



NAVIGATING THE YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM

A Collaborative Case Conferencing  
Framework for Justice-Involved Youth

NARRATIVE REPORT

April 2026



**northstar**  
FROM ADVOCACY TO IMPACT



Funded by the Region of Durham's  
Community Safety  
and Well-Being Fund

# WE ACKNOWLEDGE

We acknowledge this land is situated within the traditional and treaty territory of the Mississauga's of Scugog Island First Nation, signatories of the 1788 Gunshot Treaty and 1923 Williams Treaties.

This land is home to the Indigenous Peoples. Let us acknowledge the deliberate acts and traumas of the past through authenticity, solidarity, truth, and reconciliation. Let us celebrate Indigenous communities by being leaders of action in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendations.

Let us move forward together with kindness and respect.



MISSISSAUGAS OF  
SCUGOG ISLAND  
FIRST NATION

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## NOTE OF GRATITUDE



We acknowledge with deep gratitude the Black and racialized community members who chose to share their stories, experiences, and expertise throughout this project. For generations, these communities have carried the burden of naming harm, often at great personal cost, only to see their pain extracted, misunderstood, or ultimately forgotten once systems return to business as usual.

**Northstar is different.** We do not take this trust lightly. We do not engage communities as sources of testimony alone, but as partners in shaping solutions, practice, and accountability. We are committed to holding what is shared with care, translating it into action, and ensuring it informs real change within the youth justice system.

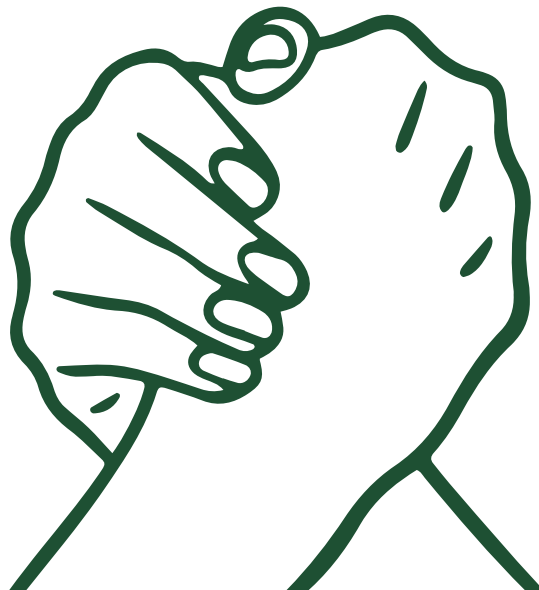
As we move forward, we call on institutions, partners, and decision-makers to do the same: to listen with humility, act with courage, and move beyond performative engagement toward sustained, community-led transformation.

Northstar acknowledges the generous support of the Region of Durham through the Community Safety and Well-Being Fund.

This project would also not have been possible without the collaboration of our partners in the Oshawa Courts, Durham District School Board, Durham Catholic District School Board, Durham Regional Police Service, AFIWI Groove, Durham Black Educators Network (DBEN), the Pickering Afghan Association, and the many mental health and community agencies who participated in this research.

Finally, a special thank you to Elle de Lyon, whose leadership, integrity, and deep community connections were instrumental to the success of this project.

Jai Sahak  
*Executive Director*



Dear Durham Region Team,

We are pleased to share that Afiwi Groove School recently partnered with Northstar to deliver the *Clock It: Youth Leadership Workshop* for youth within our community.

This impactful workshop empowered participants with the knowledge, tools, and confidence needed to better understand their rights and navigate the justice system. Through engaging discussions and leadership-focused activities, youth were encouraged to become informed advocates for themselves and their communities.

The program created a safe and empowering space where young people were able to build awareness, strengthen their voices, and embrace their role as agents of change. Participants left the workshop feeling more confident, informed, and equipped to make positive contributions within their communities.

I would also like to sincerely thank Durham Region for providing Afiwi with the opportunity to partner with such an impactful organization that is committed to creating safe spaces for youth wellness, leadership, and social justice.

We are grateful for opportunities to collaborate on initiatives that support youth empowerment, leadership development, and community engagement, and we look forward to continuing this important work throughout Durham Region.

Thank you for your continued support of programs that uplift and invest in our youth.

