

May 2012

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REAL

My Life Book

Report from the

Youth Leaving Care Hearings



This report is dedicated to children and youth in and from care and to all those who are no longer with us. We hope this report reflects all of our voices and creates change.

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All quotes used in this report come from the submissions and the Youth Leaving Care Hearings, which took place in November 2011 at Queen's Park, home of the Ontario Legislature. *First names* are used for anyone in or from care, 18 years or older. *Name withheld* is used for any young person in care, under the age of 18, per the Child and Family Services Act. *"Anonymous"* is used by request.



"My Life Book"

All I want is to be like any other child.
Do you know how it feels
to have your life typed and filed?

Kayla, 21
Former Youth in Care

Life Books are supposed to be created and given to children and youth in care to help them know their stories and mark significant events in their lives. Some are beautiful and treasured. Some youth don't know about them. One youth told us he received a file folder. Another youth said she was told she couldn't have hers. In some ways this report is our collective Life Book, a way for us to document the stories presented at the Hearings and inspire change.

HELP

Why You Should Read this Report

Hello!

On behalf of everyone involved in making this report a reality, we would like to thank you for taking the time to read, to empathize and for being a proactive agent in helping to make our recommendations possible.

For some time now, across the province, youth in and from care have been speaking out about the many issues now contained in this report. After voicing those concerns to Irwin Elman, the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, we decided to plan and hold two days of public hearings on the issues facing youth as we age out of care. On November 18th and 25th, 2011, the Youth Leaving Care Hearings took place at Queen's Park, home of the Ontario Legislature. This is the report that came out of the submissions we received.

The purpose of this report is to improve the experiences and lives of youth in and leaving care. It includes a deeply personal glimpse into our lives. It provides decision-makers with one key recommendation designed to trigger fundamental change. It also gives six more recommendations for what could be done right now to better the lives of youth in and leaving care. This report is meant for everyone. Change is needed and we need your help to get there; no one can do it alone.

Sincerely,
The Youth Leaving Care Hearings Team

Attention: Some of the stories contained within this report may be hard to take. These stories are based on what we learned through the submissions and at the Hearings. They are told by youth through the lens of their own lives. This report is not about blaming the people who work in the system. In fact, many of us would not be here without the help of the people who have dedicated themselves to children and youth in care.



The Youth Leaving Care Hearings Story

Our Voice, Our Turn

By Oneil, 23, Former Youth in Care

How this all started

For years, children and youth in and from care felt they weren't being listened to. Despite feeling silenced, ignored and given what many youth in care call "the boot," children and youth continued to speak up about the struggles they faced in the system.

There are approximately 8,300 children and youth in care in the Province of Ontario. In 2010, the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, Irwin Elman, met with a group of them. The youth told him of their desire for change around leaving care and how change would benefit them.

Right now, when youth turn 21, care officially ends. But in reality, it ends sooner for many. That means no more emotional and financial support, no more health care benefits and no more access to the people and the system they've come to know. After hearing their thoughts, Irwin was encouraged but also explained that these issues and ideas were similar to what he had been hearing since the 1980s. Not satisfied with his response, the group challenged Irwin by saying, "OK buddy, so what are you going to do about it, now that you're the Provincial Advocate?"

Irwin heard them. He and his staff continued to meet with youth — those living in group homes, foster homes and shelters — so that he could figure out how to advocate for change now. He also met with Ontario Government Ministries, and other youth groups and organizations. From all of these meetings, the youth involved delivered a clear message: "All of you have done your best, now it's our turn."

Needing "our parent" — the Province — to listen and to understand the struggles around leaving care, youth from across



the province met with the Advocate's Office to discuss how best to accomplish their goals. With that, in March 2011, the idea of the Youth Leaving Care Hearings was born.

The idea was simple! First we needed to raise awareness and let other youth in and from care, along with anyone else, know how their voices could be heard. Youth would then organize and hold public hearings at Queen's Park to speak directly to "our parent" about aging out of care and how it could be better. After the Hearings, the youth organizers would then write a report to present back to Queen's Park. The report would reflect our experiences and recommendations.



Check out the Glossary if you're not sure what some of the words and terms mean.

What we did

In the spring of 2011, Irwin created a Hearings Team which then hired four youth in and from care to be youth leads on the project. With Shanna, Rasheeda, Wendy and me on board, the team was complete. We came up with a submissions process that would include more youth-friendly options such as audio, video, art and poetry, along with the standard written format.

We then travelled the province spreading the word to other youth in and from care, and to professionals, families, and friends (PFFs), on how they could tell their stories and make recommendations by sending in submissions. Youth in and from care, along with PFFs, could also have the opportunity to present and publicly share their stories and recommendations to a panel of youth at the Hearings.

To keep it fun, we also interacted and communicated about the project through our website, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

What happened

After receiving our first few submissions in August of 2011, it was clear that youth and PFFs wanted to address more than the issues of leaving care, so we began to organize the Hearings in a way that would allow us to hear everything people wanted to say. From then on, the Hearings were not only about the issues of leaving care, but also about the many struggles we face during and after care. From our point of view, all of this would help us learn how youth could better succeed when they “age out” of care.

In order to organize two days of Hearings at Queen's Park, we needed help. We reached out to our “brothers and sisters” in and from care across the province. As a result our team grew to include 30 volunteers, as well as the youth leads, advisors and staff supports from the Advocate's Office. We held training sessions to help us prepare for the Hearings and created three teams to carry out the work: the Panels team planned how to ask questions and support the presenters; the Social Media team filmed the event and conducted interviews; and the Events team looked after all of the logistics, including organizing the art display and welcoming everyone.

On November 18th and 25th, 2011, the Youth Leaving Care Hearings rocked Queen's Park. For the first time in Canada, young people in and from care held their own public hearings at a provincial legislature. From the moment people entered the building, they were met by young people working to make the Hearings a success. Deb Deller, Clerk of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario, supported us from the beginning and provided the official welcome. “This is the seat of Ontario's parliament. It is my house and it is your house,” she said. “In the day and age where we have less than 50% voter turnout at an election, for me, when I walked in this morning, it was gratifying to see so many people attending this event and, particularly, so many young people here.”

The speakers spoke from their hearts and shared sometimes very difficult stories that often brought the government officials, the audience, special guests and the youth panels to tears. While many presenters spoke, others sang, danced, and recited poetry. More than a few people said, “I've never seen hearings like this.” It was a life-changing experience as many left the Hearings with a deeper understanding of the everyday struggles we face. They also left with a sense of urgency to make change, so that youth in and leaving care can be better protected and can better succeed in life.

National and local news crews were also there and they reported the stories they heard on television, radio, in print and online. We had our own reporting team there too — youth with cameras and microphones gathered material to post on Facebook and YouTube.



Who noticed

With more than 300 people attending on Day One and more than 500 people on Day Two, it seems like the Hearings had an impact on everyone who was there. The Hearings, also made headlines and triggered feature stories that reached a wider audience through conventional media outlets and social networks online. We received many supportive and encouraging emails from youth, adoptive and foster parents, families, professionals, government officials and many others.

What came next

All together, we received 183 submissions from across the province and beyond. We carefully read all of them and reviewed everything that was said at the Hearings in order to get a clear understanding of it all. It was a daunting task. Much like the Hearings, it was a bittersweet process. Some submissions spoke about a great experience in care, but many were heartbreaking stories that at times were hard to take. This was not easy.

Then, with the guidance of a research advisor, we coded, analyzed and organized the data into the themes that now make up this report:

- We are vulnerable
- We are isolated
- We are left out of our lives
- No one is really there for us
- Care is unpredictable
- Care ends and we struggle

We selected quotes that best represented the themes. We also recognized the importance of the issues affecting First Nations children and youth in care. They will be the focus of another project in the very near future and we have included a section that shares what we learned so far about their experiences in care.

Not only did we learn about the experiences of children and youth in care from young people and professionals, but also their ideas, suggestions and recommendations came through

loud and clear. We have devoted a whole section to “sound-bites” from the submissions.

Creating this report

Staying true to the authenticity that characterized the Hearings, this report is written by youth in and from care, with the support of the Advocate's Office.

Six youth from across the province — Alicia, Darcy, Jesse, Lindsay, Mandy, and Thaila — volunteered to expand on the themes that make up this report. Speaking from their own experiences, and using quotes taken from the Hearings and the submissions, their insights offer the reader more personal reflections on life in care. We also had editors, and a graphic designer working closely with us. The design of the report is inspired by the collaborative ideas of the team.

