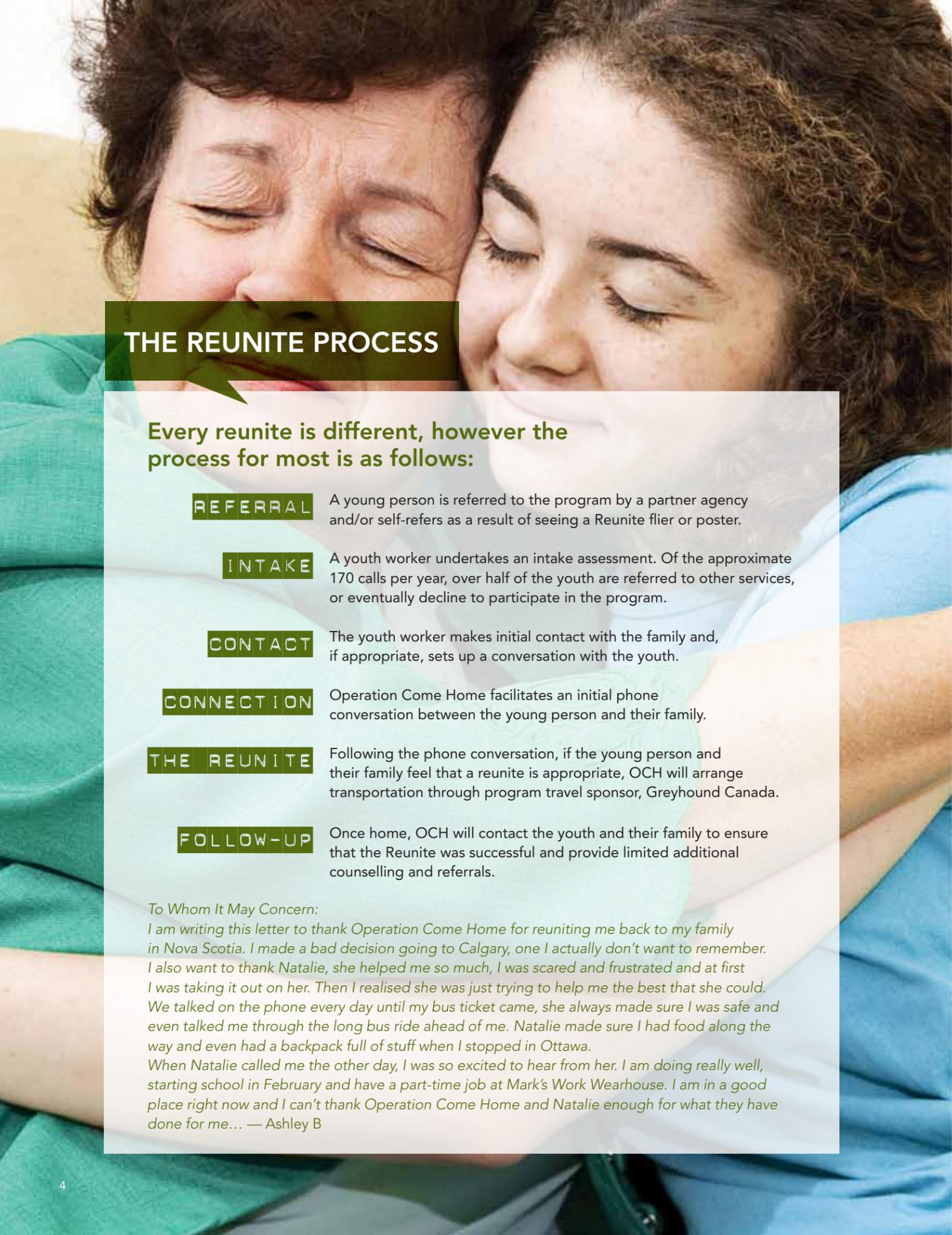


Operation Come Home Youth

METHODOLOGY

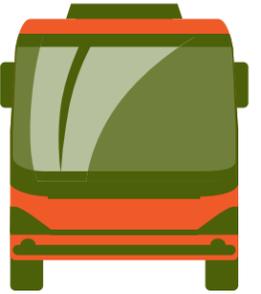
In 2010/11, 148 telephone surveys were conducted with reunited OCH youth and their families. Those available for interview include 43% of participants (26 of the 60 youth and families) who were reunited over the past year and second year interviews with 18 youth who were reunited prior to 2011.³ In addition, interviews were conducted with OCH staff along with a literature review of related research.