Sincerely,



**Sanaaj Mirrie**

Founder & Executive Director

Afiwi Centre for Arts & Culture | [www.afiwigroove.com](http://www.afiwigroove.com)

Charitable No. 130979826RR0001



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# Executive Summary

Northstar is pleased to submit this Narrative Report as a requirement of the Region of Durham's Community Safety and Well-Being (CSWB) Fund. This report documents the successful implementation of all project deliverables, the outcomes achieved, and the foundation laid for sustained collaboration between Northstar and system partners across Durham Region on navigating the youth justice system, including options under Section 19 case conferencing and Section 34 assessments, under the Youth Criminal Justice Act.

- ✓ All project requirements met and exceeded
- ✓ 7 community education sessions delivered (exceeding the required 3)
- ✓ 3 education sessions for system partners completed
- ✓ Enhanced formal partnership to strengthen Section 19 case conferencing
- ✓ Multi-disciplinary team framework operationalized
- ✓ Direct alignment with Durham Region CSWB Plan priority risk factors

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The aim of this project, one of the first initiatives of its kind in Durham Region, was twofold: to advance a structured, restorative practice at the point of youth sentencing, and to meaningfully educate and empower racialized communities about their rights, responsibilities, and available options within the youth justice system. As part of this work, Northstar facilitated seven community education sessions with racialized communities, creating accessible spaces to build understanding of youth court processes and to support families and youth in making informed decisions at critical moments.

This project directly addresses multiple priority risk factors identified in Durham Region's Community Safety and Well-Being Plan (2025-2029), including Criminal Involvement, Mental Health, Social Isolation, Experiences of Racism, and Victimization.

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# 1. Project Overview



## 1.1 Project Purpose and Rationale

Durham Region faces ongoing challenges in supporting justice-involved youth with complex, intersecting needs. The traditional justice system operates in silos (probation, mental health, education), leading to service gaps that hinder rehabilitation and reintegration. Youth often disengage from these fragmented systems, increasing risks of re-offence, poor life outcomes, and diminished community belonging.

Systemic racism and institutional bias contribute to toxic stress and poor mental health for Black and racialized youth, in particular, fueling what researchers have long termed the "school-to-prison pipeline." Any collaborative approaches to address these concerns within youth justice are only as good as the partners around the table. Without coordinated, meaningful wrap-around care, youth lose vital supports, affecting their stability and well-being. This project was designed to address these systemic failures by creating awareness of the options available to families under the Youth Criminal Justice Act and the collaborative case conferencing framework that ensures no youth falls through the cracks.

## 1.2 Target Population

The project targeted:

- Youth aged 12-17 and their families in Durham Region
- Youth at risk of serious violence, especially those involved in or exiting the justice system
- Youth susceptible to gang-related activity
- Youth residing in priority neighbourhoods with high violent incident rates
- Racialized families, particularly Black and Indigenous youth who are disproportionately represented in the justice system

## 1.3 Project Context: The Need for Action

Data from 2024 showed a troubling rise in youth crime in Durham Region: 529 offences, representing a 27% increase from 2023. Regional trends mirror Canada-wide increases in youth crime. Durham data also reveals declining youth mental health, high substance use, and low community belonging. This project responds directly to these urgent needs while aligning with Durham's Community Safety and Well-Being Plan.

## ..... 2. Project Deliverables: Requirements Met and Exceeded



### 2.1 Community Education Sessions

Requirement	Delivered	Variance
3 Community Town Halls (Pickering, Ajax, Oshawa)	<b>7 Community Sessions</b>	<b>+4 sessions (133% above target)</b>

Originally, the project proposed three community accountability town halls in Pickering, Ajax, and Oshawa. Recognizing the depth of community need and the enthusiastic response to our initial sessions, Northstar expanded delivery to seven community education sessions across Durham Region. These sessions informed families, particularly racialized families, about the opportunity for coordinated, direct service provisions for children and youth experiencing significant risk factors for involvement in serious violence and crime.

