

2024 Impact Report



Supporting children and
youth involved in the
child welfare system

(416) 893-5196
stepstonesforyouth.com



Land Acknowledgement

In the spirit of reconciliation, StepStones for Youth affirms our respect for the traditional territories on which we operate, including the lands covered by various treaties such as Treaty 13, Treaty 14, Treaty 16, Treaty 18, Treaty 19, and the Williams Treaties, which encompass the Municipality of Toronto and surrounding regions. We are humbled by the longstanding stewardship of these lands by many nations, including the Anishinaabe, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Wendat, the Chippewa, and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. StepStones is grateful to the diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples who continue to contribute to the health and vibrancy of these lands today.

The ongoing impacts of colonization and systemic discrimination are deeply entrenched in Canada's child welfare systems. Indigenous children continue to be disproportionately overrepresented in foster care, perpetuating cycles of intergenerational trauma, cultural erasure, and systemic marginalization. These injustices reflect a legacy of policies designed to disconnect Indigenous peoples from their cultures, families, languages, and communities, resulting in profound and lasting harm.

StepStones for Youth upholds our responsibility to confront and address these inequities in our work. We are committed to educating our team about the history and ongoing impacts of colonization to deepen our understanding, expand our empathy, and shape our approach to better support Indigenous youth who are disproportionately impacted by the injustices of the child welfare system.



Our Commitment to Anti-Racism & Inclusion

StepStones serves youth from Indigenous, Black, racialized, 2SLGBTQ+, low-income, and disability communities—groups disproportionately represented in the child welfare system. While Black children comprise 7% of Ontario's child population, they make up 14% of child welfare investigations (Bonnie & Facey, 2018). Approximately 30% of children in foster care are Indigenous while those under age 15 make up only 4.1% of Ontario's population (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018).

Our programs are built to address these inequities and create culturally relevant, inclusive spaces where every young person feels seen, supported, and empowered. We evaluate outcomes to ensure equitable impact for Indigenous, Black, 2SLGBTQ+, and other marginalized youth, refining our work to close gaps and dismantle barriers.

Our team reflects the diversity of the youth we serve, and we ensure representation and culturally responsive support. Our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee provides staff, volunteers, and mentors with training in anti-oppressive practices, cultural competency, and inclusive support strategies, so all youth feel valued and uplifted.

We remain unwavering in our commitment to anti-racism and inclusion—celebrating identities, amplifying marginalized voices, and working toward systemic change so every young person has the opportunities and support they deserve.

References

- Bonnie, R., & Facey, A. (2018). [One Vision One Voice: Changing the Ontario Child Welfare System to Better Serve African Canadians](#).
- Ontario Human Rights Commission. (2018). [Interrupted Childhoods: Over-representation of Indigenous and Black children in Ontario child welfare](#).
- City of Toronto. (2013). [2013 Street Needs Assessment](#)

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A Letter from our Leadership

Introduction



Greetings from StepStones for Youth! We are excited to share our 2024 Impact Report with you, highlighting the incredible outcomes we have achieved for young people involved in the child welfare system with the commitment of our invaluable supporters. We hope that the content herein provides a welcome reminder of the overwhelming good that exists in a world full of tumult and uncertainty.

It is hard to imagine that StepStones began as a volunteer-run, overnight summer camp and is now a Charity Intelligence Canada Top 100, A+, and 5-Star-rated organization for the second year in a row. Twenty years on, and with your unwavering support, our organization is improving the trajectories of vulnerable young people with award-winning programming; individualized, wrap-around supports for education, employment, housing, and mental health; and an emphasis on building strong, life-long connections for sustained health and well-being. While aging out of foster care has become even more difficult with limited affordable housing available and inflated costs of living, we are ever determined to implement innovative and evidence-based solutions in solidarity with youth affected by these barriers.

In 2024, our Youth Engagement Project flourished, confirming our knowledge that youth involved in child welfare need consistent and welcoming events to increase trust, a sense of belonging, and capacity to engage in our core programs. Our weekly youth community dinners have become legendary, and we are grateful to our wonderful volunteers who have made this initiative immensely successful.

This past year, more youth at StepStones graduated from high school, excelled in post-secondary programs, embarked on career journeys, set up home in secure apartments, and accessed culturally relevant mental health supports than ever before. We know that young people in and from foster care are highly capable of these accomplishments and we thank you for supporting our work that removes barriers to opportunities for them to do so.