3. Contact with all program participants was attempted five times, by phone. Of the 61 families that OCH was able to establish contact with, one family from 2011 declined to participate in the survey, and three families who had been reunited prior to 2011 declined participation.



2011 REUNITE TRAVELS

In 2011, with the support of Greyhound Canada, 60 Operation Come Home Youth travelled a total of 231,222 km (almost six trips around the Earth) to return to their families.⁴ Youth involved in the program came from, and travelled to, almost every part of Canada. Interestingly, over the past two years, trends show that the top three communities from which youth begin their journeys home are Ottawa (11), Halifax (10) and Kelowna (10). Not surprisingly, most youth returned to smaller communities from larger urban centres, though once again, a large number of youth (18) returned to Ottawa.⁵ If this trend continues it may be valuable to explore further outreach and prevention programs in these communities.



THE REUNITE PROCESS

Every reunite is different, however the process for most is as follows:

- REFERRAL** A young person is referred to the program by a partner agency and/or self-refers as a result of seeing a Reunite flier or poster.
- INTAKE** A youth worker undertakes an intake assessment. Of the approximate 170 calls per year, over half of the youth are referred to other services, or eventually decline to participate in the program.
- CONTACT** The youth worker makes initial contact with the family and, if appropriate, sets up a conversation with the youth.
- CONNECTION** Operation Come Home facilitates an initial phone conversation between the young person and their family.
- THE REUNITE** Following the phone conversation, if the young person and their family feel that a reunite is appropriate, OCH will arrange transportation through program travel sponsor, Greyhound Canada.
- FOLLOW-UP** Once home, OCH will contact the youth and their family to ensure that the Reunite was successful and provide limited additional counselling and referrals.

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing this letter to thank Operation Come Home for reuniting me back to my family in Nova Scotia. I made a bad decision going to Calgary, one I actually don't want to remember. I also want to thank Natalie, she helped me so much, I was scared and frustrated and at first I was taking it out on her. Then I realised she was just trying to help me the best that she could. We talked on the phone every day until my bus ticket came, she always made sure I was safe and even talked me through the long bus ride ahead of me. Natalie made sure I had food along the way and even had a backpack full of stuff when I stopped in Ottawa. When Natalie called me the other day, I was so excited to hear from her. I am doing really well, starting school in February and have a part-time job at Mark's Work Wearhouse. I am in a good place right now and I can't thank Operation Come Home and Natalie enough for what they have done for me... — Ashley B