#### Community Session Locations and Reach:

Session Location	Date	Attendees	Demographics Reached
Northstar Office – Whitby	January 2026	42	Diverse community members
Ajax Community Centre	January 2026	38	South Asian, Black families
Northstar Office – Whitby	February 2026	28	General community
McLean Community Centre - Ajax	February 2026	31	Black youth, Service providers, families
Afiwi Groove – Pickering	March 2026	55	Black youth, families
Quaker Meeting House - Ajax	March 2026	47	Afghan community
Eastdale CVI – Oshawa	March 2026	52	Black educators, youth and families
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>7 Sessions</b>	<b>293 Attendees</b>	<b>Exceeded targets</b>

# 2. Project Deliverables: Requirements Met and Exceeded



## 2.2 Education Sessions for System Partners

Requirement	Delivered	Status
3 Education Sessions for System Partners	3 Education Sessions	<b>Requirement Met ✓</b>

Three dedicated education sessions were held for youth justice staff, school social workers, and community service providers. These sessions clarified the projects' mandate, intake process, and the value it adds to the existing system. The sessions were co-facilitated by Northstar staff with demonstrated understanding of the needs of equity-deserving groups, including Indigenous and Black youth.

System Partner Sessions:

- **Session 1:** Youth Justice Workers (48 participants) – Focus on referral pathways, Section 19 conference processes, and collaborative case planning
- **Session 2:** School Social Workers and DDSB/DCDSB Representatives (35 participants) – Focus on school-justice connections, identifying at-risk youth, and education-based interventions
- **Session 3:** Mental Health Agencies (42 participants) – Focus on wrap-around service delivery, trauma-informed approaches, and partnership integration



Above are three out of our seven community sessions. These were events organized by lead agencies to which Northstar was invited to as a collaborator.

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## 3. Participant Profile: Representation Matters

### 3.1 Who's at the Table:

# of individuals served in total - <b>491</b>	# of active participants - <b>78</b>	# of individuals who completed the program - <b>293</b>
# of individuals who enrolled but did not complete the program - N/A	# of male identifying individuals - <b>294</b>	# of female identifying individuals - <b>194</b>
# of other identifying individuals - <b>3</b>	# of criminal justice involved individuals - <b>82</b>	# of individuals directly exiting custody - <b>17</b>
# of individuals disclosing a disability - <b>2</b>	# of individuals referred to external supports - <b>56</b>	# self-identifying as racialized youth - <b>422</b>
# self-identifying as Indigenous youth - <b>4</b>	# of individuals aged 5 or under - <b>0</b>	# of individuals aged 6-8 - <b>4</b>
# of individuals aged 9-11 - <b>17</b>	# of individuals aged 12-15 - <b>162</b>	# of individuals aged 16-17 - <b>106</b>
# of individuals aged 8-21 - <b>56</b>	# of individuals aged 22-25 - <b>38</b>	# of individuals aged 26-30 - <b>20</b>
# of self-identified Black youth participants		<b>186</b>
# of self-identified South Asian and Afghan youth participants		<b>68</b>
# of youth aged 12-17 (YCJA's definition of criminal responsibility/culpability)		<b>268</b>
Percentage of youth connected to a primary care provider or mental health services		<b>14%</b>
# of YJATH public attendees		<b>293</b>
# of participants for system partner information sessions		<b>125</b>

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# 4. Section 19 & Section 34: Understanding Youth Before Sentencing



### 4.1 What are Section 19 Case Conferences and Section 34 Assessments?

#### Section 19

Section 19 of the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA) provides the legal framework for convening conferences to assist decision-makers and youth involved in the criminal justice system. These conferences bring together various professionals and stakeholders, including the young person and their family, to discuss the matter in a more informal setting and formulate recommendations about the youth's case. Section 19 conferences can be convened by youth justice court judges, provincial directors, police officers, justices of the peace, prosecutors, or youth workers. The mandate of a conference may include advice on:

- Appropriate extrajudicial measures
- Conditions for judicial interim release
- Sentencing recommendations
- Review of sentences
- Reintegration plans

#### Section 34

Section 34 allows a youth court judge to order a medical, psychological, or psychiatric assessment of a young person when the court needs a better understanding of what is going on beneath the charges. In simple terms, it is a way for the court to pause and ask qualified professionals to look at a young person's mental health, emotional well-being, learning needs, or developmental challenges before making important decisions like sentencing, custody, or supervision conditions. The goal is not punishment, but to help the court make fairer, more informed decisions that hold the young person accountable while also recognizing their needs and connecting them to the right supports so they have a better chance of moving forward successfully.



