

Ignite the Light





From our President & CEO and Board Chair

In early 2019, our YMCA was poised to begin a fresh new chapter in our charity's history. *Strong Start, Great Future* — our plan for 2010–2020 — was coming to an end. We were eager to step up with a new plan and meet a range of exciting possibilities and complex challenges that had emerged in our communities.

Two weeks before launching our new strategic plan, COVID-19 shuttered most of our 450 YMCAs across the GTA. We sprang into action. From emergency child care for frontline workers to a brand-new online community for older adults — to name just two of dozens of examples — our teams pivoted in incredibly innovative ways to help our communities when they needed us most.

Though we dove into new offerings and transformed existing ones, it quickly became clear that **COVID-19 was exacerbating many of the needs we had identified** in our planning. These included several crises the GTA has been grappling with for years: those around growing mental health issues, affordable housing, accessible child care, our precarious labour market, and isolation among older adults.

Inequity is a common thread, connecting them all. Long before the pandemic, one of the leaders we consulted on this new strategic plan told us quite simply: "The GTA has outgrown its clothes." Our exponential growth brought welcome diversity and opportunity, but not everyone shares fully in the benefits. **Some of our community members are being left behind.**

In this context, maps showing COVID-19 clustering in low-income neighbourhoods with concentrations of racialized communities were tragic — but not surprising. Anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism is deep-rooted, systemic and has plagued our communities for centuries. In the spring and summer of 2020, deaths and violence in the US and right here in the GTA were a wake-up call for many. It took the quiet of quarantine for us to hear the alarm, but it's been sounding for generations.

In the wake of the pandemic and the reckoning with anti-Black racism that swept the world in 2020, we certainly recalibrated. And, we remain committed to Truth and Reconciliation.

We know our future holds more uncertainty and change, and we are prepared to continue to adapt. *Ignite the Light* gives us the flexibility we need to be nimble and respond as our communities' needs evolve.

But we also have deep roots: core capabilities and convictions that ground us. The new strategic plan you are about to read stays true to those roots, hinging on a few simple but powerful aspirations. Namely, *Ignite the Light* is about boosting well-being and promoting equity. In the future we see for the GTA, *everyone* will have opportunities to shine.

Sincerely,



Ryan Brain Chair,
Board of Directors,
YMCA of Greater
Toronto



Medhat Mahdy
President & CEO
YMCA of Greater
Toronto





Our Vision

Vibrant communities where everyone can shine

Our Mission

The YMCA of Greater Toronto is a charity that ignites the potential in people, helping them grow, lead, and give back to their communities.

Our Values

Inclusiveness

We create welcoming places and programs where everyone feels they belong.

Integrity

We are truthful, trustworthy, and take responsibility for our choices, actions, and commitments.

Kindness

We are caring and compassionate.

Optimism

We believe in the strengths and potential in people and communities.

Respect

We treat every person with dignity.

Well-being

We are dedicated to people's physical, social, and mental health.

What is Ignite the Light all about?

Boosting well-being and promoting equity

As COVID-19 continues to steal lives and livelihoods, “we’re all in this together” has become a favourite refrain. Though well-meaning, the catchphrase is simply untrue. You need only glance at a map of COVID-19 cases across the GTA to see that the impact of the virus is unequal. Different communities need better and more equitable supports.

After all, how are you supposed to “stay safe, stay home” if you don’t have housing? Or if your home is a long-term care facility at the epicentre of an outbreak? Or if you can’t work from home, and you can’t pay your rent if you don’t go to work?

COVID-19 did not create these inequities. It brought them out of the shadows, painfully reminding us that different people have different chances of living a good life in the GTA.

To help change that, over the next five years, our YMCA will work to boost well-being and promote equity. By well-being, we mean feeling healthy and happy. At the bare minimum, most of us need a few things to experience well-being: a safe place to live, a decent job and income, human connection, and a sense of purpose. But these and other necessities are not equally available to everyone in our communities.

That’s why equity is just as important to *Ignite the Light*. By equity, we mean ensuring everyone is treated fairly and has access to the opportunities they need to achieve their full potential. If we don’t promote equity, our work to boost well-being will only benefit some of our community members, leaving others behind.