Your belief in our mission fills us with determination to continue building on our progress. In 2025, we will launch The Change Project, bringing together professionals from child welfare and diverse sectors to reimagine a model that ensures every young person in Ontario is safe, supported, and accesses inclusive and efficient services. We are also excited to embark on a Capital Campaign to establish the first ever centralized hub and supported housing facility for youth in and from foster care in Ontario. This unique space will serve as a foundation for innovation, collaboration, and support for youth, families, and partners across the child welfare and related sectors.

We hope our optimism is palpable and that you will join us in another year of industry-leading inspiration and achievements. Thank you so much for your continued support and please enjoy the read!

With gratitude,

Heather O'Keefe **Lorna Freeman**
Founder & CEO **Board Chair**

StepStones for Youth Overview



Our Vision

A country where all young people thrive, have a strong sense of belonging, and are surrounded by people who love and support them.

Our Mission

We support children and youth involved in the child welfare system. We work to improve educational outcomes, secure stable housing, and build long-lasting support networks.

About Us

StepStones for Youth is an award-winning organization recognized with A+ and 5-Star ratings by Charity Intelligence Canada. We support vulnerable young people who have become involved, through no fault of their own, in child protection services and have significant histories of trauma, abuse, and neglect.

Our mission is to empower these youth by cultivating positive and meaningful connections to community and culture; strengthening their sense of belonging; increasing high school graduation and post-secondary participation; improving mental and physical health; securing long-term and stable housing; and building strong, reliable support networks youth can depend on for life.

Our strategic direction is shaped equally by the voices of the young people we serve and our Board of Directors. In solidarity with youth who have lived experience in foster and group home care, their ideas and suggestions influence every aspect of our work, from programming to evaluation. We are committed to dismantling the structural and systemic barriers that limit access to opportunities for youth from Black, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ+ and other marginalized communities who are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system.

Our Building Connections model is guided by our vision of a country where all young people feel a sense of belonging with people who love and care about them. This model of service is rooted in evidence that strong, long-term relationships with caring, non-paid adults—such as volunteer mentors, extended family members, and community allies who reflect youth's cultural identities and lived experiences—lead to better outcomes for young people from foster care. Our targeted prevention methods are designed to achieve long-term, sustainable impact, moving beyond short-term fixes to create lasting change.

StepStones Strategic Priorities for 2025–2028



Deliver What Works

We will continue offering trauma-informed, high-impact programming including housing, family and natural connections, mentorship, counselling, food and income security, and education support — and expand our model to other regions.

- Serve 600+ youth per year
- Replicate our program in two new Canadian jurisdictions
- Improve youth outcomes in housing, mental health, connection, and education



Share Results Widely

We are investing in stronger evaluation and communications so we can be transparent, improve our services, and help others replicate what works.

- Launch modern evaluation and database systems
- Publish evidence-based insights
- Participate in research



Build for the Future

We are strengthening our infrastructure to ensure long-term sustainability for our youth and our organization.

- Diversify and grow our funding base
- Purchase a permanent property with housing and program space
- Improve staff support, HR, and performance systems



Drive Systemic Change

We will advocate for policy change and raise awareness to transform how Canada supports youth from foster care.

- Launch a strategy for reform (The Change Project)
- Lead campaigns to reduce stigma
- Build eight affordable housing units for youth from foster care
- Host monthly sector learning exchanges

2024

Outcomes



Youth served

480



Workshops and events facilitated for youth

64



Housing subsidies facilitated for youth

505



Emergency food and care packages provided

976



Hours of supportive counselling and service navigation provided

12,348



Volunteers making a difference in the lives of youth

257



How Your Support Makes an Impact



\$29

Provides a workshop for a youth, teaching valuable skills such as navigating post-secondary school applications, financial literacy, budgeting, and more.



\$87

Gives two youth birthday presents to let them know they are cared for.



\$614

Provides groceries for a youth for two months to reduce food insecurity and help them focus on education and career goals.



\$789

Allows us to host a community dinner for youth providing access to a nutritious, home cooked meal and an increased sense of belonging.



\$1,396

Gives a youth a housing subsidy to cover first and last month's rent to divert them from homelessness and shelter involvement.



\$7,019

Fully supports a youth in our program for one year with a complete and individualized case management plan and full wraparound services.