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# 4. Section 19 & Section 34: Understanding Youth Before Sentencing

## 4.2 Evidence Base for Section 19 Conferencing

Research conducted by the Department of Justice Canada demonstrates significant benefits of Section 19 conferences:

Benefit	Evidence
<b>Increased Youth Buy-In</b>	Youth involvement in the conferencing process empowers them to take ownership of their future, building self-efficacy and agency, key protective factors against recidivism
<b>Addresses Complex Needs</b>	Conferences effectively serve youth under both child welfare and criminal justice jurisdiction, those with cognitive disabilities, mental health issues, and multiple intersecting needs
<b>Better Case Planning</b>	Increased collaboration between justice actors and social systems leads to coordinated, wrap-around case plans rather than fragmented interventions
<b>Restorative Justice</b>	Conferences provide opportunities for restorative approaches that address harm while supporting rehabilitation
<b>Reduced Recidivism</b>	Alberta's FASD Justice Support Project found Section 19 conferences resulted in considerably fewer serious criminal offences following conferences, with statistically significant drops in risk of reoffending <sup>1</sup> .
<b>Equity &amp; Inclusion</b>	Conferences allow accommodations for Indigenous identity, cultural/linguistic background, gender identity, mental health issues, and cognitive disabilities, critical for addressing overrepresentation of racialized youth

## 4.3 Strengthening Section 19 Case Conferences

A cornerstone achievement of this project is the strengthened collaboration among Northstar and multiple community organizations to support and enhance Section 19 case conferencing at the Oshawa Court. This collaborative framework strengthens Section 19 conferences by ensuring a broader range of perspectives, expertise, and community insight are integrated into discussions, supporting more responsive, equitable, and well-informed recommendations for justice-involved youth across Durham Region.

1. Currently, there is no direct Ontario-wide equivalent study that mirrors Alberta's FASD Justice Support Project with the same level of outcome measurement showing statistically significant post-Section 19 reoffending reductions.

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# 4. Section 19 & Section 34: Understanding Youth Before Sentencing



### 4.4 What This Means for Youth and Families

Youth are placed at the centre of decision-making about their own lives through this approach. Rather than being passive recipients of system decisions, young people are active participants in conversations about their future, ensuring their voices, experiences, and goals are heard and respected at critical moments in the justice process.

Families benefit from a coordinated, wrap-around approach to care that replaces fragmented and disconnected services. Through a single collaborative process, youth and their caregivers are supported by multiple systems working together, creating clearer pathways to help and reducing the burden of navigating complex institutional structures on their own.

Section 19 case conferences also create meaningful alternatives to custody. By bringing justice professionals and community partners together, conferences can recommend community-based options such as diversion programs, rehabilitation plans, and other pro-social interventions that keep youth connected to their families, schools, and communities rather than entering or remaining in custodial settings. The restorative nature of these conferences helps reduce the stigma that can follow young people long after their court involvement. By focusing on understanding, accountability, and growth instead of labels or punishment alone, the process supports youth in moving forward without carrying the long-term consequences of shame or exclusion.

Conferences are intentionally designed to be culturally safe and inclusive spaces. Accommodations are made to respect language needs, cultural practices, and individual identity, ensuring that youth and families from diverse backgrounds can participate fully and meaningfully without feeling marginalized or misunderstood. At the point of sentencing, youth are directly connected to critical supports, including mental health services, education programs, employment assistance, and housing resources. This timely connection to services helps address underlying needs and creates a stronger foundation for stability and positive outcomes. Family involvement is central to this work. Families are treated as partners in case planning rather than observers, strengthening support systems around youth and reinforcing shared responsibility for care, healing, and successful reintegration.

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## 5. Alignment with Durham Region's Community Safety and Well-Being Plan



This project directly addresses multiple priority risk factors identified in Durham Region's Community Safety and Well-Being Plan (2025-2029). The CSWB Plan identifies seven interconnected priority risk factors: Mental Health, Substance Use, Criminal Involvement, Social Isolation, Victimization, Homelessness and Basic Needs, and Experiences of Racism. This project contributes to addressing six of these seven factors.