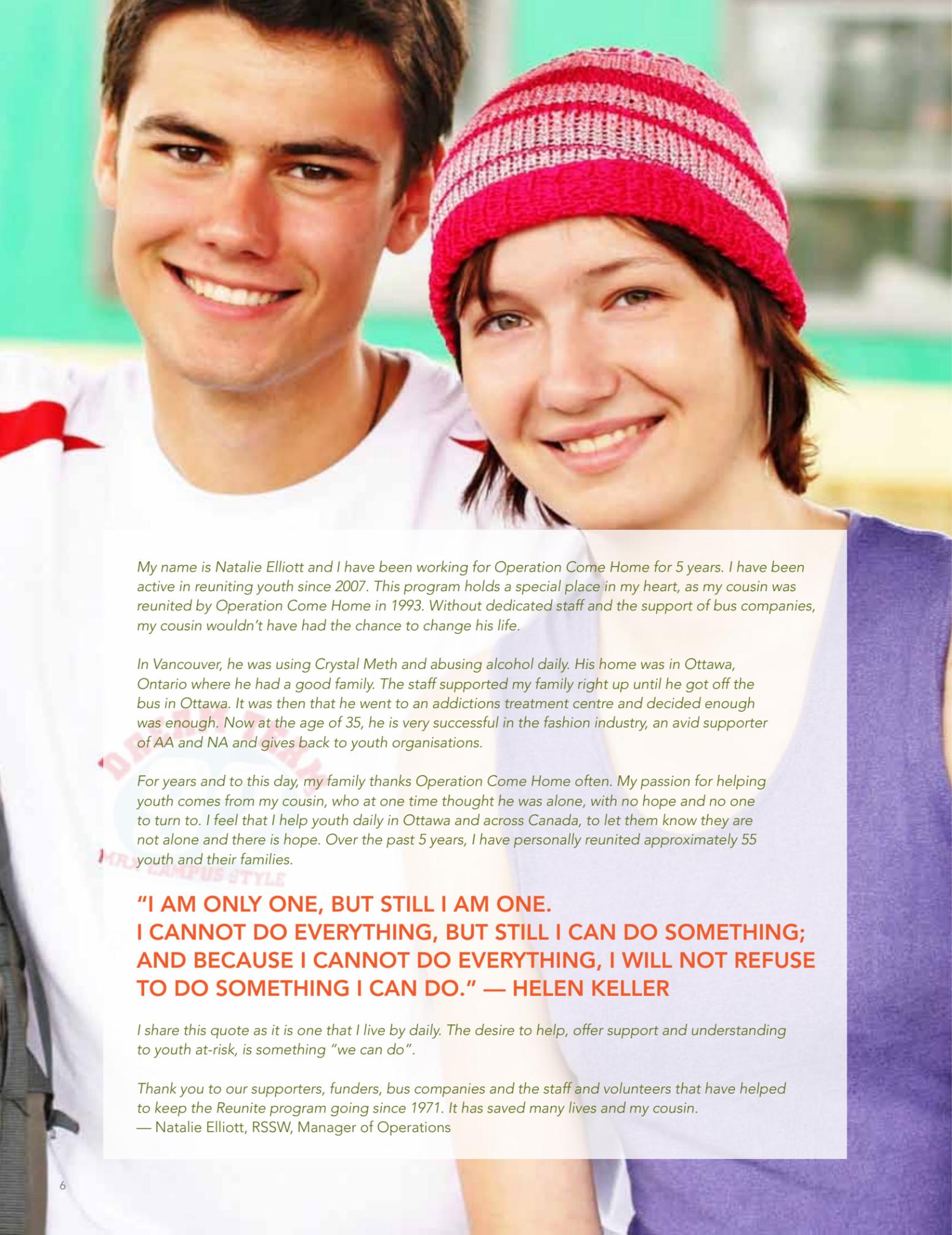
2011 Reunites

FROM	TO
Barrie, ON	Burlington, ON
Barrie, ON	Burlington, ON
Barrie, ON	North Bay, ON
Barrie, ON	Brockville, ON
Belleville, ON	Coquitlam, BC
Calgary, AB	Montreal, QC
Calgary, AB	Kingston, ON
Calgary, AB	Kingston, ON
Calgary, AB	London, ON
Calgary, AB	London, ON
Carleton Place, ON	Montreal, QC
Cold Lake, AB	London, ON
Cold Lake, AB	Prince George, BC
Cold Lake, AB	Prince George, BC
Edmonton, AB	Halifax, NS
Halifax, NS	Ottawa, ON
Halifax, NS	Ottawa, ON
Halifax, NS	Edmonton, AB
Kelowna, BC	Winnipeg, MB
Kelowna, BC	Airdrie, AB
Kelowna, BC	Grand Forks, BC
Kelowna, BC	Edmonton, AB
Kingston, ON	Ottawa, ON
Kitchener, NS	Port Hawkesbury, NS
Kitchener, ON	Edmonton, AB
Kitchener, ON	Halifax, NS
Kitchener, ON	Halifax, NS
La-Pacatiere, QC	Ottawa, ON
Lloydminster, AB	Ottawa, ON
London, ON	Ottawa, ON