“ — Asking for help is very difficult, but don’t be scared. Concern yourself with bettering your situation and reaching your goals. Once you take that step, **your life changes.** — ”

Mary
Youth at StepStones

How We Help



Our Programs



Our Programs

Building Connections

Most youth in and from foster care lack consistent relationships with natural adult supports such as parents, relatives, and teachers. Having to rely solely on paid, temporary adults for care and connection erodes self-esteem and trust in others.

StepStones' innovative programming addresses this gap for young people by nurturing genuine, long-term relationships with adults who reflect their culture, identity, and lived experience. Once youth's basic needs are met at intake to our program, our one-to-one Connections Coordinators use trauma-informed strategies like mobility mapping to help youth identify individuals they have pre-existing relationships with, such as extended family members and community allies. Youth are also matched with one-to-one volunteer mentors trained by StepStones in best practices for assisting youth with trauma history and child welfare involvement. We provide ongoing guidance and support for new connections to ensure relationships are sustainable and can flourish. Strong connections with natural supports are key to the health, well-being, and sense of belonging for young people in and from foster care.

80% of youth in our Building Connections Program demonstrate a sense of belonging in the community.

We support young people in building trusted and long-term connections by:

- Utilizing trauma-informed methods like mobility mapping for exploring potential individuals in youth's lives with whom they may like to connect or reconnect;
- Connecting youth with long-term mentors, family members, and community allies and providing support for healthy connections;
- Hosting engaging events, activities, and workshops — such as our weekly community dinners or expert-led workshops on hospitality, finance, and cultural competency—that create opportunities for youth to connect, learn, and build community.

Within our Building Connections Program we have three key focus areas:

- Homelessness Prevention
- Education & Employment
- Belonging & Mental Health





Building Connections Program

Homelessness Prevention

Beginning at the age of 18, youth forced to leave foster care experience among the highest rates of youth homelessness in our society. A lack of stable housing, unaddressed trauma, and little support create barriers to graduating from high school, maintaining employment, and belonging to a community. With the city's growing housing crisis, the stakes are higher than ever.

StepStones' Homelessness Prevention focus addresses this urgent issue through innovative and award-winning solutions. Our work bridges the critical service gap by helping youth secure and maintain housing before they experience homelessness or shelter involvement. We assist youth by navigating housing systems and services, facilitating community-embedded housing with extended family and allies, and utilizing housing grants paid directly to landlords to remove financial barriers through our Housing Subsidy Program. Additionally, StepStones offers emergency supports to help youth meet their basic needs, addressing food and financial insecurity as they transition out of foster care.

At StepStones, we know that housing provides a safe and stable foundation from which youth from foster care can achieve educational goals, build careers, and prioritize their health and well-being. Our critical work is made possible by our community of supporters who fuel our ability to act quickly and effectively to divert youth from homelessness.



Young people in our program obtain stable housing through:

- Long-term, community-embedded housing solutions;
- Support re-building connections with trusted individuals;
- One-to-one mentorship;
- Housing service navigation support;
- Housing grants accessible through a newly developed online solution;
- Emergency supports distributed to help meet basic needs;
- A peer-to-peer knowledge exchange for housing organizations and advocates; and
- Support from one-to-one Connection Coordinators in locating, viewing, and securing housing options

58%

of youth experiencing homelessness report involvement with the child welfare system



85%

of youth are in stable housing after six months at StepStones



Building Connections Program Education & Employment



Youth in and from foster care face significant barriers to education and stable employment. Frequent transitions, school disruptions, and missed classes due to child protection involvement often derail academic progress. Without consistent support, many struggle to stay on track or navigate post-secondary options. Unlike their peers, they rarely have help with applications, finances, or encouragement to pursue their goals. After aging out of foster care, challenges like financial insecurity, housing instability, and mental health concerns make it even harder to focus on school or maintain employment. Without a diploma or training, job prospects are often limited to low-wage positions, and even when youth secure employment, mental health barriers can impact retention.

StepStones breaks these cycles by offering the support youth need to succeed. Through personalized tutoring, academic and career counselling, job shadowing, résumé and interview preparation, and connections to entrepreneurial mentors, we help youth set and achieve education and employment goals.