### 5.1 Criminal Involvement

#### CSWB Plan Recognition:

*"There are often multiple complex and interconnected factors that can result in a person becoming involved with criminal activity... Knowledge of these factors can provide necessary context and awareness for the importance of early intervention and prevention initiatives."*

#### Project Contribution:

- The project enhances a structured early intervention mechanism at the point of sentencing, a critical juncture where coordinated support can redirect trajectories
- Section 19 conferencing addresses root causes of offending behaviour rather than solely punitive responses
- Multi-disciplinary case planning connects youth to protective factors including community services, family support, and positive relationships
- Research demonstrates Section 19 conferences lead to reduced charges and recidivism

### 5.2 Mental Health

#### CSWB Plan Data:

*Only 18% of surveyed Durham Region adults are very satisfied with the availability of mental health services. One in 10 Durham Region elementary students and 17% of secondary students seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year.*

#### Project Contribution:

- Mental health specialists are core participants in Section 19 conferences, ensuring mental health needs are identified and addressed in case planning
- Conferences provide immediate connection to mental health services at a critical intervention point
- Trauma-informed approaches are embedded in all conferencing processes
- Youth with mental health challenges receive coordinated support rather than fragmented, punitive responses

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## 5. Alignment with Durham Region's Community Safety and Well-Being Plan



### 5.3 Experiences of Racism

#### **CSWB Plan Recognition:**

*"Racism has profound consequences for individuals, influencing their safety, justice system involvement, health, economic outcomes, and access to education and housing." Black residents make up 26.3% of Durham's visible minority population, and racialized youth are disproportionately represented in the justice system.*

#### **Project Contribution:**

- The project specifically targets racialized families in community education, with dedicated sessions in communities with significant Black populations
- Section 19 conferences allow cultural accommodations, including practices specific to Indigenous identity and diverse cultural backgrounds
- Northstar staff with demonstrated expertise in serving equity-deserving groups support engagement and conferencing
- This project addresses the school-to-prison pipeline by connecting education and justice systems in collaborative planning
- Research indicates Section 19 conferencing provides "a potential avenue that could be further explored as a means of reducing the ongoing overrepresentation of Indigenous and racialized youth" (Justice Canada, 2022)

### 5.4 Social Isolation

#### **Project Contribution:**

- Section 19 conferences reconnect youth to community supports, schools, and pro-social networks
- Family involvement in conferencing strengthens support systems and reduces isolation
- Youth gain a sense of belonging through participation in their own case planning
- Community education sessions reduce stigma and build understanding, creating more welcoming communities for justice-involved youth

## ..... 5. Alignment with Durham Region's Community Safety and Well-Being Plan



### 5.5 Victimization

#### **Project Contribution:**

- Many justice-involved youth are themselves victims of violence, abuse, or neglect;  
Section 19 conferences can identify and address victimization histories
- Restorative approaches within conferencing acknowledge harm to victims while supporting rehabilitation
- Coordinated case planning reduces revictimization by connecting youth to safe environments and supportive services

### 5.6 Alignment with CSWB Plan Framework

The CSWB Plan Framework emphasizes moving upstream, from incident response to prevention and social development. This project strengthens supports to operate at the critical "Risk Intervention" level, mitigating situations of elevated risk before they escalate to crisis. By connecting youth to services at the point of sentencing, the hope is to prevent the cycle of reoffending, disengagement, and deepening system involvement.

As the CSWB Plan states: "The CSWB Plan acknowledges this work must extend beyond the system of policing to address complex social issues that often contribute to crime and poor health outcomes." This project embodies this principle by bringing together health, education, social services, and justice in a unified response.