Supporting those who need it most

“We’re all in this together” is a message of *equality*. It implies we’re all going through the same thing, with the same supports and resources at our fingertips.

The tragic, recurring loss of Black lives is just one example that clearly shows we are not all going through the same things. Systemic anti-Black racism illustrates the need for *equity*.

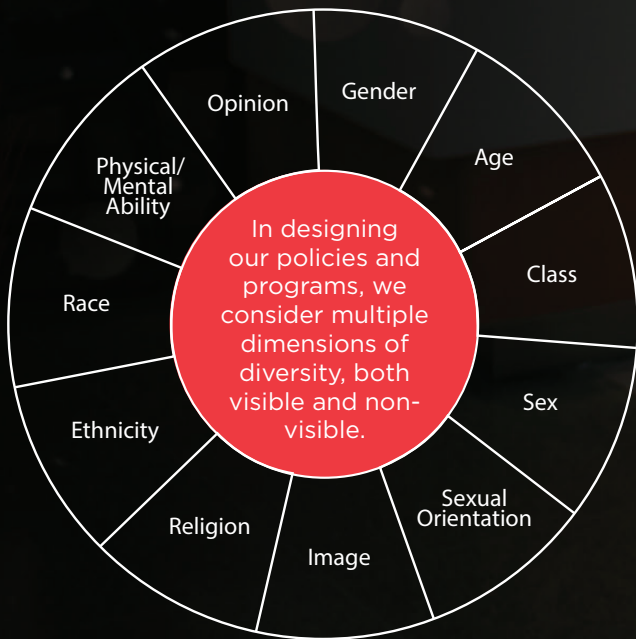
To understand the difference in very broad terms, think about the shoes you wear every day. If we treated everyone equally, we’d give everyone the exact same pair of shoes, no matter their size. Treating everyone equitably, on the other hand, means each person gets a pair of shoes that *fit*.

Equity means recognizing that different people need different support as we walk through life to get us wherever we want to go.



This metaphor, though overly simplistic, helps explain why our YMCA doesn't take a one-size-fits-all approach to our work, even though we want everyone to enjoy the same outcome of improved well-being.

We consider many intersectional dimensions of diversity, each consisting of communities with unique histories, experiences, and needs. And when we work to support those who need us most, it helps our entire region shine even brighter.



That's why several of the strategic goals you are about to read focus on supporting the well-being of particular populations. For example, we're committed to:

- Creating new programs for and building communities among older adults.
- Helping youth navigate the labour market that COVID-19 has made even more precarious.
- Renewing our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion plan, which will include a new strategy to confront anti-Black racism specifically.

Other goals aim to address key issues in our region that will help people reach their full potential. These include:

- Making high-quality, affordable child care accessible to everyone who needs and wants it.
- Creating more and fairer housing options.
- Addressing the mental health crisis.

These are just a handful of examples, but equity shines through every aspect of *Ignite the Light*. If we're going to say "we're all in this together" and truly mean it, promoting equity is the first step.



Ignite the Light

To boost well-being and promote equity in the GTA, the YMCA will:

1

DIRECTIONS

Champion diversity, social connection, and belonging

1. Embody inclusion and kindness and advocate for them in our communities
2. Create new programs for and build communities among older adults
3. Promote community resilience for climate, health, and other emergencies
4. Create more equitable outcomes for staff and participants through a renewed Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion plan

2

Address key issues

GOALS

1. Prioritize the mental health of our participants, volunteers, and staff
2. Deliver and advocate for more high-quality, affordable child care
3. Create more and fairer housing options for older adults and youth
4. Help those disadvantaged in finding employment, especially youth, navigate the uncertain labour market

Strategic Enablers:

Healthy & Engaging Workplace

Technology & Digital Transformation

Philanthropy

3

4

DIRECTIONS

Reach people in new ways

Evolve the ways we work

GOALS

1. Grow our digital programs and communities, and make them accessible and inclusive
2. Open new YMCA Centres of Community
3. Expand beyond our walls and bring the YMCA to new and non-traditional places
4. Adapt existing Centres to meet new health standards