FROM	TO
London, ON	Ottawa, ON
London, ON	Kirkland Lake, ON
Maple Ridge, BC	Ottawa, ON
Medicine Hat, AB	Brampton, ON
Montreal, QC	Ottawa, ON
Montreal, QC	London, ON
Montreal, QC	Moncton, NB
Ottawa, ON	Kelowna, BC
Ottawa, ON	Alma, QC
Ottawa, ON	Montreal, QC
Ottawa, ON	Owen Sound, ON
Ottawa, ON	Alma, QC
Ottawa, ON	Windsor, ON
Rosa River, MB	Edmonton, AB
Saint John, NB	Oshawa, ON
Springhill, NS	Chilliwack, BC
Sudbury, ON	Bancroft, ON
Sudbury, ON	Bancroft, ON
Sudbury, ON	Manitouwadge, ON
Thunder Bay, ON	Kitchener, ON
Thunder Bay, ON	Kitchener, ON
Timmins, ON	Waterloo, ON
Toronto, ON	Winnipeg, MB
Toronto, ON	Winnipeg, MB
Toronto, ON	North Bay, ON
Toronto, ON	St. Johns, NFLD
Vancouver, BC	Ottawa, ON
Vancouver, BC	Toronto, ON
Winnipeg, MB	Ottawa, ON
Winnipeg, MB	Edmonton, AB

4. In 2011, a bus and ferry strike affected efforts to reunite youth with their families on the East Coast. The strike began in December 2011, and affected 3 youth in 2011, and 7 more youth have been delayed so far in 2012. These youth are currently being housed in local shelters, and being helped by OCH Reunite staff until transportation arrangements can be made.

5. This is most likely due to the Operation Come Home office location in Ottawa. However, second on the list was London, Ontario a significantly smaller community than any others in the top five.



My name is Natalie Elliott and I have been working for Operation Come Home for 5 years. I have been active in reuniting youth since 2007. This program holds a special place in my heart, as my cousin was reunited by Operation Come Home in 1993. Without dedicated staff and the support of bus companies, my cousin wouldn't have had the chance to change his life.

In Vancouver, he was using Crystal Meth and abusing alcohol daily. His home was in Ottawa, Ontario where he had a good family. The staff supported my family right up until he got off the bus in Ottawa. It was then that he went to an addictions treatment centre and decided enough was enough. Now at the age of 35, he is very successful in the fashion industry, an avid supporter of AA and NA and gives back to youth organisations.

For years and to this day, my family thanks Operation Come Home often. My passion for helping youth comes from my cousin, who at one time thought he was alone, with no hope and no one to turn to. I feel that I help youth daily in Ottawa and across Canada, to let them know they are not alone and there is hope. Over the past 5 years, I have personally reunited approximately 55 youth and their families.

"I AM ONLY ONE, BUT STILL I AM ONE. I CANNOT DO EVERYTHING, BUT STILL I CAN DO SOMETHING; AND BECAUSE I CANNOT DO EVERYTHING, I WILL NOT REFUSE TO DO SOMETHING I CAN DO." — HELEN KELLER

I share this quote as it is one that I live by daily. The desire to help, offer support and understanding to youth at-risk, is something "we can do".

Thank you to our supporters, funders, bus companies and the staff and volunteers that have helped to keep the Reunite program going since 1971. It has saved many lives and my cousin.
— Natalie Elliott, RSSW, Manager of Operations

RESULTS

DOES IT WORK? DO THESE YOUNG PEOPLE STAY UNITED WITH THEIR FAMILIES?

50% of all youth surveyed remained home or in stable situations from six months to a year following their reunite. Out of all of the reunites surveyed, 95% of the youth have remained in contact with their families since returning home.