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## 6. Project Outcomes and Impact



### 6.1 Quantitative Outcomes

Metric	Target	Achieved
Youth Justice Accountability Town Halls	3	7 (233%)
System Partner Education Sessions	3	3 (100%)
Community Members Reached (Town Halls)	150 est.	293 (195%)
System Partners Trained	75 est.	125 (167%)
Partnership with Oshawa Courts Established	Yes	Yes ✓
Section 19 Conferencing Framework Operationalized for Northstar	Yes	Yes ✓
Multi-Disciplinary Team Framework Developed	Yes	Yes ✓

### 6.2 Qualitative Outcomes

#### System Partner Feedback:

- School representatives value the direct connection between education and justice systems
- Mental health agencies appreciate the structured pathway for intervention at sentencing

#### Community Feedback:

- Racialized families express relief at having a culturally responsive pathway for their children
- Parents report feeling heard and included in case planning for the first time
- Community members appreciate the shift from punitive to restorative approaches
- Service providers value the elimination of service gaps through coordinated planning

### 6.3 Longer-Term Anticipated Outcomes

While recidivism and long-term outcome data will require ongoing tracking, the evidence base indicates the following anticipated outcomes:

- Reduced recidivism among youth who participate in conferences
- Decreased use of custodial sentences in favour of community-based alternatives
- Improved mental health outcomes through early intervention and connection to services
- Reduced overrepresentation of racialized youth in the justice system
- Strengthened family relationships through collaborative case planning
- Increased youth engagement in education, employment, and pro-social activities

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## 7. Sustainability and Future Directions



### 7.1 Ongoing Partnership with Community Partners

The partnerships established between Northstar and the community organizations as a result of this project will continue to support the case conference model beyond the funded project period. Key sustainability mechanisms include:

- Dedicated Clinical Director at Northstar to maintain referral pathways and coordinate conferences
- Established relationships with judges, Crown attorneys, and defence counsel who understand and support the model
- Trained probation officers who can initiate Section 19 conference requests
- Integration with existing Northstar programs serving justice-involved youth

### 7.2 Integration with Durham Connect Situation Table

Durham Region and DRPS are on track to relaunch the Durham Connect Situation Table in early 2026 to address situations of Acutely Elevated Risk. This project provides a complementary intervention point, while Situation Table addresses crisis situations, Section 19 conferencing intervenes at the sentencing stage to prevent escalation and recurrence.

### 7.3 Alignment with Youth Violence Prevention Strategy

The CSWB Secretariat is developing a Youth Violence Prevention Strategy with guidance from the Strategic Advisory Group and youth engagement. This project provides operational infrastructure that can support strategy implementation by:

- Serving as a referral pathway for youth identified through prevention efforts
- Contributing data on youth justice involvement and conference outcomes
- Demonstrating the effectiveness of collaborative, restorative approaches

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## 7. Sustainability and Future Directions



### 7.4 Recommendations for Continued Investment

Based on project success and community response, Northstar recommends:

1. **Expansion of Section 19 conferencing capacity** to meet anticipated demand as awareness grows among justice system actors
2. **Continued community education** to ensure families, particularly racialized families know about and can access coordinated case conferencing
3. **Data collection and outcome tracking** to build the evidence base for Section 19 conferencing in Durham Region
4. **Integration with CSWB Plan reporting** to contribute data to the CSWB Data Dashboard on criminal involvement indicators
5. **Cross-jurisdictional learning through the GTHA CSWB Working Group** to share best practices in Section 19 conferencing and Situation Table integration