Moving forward

A lot of hard work went into creating this report. And again, it wasn't easy. Change is scary and what is worse, is having to open ourselves to change. It's an unsettling feeling, this we know. But in order for us to move forward, we must first allow ourselves to be vulnerable, as it breaks down barriers and creates an opportunity for understanding.

Yes, we know that everyone at one point or another feels vulnerable, but many can move past that feeling because they have healthy support networks. Many of the youth who made submissions told us they don't have that kind of support and instead, live by the policies and bureaucracy of the system.

But we need more than that. Every child and youth deserves to feel and know that we are loved and cared for. We are vulnerable youth and need more than a system of policies for this to happen. Let us be vulnerable together, so we can strengthen our relationship, better our futures and have a better understanding of one another. Only then will we experience what it means to be part of a “good family.”

Helping us grow to be successful adults should start the moment we enter care. To understand what we need when we leave, you need to know who we are and what our lives are like in care.



We are vulnerable...

By Alicia, Age 23, Former Youth in Care

At this point in my life I had no one to look up to or help me through my struggles.

Jesse, 21, Former Youth in Care

Youth in care are vulnerable in a number of ways. As with any other child, children in care are influenced and shaped by the people, places and environment around them. As kids in care, we live a life that can resemble a revolving door. Frequent changes in people, places and things can both positively and negatively affect a child or youth in care. There are multiple ways youth in care can be vulnerable: for example, when adults are making life-changing choices such as where we will live, what programs we can attend and if we are able to see our biological families. Often these adults are making decisions having never even met us. We are also continually introduced to new adults knowing nothing about them, yet they know everything about us. Every child is vulnerable growing up. When vulnerable children and youth are placed in healthy homes with caring adults who encourage and support them, they are protected and they thrive. Unfortunately, not all youth live in these conditions.

Instead of hospitalization and psychiatric appointments, I would have benefited more from summer camps, class trips and family vacations but CAS never gave me that.

Cheryl Gray, 31, Former Youth in Care

For most people childhood is about summer camps, family weekends, school trips, birthday parties, vacations and a number of other family-oriented experiences. Youth in care often do not have enough of these experiences. CAS is a service, but a service to whom? Children do not fit into a 'one service fits all' structure; all children come with different personalities, baggage, goals, strengths, weaknesses and everything in between.

As a person of colour I was offended when group home staff would laugh or encourage racist comments in the house. I feel that there was no cultural competence.

Anonymous

The Province of Ontario is not fit to be the guardian of any child. The director of our program referred to the youth in care as "the worst of the worst." What does it say about a guardian who labels their new wards as "the worst of the

worst"? It assumes that all kids coming from care are criminals to be feared and not trusted. **Anonymous Professional**

It seems that instead of looking at individual cases and giving the proper support to each individual youth, some of us feel labelled, diagnosed and placed. This leaves some youth angry, frustrated, lost and vulnerable.

As a child I received many labels: bi-racial, orphan, foster child and Crown ward. These labels profoundly affected my sense of identity.

Ken, 31, Former Youth in Care

Children and youth are not given the chance to flourish in a nurturing environment when they end up in unfit homes and shelters. Those influences can leave our youth extremely vulnerable to picking up behaviours and habits they are then reprimanded for. When will CAS stop and see that they may be inadvertently pushing youth in care into these behaviours and lifestyles? When will CAS be accountable for their parenting skills? When will they become better parents?

Now as an adult looking back, I know now all the mistakes that went on within the system. As a child you don't have a voice that is taken seriously by adults. You have no choice but to go with what you are told or be put in a home with more 'security.' I know now I will do everything in my power to not turn out like my parents, the government.

Anonymous, Former Youth In Care

The system is broken, there is no accountability. We have tried everything so we could see our brothers and they have put up a wall to stop us.

Name withheld, 14, Youth in Care

As a child or youth in care we are used to the fact that there are constantly new people entering our lives. From an intake worker to the case worker, emergency home to permanent homes, social workers to child and youth workers, the changes are endless. As these people enter into a new relationship with us, they know all our personal facts, details and I guess not-so-secret family secrets; we enter the relationship only knowing their first names.

We joke now about how my foster mom was told I was a really hard teen to handle. They made it sound like I was unmanageable and they promised I would be out of the house within a month . . . taking me in was considered "a big favour." Now, almost 10 years later I still attend Thanksgiving dinners and have regular visits with her and the whole extended family. It was not fair of them to label or judge me.

Anonymous, 23, Former Youth In Care

Half the time . . . I don't even remember their names . . . It just went so fast that I didn't have a chance to get to know anybody and it was tough . . . they just looked on me as a bad kid and no one cared.

Jesse, 21, Former Youth in Care

One-sided relationships are just not fair. Some adults are coming to the table with assumptions, biases and judgments. Our personal lives are spread out like an open book for all the adults in the system to read at their convenience. This seems unfair to the thousands of children and youth trying to figure out their lives.

I discharged myself from CAS when I was 19 because I wasn't getting what I needed from them. They really underestimated me and my efforts to be independent and move forward.

Cheryl Gray, 31, Former Youth in Care

I felt that my life in care was holding me back from my real life which was outside of care with people I knew, my friends and my family.

Paul, 20, Youth in Care

Children and youth have a right, where possible, to know their families and feel that they are part of their biological families. Adults working in the system need to realize that these bonds outside of CAS, healthy or unhealthy, are a part of each child who comes through those doors. The system needs to come up with alternative ways for children and youth to have meaningful interactions with them, if they so choose.

I'm very close with my grandma, even up until today, I still talk to my grandma. And out of how many people in my family, I think she's the only one that actually calls and checks up on me. But in that home, I wasn't allowed to go see my mom, my sister, my dad, none of them.

Steven, 20, Former Youth in Care

I have come to learn that the most important things in life are family and permanency. Less changes in a youth-in-care's life means more time to focus on something else like post-secondary education.

Patricia, 22, Former Youth In Care

One of the more poignant moments that I experienced in the last number of years was [when a youth in care] said to me "I am alone living two blocks away from my family and I don't even know them." **Karen Schafer, Family Therapist**

It is not fair to paint the life of a child in care as all bad. There are many children and youth that have positive, enriching and fulfilling experiences and grow into well-adjusted, well-rounded adults.

Having a support 'team' consisting of two great case workers is fantastic and helps me every day. Having someone to go to when family isn't an option for us is beyond words. The financial and emotional support given to me in care is what keeps me going.

Sonja, 20, Youth in Care

I'm pretty sure I would have died without the CAS. So, I would not be living.

Anonymous

Having a positive support team, environment and structure, leads to positive outcomes. Being vulnerable is a natural part of life. The main difference between the vulnerability of a child in care and a child at home, is the support system and environment they live in. Children and youth in care lead a rollercoaster life. Without healthy outlets, support and surroundings, it is easy to fall into the unhealthy vices of life. With loving, nurturing support around you, you have the benefits of knowing you have your cheerleaders, your team, your "family" on your side.

These are things I hope every child gets to feel some day.

She was the only person I could be broken in front of. She showed me I was loved and that I could trust someone else with my burden. Her love has let me open up and love others. For this I am forever grateful.

Anonymous, 23, Former Youth In Care

So I do think Children's Aid has helped me in my life. As my journey with this organization is slowly coming to a close, with all the stuff I've been through, I'd just like to say thank you to all who believed in me, even when I didn't.

Nate, 19, Youth in Care



We are isolated...

By Lindsay, 19, Youth in Care

I'm here today because I want to tell you that I want a future... I haven't been getting the help that I need and I want, and I feel very isolated.

Name withheld, 16, Youth in Care

Isolation is a funny thing. You can be isolated at any point in time and outside factors can have little to no effect on the feeling. Have you ever heard the expression "You can be alone in a crowded room." That's Isolation. Feelings from the past isolate us in a world we face alone. But it doesn't stop there, add in everybody else's opinion of how you should be dealing with your life, add in every rule the CAS wants you to follow, add in every life situation that is real and raw and in your face. That's Isolation. Doing it all alone, every day.

It's tough growing up in a system where every day is unfamiliar and every day you are not sure what is going to happen to you, or where you're going to be, or where you are going to live, or whether you're going home or not, or how long it's going to take you to go home. It's just so many things you have to worry about and it's sad cause a lot of these things you have to be concerned about at a very young age.

