Summit 2025 Summary Report:

Failing Forward: Transforming Setbacks into Progress
April 30 – May 1, 2025

What We Heard: Reflections from the 2025 Converge Mental Health Summit

The 2025 Converge Mental Health Summit brought together diverse voices from across sectors to explore a central theme: Failing Forward. First introduced at last year's Summit, this theme underscores that sharing failures is just as valuable as celebrating successes. In sessions ranging from funding models to youth mental health to data sharing, participants were encouraged to speak candidly about what's not working, and to imagine what's possible when failure is embraced as a catalyst for learning and innovation.
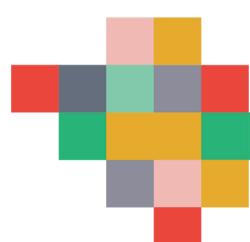
Acknowledgements

This year's Summit took place at The Confluence (formerly Fort Calgary), meaningfully located at the confluence of the Bow and Elbow Rivers on the traditional territories of the Blackfoot Confederacy, comprising the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai Nations, as well as the Tsuut'ina and Stoney Nakoda First Nations, and the Métis Nation of Alberta (Districts 5 and 6). We are deeply grateful to Siksika Elder Clarence Wolfleg, who opened our Summit in a good way, grounding our conversations in the wisdom of traditional oral practices and ways of knowing. His presence reminded us that healing, learning, and community care are deeply interconnected.

Thank you to Tara Adams, our Summit emcee, whose generosity, insight, and humour helped weave the threads of each session into an engaging and reflective experience.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to our sponsors for your trust and support: Dollar A Day Foundation, Hunter Family Foundation, and Rotary Club of Calgary Downtown.

Thank you to all the contributors, speakers, and supporters of our 2nd annual Mental Health Summit. We encourage you to share your reflections on the event and continue the conversations.

Day 1

Opening Keynote: Samir Mourani: Breaking Down to Break Through: A Journey of Resilience

The Summit opened with a keynote that cut straight to the "Failing Forward" theme. Samir Mourani delivered a deeply personal and powerful address on how his greatest breakthroughs came not despite failure, but because of it. He reminded us that what we often see as an ending may actually be the turning point we didn't know we needed.
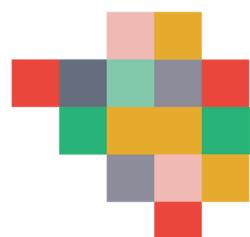
"Failure is not a full stop—it's a comma."

Samir spoke directly to men, calling out how often they hide their failures and how that silence takes a toll on their mental health. By sharing his own story with honesty and humility, he reminded us that vulnerability isn't weakness, it's a way forward.

Key takeaways:
- **Vulnerability invites vulnerability.** When we're honest about what didn't work, we create space for others to be honest too.
- **We don't need to be perfect to start.** Samir challenged the fear of failure with lived experience and a call to act anyway, even when conditions aren't perfect.
- **Failure is about what we do next.** The mark of resilience is how we respond, grow, and build forward.
- **Tend to relationships.** Trust and care are the real infrastructure of progress.

Samir's keynote grounded us in a shared understanding that failure isn't a detour on the path to change, but rather it is a critical part of the path itself.

Day 1

Panel 1: Financing Failures: Failing Forward

Moderator: Heather Spratt, Dollar a Day Foundation

Panelists:
◆ Crystal Phillips
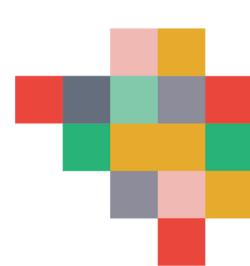◆ Karen Macdonald, Viewpoint Foundation
◆ Adam Jagelewski, TwinRiver Capital

The opening panel set the tone for reflection, asking funders and leaders to consider what becomes possible when we embrace failure as a design principle, not a setback. Crystal Phillips captured this spirit best: "Amazing failure can be the ticket to amazing success."

Panelists explored emerging practices like venture philanthropy and impact investing, models that require not just the willingness to fund innovation but the courage to fund what might not work the first time.

The session ended with an important question: *What if failure wasn't something to recover from, but the very thing that moves the field forward?*

Key takeaways:
- **Philanthropy can take risks that government cannot.** Private funders have the flexibility to experiment.
- **Fund failure as a learning tool.** Projects that don't succeed still generate valuable knowledge.
- **Shift from supportive to strategic giving.** Deep partnerships lead to deeper results.
- **Diversity improves decision-making.** Multiple perspectives help funders evaluate potential and risk more holistically.

Day 1

Panel 2: Turning Setbacks into Strategies: How Have Failures Positioned Us for the Future of Workplace Mental Health

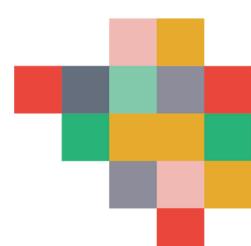**Moderator:** Tara Adams, Abridge Consulting Inc.