## ..... 8. Conclusion



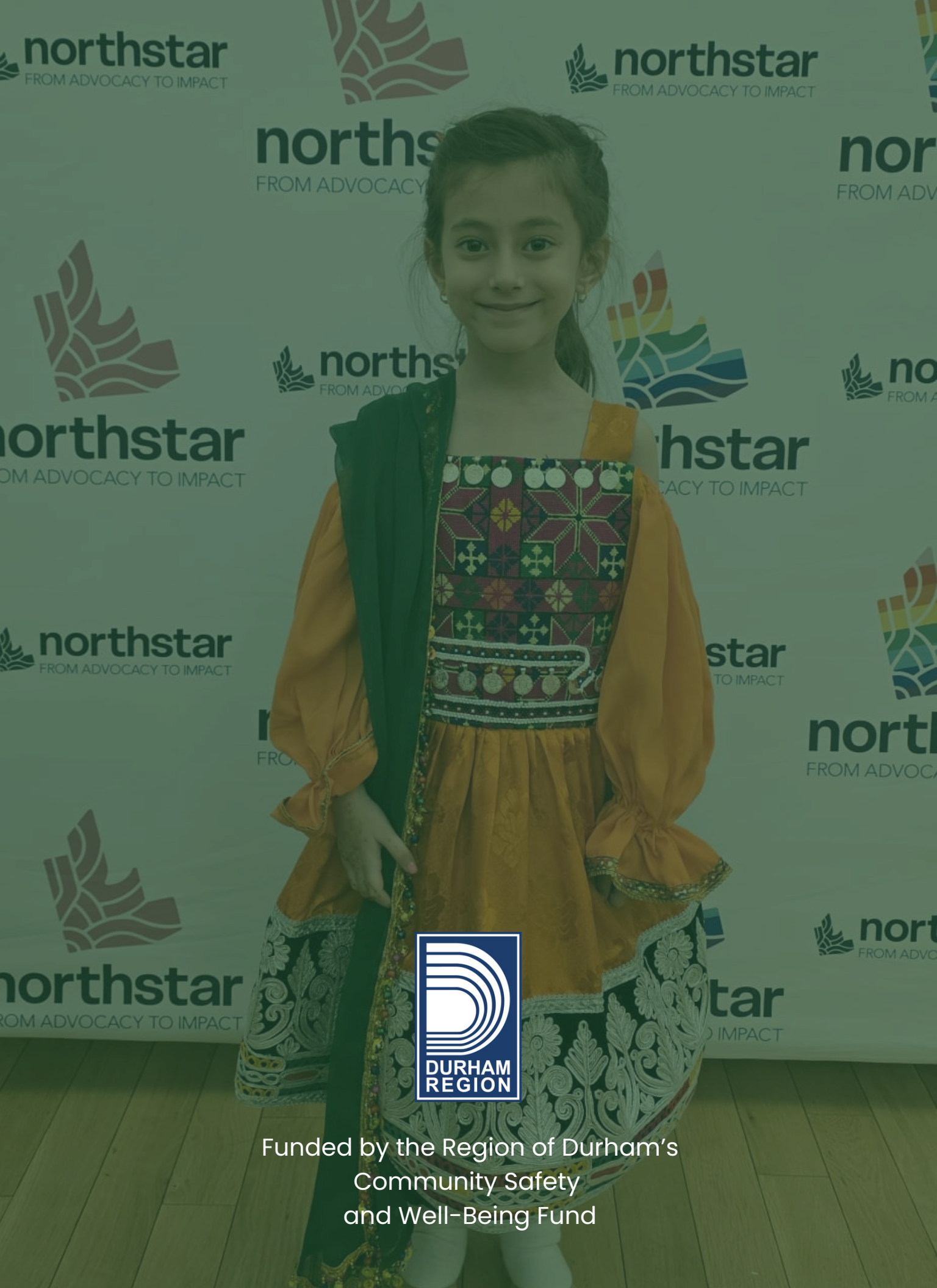
The project represents a transformative approach to youth justice in Durham Region. By bringing together schools, mental health specialists, and community partners in a collaborative manner to enhance the work of judges, probation officers, Crown and defence counsel in a case conferencing framework, we have created the infrastructure for coordinated, wrap-around care that addresses the root causes of youth offending rather than perpetuating cycles of system involvement.

This project exceeded all deliverable requirements, conducting seven community education sessions (against a target of three) and reaching nearly 300 community members and 125 system partners. Most importantly, we have strengthened an existing partnership with the Oshawa Courts for Section 19 case conferencing, the first of its kind in Durham Region.

The alignment between this project and Durham Region's Community Safety and Well-Being Plan is profound. By addressing Criminal Involvement, Mental Health, Experiences of Racism, Social Isolation, and Victimization simultaneously, the Youth Court Collective exemplifies the CSWB Plan's vision of collective impact through upstream intervention.

The CSWB Plan states: "No one organization or sector holds the sole responsibility for community safety and well-being. Building robust community capacity to ensure residents have access to the right services at the right time is a shared responsibility across all sectors." The project embodies this principle, creating a mechanism that ensures justice-involved youth receive the coordinated support they need at the critical moment of sentencing.

Northstar is deeply grateful to the Region of Durham for the funding that made this work possible. We are committed to sustaining and expanding this initiative, working alongside our partners in the courts, schools, mental health agencies, and community organizations to build a safer, more equitable Durham Region where every young person has the opportunity to thrive.



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