Paul, 20, Youth in Care

So, I very much felt alone and it would have been nice to have somebody, I guess, there to be able to say, we kind of get this and it's okay that you're feeling this way.

Katelynn, 20, Youth in Care

I remember sitting in my room alone the day I turned 21. I'd been alone a million times in that room before but I'd never really felt alone like I did at that point in time.

Justine, 25, Former Youth in Care

Often times we feel that there is no one else out there who knows what exactly it is like. Facing our demons, one day at a time, often all at once and alone. Always alone. We forget that we're not the only youth in care, not the only youth who's gone through the pain and suffering of losing your family. Before coming into care, we were in unsafe situations, but

that was the last time some of us ever felt "safe." Our family could not function, but at least some of us felt like we belonged. Of course, some of us don't want to belong to an abusive family, and do find safety somewhere else.

Going into care, Isolation becomes your best friend, sticking by your side through thick and thin. If there's one thing you can count on in this big, scary world, it's your best friend Isolation. He'll be there for you, a cushion to fall back on, a shoulder to cry on. Everybody else was invited to a party that you can't attend. Isolation will stay home from the party just to console your mixed-up feelings.

There's no place like a spot in someone's heart.

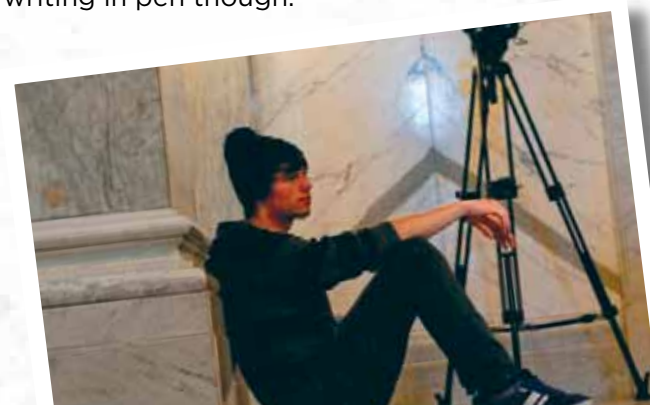
Jessica, 12, Adopted

Statistics show that every child needs 4 hugs a day for survival, 8 hugs a day for maintenance, and 12 hugs a day for growth. Some children and youth don't even get one hug a day. Make a difference in a child's life today. You can be the change, just open your heart for a child or youth today.

Tiffany, 19, Youth in Care

Feeling isolated, as kids in care, could be prevented easily. After all, it only takes one person to make us feel like we're not alone and there are 7 billion people in the world. One person to reach out and help us, listen to us, actually hear what we have to say and then guide us in the right direction. The Province takes on the role of parent and then CAS assigns us social workers and foster parents to structure our messed-up and foggy world, but that still isn't enough. We're still battling it alone every day, figuring out what exactly it is we want for ourselves, how to attain it, how it will pan out after we've gotten what we want.

To eliminate Isolation is to get together, share our feelings and stories and find out that we really aren't that different from one another, and to raise out of the slump that is our lives by attaining a fulfilling career that sustains opportunity and independence. We'd find out that we all have gone through the same thing at one point or another. We'd come to the conclusion that we all struggle every day with how to write our futures down in the blank book that is our lives. We're writing in pen though.



"You know, children in foster care have wings, but they need someone to teach them to fly, someone to lead them in the right direction, someone to be there when they fall. I am here today because of those people who taught me how to fly."

quote from *The Future of Children* in a submission

What these kids need is time. Time to figure out who they are as a person, what they want to do with their lives, what they're good at, and time to make a plan to have it all happen.

Angela, 28, Former Youth in Care

Respecting your rights means doing everything possible to ensure you have every chance to be healthy in mind, body and spirit, to be safe, to be able to learn and develop to your full potential. If your rights were fully respected in the child welfare system, you would build the capacities you need to leave care from the start. Marv Bernstein, Chief Advisor, Advocacy, UNICEF Canada

No other relationship begins with an expiry date.

Adam, 27, Former Youth in Care

How can you put a time limit on caring? The sand running to the bottom of the hourglass only wraps the Isolation that's blanketing us tighter and tighter until we can no longer see anything ahead of us except our worries and fears coming true. It takes a lifetime to figure out who you are, what makes you happy, what you want to do. But we're not asking for a lifetime, all we're asking for is for four more years. Four more years of care to find people who matter to us, who don't fall into the circle of the unhealthy lifestyle we've been born into.

Even though North American society stresses the importance of the individual, human nature has not changed. We are social beings. Other people are important to us. We need a social context. We live interdependently, not independently. If former youth in care are not lucky enough to have foster homes that keep doors open (in spite of getting no support from CAS) or to be adopted or to have (re)established ties to their families, they might end up in unhealthy social contexts.

Gitte Granofsky, Chair, Children in Limbo Task Force of the Sparrow Lake Alliance

Build healthy relationships that will last the rest of their lives. Anonymous Professional

Extending care four more years is what we need to find out who we are, as individuals, not youth in care. To find a niche where we can belong. When we find that person, that family, that lifestyle, that education, that career, I surmise we will no longer be holding hands with our good pal Isolation. We'll be living our own lives, we'll be able to shake free from the label we were given without a say. We'll find our voices and we'll walk on our own two feet.

That's all we want, to be able to balance ourselves, fly from the coop and not look back. We want our wings, and they're long overdue.



We are left out of our lives...

By Darcy, 19, Youth in Care

I never felt like I belonged.

Teresa, 38, Former Youth in Care

Introduction

As a child in care you often feel as if someone else is living your life, as if there is a predetermined plan. And it's a plan you've had no say in.

Feeling there's a predetermined plan

Children and youth in care rarely have control of their own lives. Being in care can feel like you're watching your life flash before your eyes and you have no way of changing any of it. Youth may see themselves as passengers in their own lives. They get to watch the adults (workers, foster parents, staff) plan their lives. The children and youth need to be able to feel safe, stable and happy. If the system and the people in the children's and the youth's lives are making all the choices for them, how will they ever learn to take care of themselves?

And forgive me for not knowing what I want to be. When the past 20 years of my life I've been fighting for stability. All I want is to be like any other child. Do you know how it feels to have your life typed and filed?

Kayla, 21, Former Youth in Care

They listen suspiciously and I go to a room that would never be mine, with a roommate that is not my sister. I ask, "Where is my sister? Did you save her too?" But they cannot discuss this and I am told to call my worker. I am thrown into a system, a new life, no instructions manual given...

Sophie, 22, Former Youth in Care

No decision about us without us!

Feeling not good enough

Many children in care feel unwanted or not good enough. This could be because they have little input into what happens to them in their lives. . . past, present and future.

As a child, being taken from home, and moved from family to family, I was never able to find home again. I was looked at differently by society, had words pushed into my mouth by workers, and as a child I never seen or had a say for my best interest.

Ashley, 20, Youth in Care

I'm a group home kid, I ain't got no rights.

Nick, 35, Former Youth in Care

Staff are hired to cook for them. Heaven forbid they are given a knife! It is easier to put food in front of them rather [than] teach them cooking skills and nutrition.

Anonymous Professional

Feeling invisible

It's lonely as well when children and youth in care are always having to move or have many different workers. It makes them feel unwanted and they begin to see themselves as alone. For some youth, having to watch as your foster family leaves with their family for vacation and leaves you with a relief home, also creates the feeling of being unwanted. You are supposed to be part of their family but yet they leave you behind while they are on their family trip.

Growing up in a foster home I felt excluded because the parents had their own kids and I felt like I was treated differently. I wish my foster parents would understand how the way I was treated excluded me and made me feel like an outsider.

Anonymous, 19, Former Youth in Care

Inclusion in family outings is also important and needed in order to be a family. Family is one of the fundamental institutions in society and it is one we foster kids need the most. A family is a home, stability, love and most of all, support

Patricia, 22, Former Youth in Care

Children and youth are often unable to get hold of their workers because the workers have such big case loads. Or they always seem so busy, you don't want to bother them.

Tell me what's become of my rights. Am I invisible because you ignore me?



Elevated Grounds - performance at the Hearings

CAS was my legal guardian for eight-and-a-half years and I feel as if they treated me like a burden and left me to fend for myself with no other help, like I was just a case load and now that file is closed.

