

SCOTT HALDANE | A YMCA ADVOCATE FOR HEALTHY CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Scott Haldane learned early in his career how the YMCA makes a difference in the health of children and youth. In his 20s, he coordinated a program called The Underground serving more than 300 young people living in the West Island neighbourhood of Montréal. 33 years later, Haldane is working with YMCA leaders across Canada to respond collectively to the barriers to growing up healthy today. YMCA Canada's new President & CEO talks about a few of the issues, challenges and opportunities facing the organization at this time in its 160-year history.

WHY IS THE YMCA PUTTING SUCH EMPHASIS ON THE HEALTH OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH?

We have a generation right now that needs help. It is the first generation in recent history that is predicted to have a shorter life span than their parents. Two-thirds of the jobs that are going to be available to young people in the future require post-secondary education yet many are not finishing high school. There are gaps of varying sizes across the country in support and programs for children and youth. We need to narrow those gaps and provide a more equitable level of support because we'll lose a generation if we're not careful.

It's hard for an organization with as broad a mission as the YMCA to choose a particular emphasis, but this is the right one for us right now. We work with a lot of children and youth – one in ten young people in Canada are involved in YMCA programs. We're widely recognized for the quality and impact of this work. We have a lot of expertise in this area that has been acquired over many, many years.

This doesn't mean that we're going to stop working with other age groups. But it means that YMCAs are ready to pool their resources and collaborate with other organizations to have a greater impact – a societal impact – on a critical issue. This challenge is bigger than us. It's bigger than them. We have to work together.

HOW IS THE YMCA CHANGING TO TACKLE THIS CHALLENGE?

We're becoming better collaborators. The YMCA way usually means direct and immediate action. Collaborative work can be very time consuming and sometimes inefficient. But we know that this is the only way to reverse these disturbing trends related to the health of children and youth. We're learning how to choose partners by the outcome we want to achieve, followed by strategic strengths and differences.

We're also becoming more effective advocates. At our recent national conference in Winnipeg, a majority of YMCA leaders said that we need this tool in our toolkit. Not to speak out on issues outside our areas of knowledge and expertise. But to speak with and for those whose stories we know can help shape more effective policies at every level of government, inside every workplace and within our own households.

We build strong kids,
strong families,
strong communities.



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des jeunes, des familles
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I see unprecedented signs that YMCAs are ready even eager to change – to organize themselves to work more closely together. I also see signs that leaders in other sectors are ready for the YMCA to take its seat at tables where problems get solved. This internal readiness and external opportunity makes it possible for us to imagine creating new resources and building more capacity to respond creatively, energetically – and, I hope, boldly.

HOW ARE YMCA LEADERS CHANGING?

You can find leaders everywhere in our organization. They're becoming more able to work across traditional boundaries both inside and outside the YMCA. They're holding a bigger vision of the YMCA – one that is local, national and global in scope. They're determined to find and mobilize resources on a larger scale than ever before.

These volunteers and staff members are the YMCA's great strength. They're extraordinarily capable of picking up the torch, carrying it forward and handing it off. We've done that for a long time. Our task is to get that torch to burn even brighter before we hand it on. Focusing on dramatically improving the health of Canada's children and youth is one way that we'll do this. Creating new resources and building our capacity to act collectively on emerging issues is another.

HOW DID YOU COME TO WORK FOR YMCA AND WHY HAVE YOU STAYED?

I can draw a line from my suburban neighbourhood in Montréal where my dad and I went door-to-door to raise money for the YMCA to my new office at YMCA Canada in downtown Toronto – but it's not a straight one.

It winds through stints on the front-line working in aquatics programs and with youth at risk. Then there were operational assignments in a branch of a multi-branch YMCA. I spent a few years coordinating and developing national initiatives aimed at dealing with youth unemployment before taking on leadership roles in two of the largest YMCAs in diverse and rapidly growing urban centres. The YMCA has taken me all over the world to learn from YMCA colleagues who work in different cultural contexts. It has enabled me to do graduate work in management at McGill and to get advanced training at Harvard. It has put me at community tables where we've done research and taken action to get at the root causes of social problems.

The YMCA has been an organization that has never stopped challenging and stretching me. Every five years or so, I've had a major new opportunity to do something that I've never done before. In fact, the YMCA grows its leaders by giving us assignments that take us out of our comfort zones and require us to do things that we're not quite sure we can do. That's what's kept me in the YMCA for all these years. The chance to grow. The chance to work with highly motivated and exceptionally talented people. And the chance to make a positive difference in the lives of individuals and communities while helping others do the same.

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