48%

of youth from the
child welfare system
graduate high school



82%

of youth at
StepStones are
currently attending
school or have
graduated high
school

We provide the support and stability youth need to take charge of their education and achieve success. Our approach includes:

- Collaborating with one-to-one Connection Coordinators and volunteer mentors to develop personalized education plans and pathways;
- Offering ongoing academic counselling, advocacy for learning disabilities and mental health challenges, and one-to-one tutoring;
- Guiding youth through post-secondary applications, school visits, and the complexities of the education system;
- Increasing access to customized employment and career events and networks for racialized, BIPOC, and women-identifying youth;
- Providing student housing grants to stabilize housing and reduce risks of experiencing homelessness and shelter involvement; and
- Recognizing and celebrating milestones and achievements along the way





Building Connections Program Belonging & Mental Health



Youth involved in the child welfare system face significant mental health challenges rooted in instability, isolation, and trauma. Many have sustained Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) like neglect, abuse, parental incarceration, and domestic violence that led to their involvement in child welfare—factors that increase the risk of developing long-term mental and physical health concerns. Once in foster care, frequent moves, disrupted relationships, and inconsistent support exacerbate mental health challenges.

StepStones for Youth takes a holistic, trauma-informed approach to mental health, recognizing that healing is deeply connected to stability, belonging, and culturally relevant support. Through full case-management and one-to-one relationships, we ensure every young person has a consistent, long-term support system to help them navigate their mental health journey. We prioritize early intervention and create safe, stigma-free spaces where youth can process their experiences and access the care they need. By addressing the impact of trauma and systemic barriers, StepStones empowers young people to develop healthy coping strategies and create a stable, fulfilling future.

7%

of youth describe
stable mental health
at intake to
StepStones



88%

of youth have
stabilized their
mental health after
12 months in our
program

To support youth on their mental health journeys we:

- Train our front-line team in Dialectical Behaviour Therapy, Permanency and Adoption Competency Training, and suicide prevention counselling;
- Offer mental health grants accessible through a newly developed online solution;
- Provide access to trauma-informed psychotherapists and subsidies for counselling to remove financial barriers;
- Connect youth with physicians, counsellors, and culturally appropriate services;
- Help youth build support networks of volunteer mentors, community allies, and other trusted adults;
- Subsidize travel and meals for youth during the holidays to help them spend meaningful time with family and friends; and
- Increase youth engagement with cultural, social, and interest groups to increase self-esteem, belonging, and community



Our Programs

Housing Subsidy Program

For youth transitioning out of foster care, stable housing can make the difference between pursuing education or employment and falling into crisis. In today's housing market, even with multiple supports, rent can still be out of reach.

To address this gap, StepStones created the Youth Housing Subsidy Portal—a secure, online system that allows young people to directly apply for housing grants. The system is fast, youth-friendly, and uses automation and AI to streamline eligibility, verify identification, and process payments. Subsidies are paid directly to landlords, easing financial strain and helping youth stay housed.

The portal was co-designed with experts across the youth homelessness and child welfare sectors, and is built to expand. In the future, StepStones will open the portal to partner organizations so we can move closer to a coordinated, scalable solution to youth homelessness.

StepStones' portable housing grants support youth who face significant financial hardship, covering rent top-ups and first and last month's rent for those living below the poverty line with no family support. With the right tools in place, youth can build the stability needed to pursue their goals and move forward with confidence.



505

housing subsidies were distributed to youth in 2024

Young people in our program access and maintain housing through:

- A secure, youth-accessible online portal to apply for housing subsidies;
- Automated eligibility checks, ID verification, and direct payments to landlords;
- Grants covering first and last month's rent and monthly rent top-ups for up to 12 months;
- Clear eligibility criteria ensuring support reaches youth with the greatest need; and
- Collaborative partnerships across the sector to expand access and scale impact.





Our Programs

Engagement Program



Since the inception of StepStones, we have understood that youth involved in the foster care system require inclusive strategies to feel comfortable and motivated to engage with resources and services. Youth who have lived in foster and group home care have experienced institutionalization, the eroding of trust in adults and systems, and have only been able to depend on adults who are paid to take care of them temporarily. To be able to achieve our targets for improving outcomes for the youth we serve, we know that we must first earn their trust for building supportive foundations and relationships.

Our engagement programming consists of vibrant workshops, recreational events, and seasonal celebrations. Our unique weekly youth community dinner provides a set time and place for youth to meet with front-line staff, volunteer mentors, and other supportive individuals on a consistent basis to share culturally diverse meals and receive individualized services.