Panelists:
- ◆ Kerilee Snatenchuk, ATB Financial
- ◆ Dason Harker, WestJet Mental Wellness Strategy
- ◆ Beth Kelln, LivingWorks
- ◆ Michael Mee, SLB Financial, Buddy Up

This session addressed what happens when workplace mental health strategies don't deliver on their promises. Despite good intentions, many well-being initiatives remain disconnected from the realities of those they're meant to support, especially employees navigating burnout, marginalization, or invisible forms of distress.

The discussion unpacked how conventional definitions of success and wellness can exclude or even harm those who experience and express mental health differently. It emphasized that workplace mental health isn't a program; it's a culture shift.

Key takeaways:
- **Mental health is everyone's job.** It can't be siloed in HR.
- **Generic solutions often miss the mark.** Customization and cultural fit are key.
- **Check for impact, not just implementation.** Are people actually using and benefiting from what's provided?
- **Culture over programming.** Mental health needs to be embedded in leadership, not just in initiatives.

Day 1

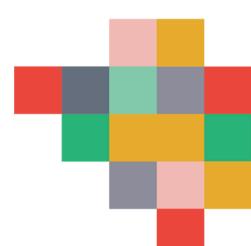**Panel 3: Missing Voices in Mental Health Service Delivery**

Moderator: Peyasu Wuttunee

Panelists:
◆ Sherri Shergill, Punjabi Community Health Services
◆ Aurelio Jun Naraval, ActionDignity
◆ C. Lorne Green, Maskwacîs Health Services

This panel elevated the conversation from individual interventions to the systemic and structural shifts needed to transform Canada's mental health system. Panelists explored pressing questions: Who gets to be heard? Who gets to be well? Who gets left behind? These questions challenged participants to confront the inequities embedded in our systems that disproportionately impact racialized communities, Indigenous populations, youth, and those navigating poverty, housing instability, or disability. Panelists also emphasized that well-being is cultural, not transactional. Investments need to support both formal and informal systems of care, and that starts with equipping leaders, especially in small and resource-limited organizations. The conversation left a clear message: without structural change, we risk continuing to patch a system that was never built for all.

Key takeaways:
- **Language gaps are access gaps.** Many communities lack words or frameworks for Western mental health concepts.
- **Participants are rights-bearers.** Systems must be accountable to those they serve.
- **Symptoms aren't the whole story.** We must address root causes like poverty, racism, and trauma.
- **Representation matters.** Co-creation, not consultation, should guide system reform.

Day 1

Workshop 1: Funding Social Change: New Funding Models for Mental Health

Facilitator: Margo Long, Margo Long Consulting, and EJ Jacobs, Virtual Philanthropy

This interactive session introduced participants to a range of innovative funding models for mental health, including social impact bonds, blended finance, venture capital, and trust-based philanthropy. Through a fun 'funding dating game,' participants explored how to better match funding approaches with organizational needs, emphasizing the importance of risk tolerance, flexibility, and co-designed evaluation in building sustainable mental health systems.

Key Takeaways:
- **Failing forward needs funding.** Innovative models like social impact bonds and blended finance **only** work if funders accept iteration, risk, and long timelines. We must normalize 'learning capital.'
- **Collaboration can't be an afterthought.** Effective partnerships require explicit funding for shared governance, evaluation, and administration, not just program delivery.
- **Short-term dollars undermine long-term change.** New funding models should enable multi-year replication, not one-off pilots that disappear after 12 months.
- **Financial literacy is a barrier.** Many organizations and funders lack the tools or shared language to pursue innovative models. Building this literacy is foundational to moving the sector forward.
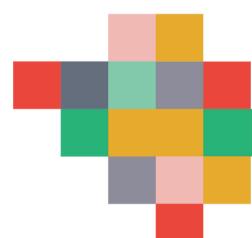
Day 1

Workshop 2: The Future of Workplace Mental Health

Facilitator: Tara Adams, Abridge Consulting Inc

This workshop explored how workplaces are evolving to meet growing mental health needs and where they're falling short. With 40% of employees expected to experience a diagnosable mental illness, and 60% reporting symptoms without a diagnosis, panelists emphasized that employers can no longer treat mental health as a fringe benefit. From outdated Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) to rising burnout and quiet quitting, organizations must move beyond box-checking to create cultures of care.

Key takeaways:
- **EAPs fall short.** Gaps in access, trust, and quality persist—and most are designed for early intervention only, leaving those with complex needs without support. Meaningful, responsive support systems must replace outdated models to meet the full spectrum of mental health needs.
- **Tools exist but aren't used.** Proven resources like The Working Mind and Guarding Minds are underleveraged because they're not embedded systemically.
- **Voluntary standards may become law.** The National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety offers a roadmap for forward-thinking organizations to act now.
- **Culture is the real fix.** Mental health strategies fail when they're surface-level. Leaders must invest in psychological safety and model care from leadership.