1. Deepen collaborations across Y teams, the Y network, and with external partners
2. Design and assess programs with insights from researchers, delivery experts, and community members
3. Develop a new volunteer strategy
4. Deliver a consistent, positive participant experience through innovation and relationship building

Positioning & Advocacy

Financial Sustainability

Champion diversity, social connection, and belonging

Physical distancing underscored the fundamentally human need for connection and its powerful effects on well-being. Even when we're apart, we stay strong together, sending a reminder that connected communities are more resilient to challenges ranging from public health crises to natural disasters.

Although the GTA offers plenty of opportunities for such connection, several barriers — from busy work schedules and transportation challenges to poverty and discrimination — can make it difficult for people to participate. As we pursue this strategic direction, we'll work with even greater intention to confront racism, reach out to older adults, and build community resiliency — both in our own programs and places, and in the broader community.

Goals

Guided by this strategic direction, we will:

1. Embody inclusion and kindness and advocate for them in our communities
2. Create new programs for and build communities among older adults
3. Promote community resilience for climate, health, and other emergencies
4. Create more equitable outcomes for staff and participants through a renewed Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion plan



Why it matters

24%

Share of GTA households containing one person. Living alone has become more common over the last few decades.

3/10

Between 2011 and 2016, 30% of newcomers to Canada settled in the GTA. In 2018, 106,000 newcomers to Canada arrived in the GTA.

82%

of Toronto residents with COVID-19 identified with a racialized group — even though racialized groups only make up 52% of the population.

Address key issues

While the YMCA works to help all people increase their well-being, we also know systemic barriers make it harder for some groups to reach their full potential than others. COVID-19 both exacerbated and drew greater attention to many of these existing barriers, including the dearth of mental health support, child care, housing, and employment opportunities outlined in our Goals. Though this list is far from complete, it strategically focuses on the key issues on which the YMCA can bring its expertise to bear.

Goals

Guided by this strategic direction, we will:

1. Prioritize the mental health of our participants, volunteers, and staff
2. Deliver and advocate for more high-quality, affordable child care
3. Create more and fairer housing options for older adults and youth
4. Help those disadvantaged in finding employment, especially youth, navigate the uncertain labour market



Why it matters

35,208

People reached through YMCA of Greater Toronto Employment Services in 2019–2020.

50%

of Canadians reported worsened mental health since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic according to CAMH survey.

1 in 5

tenants who are seniors spend 50% or more of their income on housing, risking homelessness.

Reach people in new ways

COVID-19 has already transformed the ways people access resources, opportunities, and supports — and the ways our Y delivers them. During the state of emergency in spring 2020, we brought programming directly into the homes of our community members via hundreds of videos and livestreams. Reaching beyond the walls of our buildings and offering more innovative, online experiences will remain a priority to ensure that people have opportunities to learn, play, grow, get help, and give back right at their fingertips.

At the same time, the need for social connection and community has never been greater. As crucial as virtual programming is, it simply can't replace face-to-face interactions. The YMCA will continue to be the place where neighbours gather to enjoy the powerful effects of such interactions on their well-being. Whether we're in a school, park, or YMCA Centre of Community, our first priority will continue to be the health and safety of our community members, volunteers, and staff.

Goals

Guided by this strategic direction, we will:

1. Grow our digital programs and communities, and make them accessible and inclusive
2. Open new YMCA Centres of Community
3. Expand beyond our walls and bring the YMCA to new and non-traditional places
4. Adapt existing Centres to meet new health standards



Why it matters

94%

of Canadians had home internet access in 2018.

37%

projected increase in the GTA's population, from 7 million in 2019 to over 9.5 million by 2046.

19%

Participants in YMCA programs and services are 19% more likely to have high life satisfaction.

Evolve the ways we work

Program excellence and innovation have always been central to our YMCA's work. Over time, we've struck a balance between reinforcing our strengths and adapting our offerings to the needs of our unique time and place.