StepStones' Engagement Program directly improves the sense of belonging and community for youth while providing an entry point into StepStones' services. As StepStones' high outcomes demonstrate, youth thrive when they have the support of consistent adults who are invested in their success.



1,294

**attendees at StepStones
workshops, events, and dinners this
year**

To engage youth and build trusting relationships, StepStones offers:

- Diverse workshops featuring cooking skills, nutrition knowledge, arts and creative expression, health and wellness, financial literacy, and small-business development led by experts;
- Group recreational events like go-karting, bowling, and roller skating for physical fitness and peer camaraderie;
- Inclusive events celebrating diversity through the calendar year including Black History Month, International Women's Day, Pride, and National Indigenous Peoples Day;
- Seasonal celebrations including our Fall Harvest Feast, Holiday Dinner and Party in December, and annual Spring BBQ; and
- Weekly Community Dinners for youth involved in child welfare in our program, on our waiting list, and from the broader community



Get Involved

Volunteers in Action

Our volunteers are the driving force behind StepStones, walking alongside our youth and staff with unwavering dedication. Their generosity strengthens our community, and their commitment inspires us every day. We are deeply grateful for the many ways they make a difference.

Contributions from our incredible volunteers in 2024 include:

- Becoming long-term, one-to-one mentors for youth in our program;
- Supporting engagement events and activities such as our annual Harvest Dinner and Holiday Party;
- Cooking and serving food at our weekly community dinners;
- Increasing youth's sense of belonging through our Holiday Gift Drive and essential supply kits donated by supporters;
- Teaching art workshops to encourage self-expression and creativity;
- Running cooking workshops to help youth develop culinary and nutritional knowledge;
- Supporting the coordination and execution of our annual Crafting Change fundraising event;
- Serving on our Board of Directors



Our Volunteers have:



- Served over **2,600** meals at our community dinners
- Wrapped **174** gifts for our Holiday Gift Drive
- Committed **1,970** hours of their time to support youth



2024 Board of Directors

Lorna Freeman
Chair

Sharon Beers
Board Member

Tanya Sinha
Vice Chair

Tim Leonard
Board Member

Brendan Cochrane
Treasurer

Roman Lifshitz
Board Member

Katherine Brown
Secretary

Diavin Miller
Board Member

Finding Community Through Volunteering

John & Michael's StepStones Experience



When John and Michael first learned about StepStones for Youth, they were immediately drawn to the organization's unique approach—one where youth actively choose to seek support, mentorship, and community. As volunteers, they wanted to provide guidance and stability to young people who need it most, and StepStones offered them a meaningful way to do just that.

Since joining as volunteers in 2024, John and Michael have immersed themselves in the heart of StepStones—our weekly community dinners. Serving meals may seem like a simple act, but to them, it is deeply significant. “There is something so fundamental about one person serving food to another. Talk about a nurturing experience!” John shared. Through these weekly dinners, they have not only provided warm meals but have also built relationships through conversations and becoming familiar faces in the StepStones community.

What stands out most to John and Michael is the intentionality behind StepStones' work. From comprehensive mentor training to the empowerment-focused approach, they recognize the importance StepStones places on ensuring volunteers are truly prepared to make a lasting impact. “The youth who participate in StepStones' programs are here of their own volition. That matters enormously because it is a sign that they are willing to seek advice and input from others, and that they are committed to writing their own story rather than letting anyone else write it for them,” Michael explained.

For them, volunteering with StepStones has become more than just giving back—it is about being part of something bigger, a community where everyone shows up for one another. “We both look forward to seeing the youth, staff, and volunteers at the weekly community dinners and we are slowly becoming part of this community. It is one of the highlights of our week,” they shared.

John and Michael have been a vibrant presence in our community, bringing warmth, dedication, and compassion to every interaction. Now, they are taking the next step in their volunteer journey—training to become mentors to a youth in our program, providing the kind of lasting impact that only a steady, trusted connection can offer. We look forward to seeing where their journey with StepStones takes them next. To anyone considering getting involved, their advice is simple: “If you are ready to make a commitment and stick with it, then do it—you won't be sorry.”

Our Supporters

For over 20 years, StepStones for Youth has thrived because of our supporters. Your generosity, belief in our mission, and commitment to equity and opportunity have helped shape brighter futures for youth from the child welfare system. Our community sees the boundless potential in every young person—and takes action to help them reach it. With your invaluable dedication, StepStones continues to grow, providing the stability and support youth need to build a better tomorrow. From all of us at StepStones, thank you!