Martha, 24, Former Youth in Care

I feel like I'm very limited. I don't even know how to use email. If I need . . . a deaf interpreter, if I need to make a phone call, if I need to write to someone . . . I need interpreters. I need to be more independent and do things. If I go to a doctor, I feel like there's no interpreter there and I can't even communicate and it's very, very frustrating. I want to be able to, as a deaf person, have access to interpreters and be involved in the world.

Name withheld, 16, Youth in Care

Feeling you can't have your own future

And when you try to make decisions about your future, you are burdened by rules and guidelines. Guidelines such as the distance of your college or university, or even your job. CAS often tries to tell you that you are incapable of being by yourself at a far distance and often restricts you to schools close to the area. When this happens, it prevents youth in care from following their dreams and goals. Youth, almost young adults now, are then forced to lower their personal standards as to where and how they wish to continue the next step of their lives. Some youth get pregnant when they are still in care. They still want a future for themselves and now for their baby too. Once again, the system makes that difficult when some agencies close their files.

Suddenly, as a young mother, you are no longer seen as the child in need of protection, but your child is . . . It's the pregnancy that has suddenly given this young woman the motivation and maybe the self-esteem, or at least the self-drive, to make positive changes in her life . . . She never felt worthy enough to do that for herself, but she feels her baby deserves a better life and she wants to do that for her child.

Yvette Roberts, Co-ordinator, Young Parents No Fixed Address Network

I want to be able to provide for my daughter and give her the best life possible. I am afraid that I might not be able to do that with the limitations of the age limit that is currently in place for today's children in care.

Alisha, 18, Youth in Care

It is hard to see a bright future or any future with obstacles in one's path before they even begin the journey. For instance, when I look at my 21-year-old sister as she is struggling to manage the school work load and bills, I question myself whether trying so hard in school is worth it when failure is almost destined for me.

Jemimah, 19, Youth in Care

. . . the futures of youth should not be dependent on social workers but on the youth themselves.

Edwin, 21, Former Youth in Care, on behalf of the Voyager Project

Conclusion

Youth in care need to have a say in their plans, otherwise you're just along for the ride. When you have a say, then you care about what happens and you care about yourself. And you don't feel as invisible or as worthless anymore. Just knowing that there is someone there that will be able to help with your needs, is what all children and youth in care need.

. . . having a voice is crucial to the development and empowerment of young people. It is also your right. Ensuring you have a voice while you are in care will help you prepare to use that voice when you leave it and as you continue to make your way through life. Marv Bernstein, Chief Advisor, Advocacy, UNICEF Canada

You are our kids, we're proud of you, and we want to do the very best for you, and we also know that your voices are the ones that are going to really help us to do that and today is an excellent example of that. Mary Ballantyne, Executive Director, Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies

So we come now hoping you hear our voice. We're giving you a chance to make a choice. Help us to get the things that we need in order for us to truly succeed.

Kayla, 21, Former Youth in Care

No one is really there for us...

By Thaila, 18, Youth in Care

So, when you don't have the privilege of having a family... youth ask... "Who is going to buy my birthday cake this year? Who is going to remember me?"

Delia, 35, Former Youth in Care, National Youth in Care Network

During the Hearings we heard a lot of stories from youth all over the province. My role in this event was as a panelist. This allowed me to hear the stories up close and personal. I was able to ask questions and ask for details. We gathered a lot of information and heard about a lot of different experiences. But having no one there for us seemed to be a recurring theme.

Living in an unsafe and unhealthy environment is a trauma in itself. Being in it alone makes it more difficult. Being taken from it makes it safer, but safer doesn't always mean happy and sometimes just makes it worse.

*I feel alone and there's no one to talk to
So I look to company I can relate to
Destructive instincts crash,
omniscient and blue
Trust no one, nobody cares about the truth
Put up stronger, higher fences
The awkward air vomits blind pretences
Secrets one girl is desperate to tell
This is my private childhood hell.*

Sophie, 22, Former Youth in Care

Children are taken from their homes for many different reasons. Some because the parents are incapable of caring for the youth or CAS has decided rightly or wrongly, they are better off without their families.

We were also so poor and had to move multiple times and mainly survived on dry cereal, tomato sandwiches and a mixture of mashed potatoes, tomatoes and noodles, because that was all we could afford.

Nate, 19, Youth in Care

Other times the child is being abused sexually, physically or emotionally, or the parents struggle with addiction or their mental health. Every child deserves to be safe and to be a child so I agree that CAS is often right. But sometimes, as

horrible as these circumstances might be, I think we forget that for these youth those circumstances are all they know. And sometimes just being in a "CAS approved" home is no more safe or healthy.

I have since the age of three or four been responsible for myself and my upkeep.

Catherine, 19, Youth in Care

The mental state of a child can be so fragile that once being taken out of the home, the child feels alone, confused and vulnerable. Being moved to a new area away from friends, school, and family is a scary and lonely thing. The child is constantly meeting new workers, new staff, new foster parents, and new kids in the same position but different circumstances. Everything moves so quickly and things need to be done at a certain time and done in the proper way. It's as if no one stops to think that maybe the child could use someone to talk to.

I was told that I was depressed and I was court ordered to take an anti-depressant medication that has left an effect on me.

Claire, 25, Former Youth in Care

Should I have accepted the opportunities that they had given me? Yeah I should have! I made mistakes and I accomplished some great things, and you continue to in the future.

Patrick, 23, Former Youth in Care

Some youth are put in therapy, counselling, or they are looked at as having behavioural problems. They are diagnosed, medicated and treated. Some kids just don't know how to speak up or are too scared to say "I feel alone."

And for those who do . . .



You reach out for help and support. Some reach back to guide you, some don't even call back.

Chaelene, 20, Youth in Care

We've heard and seen evidence that frontline workers may have as little as 25 to 30% of their time to do what they went to school to do and do what they want to do, and that's spending face-to-face time with kids, youth, and families.

Ene Underwood, Commission to Promote Sustainable Child Welfare

Some youth will turn to the wrong crowd, falling into the same pattern that they escaped from. Drug abuse, alcohol abuse, self-mutilation are all forms of self-medicating. Some often end up being in unhealthy or abusive relationships because they want the feeling of being "wanted" and being "loved." And if they find a good person, how could they trust that person will stay? So they push everyone away because they're afraid to get hurt.

For those who are adopted, it's usually a very different story. And that story was heard loud and clear at the Hearings.

I was adopted by my foster parents when I was four years old. Now I can always have a family. My kids will have grandparents and aunts and uncles. I will always have someone to call in the middle of the night when I need to talk, even when I'm 19 or 25 or 30 . . . I can share family pictures and tell family stories but most of all, I'll always belong.

Amanda, 13, Adopted

There's a stereotype that adopted kids are trouble, but we aren't. Why do people think that? We just need some love from our forever families; some people we know won't abandon us. We're not items, we can't be returned at the scan of a barcode. Do you know how good it feels to come home and have a mom and dad?

Jessica, 12, Adopted

I was adopted when I was 12 years old . . . I know for sure my adoptive mother, sister and extended family have my back, and no matter what happens in life, I have a safety net. I know I am one of the lucky ones and I would not have had that if I stayed in care.

Ashley, 15, Adopted

Adoption may not be the answer for everyone, but how can we make this feeling happen with all youth in care? Having great support backing you up makes going through all the bad things so much easier. Someone to lean on, someone to cry to, someone to talk and laugh with. More stability, less change.

I have been living in a residence [at school] . . . since September 4th, 2011, and my workers are still available to talk to, my worker came to visit me my second week of school, and we spent a day together.

Catherine, 19, Youth in Care



I feel that it would be a big asset if there was a mentor or a Big Brother program in the system. This would let kids see that life is hard and things don't always go your way but they can make their lives good even if their past was so bad. Just because other people give up on life and go to drugs and alcohol doesn't mean that they have to as well.

Jesse, 21, Former Youth in Care

Being able to maintain a stable and steady relationship with at least one person makes all the difference in the world. I'm sure if we can somehow fix things so children and youth in care can have a constant in their lives, someone who is there for them.