Day 2

Panel 4: Youth and Education Mental Health Challenges and Opportunities

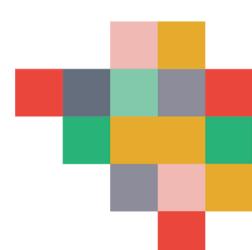**Moderator:** Dr. Paul Arnold, Mathison Centre for Mental Health

Panelists:
◆ Melanie Grylls, Kindred Services
◆ Dr. Patricia Lingley-Pottie, Strongest Families
◆ Lindsey Fiebig, Bow Valley College
◆ Dr. Jennifer Thannhauser, University of Calgary

In this session, panelists challenged the narrow, reactive approaches that continue to define much of today's youth mental health response. They returned often to a central question: How do we keep the whole person front of mind?
Youth mental health cannot be separated from the broader context of their lives—factors like food insecurity, housing instability, the long-term impacts of the pandemic, and rising social disconnection all shape well-being. Panelists emphasized that what young people need is not just crisis intervention, but sustained, wraparound support that is rooted in community, culture, and trusted relationships.

Key takeaways:
- **Demand is rising, but capacity is lagging.** While we've made great strides in reducing stigma and increasing awareness, the system hasn't scaled to meet the need.
- **Youth operate on compressed timelines.** They live "by semester," which demands faster, more responsive supports.
- **System navigation remains challenging.** Warm referrals are rare, transitions between services (e.g., from college to public health systems) are inconsistent, and young people often fall through the cracks.
- **Trust in the system is fragile.** The current emphasis on clinical language and diagnosis, while necessary in some contexts, may be crowding out conversations that normalize healthy stress and resilience. Panelists emphasized that rebuilding trust starts with diversity, representation, and relationships.

Day 2

Panel 5: Technology, Apps, and the Realities of Digital Mental Health
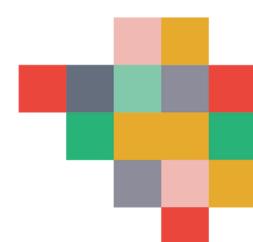
Moderator: Dr. Alina Turner, HelpSeeker

Panelists:
◆ Mike Urquhart, Zamplo
◆ EJ Jacobs, Virtual Philanthropy
◆ AnnMarie Churchill, Stepped Care Solutions

This panel explored the promise and pitfalls of digital mental health tools, asking a critical question: Why do so many apps designed to support mental well-being fail to create meaningful, lasting impact? The conversation unpacked why there is a disconnect between design and real-world user needs, a lack of evidence-based development, and the tendency to mimic exploitative tech models that prioritize stickiness over substance. Tools should aim to empower, not distract. They should connect, not isolate.

Key takeaways:
- **Tech must serve human needs.** Not the other way around.
- **App fatigue is real.** With 10,000+ apps, only 3.9% retain users.
- **Measure what matters.** Success is not about downloads; it's about impact.
- **Don't replicate attention traps.** Mental health apps should heal, not hook.
- **Success metrics for mental health apps should be measured by impact and outcome:** improved well-being, increased help-seeking, or a strengthened connection to real-world supports, not solely by engagement.
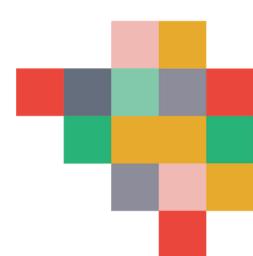
Day 2

Presentation by Data for Good on the National Mental Health Datathon

Presenters: Geoff Zakaib and David Chan, Data for Good

When Converge and Data for Good first ideated the Datathon, it was to directly challenge the long-held belief that data interoperability in the mental health sector was out of reach, complicated by concerns around privacy, funding, and technological complexity. In their presentation, Geoff Zakaib and David Chan demonstrated how this perceived barrier became a catalyst for innovation.

Launched in April 2025, the National Datathon brought together over 800 data volunteers from across the country to work with nine core datasets through local Data for Good chapters. Together, they identified key service gaps and explored actionable, data-driven solutions to help strengthen Canada's mental health system.

Key Takeaways:
- **Cross-sector collaboration enables systemic impact.** Closing gaps and driving meaningful change is possible when sectors work together with a shared purpose.
- **Responsible data sharing starts with trust.** It's achievable when collaboration and strong relationships are prioritized from the outset.
- **Strategic use of data matters.** Solutions must be co-designed with communities to close gaps, not widen them.