Today, as technology, social expectations, and our communities continue to change rapidly, it's more urgent than ever that we keep adapting and innovating for impact and relevance. Over the next five years, we plan to realize these ambitions through collaboration both within and beyond our YMCA; by taking new approaches to program design and evaluation; by investing in our 5000+ volunteers; and by ensuring every connection we make with our community members is positive and rewarding.

Goals

Guided by this strategic direction, we will:

1. Deepen collaborations across Y teams, the Y network, and with external partners
2. Design and assess programs with insights from researchers, delivery experts, and community members
3. Develop a new volunteer strategy
4. Deliver a consistent, positive participant experience through innovation and relationship building



Why it matters

53,517

Number of members and program participants who received financial assistance to access YMCA programs in 2019–20. The YMCA delivered over \$5 million in financial assistance that year.

93%

In 2019, there were YMCA members and participants in 93% of postal codes across the GTA.

5,355

volunteers dedicated their time and talents to building vibrant communities through the YMCA in 2019-20.

Strategic Enablers

Under *Strong Start, Great Future* (2010–2020), our YMCA substantially improved its capabilities in a number of key areas, making us more efficient; strengthening our relationships with partners, donors, and communities; and helping to deepen our impact. To realize the ambitions of *Ignite the Light* and continue building our charity's resilience in the wake of COVID-19, we'll need to enhance our capabilities in the following key areas.

Healthy, engaged, and inclusive workforce

People are at the heart of our YMCA. Our existing People Strategy and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Strategy have guided our efforts to build a healthy, inclusive workforce and have helped us attract and retain highly skilled, dedicated team members. These strategies will serve as a strong foundation for us to build upon as we focus on equity, navigate the challenges COVID-19 has posed for our teams, and position our workforce for the future.

Positioning and advocacy

Communicating effectively about our work helps us engage partners and program participants, earn philanthropic support, advocate for change, and contribute to conversations that shape our communities. Under *Ignite the Light*, we'll work to grow awareness of our charitable status, the scale of our work, and the impact we have in our communities. We'll also promote our places and programs, and advocate on important issues where we have relevant expertise.




**SUMMER
DAY CAMPS**

Technology and digital transformation

To bring *Ignite the Light* to life, we'll need to continue our focus on data-driven decision making and advanced technologies to create new digital programs, boost efficiency, enhance participant experience, support effective collaboration, and open untapped lines of revenue — both across our own departments and with external partners. We're committed to incorporating technology into our programs and communications thoughtfully, crafting an excellent digital experience for our members and participants, while maintaining the human touch that has always defined the YMCA's approach.

Philanthropy

The YMCA of Greater Toronto is a charity. Today, as we respond to the needs of a rapidly growing GTA that's facing a long recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, we're raising the scale of our philanthropic ambitions. Our capital campaign will support the creation of five new YMCA Centres of Community. We'll work to broaden our donor base, making giving a habit among a greater share of our participants, and among the wider public. And we'll continue enhancing the giving experience, taking steps to deepen our relationships with donors and make it easier to support the Y.

Financial sustainability

Our charity's work is made possible by a combination of donor support, fees paid by program users, and government funding. This mix of revenue sources has supported the YMCA's resilience and sustainability for more than 165 years. Today, the entire charitable sector faces unprecedented financial challenges in the wake of COVID-19, and the road to recovery remains uncertain. Operating in this new environment means we will need to focus strategically — investing in key areas, scaling our ambitions to match our new capacities, and adapting nimbly as our circumstances change — to ensure our YMCA's viability for another 165 years to come.





The Y Steps Up

Our COVID-19 Recovery and Rebuild

Ignite the Light spans five years over which the GTA will continue to grapple with emergency responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and embark on a long road to recovery. Just as the YMCA of Greater Toronto has stepped up to meet unprecedented needs in the past — from serving as a relief centre in the aftermath of Hurricane Hazel in 1954 to delivering child care to support women entering the work force after the Second World War — so too are we committed to partnering with our communities to address critical needs and supporting each other through this crisis.

