My name is Kat and I have been the co-coordinator at the YFS Access Centre for the past 4 years. We are one of five community service groups funded by our student union that support different marginalized students. We support disabled students, including physical, mental health, developmental/genetic, sensory, and learning disabilities. Everyone on my team identifies as disabled, mentally ill, chronically ill, and/or neurodivergent. I personally have Myalgic Encephalomyelitis, Fibromyalgia, Anxiety, Depression, Depersonalization/Derealization, and Anorexia. We strive to ensure our services are cross-disability informed and welcoming of multiply marginalized folks.

We aim to reach a balance between providing a social space for disabled students and fighting larger accessibility issues. We have a small staff, so resources, particularly time and energy, have been an issue, but we have a consistent events schedule and offer more advocacy-oriented services.

**Events:**

* Peer Support Groups (Mad Students and Autistic Students)
* Informative workshops
* Community art spaces
* Film events

**Services:**

* Safe space
  + No florescent lights
  + Couches
  + Study space
  + Lower-stim corner
* Emergency nutrition
  + Nutrition shakes
  + Juice boxes
  + Warm drinks
  + Granola bars
  + Snacks
* Harm reduction supplies
  + Condoms (various)
    - Lubricated and non-lubricated (with lubricate samples)
    - Ribbed
    - Latex-free
  + Various needles and syringes to meet diverse needs
  + Cleaning supplies
    - For the person’s body and their equipment
  + Single-use spoons for injecting and foil sheets for smoking
* Small resource library
  + With short documents, zines, and books

Most importantly, we offer individual support to student and community members, to the best of our ability.

* This can include directing folks to external services, like shelters, legal offices, medical centres, etc.
* Students report a large variety of issues physically navigating campus; York is still not AODA compliant and the physical layout causes many injuries.
* We support many students through conflicts with their professors; most often it’s professors refusing to follow the official accommodation letter from the university.
  + This is again a violation of AODA and the Duty to Accommodate, which is very clear about the only reasons an accommodation can be denied.
* We have partnered up with the Access to Osgoode, the disability justice group at our law school, to offer advocates for our students for free.
* To try to prevent ongoing barriers, I developed an accessibility and disability awareness training a few years ago with a colleague, which is still offered for free or low-cost to local groups on request.
  + The training includes a lot of my personal stories and discussion.
  + Participants are given a handbook with over 60 pages of information, including sample forms and visual examples.

**Barriers:**

We do have students requesting support we cannot offer or services that do not exist.

* There is a lack of services for disabled people, especially community-based services.
* Community members fall through the cracks.
  + The biggest need we struggle to fill is financial. We do not have enough funding to offer grants or emergency assistance. But being disabled is expensive; students need money for medication, assistive devices, supplementary medical care, hiring support workers, and a lot more. The hidden cost of being disabled is sometimes called Crip Tax, a term coined by SB Smith.
  + My hidden cost is ordering a lot of food because I’m too tired to cook, taking ride shares because public transit really hurts me during a flare up, and buying over-the-counter medications to treat my unmanaged symptoms.
* My staff and I are determined to find options, but sometimes there are requests we cannot fulfill.

The administration’s disability office handles official academic accommodations, runs learning skills workshops, mentorship programs, technology services, and offers limited short-term counselling with a strict cancellation policy. They do cover a variety of areas, but they are not run by the disability community, which shows in their areas focus and policies.

The larger issues are not the administration’s focus. I was part of consultations a few years ago for York’s new disability accommodation policy and dealt with resistance the entire time; people really wanted to write a new policy that was almost exactly the same as the old one.

The lack of solidarity was clearest when we almost lost our funding after the most recent election. The Premier of Ontario, Doug Ford, run on a platform of stripping human rights; when he won the election, our President tweeted her support. Ford later passed the Student Choice Initiative where students were able to opt-out of paying fees for non-essential services, largely political groups. Our students overwhelmingly decided to fund us and our colleagues. Ford attacked our funding again, but it was given voluntarily and cannot be taken.

Our staff is divided between fighting for systemic change and providing community space. I’m really proud of our work and I believe in the power of lived experience, but it is difficult to balance our access needs as disabled organizers. The more you work in disability justice, the more you see ableism and inaccessibility everywhere. It’s exhausting.

This is furthered complicated by our physical space, which is on York’s campus in the Old Student Centre. We recently moved to a bigger room, but the First Student Centre was not designed with disabled folks in mind, yet it is better than most of the other buildings on campus. Our Second Student Centre is newer and much more accessibility, which gives us better options for event spaces. Unfortunately, we are still waiting for the rest of campus to be updated. The walkways are uneven, most door buttons are broken, and there are whole areas without elevators. We have had groups decline our event invitations because our campus is not safe for them.

My team is incredibly creative and talented, constantly finding solutions around inaccessible areas or alternative plans to entirely avoid our concerns. They are also constantly working to strengthen their capacity and learn new skills to share with the community or utilize to offer a service. Throughout my time, I have taught myself as much as I could to cover the service gaps. The work is constantly changing based on what we can offer and what our community is asking for. We are always busy. I struggle with the internalized ableism of productivity because I relate so strongly to the pain of our community members. As an organizer, I have been working to prioritize healing and rest to ensure my team is well taken care of and my work is sustainable.