Day 2

Workshop 3: National Mental Health Datathon—Unlocking the Power of Shared Information

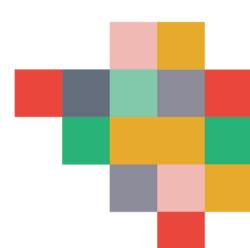**Co-Facilitators:** Geoff Zakaib and George Alvarez

This session spotlighted one of the most underutilized resources in Canada's mental health sector: data. Both Geoff and George shared lessons learned from their experience with issues pertaining to data capture, privacy, and data sharing.

Their message was clear: unlocking the potential of shared information is not a technical challenge alone; it's a cultural and structural one. When data remains siloed, fragmented, or under-analyzed, it becomes a barrier to progress. When shared with care, context, and consent, it becomes a tool for innovation, equity, and accountability.

"We are as responsible for what we don't share as for what we do."
— George Alvarez

Key Takeaways:
- **Our data is siloed, limiting progress.** Critical mental health data is fragmented across systems and organizations, making it hard to see the full picture or scale what works.
- **We're not funded—or structured—to learn from data.** Most organizations don't have the resources or infrastructure to analyze data, meaning insights are often lost.
- **Privacy should empower, not obstruct.** With thoughtful frameworks, privacy legislation can enable ethical, secure data sharing that builds trust and drives improvement.
- **Indigenous data sovereignty must be respected.** Any data-sharing efforts must prioritize Indigenous rights and leadership, grounded in OCAP principles and meaningful partnership.

Day 2

Workshop 4: School Mental Health—Mental Health Standard & Framework Deep Dive

Co-facilitators: Dr. Paul Arnold and Loriann Stienwand

This collaborative project between the City of Calgary, Mathison Centre, CBE, University of Calgary, and Converge focused on building a scalable Tier 2 mental health intervention model for schools. With nearly half of youth first seeking help in schools, the project aimed to equip educators with the competencies and tools to offer targeted, evidence-informed supports.

Key takeaways:
- **Schools are a frontline for youth mental health.** But without standardized frameworks and training, interventions remain inconsistent and often ineffective.
- **Tier 2 interventions work — when built into systems.** Early, targeted supports are scalable and impactful when embedded structurally, not added on as afterthoughts.
- **Professional development drives change.** A six-day training series for school counsellors measurably improved their confidence and skills, proving the value of sustained learning.
- **Reframing mental health as a social issue builds sustainability.** Moving beyond a purely clinical lens enables a shared, community-based approach to mental health in schools.
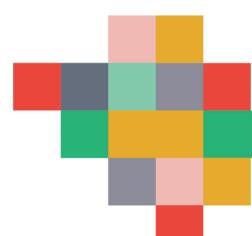
Day 2

Closing Speaker: Baillie Aaron: Built to Break- The Surprising Similarities Between Prisons and Start-ups

In her spotlight session, Baillie Aaron—an entrepreneur, speaker, and systems thinker—drew a compelling connection between two very different life transitions: individuals leaving the prison system and entrepreneurs stepping away from their businesses.

Baillie Aaron highlights that while these transitions are emotionally difficult and often unsupported, they can become catalysts for growth, reinvention, and system-level insight. Her perspective invited us to recognize that failure or disruption, when met with reflection and support, can be a powerful force for change, both individually and societally.

Key Takeaways:
- **Transitions can be transformational.** Whether leaving prison or exiting a business, major life shifts can spark growth and deeper understanding.
- **Disruption isn't failure; it's feedback.** Disruption can be reframed as a chance to reflect, adapt, and influence systems from the inside out.
- **Support during transitions is critical.** These emotionally charged times are often overlooked, yet they hold potential for reinvention and impact.
- **Personal insight fuels system change.** When individuals are given space to process and grow through disruption, they can drive broader transformation in justice, mental health, and beyond.

Moving Forward

We are at a pivotal moment for Canada's mental health system. The gaps—long wait times, disconnected services, and unequal access—are clear, and the need for change is urgent.

But there is momentum.

This recognition of vulnerabilities is driving innovation across the sector. There's a growing understanding that mental health cannot be treated as a standalone system; it is shaped by, and connected to, housing, education, income, justice, and other social determinants. If we're serious about improving outcomes, we need integrated, data-informed solutions that reflect this complexity. In that context, learning from failure is not just helpful; it's necessary.

At the summit, we heard stories about things that didn't go as planned: initiatives launched too quickly, tools designed without the right input, and efforts that didn't land because foundational pieces weren't in place. But these weren't stories of defeat. They were stories of reflection, recalibration, and ultimately, stronger outcomes.

As we collectively reimagine a mental health system that is connected, data-informed, equitable, and deeply human, embracing failure as part of that process is not just beneficial—it's vital. Our coalition is committed to creating spaces where truth-telling is welcomed and where every misstep becomes an opportunity to build better.

This is how we get better- together.