2024

Individual Supporters

Diamond Supporters (\$20,000+)

Jim Byrd & Carol Bagozzi
Don Langill
Shreya Shah
Glen Silvestri

Platinum Supporters (\$10,000–\$19,999)

Harleen Bains
Ian de Verteuil & Linda Glover
Andrew Grimes
Anonymous



Gold Supporters (\$5,000–\$9,999)

Jacqui Allard & Burke Paterson
Heidi Gollert
Judy & Craig Jarvis
Monique Morden in memoriam of Shirley Morden
Awanish & Tanya Sinha
The Ward Family Foundation
Anonymous (4)

Silver Supporters (\$1,000–\$4,999)

Kimara Allard
Michelle & Marcus Bertagnolli
Katherine Brown
Paul & Catherine Campbell
Alex Caridia
Liz Chisholm
Loredana Cunti
Mark & Rita Daniel
Graham & Susan Denton
Sandra Dye
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Frank Salmonds
Lyssa & Brian Sequeira
Lauren Tollstam
Sandy Walker
Dave & Ashley Wiley
Anonymous (25)

Bronze Supporters (\$500–\$999)

Jan Beattie
Doug Bradley & Mary Killoran
Franky Chernin
The Cory Family
Danielle Foerster
Adrien Gaudet
Katherine Gurney & André Nowakowski
Lawvin Hadisi
Luzia Jean Pedro
Derek Little
Felix Mayr-Harting
Josie Merenda
Lauren O'Malley
Shawn & Audrey Reynolds
Dianne & Jim Sanderson
Anonymous (32)

Corporate, Foundation & Government Supporters



Diamond Supporters (\$125,000+)

Government of Canada's Supports for Student Learning Program
Scotiabank
United Way Greater Toronto

Platinum Supporters (\$75,000-\$124,999)

The Four Oaks Foundation
The Home Depot Canada Foundation

Gold Supporters (\$50,000-\$74,999)

The Fyfe Foundation
HALO Fund at the Minto Foundation
The Lillian Meighen and Don Wright Foundation
Mohari Canada Inc.
Pelletier Youth in Transition
RBC Foundation
TD Ready Commitment
W.C. Kitchen Family Foundation

Silver Supporters (\$25,000-\$49,999)

Aubrey & Marla Dan Foundation
Bickle-Wilder Foundation
Delta Bingo Etobicoke
The Government of Canada under the Community Services
Recovery Fund
Ontario Trillium Foundation
Shorcan Brokers Limited
Sycamore Fund
Tenaquip Foundation
Williams Wilson Sherport Foundation

Bronze Supporters (\$10,000-\$24,999)

Belsize Foundation
Catherine Donnelly Foundation
Children's Aid Foundation of Canada
Exposed Film
Grant Thornton Foundation
Kiwanis Club of Toronto Foundation
Mackenzie Investments Charitable Foundation
Speranza Foundation

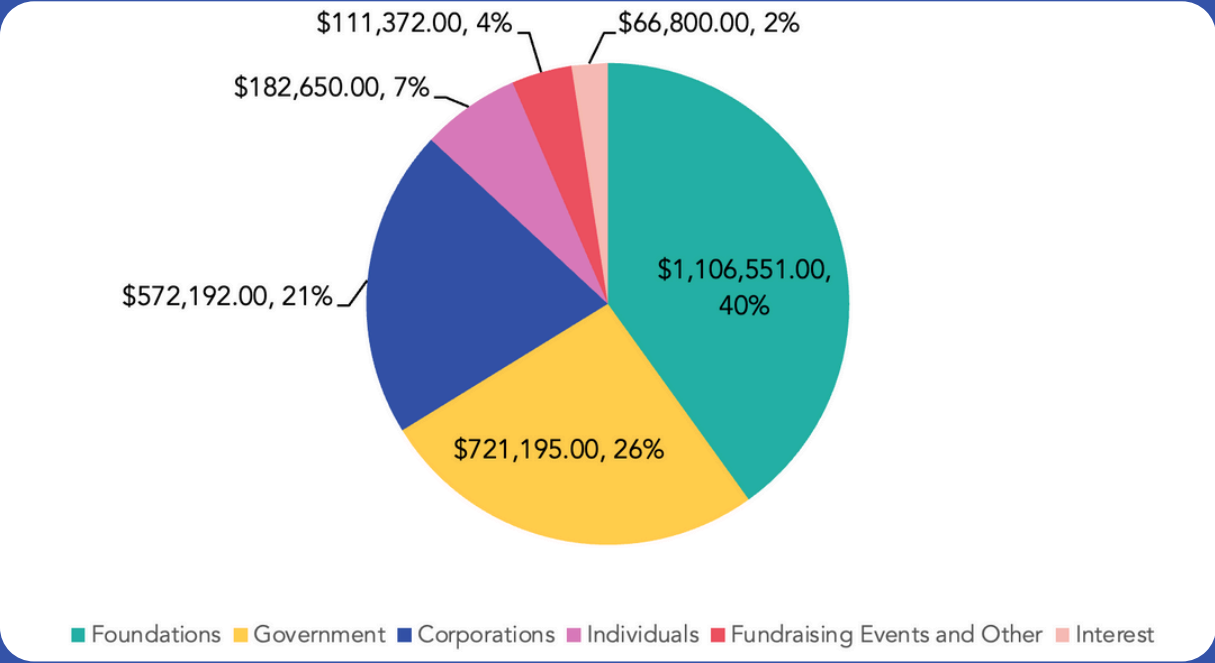
General Corporate, Foundation & Government Supporters