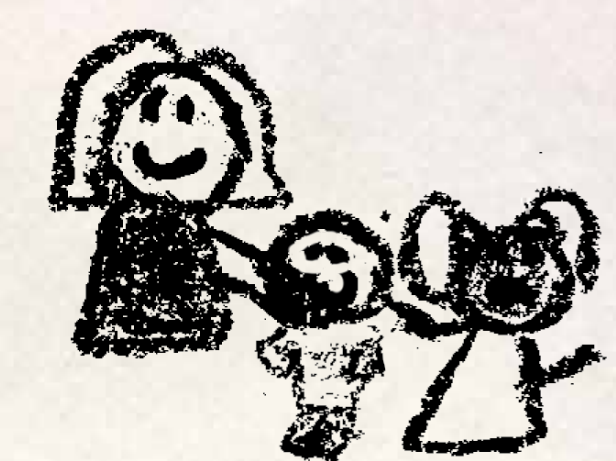
You deserve our support to help you connect with your family. You deserve our support to assist you in getting a good education and having us remove the barriers that keep you from doing that. And you also deserve our support to be able to come together as youth to develop. We are committed to working with you at the OACAS and I hope that all of us here, government, Children's Aid Societies, people in the community, can come together to do better for you because, as we heard so much this morning, we are your parents.

Mary Ballantyne, Executive Director, Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies

It takes a lot of courage from the youth we work with to overcome the obstacles they've been placed with. They need someone that will be there in the long term that will help them achieve their goals.

All a child needs is the love of a parent and stability.

Kihaw, 20, Youth in Care



Care is unpredictable...

By Lindsay, 19, Youth in Care and Thaila, 18, Youth in Care

Being taken away from your home is a confusing, complicated, and scary time. No one is ever prepared to leave what's familiar. When you're home, even if things aren't the best, they're usually constant. On the other hand, life in care is usually unpredictable. Everything, from a new foster home, new group home, house outings, roommates, other residents' behaviour and more, is unpredictable.

Things become uncertain very quickly. You are removed from your home and right from the start you have no idea where you will be placed, or if you will like the people you meet. Everything about you is written down in a notepad that you are not even allowed to see.

Because workers sometimes need to find shelter for a child as quickly as possible, at times it seems like they do not check the home to see if it is a good fit. Every home is run differently and each should cater to the needs of individual youth. Care is not the same everywhere. Some foster and group homes work well for some youth and not for others.

We have a lot of staff that are in and out. I don't always have the same people that I'm working with. There's a big turnover in staff, and just when I feel I'm getting better emotionally, things get worse because now there's someone different there and it's really hard to get through things.

Name withheld, 16, Youth in Care

I moved to a group home. I was very frustrated going there. I moved into another home, moved in with other individuals who were not deaf. It's always been very frustrating especially because I had to move around so much and I moved quite a bit.

Name withheld, 16, Youth in Care

I lived and worked in group homes. It is my personal and professional opinion that this is not an acceptable option for success. I think it puts otherwise normal human beings under a microscope and pathologizes normal human responses to trauma.

Sarah, 30, Former Youth in Care

Different group homes have procedures and structures that they go by. Protocol for one home may not be the same for another, and sometimes that's not even the real issue. Sometimes, how the home is run depends on which staff team is working. For the youth staying there, this can be a positive or a negative thing. Either way it's as if nothing stays the same... nothing is constant... life in a group home is unpredictable.

I've been with the Children's Aid Society for a decade... and I must say, and I quote from a famous book, "It was the best of times and the worst of times."

Nate, 19, Youth in Care

For example, when a child is acting out, one group of staff on duty at that time might decide that his or her behaviour is too out of hand and might decide to restrain the child and/or call the police. Another group of staff, faced with the same situation, might just verbally try to calm that child down and negotiate instead of using such drastic measures. This can be confusing for youth because they aren't sure what will happen after each shift change.

Outings and "family vacations" rarely happen because the many plans and decisions are "behaviourally-based." If one youth decides to act out, then the whole house suffers and no one goes out. And because these events are usually programmed for certain times, another outing might not be scheduled for another month or even longer.

The structures in group homes are divisive and are focused on control and punishment and reform rather than growth, learning and creating stability.

Edwin, 21, Former Youth in Care, on behalf of the Voyager Project

HH
HOMES I've
Lived in HH

I don't find the generalization of group homes fair and they should take into account that there are many different types of children out there. And they just can't throw each and every one into the same household and call that proper living arrangements.

Name withheld, 17, Youth in Care

While some people are having the worst of times in care, others are having the best of times and are thankful for the help they receive while in care.

My CAS worker is like the dad I never had. And since my CYW has taken me under her wing, I know I can get through pretty much anything.

Kayla, 21, Former Youth in Care

Whenever I need something they're there. Just because I'm out of care doesn't mean I'm out of their family. They still consider me their son. I'm thankful every day that they stand by me whatever I do.

Jesse, 21, Former Youth in Care

How does this happen? Why is one experience so different from another? Support. Some individuals are receiving support while others only dream of what that might be like. What it means to be in someone else's thoughts. What it means to have someone who respects your rights and thinks and acts with your best interests as a priority.

More long term future planning, education, life skills.

Anonymous

Many youth in care who have received support from workers, social workers, the government, foster families, maybe even their own families, are the ones who are doing well. They are the ones who are telling the world with huge grins on their faces how great their lives are thanks to the kind consideration they have been given.

I am just learning job skills and learning many important life skills that I will need in order to succeed in life and to reach my goals, thanks to my dedicated, patient and loving foster family and other great supports.

Name withheld, 17, Youth in Care

But what about all those other lives?

I went from being financially supported to having nothing but I wasn't given the opportunity to learn about budgeting or handling my money properly. Any competent parent would not make these mistakes.

AJ, 21, Former Youth in Care

Growing up in this type of environment is going to set youth up for trouble in the future. All their lives they learn to relate through power and consequences and

when they leave care, the structures aren't there anymore. Many are lucky and learn to adapt... but others do not know how to cope and end up re-institutionalized.

Edwin, 21, Former Youth in Care, on behalf of the Voyager Project

One way for us to reach a level of happiness, independence, even self-confidence, is through the support of people who care. You can't make someone else care for you, but you can care for yourself. The Province can care for you and help you, they can be that support system you're lacking.

We feel that workers and foster homes need to be central in this aspect of development. This doesn't mean more chores or going to bed on time, it means creating a structure whose focus is not that of imposed discipline but of self-discipline and self-worth.

Edwin, 21, Former Youth in Care, on behalf of the Voyager Project

By putting change in place for the youth in care who need guidance and support, they would be better able to succeed.

We need to examine what we're doing and, frankly, really change the entire concept of case management for youth in care to a system of caring for youth...

Les Voakes, Executive Director, Youth Centres Canada

When WE believe in young people, they come to believe in themselves. We need to know that, it is not enough to say that we love them, they must know that they are loved.

Bob Interbartolo, Sisters of the Good Shepherd

We need loving, kind, caring, compassionate people.

Sarah, 30, Former Youth in Care

All of that would make life in care more consistent and predictable for every young person in care. It might even create the best of times for everyone.



Care ends and we struggle...

By Mandy, 20, Youth in Care

Just when you thought there was no more to lose, you lose it all.

Chaelene, 20, Youth in Care

When a child enters the foster care system, they enter carrying a very heavy weight of traumatic experiences on their shoulders. Each child's experience is different from the next, but one thing many of us feel is abandoned.

I already had my family taken away once, and it was probably the hardest thing in my life. I didn't know where else to turn or what I was going to do, and when I turn 21, it's all going to happen again.

Brandon, 20, Youth in Care

It is extremely important that a child has love, support and guidance. This is key to every child's success. Each child struggles with the reality that they are removed from their families. In some cases, they don't have that understanding of it all. It's like an emotional tornado they must go through alone. It makes one question the purpose of removing children from unsafe situations, providing safety for the time being, and then tossing them when they reach the age of 21. What is the point in trying to help children if they don't have the support to transition to adulthood?

Children's Aid saved my life, but at this moment I felt betrayed and abandoned. I was not ready to leave care! I felt their love, guidance and support was unconditional — until I turned 21 and then it became conditional.

Corey, 27, Former Youth in Care



I have tried to finish school but it is so hard to do when I have never been too comfortable in schools plus the money was so tight that if I even spent a few dollars more than my budget I was done and no bus pass for school, no lunch to take to school sometimes not even food for meals. There is NO FOOD in my house right now. I am 20 years old and THERE IS NO FOOD IN MY HOUSE.