Age of youth at time of Reunite

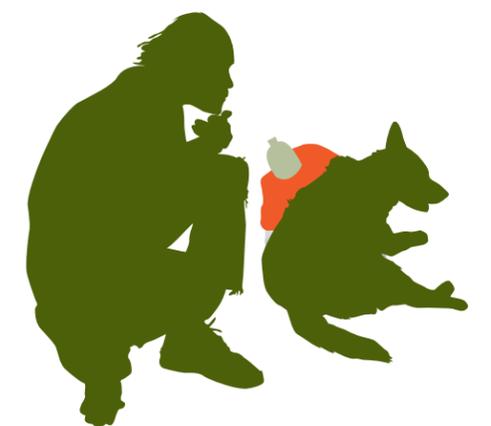
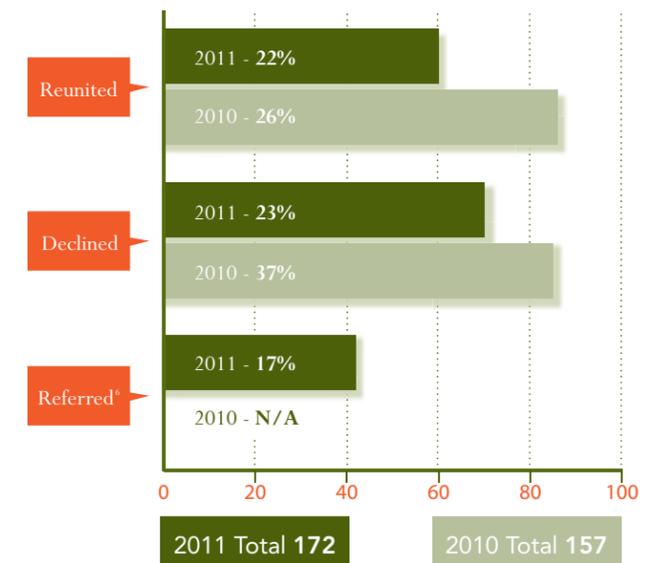
The percentage breakdown regarding the age of youth remains consistent with the 2010 results. There appears to be a greater number of 17 year olds who are reunited (15% higher than 18 year olds and 16% higher than 16 year olds). If this trend continues in future years it may speak to an opportunity with regard to prevention programs for youth aged 14-16.



Youth reunited through the program in 2011 were divided 62% male and 38% female. In 2010, the reunites were divided almost evenly between males and females.

WHO WAS NOT REUNITED

The Reunite Program had 172 requests for support in 2011, up from 157 in 2010. In 2011, 60 of the Reunite requests were fulfilled, 70 were declined, and 42 were referred to other programs.

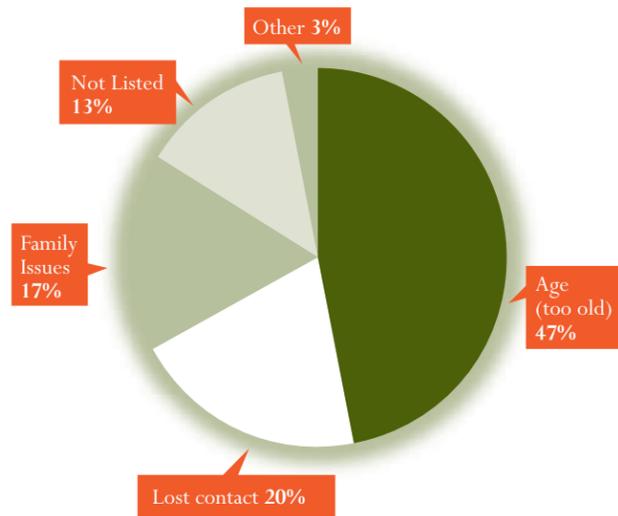


6. A distinction between "referred" and "declined" was not made in the administrative notes for the 2010 Reunite program. As well, not all calls for support are logged into the Reunite system, so the numbers in this 2011 Report do not capture the entire picture regarding the number of calls that Reunite staff field annually. A more accurate administrative system that tracks all calls has been suggested at the end of this report in "Opportunities for Improvement" section.

Reunite Requests Incomplete or Declined

Young people who have been declined or referred from The Reunite Program may not have been ready to return home, their families may not have been willing to accept them back, or the youth worker may have felt that a reunite was not appropriate for any number of reasons. Most of these young people were referred to other services or, at the very least, received telephone counselling from Reunite staff.

