



Algoma Family Services  
205 McNabb Street  
Sault Ste. Marie, ON P6B 1Y3



THE  
NORTHERN  
OUTLET

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Sault Ste. Marie, ON & Algoma District, March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2021:** Algoma Family Services on behalf of an alliance of community partners is pleased to announce the launch of Algoma's first virtual youth hub. The Northern Outlet is a virtual space for youth to connect, learn, and create. A safe place for youth ages 13-24 to hang out given the pandemic and restrictions on organized activities, such as sports, have significantly impacted on their well-being. An alliance of community agencies came together last fall to address the impact on mental health and substance use exacerbated by the pandemic. From this alliance the Community Wellness Bus and now the virtual youth hub was created. The Northern Outlet will provide Algoma youth an opportunity to have something to do in the virtual "Bored Rooms" lead by a youth or an adult. Room activities will include talking about gaming, making a craft, baking, music, or any topic of interest to the youth. From a safety perspective, each room is moderated to ensure activity in the room remains appropriate. As well, SAH Crisis Line staff will provide support to youth as needed.

According to Ali Juma, CEO, Algoma Family Services, "the pandemic has been hard on everyone, even harder on the mental health and well-being of our youth. We are seeing this in increased service demand." The Kids Help Phone has reported over a 400% increase in calls and texts since the onset of the pandemic. In a study, *The mental health impact of COVID-19 on youth and young adults: Getting ahead of the mental health surge*, conducted by Sault native Dr. Mario Cappelli and colleague Dr. Ashley Rodomski, of youth between the ages of 12 -25, 60% reported their mental health has gotten worse and 35% reported severe impairment due to anxiety. A Public Health Ontario report released in November 2020, indicated 700 overdose deaths since March 2020, a 40% increase with 90% of the deaths occurring in individuals between 24-64 year of age. A CAMH report released in November 2020 indicates Ontario youth were experiencing the highest ever levels of suicidal ideation and psychological distress, where one in six youth had serious thoughts of suicide.

It is with concern regarding the impact on youth mental health and well-being the alliance explored the creation of a virtual youth hub. That alliance of agencies includes: Algoma Children's Aid Society, Algoma District School Board, Algoma Family Services, Algoma Public Health, Canadian Mental Health Association, Future SSM, Huron-Superior Catholic District School Board, the John Howard's Society, Northern Youth Services, Sault Area Hospital, SSM District Social Services Administration Board, SSM Innovation Centre, and the SSM Police Services. The Children's Aid Society of Algoma is happy to support the Northern Outlet as a new innovative way for the youth of Algoma to connect, build new skills, relationships and interests in a safe online environment", said Kim Streich-Poser, CAS Executive Director.

Time limited funding for this initiative was made available through a Bell Let's Talk Grant, the Ministry of Health and also the Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services through special COVID funding allocated to Algoma Family Services and the Sault Area Hospital. "Sault Area Hospital welcomes this opportunity to work with our community partners in Mental Health and Addictions care to support the youth of Algoma via the Northern Outlet. We look forward to future partnership opportunities", said Lisa Case, SAH Clinical Director-Mental Health & Addictions.

The very first "Bored Room" is this Saturday, March 6th at 7 PM will feature Tianna Legacy, a local youth singer and song writer. Tianna will discuss her music, play songs, and interact with youth in the virtual room. Zoom is the virtual platform used to host the Bored Rooms. The Zoom link can be found at the Northern Outlet website. The Northern Outlet Coordinators or "Guides", are Brenna Tomas and Benjamin St. Pierre. Their role is to coordinate the leads for each Bored Room, develop the calendar of events, and recruit volunteers to support the Northern Outlet. "For the first month we will start out with one Bored Room and then expand from there. We hope to have several rooms available every weekend for youth to join", said Juma. Since January, the Coordinators have held soft launches of the hub with youth to get feedback on the design and experience. The Northern Outlet website will be the portal to the Bored Rooms, and also serve as a one stop place where youth can find out what is going in Algoma, and learn out about services available. "We look forward to seeing what Algoma's Youth have to offer each other and the community as a whole through this initiative, said St. Pierre.

Youth or adult allies interested in joining "the Crew" at the Northern Outlet can email [thenorthernoutlet@gmail.com](mailto:thenorthernoutlet@gmail.com) More info on the Northern Outlet can be found at the website [thenorthernoutlet.ca](http://thenorthernoutlet.ca) Donations and in-kind contributions are welcomed and can be made by contacting the Algoma Family Services Foundation at [foundation@algomafamilyservices.org](mailto:foundation@algomafamilyservices.org)