Steven, 20, Former Youth in Care

How is one supposed to feel the love of a parent or of anyone for that matter if one is bounced around from worker to worker, from foster home to foster home, group home to group home? What is stable about that? A child needs all the support they can get, especially if they are struggling with what happened before care or even during.

We all tried to grow up too fast.

Tiffany, 20, Youth in Care

It is not necessarily that we "try," it is as if growing up is forced upon us as if childhood is over. While we try to understand what we are going through, our childhood slips away. Other children who have not faced these types of experiences have fewer worries than foster children or children in care. There needs to be more support to help each child grow as a person and succeed in life as much as they possibly can.

Many youth in care feel that there is a lack of support as they approach 21 and have to leave care. Youth in care need to develop life skills such as cleaning, cooking, and paying bills, along with learning how to set goals and maintain structure in their lives. Youth in care should feel completely prepared when they turn 21, but the majority of us do not.

There is a lot of anxiety built up around the 21st birthday for those in care when there really should not be . . . 21st birthday — It is a milestone in a person's life and shouldn't be feared. Losing support from Children's Aid leaves too many unanswered questions. Where will I go when times get tough? Who will I turn to? How will this affect my future?

Sonja, 20, Former Youth in Care

Youth in care feel constantly reminded that the countdown has begun. Many youth dread their 21st birthdays. The "family," the system that they have depended on most of their lives, decides they are ready to be on their own. They no longer receive the emotional and financial support that has helped them move forward in life. There are a lot of youth in care who struggle just before turning 21 and this is when they need consistency, stability, love and guidance.

It's always the little things that mean the most. Who will they call when they need someone to talk to? If they are short cash for groceries, who will help them out? Where will they spend Christmas? There are plenty of emotions of anxiety and isolation that many youth in care feel when they are about to age out of care. Here's what many are saying:

What doesn't help the most right now is I don't have a lot of support now. And I am needing that, I have been trying to go back to school and I have needed support with that . . . Leaving care was the hardest thing I have gone through!

Amanda, 21, Former Youth in Care



It is really hard for myself to grasp that the government thought you needed to be placed in better hands and when you're 21 it's all over. At that age many things are happening and this is the time when you need the most support.

Angel, 19, Youth in Care

It's really scary because it's like you're trying so hard and you just get cut off right in the middle of when you're trying to do your best work.

Jess, 21, Former Youth in Care

The loss of emotional support and feeling the iceberg of abandonment again, are just two of the issues. Some youth in care are medicated for a variety of things. There are cases where it's dangerous to stop taking the medication. Medication costs money and once youth age out, how can they afford the medication that they need? Also, some of us have problems with finding and keeping a doctor that will stick with us.

I am 5' 3", currently weigh 328 lbs. and have seven health conditions . . . I have an addiction to food or an eating disorder so powerful that it is harming my body. My health has gotten worse, that the other week a doctor refused to take me on as a patient because he said it seems like I'm not doing much to better myself. I was five years old when my health started getting worse. I've been trying to fight this battle. Some days I feel in control and self-confident, and others, I feel out of control and have low self-esteem.

Michele, 22, Former Youth in Care

In addition to the typical challenges of securing money for rent, food, tuition and books, I had to find a way to pay for treatment for debilitating depression that stemmed from the loss of my parents and the subsequent abuse that followed while I was in care.

Ken, 31, Former Youth in Care

Many foster children have complex needs due to trauma and some to exposure and effects of substance, alcohol abuse by their parents . . . ADHD, learning disabilities . . . have necessitated the need for mental health services, counseling, psychiatric services, etc. We would like to recommend that there be an easier transition from childhood services to adult services so that there is no interruption in these services that are required by the child to a successful transition into adulthood. Cecile Brookes, President, Foster Parent Society of Ontario.

There are a lot of issues that are caused when youth leave care. One main issue is how do we manage when dealing with school.

Although I entered university after aging out of care with high ambitions for achieving academic excellence, my traumatic childhood greatly affected my academic performance . . . My first degree took longer to complete than a normal four-year track, because at different times I needed to reduce my course load as I dealt with the psychological difficulties that presented themselves after I left care . . .

Ken, 31, Former Youth in Care

I would like to see the age of termination from ECM extended . . . 21 is too scary of a time to lose so much support, and makes youth fearful of their future. Just going to college, accumulating debt from school, on your own, trying to work around school to make ends meet, most likely around the time of getting first car, etc. and then losing the only support you have is a terrifying thought.

Kihaw, 20, Youth in Care

Youth are the future generation and we need to be successful. In order to be successful we need to obtain the right life skills and be the best we can be. In any given situation there are challenges, but there are also good things that come from them. Youth in care tend to be very resilient and persistent. But the best way to do anything is to have guidance and support to get where you need to be. With all the negative things youth in care face, there are positive things that help them grow. From these submissions you'll see that support and resilience in youth play a huge part in success:

I am a proud graduate from the Medical Laboratory Technician program, and I now am currently living on my own and my life in care has been a journey I will never forget. The friends, memories and the strong bond with my foster family. I know life is a long winding road of opportunities and with them behind me in everything I do, I will always strive to be the best. I have to be [the best] to succeed in the life that is presented to me!

Nate, 19, Youth in Care

I am also the first one in my family to get my high school diploma and attend college.

Tiffany, 20, Youth in Care

In the submissions, there were plenty of suggestions for every difficulty and problem youth in care are facing. With regard to leaving care at 21, here are some of the suggestions:

All I'm asking is that there be an after-care organization for when you're out of the system. In my opinion, I think having an organization who could help with job searching, help with food, going out monthly, would really help youth transitioning . . .

Angel, 19, Youth in Care

Comprehensive health and dental benefits, including prescriptions, should be extended to youth to the age of 25 to allow them to complete their education and gain employment before coverage ends. Mary Ballantyne, Executive Director, Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies

Safe and affordable housing, transition homes, and semi-supported living arrangements, geographically accessible to allow for proximity to schools, are needed to meet the housing needs of youth leaving care. Billie Schibler, Former Child Advocate, Manitoba

One professional speaking at the Hearings made a statement that sums it up well:

We as adults are making them fail. I don't think that's good enough and I'd like to think there's a lot of adults out there who would also agree with that. I have . . . a 19-year-old daughter who's gone to college. She calls me every evening. I pick her up every weekend. Why? Because she's my daughter. But what do we do? We say, here's your suitcase at 18 and you're on your own. Go to that small apartment, find your own food and, by the way, go to school and be successful and go to college . . . The care is gone and we need to put it back. We need to care. It's going to take some dedicated adults and decision-makers to take the 18 away, but we have to do it if we care. Glen Bishop, Executive Director, Ausable Family Services