REUNITE REQUESTS DECLINED



Of particular interest are the 33 young people (47% of declined calls) who were declined because they were too old to participate in the program (over 19). One caller in 2011 was 56 years old. It is important to note that everyone who calls the program receives some level of support, counselling and advocacy, regardless of age. As recommended in 2010, expanding the program to include young people up to the ages of 21-24 would be worth consideration.⁷

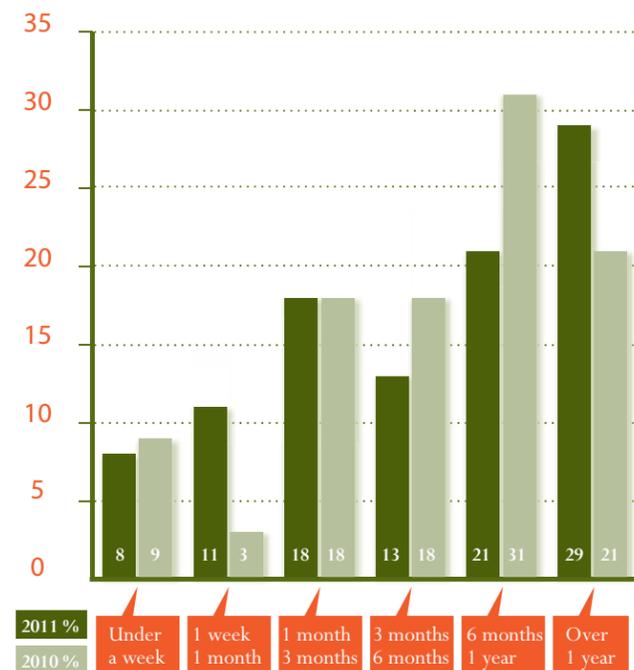
I am lucky for the program. Without [Reunite], I would not be with my daughter today. — Mother

SURVEY RESULTS

How long did your child stay at home after the Reunite?

Of the reunites contacted in 2011, 50% of the youth were still at home six months to over a year after the reunite. 19% percent had been at home for less than one month.⁸ These numbers are fairly consistent with the 2010 numbers.

HOW LONG DID YOUR CHILD STAY AT HOME?



Many of the successful reunites go back to school or get jobs and move into their own apartments. In a couple of cases, social services or other family members stepped in for the youth, and helped them continue their journey.

7. Stephen Couchman and Rebecca Thomas, *Measuring Return - The Operation Come Home Reunite Program* (Measuredoutcome.org, August, 2010)

8. This does not necessarily indicate an early departure from home. All reunites surveyed have taken place within the last 18 months. Many of the survey participants were contacted in the 3-6 month period after their reunite. Subsequent surveys will provide a more developed statistic for this element.

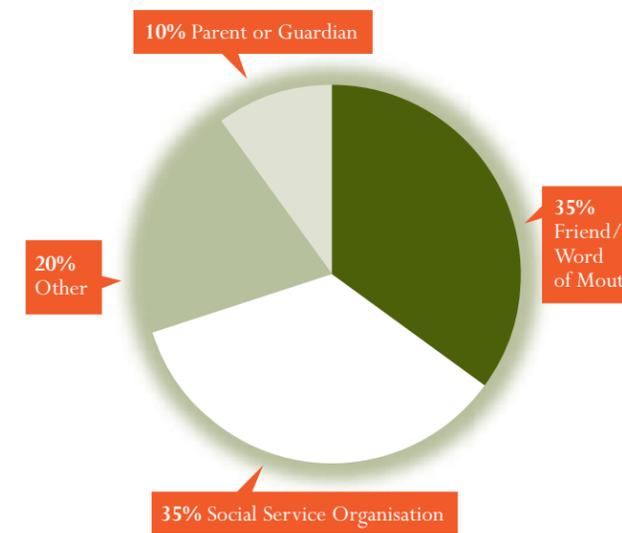
Has your child stayed in contact since they left again?

95% of the youth who took part in this study are still in regular contact with their families, even if they have not continued to live with them.

How did your child find out about the Reunite Program?

Most reunites were initiated through word of mouth and referral. 70% of youth who accessed the program found out about it through word of mouth—from either friends or a social service program. In one 2011 case, the child of a father who had been reunited 15 years earlier participated in the program.

HOW DID YOU/YOUR CHILD OR WARD FIND OUT ABOUT THE REUNITE PROGRAM?



