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New report outlines how to strengthen sexual health services for youth in British Columbia

The “BC Youth Sexual Health Evaluation Report” shares findings from expert consultations with youth and service providers across the province with the aim of understanding current gaps in care and co-designing strengthened, youth-centred sexual health services to better meet the needs of youth moving forward.

Today, August 11th 2026, the UBC Sexual Health Evaluation Team and Options for Sexual Health (Options) have published a new report documenting persistent barriers to youth sexual health access across BC and the development of a co-designed, youth-centred sexual health service model to better meet the needs of diverse youth. Drawing on the experiences of youth (ages 15-29 years) and service providers across BC, in partnership with local youth and community advisors and the Options team, the report summarizes the findings from the evaluation phase of an ongoing co-design, implementation project on youth-centred sexual health care in BC.

Equitable access to sexual and reproductive health services remains a pressing concern for youth (ages 15-29 years) in BC and across Canada. Rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), sexual violence, and unplanned pregnancies remain disproportionately high, particularly in rural, remote, and smaller urban centres settings across the province. While there have been some major advancements in sexual health service delivery in BC, including free contraception for youth, online testing for STIs, and expanded scope of practice for prescribing contraception and Mifegymiso (prescription abortion), inequities in access to sexual health care and education for youth remain a major concern, particularly outside urban centres and for minoritized youth.

The evaluation phase (2025-2026) included site visits across 8 communities and 4 health regions in BC; alongside expert consultations and interviews with 91 youth and 47 sexual health care providers across the province. Among youth, the highest proportion were aged 15-19 years (44%) and 24% of youth were 20-24 years. Close to half (46%) identified as a racial minority, with 19% as First Nations and/or Métis. A quarter of youth (24%) identified a sexual

minority (lesbian, gay, queer, bisexual, pansexual, asexual or questioning). In terms of gender identity, the majority (69%) identified as girls or young women, 25% as boys or young men, and 6% as gender diverse, non-binary, or gender queer. Among the 47 service providers, close to half were nurses (49%), along with family physicians, counsellors, sexual assault educators, settlement service providers, and midwives.

“The evaluation revealed ongoing gaps in sexual health care access across BC, and these are particularly amplified for youth in rural communities and with intersecting social inequities” says **Rachel Bergen, Evaluation Lead**

The report documents limited awareness and promotion of available and accessible services for youth, from contraception and abortion care to STI and pregnancy supports; gaps in sexual health education and services in schools; restricted clinic hours where available; lack of flexibility and inaccessible locations; and widespread concerns of confidentiality, particularly in smaller communities. Youth also describe significant transportation barriers, with some youth travelling a full day just to access care.

“You have to walk through an emergency department to get to something that just should be easy access for everyone. It felt really isolating. If I hadn't gone with my friend, I wouldn't have gone, because I feel like...you had to ask everyone, ‘Where's the sexual health [clinic]?’” – **Youth Expert**

“So, [the local primary health center] has a lot of barriers for youth to access because of confidentiality reasons. For youth, it's a small community, everyone knows each other. And unfortunately, there's a lot of talk about who comes in there... So, I've just heard a lot of youth say they won't go there.” – **Rural Service Provider Expert**

The evaluation also found a concerning lack of safe, inclusive and culturally competent care, with disproportionate gaps for gender, sexual minority youth, Indigenous and racial minority youth and newcomer youth within mainstream public health units and primary care clinics.

Through a network of more than 30 sexual health clinics, as well as a telehealth service, and affiliate clinics in partnership with First Nations Bands and Northern Health Authorities, Options delivers a broad range of care- from contraception management, STI testing and treatment, cervical cancer screening, pregnancy testing and counselling, and referrals to external sexual and reproductive health services. Through this clinical program and its Sex Sense, Education and Community Engagement programs, Options champions and celebrates the sexual health of all people in BC by supporting, providing, and promoting inclusive and accessible health care

and education *“This evaluation phase was undertaken alongside our strategic planning activities, with the aim of connecting with youth and providers across BC to bring their voices directly into determining the best way forward for sexual health service delivery in BC.”* **says Tiffany Melius, Executive Director of Options for Sexual Health.**

A key outcome of the evaluation phase is the creation of a co-designed, youth-centred sexual health care model that will be piloted this coming fall by Options for Sexual Health and local partners in two rural and remote communities. With funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), during the upcoming phases of the project the team will evaluate the youth clinics for acceptability, feasibility, and refinement of the model with a focus on potential for scale-up and sustainability.

The co-designed, youth-centred sexual health service model includes low-barrier, youth only spaces that are 2S/LGBTQIA+ inclusive, culturally competent and adopt core principles of youth friendly spaces; access to youth social programming; specialized sexual health care with adjacency /or direct pathways to other primary care clinical supports; linkages to comprehensive sexual health education within schools; flexible options for evening or weekends access; and transportation support.

“It is exciting to see Options and local partners pilot a youth-centred sexual health care model that is directly co-designed by youth and providers to better meet the needs of youth across BC. The model aims to address growing sexual health inequities, particularly for minoritized youth and those living in rural and remote communities.” **says Dr. Kate Shannon, UBC Professor and co-principal investigator of the project.**

About BC Youth Sexual Health Evaluation and Co-Design Project

Funded by Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the UBC Sexual Health Evaluation Team and Options for Sexual Health partnered in 2025 to facilitate a project aimed at strengthening youth sexual health services in BC – with a particular focus on underrepresented youth and youth in rural, and remote communities. The project adopts a user-engaged, co-design implementation science approach to evaluate youth and provider-identified gaps and design of youth-centred, sexual health services that better meets the needs of youth in BC.

You can read more about the project and access the report here: <https://www.bc-sexualhealthevaluation.ca>

About Options for Sexual Health

As the largest sexual health non-profit in Canada, Options provides sexual and reproductive health education, information, and clinical services across BC with the mission of supporting, providing, and promoting inclusive and accessible health care and education. Through a network of more than 30 sexual health clinics, as well as a telehealth service, Options delivers a broad range of care from contraception management, sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing and treatment, cervical cancer screening, pregnancy testing and counselling, and referrals to external sexual and reproductive health services. In addition to clinical care, Options delivers school- and community-based sexual health education sessions, administers a certification program for sexual health educators, the Sexual Health Educator Certificate (SHEC), and runs the Sex Sense program. Sex Sense is a confidential service operated by registered nurses, counsellors, and sex educators, which offers information, referrals, and system navigation support via phone and email, with chat and text to be added in the Fall of 2026.

You can read more about Options here: <https://www.optionsforsexualhealth.org>

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