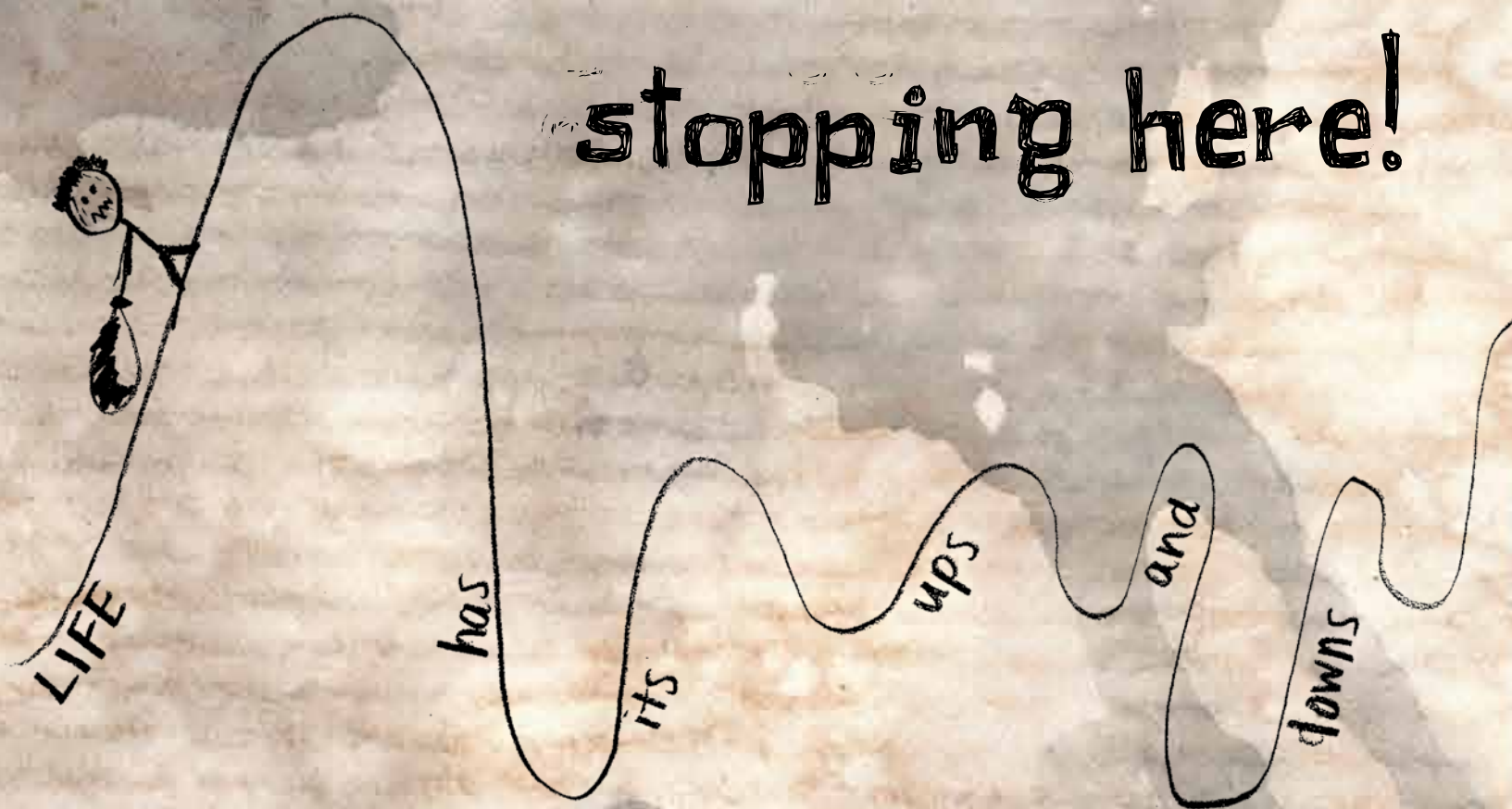
Every child in care will face the difficulties of care ending. The cycle of destruction needs to come to an end. There needs to be a great solution to this problem. Youth need to succeed in life the best they can. In order for this to happen, we all need support. We need to feel ready to transition into adulthood with all the necessary support and knowledge. There are over 8,000 youth in care in Ontario alone. Do you wish for your future generation to fail and continue the cycle of destruction?

We are, after all, YOUR children, Ontario. Justine, 25, Former Youth in Care



vulnerable + isolated +
left out + no one there
for us + unpredictable
care + care ends
≠ success.

That's why we're not
stopping here!



We keep losing who we are

First Nations Voices at the Hearings

By Jesse, 21, Former Youth in Care

Most of our young people don't know who they are. All they know is that they are Aboriginal, Anishinabe... but they don't know what that means.

Quote from 3rd World Canada, documentary film submitted by Andrée Cazabon, 38, Former Youth in Care

Native youth face numerous challenges in today's care system. Some major troubles include differences in religious views, drug and alcohol abuse, and the feeling of alienation from their community. A lot of native youth do not get a chance to learn about their own culture because foster parents may not give the kids an option, since the child is living under their roof, the child should follow their rules and their beliefs.

Take Katelynn for example: "Well, I was forced to go to church and if I wasn't, I was grounded."

For Aboriginal children and youth in care, there is a hunger for our own culture because a lot of beliefs have been lost.

I did not have a say if I wanted to attend my cultural things as in pow-wows or sweat lodges. Instead, I went to church.

Name withheld, 17, Youth in Care

Elders are just now trying to bring back the traditions and language that were lost. All too often reservations are stricken with poverty and high rates of drug abuse. This may be due to most of the youth growing up not knowing how to cope with what has happened to them while they were in the system. They may have been placed in foster care, something that no one really wanted, but it happened and there is nothing they could do about it.

The number one reason for those children coming into care in the first place was neglect, of course, related to — as we all know the story — poverty, poor housing conditions and high incidences of substance abuse. Theresa Stevens, Executive Director, Anishinaabe Abinoojii and Board President of the Association of Native Child and Family Service Agencies of Ontario

Theresa's statement shows a seemingly never-ending vicious cycle and this cycle is the reason why kids are put into care. Also, people do not realize that this has an impact on the youth's children because even in adulthood, they may still not know how to deal with life. While the system wants to put the individual in a good home, sometimes this means that they take youth away from what they are used to. This might further alienate the youth from their family and they may not have anyone to look up to or may lack a sense of belonging.

We cannot cut those ties to families and communities without the young person paying the price. Theresa Stevens, Executive Director, Anishinaabe Abinoojii and Board President of the Association of Native Child and Family Service Agencies of Ontario

This is not to say that the child should stay with their parents but it means that the child should have a family member close to them.

In the video *3rd World Canada*, a young boy states, "I lived with everyone in the whole town, but no one would keep me." And another presenter put it this way, "Like a lot of young people in care, I never felt like I had anyone to turn to, including CAS."

Despite the agencies' best efforts to help the children, they could do more damage than good. If the child or youth does not have anyone to look up to, how does society think that kids in care are going to prevail, if they have no one to help them rise up out of the ashes?

At the Hearings I made this point:

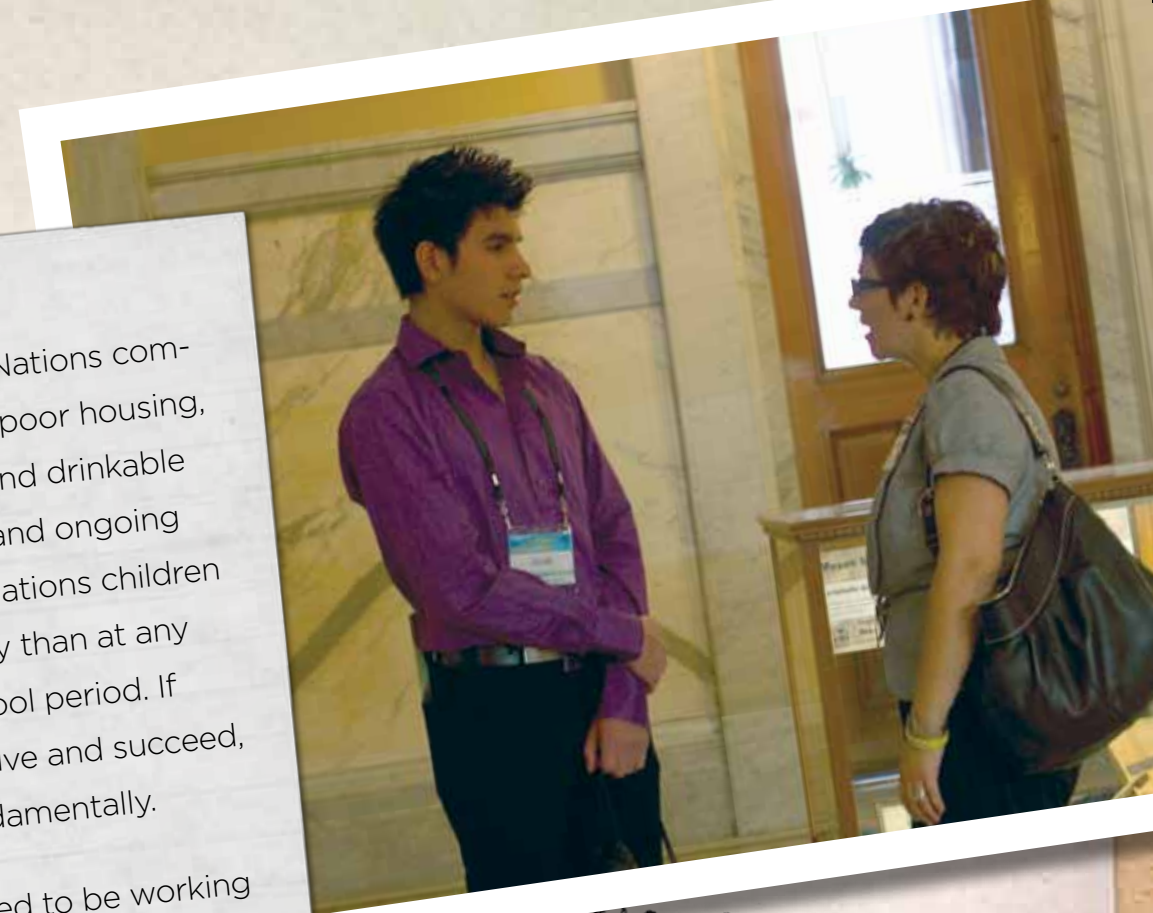
I'd like to see the fact that siblings could stay together . . . because that gives them a sense of home. I'd like to see a peer mentor system or Big Brother system for those who don't have siblings . . . somebody to look up to . . . to help them along.