Airlie Foundation
Azrieli Foundation
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CIBC
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Godsoe Financial Capital
Great Lakes Brewery
Greta
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Stir Consulting Inc.
TELUS
Trisura Guarantee Insurance Company
United Way East Ontario
Ursel Phillips Fellows Hopkinson LLP
Walker Law
Warder Law Professional Corporation
Youth Philanthropy Initiative Canada

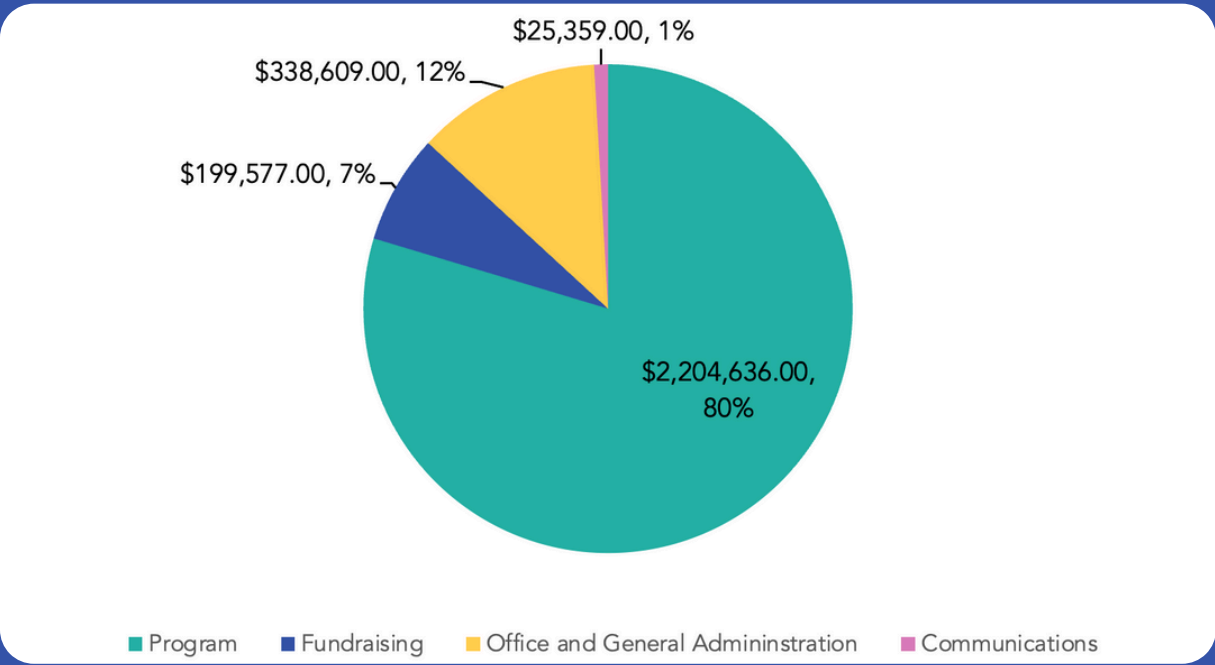
Financials 2024



Revenue: \$2,760,760



Expenses: \$2,768,181



More than just a place to stay – a home.