Brightening our communities’ darkest days

It’s impossible to predict precisely how our communities’ needs will evolve, and therefore impossible for us to detail precisely how we will step up to meet them. That said, we *do* have a precedent today; we now know what’s at stake, for our Y and for our region, and we have many months of hard work to look back on and learn from. Based on our response throughout 2020, these are just some of the ways we anticipate our YMCA might continue to help the GTA recover and rebuild from the devastation the pandemic has caused.

1. Repurposing our spaces to meet emergency needs

Digital offerings have exploded during the pandemic and will continue to prove invaluable. However, we have also seen that some needs simply cannot be met virtually. Physical spaces must be reimaged — even if only temporarily — so people can access essentials.

What we've done so far

During the first wave, we offered up our buildings to hospitals across the GTA in case they became overwhelmed and overcrowded. As food insecurity peaked, we transformed eight of our centres into pop-up food banks, turned YMCA Cedar Glen Outdoor Centre into a food sorting and distribution site for York Region, and collected hundreds of pounds of non-perishables through food drives at our Health & Fitness centres.

How we could help in future

The YMCA is present in 450 locations across the GTA, including nine larger Centres of Community, each offering tens of thousands of square feet of space that can be repurposed during emergencies. In the future, YMCAs could be used as vaccination sites, temporary food banks, or emergency shelters, to name just three of many possibilities.

2. Investing in affordable, accessible, high-quality child care

COVID-19 kicked off a “she-cession,” potentially setting women back decades in terms of their ability to bring their talents and expertise to our workforce. One barrier is that child care responsibilities continue to fall disproportionately to women.

What we've done so far

During the lockdown, the YMCA cared for the children of essential workers — nurses, doctors, police, firefighters, personal support workers, grocery store staff, and so many more — so they could do their crucial work on the frontlines. To help families working and studying at home, we also began offering virtual camps in which children participate independently in interactive sessions with counsellors.

How we could help in future

As the largest not-for-profit child care provider in Canada, we know how critical this service is for our economic recovery. We'll continue our fifty-year-long legacy of delivering and advocating for more high-quality, affordable child care, so more families who need and want it have this option available to them.

3. Housing vulnerable groups

No one can live up to their full potential without a decent home, let alone a safe place to sleep. The pandemic has shown just how vulnerable seniors and youth are to the dangers of life on the street.

What we've done so far

YMCA Sprott House and the Vanauley Street YMCA kept their doors open to at-risk youth throughout the state of emergency and beyond. Extra staff were deployed and additional health and safety precautions were implemented to ensure we could continue offering youth experiencing homelessness emergency shelter and free, empowering supports.

How we could help in future

Over the next five years, we will continue serving as a critical lifeline for homeless and at-risk youth, helping to meet not only their immediate needs, but also offering resources like legal guidance and employment programs that help them build brighter futures for themselves. We will also expand our work to create more and fairer housing options for older adults.

4. Helping job-seekers find work

COVID-19 has led to unprecedented lay-offs, job insecurity, and financial struggle. Youth in particular are facing unique barriers: as education, training, and opportunities to gain work experience are all upended, many cannot even get a foothold in the labour market.

What we've done so far

During lockdown, our Employment Services team offered the support for un- and underemployed individuals that we know will be essential as we work to rebuild our economy. They began reaching job seekers online and by phone for one-on-one help, and offering digital webinars and job fairs to connect them with new opportunities.

How we could help in future

Losing their already-precarious jobs, missing out on summer internships, and watching the labour pool dry up just as they were supposed to wade into it — these challenges and more are dimming the next generation's potential. We'll focus on youth in particular as we help those disadvantaged in finding employment navigate a labour market unlike any we've experienced before.



5. Prioritizing mental health

The pandemic brought Canadians' decades-long mental health crisis out of the shadows. Not only did it stir up feelings of worry, fear, loneliness, and anxiety; it also hindered access to the resources people need to support their mental well-being.