The family situation has improved 140%. It is a wonderful program getting back my daughter. — Parent

Reunite Program Return on Investment

Calculating the cost of homelessness in Canada is not an easy task. In addition to emergency shelter and food, homeless people are more likely to draw on resources from social services, as well as the medical and criminal justice system. Homeless people generally require additional counselling for mental health and addiction issues, they make greater and more frequent use of hospital emergency care, and they are much more likely to be involved with police and the courts. The most recent estimates of the cumulative costs of these services range between \$30,000 and \$55,000 per person each year.⁹

In 2011, investment in the Operation Come Home Reunite Program (not including in-kind contributions by Greyhound Canada) was approximately \$59,000. Assuming that 75% of the 60 reunites were successful for at least one year, this would represent an annual savings of between \$1.3 and \$2.5 million.¹⁰

Looked at another way, support for one homeless youth for the year requires the same investment as 50 reunites.



9. The Cost of Homelessness and the Value of Investment in Housing Support Services in Halifax Regional Municipality (Cities and Environment Unit, Dalhousie University, June, 2006) Somers, Julian est. al, Housing and Support for Adults with Severe Addictions and/or Mental Illness in British Columbia (Simon Fraser University Centre for Applied Research in Mental Health and Addiction, April, 2008)

10. This calculation does not take into consideration savings over multiple years or other benefits of the program such as support for non-reunited youth. It also does not include the cost of any long-term physical or mental health issues and/or involvement in the justice system. It may be valuable to consider these factors in future research.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT



1. PROGRAM EXPANSION

Currently, Reunite is limited to youth aged 16-19. Services need to be expanded to better assist older homeless youth, those with companion animals, and aboriginal youth who may have unique needs. (Those under the age of 16 should be assisted by provincial child welfare services.)

2. OUTREACH AND PREVENTION

As research continues, a clear picture is developing as to where young people are coming from, where they are going and at what age they choose to leave home. This information could be highly valuable in targeting prevention programs and outreach including the development of affiliate networks.

3. TRAVEL SUPPORT

At the best of times, a journey across Canada by bus can be a challenging experience. Several interviewees identified difficulties transferring buses. Operation Come Home currently has limited ability to meet youth as they travel. A friendly face and the prospect of a good meal and someone to talk to along the journey would be beneficial. This would require increased volunteer coordination.

The children were not supervised when they were travelling home. My granddaughter had to change buses three times. There should be help for them along the way when they make their trip home.
— Grandmother

4. ONGOING SUPPORT AND FOLLOW-UP

Once home, the issues that led a young person to leave likely still exist. Operation Come Home has limited resources to provide support and referrals to families. In addition to the one-month call, feedback suggests that working with families in the first weeks after a reunite and checking in with the family in the first six months would increase long-term reunite success. It would also help Operation Come Home assess and improve the program. Multiple Reunite families have indicated that a more effective follow-up and referral system would be very valuable.

5. ESSENTIAL SERVICE

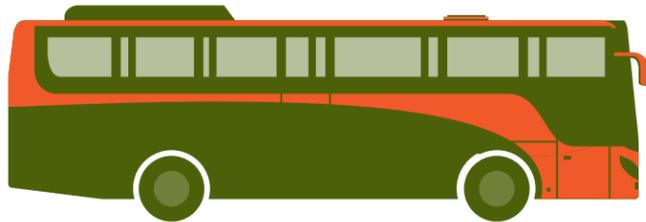
Despite the cost-effectiveness of this program, core funding for a helpline, network development and marketing does not exist. A stable source of funding for Reunite would ensure continued and expanded success of the program.

6. DATA COLLECTION

Data on the successful Reunites is being collected and recorded by the team of staff and volunteers who do a considerable amount of work in this challenging field. Establishing a system to collect basic data on all people who access the Reunite program for support — those who call in and are referred, or declined — would allow for a more in-depth look at the full scope of the services that Reunite provides.

If you are interested in becoming an affiliate partner with Operation Come Home for their Reunite Program, please call 1-800-668-4663, or write to them at info@operationcomehome.ca.

Would you like to contribute to ongoing research on Reunite and similar programs? Please contact Measuredoutcome.org at (416) 487-9114, or write to us at info@measuredoutcome.org



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