Ethan's Story

When Ethan joined StepStones for Youth in 2023, he was guarded and hesitant to engage in our program. While he met several times with his StepStones Connections Coordinator, he resisted fully investing in our Building Connections Program or the personalized plan they created together. Understandably so—Ethan had grown accustomed to relying on himself, shaped by an inconsistent support system and the feeling of needing to navigate life independently.

At the time, Ethan was living with his foster mother and attending high school to complete his studies before pursuing his goal of becoming a carpenter. However, he struggled to see the value in seeking resources or building relationships, viewing them as risks rather than opportunities. Upon graduating and leaving his foster home, Ethan faced a string of overwhelming challenges. His housing situation became precarious, forcing him to move between short-term rentals which offered no stability and drained his finances. At the same time, he realized that carpentry was no longer a career path he wanted to pursue. These converging difficulties left him at a crossroads where he began to reflect on his need for support.



This turning point marked a shift in Ethan's mindset. Recognizing that he could not navigate these challenges alone, he began collaborating more openly with his Connection Coordinator who helped him redefine his perspective on relationships. Ethan was supported in identifying genuine connections and developing a stronger support network. Through this process, he rebuilt relationships with immediate and extended family members which significantly improved his mental health and emotional stability. With his newfound openness, StepStones was able to provide more intentional support, helping Ethan create his résumé, explore new career options, and cultivate a positive outlook on his future.

StepStones supported Ethan in navigating essential resources to build a foundation for his future. Ethan was offered stable employment at the Toronto Humane Society—a role he loves for its purpose and reliability. StepStones continued to provide mentorship and encouragement as Ethan worked toward his next goal: secure housing.

In November, he moved into his own apartment and has received the practical assistance and emotional support needed for a smooth transition. Now, his apartment is more than just a place to live—it is a symbol of the stability and optimism he has been striving for.

With help addressing critical barriers faced by many youth from foster care, Ethan transitioned from a precarious living situation to a stable home, supported by a strong foundation of relationships and resources. This integration demonstrates how StepStones tailors its programming to address multiple challenges simultaneously, empowering youth to achieve stability and success.

Today, Ethan continues to flourish. He regularly participates in StepStones events, including engagement activities and our weekly youth community dinners where his personality shines. Ethan has come a long way as he embraces the value of relationships and community. To Ethan, we want to say how incredibly proud we are of him and how happy it makes us to know he has a safe place to call home. His hard work and tenacity, combined with his optimism and drive to succeed, is an inspiration to us all.

Thank you, Ethan, for sharing your story!



Testimonials

"At AMDF, we believe every young person deserves access to mental health support and safe housing. StepStones for Youth aligns with this mission by helping at-risk youth through its Homelessness Prevention Program and providing vital resources for those transitioning from the child welfare system. Our partnership is based on a shared vision of safety, inclusivity, and transformative change. We are inspired by the life-changing impact StepStones has on youth across Toronto."

Alyse Bernbaum | Executive Director, Aubrey & Marla Dan Foundation



"StepStones for Youth has been a critical referral champion for youth accessing mental health subsidy support through WoodGreen, and instrumental in building a pathway between our two organizations that ensured the expansion of support for all young people aging out of care. Having worked alongside their team for over three years, StepStones has demonstrated a clear understanding of the key issues facing youth from child welfare, and a willingness to approach solutions through a collective impact approach. I am proud to say that we have had the opportunity to work alongside their team in doing this work."

Erik Wexler | Program Manager, WoodGreen



"The Home Depot Canada Foundation has been a proud supporter of StepStones for Youth and their transformative work in preventing youth homelessness. Their dedication and compassion in their work to support youth and end intergenerational dependency is evident. By securing stable housing, building long-lasting support networks, and equipping youth with essential life skills, StepStones for Youth is breaking the cycle of hardship and empowering young people to thrive. We look forward to continuing our impactful partnership and shared mission to prevent and end youth homelessness in the years ahead."

Amy Bilodeau | Sr. Manager, The Home Depot Canada Foundation



"Please know that the organization you are supporting is a great one, and it is **changing the lives of vulnerable youth daily**. Thank you again for your continued support!"

Shavesha
Youth at StepStones



Cover page photo credit: Self-Portrait by Leah

Back cover page photo credit: Self-Portrait by ES

Both portraits created in StepStones Visual Voices photography workshop



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