What we've done so far

Just three days after closing the doors of our Health & Fitness centres in March 2020, our community reunited virtually in a group fitness class livestreamed straight to their homes. Over the course of the summer, our Y would offer day camp for children and share 545 videos to help our members stay active and connected, culminating in over 2.1 million views. Our ever-evolving camp and fitness options, which now include outdoor classes and activities, continue to support our participants' physical and mental well-being throughout a crisis that threatens both.

How we could help in future

So much of what people gain at the Y helps them build resilience, from the physical exercise we know to be connected with mental health, to the feelings of community and connection we know people need to live a fulfilling life. In the coming years, we'll prioritize the mental health of our participants, volunteers, and staff, investing in the supports all people need to boost this critical aspect of well-being.



Monitoring and recalibrating our plan

As our world continues to change on what often feels like a daily or even hourly basis, crafting a plan to guide our charity for the next five years has been challenging. From the start, we knew *Ignite the Light* would need to be flexible so our YMCA could continue to adapt to new needs as they evolve.

To that end, we will use a number of tools and checkpoints to monitor our progress against our strategy and recalibrate our plans as needed.

1. Key Performance Indicators

A set of six key performance indicators (KPIs) has been developed that our charity will track and report on over the course of *Ignite the Light*:

- Subjective well-being (self-reported) of YMCA program participants
- YMCA participants' perception of the YMCA's contribution to their well-being
- Net promoter score (participants' likelihood of recommending the Y to others)
- Number of registered participants in YMCA programs
- Number of unregistered participants in YMCA programs (e.g., workshops and drop-ins)
- Number of YMCA locations

2. A phased approach

We will deliver on *Ignite the Light* in two phases. The first spans the initial 24 months of the five-year period, when we will continue to respond to and recover from the pandemic.

A built-in checkpoint will help us take stock of our progress and make adjustments as needed before heading into the second phase, which encompasses the following three years.

How we developed this plan

In 2018, when we set out to develop *Ignite the Light*, our goal was to ensure that the plan would be timely, relevant, and well informed by our teams' insights and on-the-ground knowledge. Staying true to those guiding principles meant revisiting our strategy in the wake of COVID-19. To that end, we carried out a consultative planning process that included:

Leadership by a Strategic Planning Task Force

This volunteer task force was composed of YMCA Board members and other community leaders selected for a combination of subject-area expertise, regional knowledge and networks, and understanding of the YMCA's work and recent history. The task force met several times beginning in February 2019 to discuss current issues in the GTA — including priorities specific to Peel, Durham, and York — and opportunities for the YMCA to respond and contribute. They were reconvened in the summer of 2020 to discuss the dramatic changes to our environment internally and externally that impacted our strategic plan, after which they recommended this strategy for approval by the Board of Directors.

Research and reflection

In 2019, the YMCA's Program Research and Development Department reported on key social and economic trends; changes in YMCA programs, facilities, and operations; and our progress against key strategic objectives over the last 10 years. This work complemented a series of interviews with partners and community leaders as well as an ideation document produced by a senior management consultant on a volunteer basis. In 2020, we considered new research conducted around the pandemic and the groundswell of support for confronting systemic anti-Black racism, building on the evidence-based approach we took to our 2018–2021 Diversity & Social Inclusion strategy. Key stakeholders weighed in as we recalibrated our strategy to confront our new realities.

Internal conversations and consultations

The planning process drew insight from YMCA volunteers, staff, participants, and other stakeholders through a range of discussion forums, gatherings, one-on-one discussions, and surveys.

Board of Directors and Youth Advisory Committee retreat

Once a draft strategic framework had been developed in 2019, the YMCA's Board of Directors, senior staff leaders, and Youth Advisory Committee assembled to review and respond to the document. After discussion and revisions, this group affirmed its support for *Ignite the Light*.

Thank you

Many people and groups generously supported the development of this strategy by sharing their time, insights, and expertise with us. The YMCA of Greater Toronto gratefully acknowledges the contributions of:

Members of the *Ignite the Light* Strategic Planning Task Force

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* Board member

Members, donors, and program participants who completed surveys and shared their experiences with us

Community leaders who participated in our “Beyond 2020” interview process

YMCA staff who participated in planning discussions





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