They are stronger with family or a mentor than on their own.

“ So many of the problems in First Nations communities today like deep poverty, poor housing, poor schools, instability of food and drinkable water, are deeply rooted in past and ongoing injustices. There are more First Nations children in our child welfare system today than at any point during the residential school period. If First Nations children are to thrive and succeed, child welfare must change fundamentally.

The Advocate's Office is pleased to be working with key stakeholders in Northern Ontario to organize a forum that will bring together First Nations young people, decision-makers and stakeholders to talk about the needs of First Nations children and youth living in Northern fly-in and remote communities. ”

Irwin Elman,
Provincial Advocate
for Children and Youth



You need is love
You Need Is Love
YOU NEED IS LOVE
love lifts us up where we BELONG



Each of you has a role to play and none of you is more important than the other. If you think you might be too small, there is an American author that I'm fond of that has a quote that I'm even more fond of, and it is this: "If you think you are too small to be effective, you've never been in the dark with a mosquito."

- Deb Deller, Clerk of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario

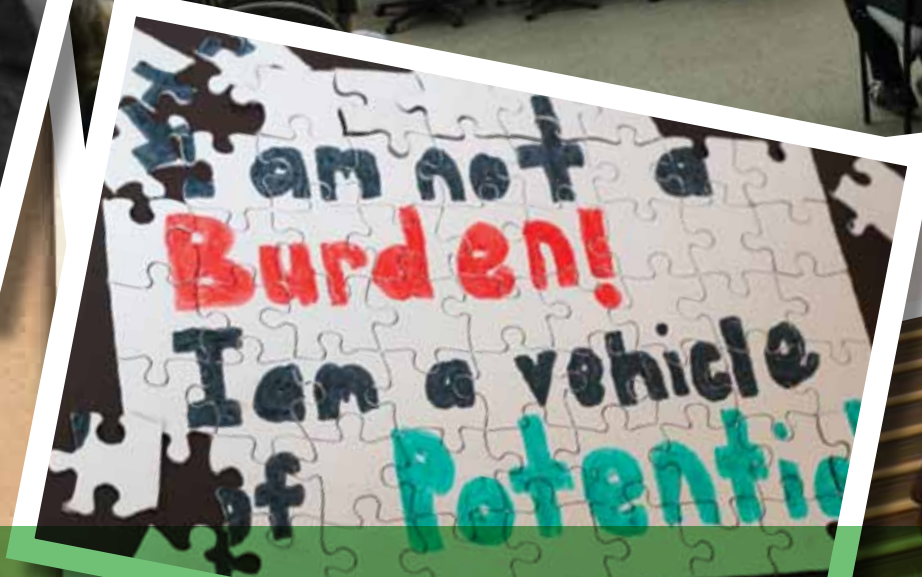
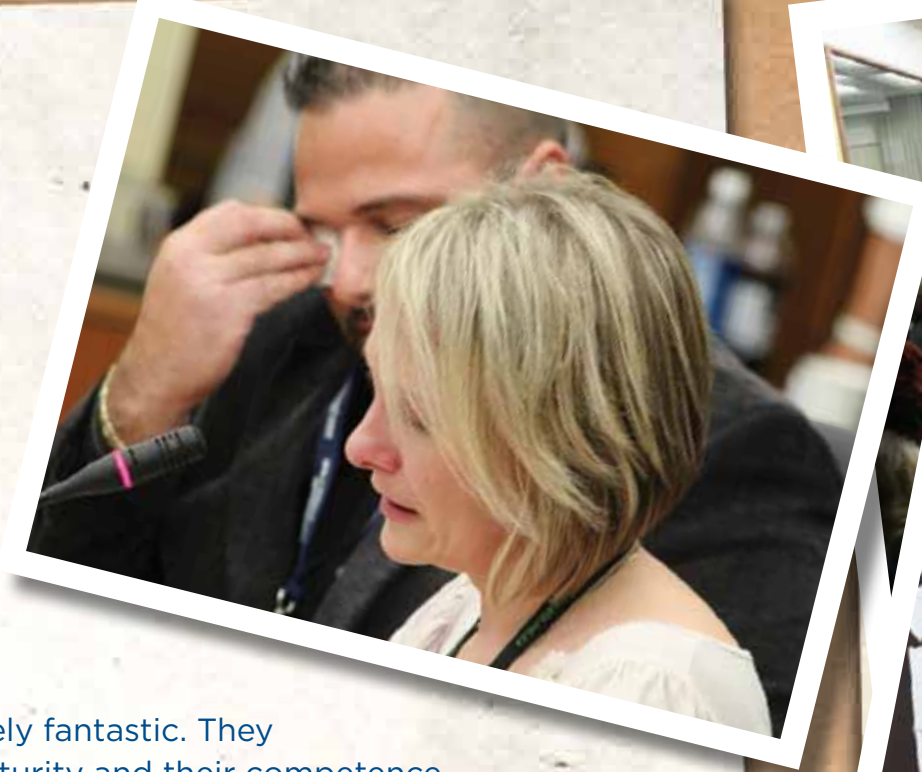
What these talented youth have accomplished with these hearings is without precedent. It is groundbreaking and it is brave. I commend them for their hard work and their courage.

- The Hon. Dr. Eric Hoskins, Minister of Children and Youth Services



The panel was absolutely fantastic. They demonstrated their maturity and their competence in dealing with issues they were exposed to, but they were able to lead the conversation in a very professional way.

- George Zegarac, Former Deputy Minister of Children and Youth Services



Scenes from the Hearings

These are very powerful young people who have struggled through many, many challenges and are able to sit in a room that's quite intimidating and share their stories, not for their own sake, but for the sake of trying to make a system that's failing them, work better.

- Andrea Horwath, Leader, New Democratic Party of Ontario

It's really valuable to get a first-hand, front line perspective on the issues in play, certainly very multifaceted concerns and very complex, but impressive."

- David Young, Executive Assistant to Jane McKenna, MPP, Critic, Children and Youth Services, Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario

And one of the remarkable things in my job is that every time I meet young people, no matter their stories, no matter how difficult their life has been in the system, before the system, outside the system, they want to contribute.

- Irwin Elman, Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth



Who a child is, is not the hardship they suffer in the family drama. A child is far greater than this... Try and be kind and understanding to yourself when you fail or fall off the tracks. We all fail at some point in some things, just try again. You deserve a good life and you have something special to give to our society.

Cindy, 40, Former Youth in Care

My life, my choice, my surroundings, my voice.

The pain I've endured, I came out on top.

No matter how many curveballs, I never did stop.

Lauren, 20, Youth in Care

Thanks for giving us the chance to speak our mind. We want to make a change, leave the past behind. We want to do this our way, not the highway. Let's make a change, let's make a change, together. Let us have some freedom to make decisions. You have a system that needs revisions. We need to speak our mind because we feel left behind. Let's make a change, let's make a change, together.

Amanda, 21, Former Youth in Care



EXTEND ECM TO 25

all services should adhere to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child offer protection to 18*

RESPECT THE VOICE OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR RIGHT TO BE HEARD

So many ideas and suggestions. Some may already be happening in some places. Some may not fit with others. Some may not reflect the rights and policies already in place.

make sure we can communicate with those around us (e.g. deaf children must live with people who can communicate with them, learn how to use email and text...)

do better screening of foster parents

put more precision into placing children/youth in proper, better homes

do more follow-up when parents get children back

ensure foster families treat us like their own children (don't feed us different meals, don't exclude us from trips...)

GIVE YOUTH KNOWLEDGE OF THEIR CHILDHOOD CIRCUMSTANCES

GIVE US ACCESS TO OUR FILES — IT SHOULD BE A RIGHT

diagnose us more carefully improve monitoring of medication and side effects

the federal government should change its procedures so that alternatives to original documents will be accepted for citizenship applications

explore all avenues to find a permanent adoptive family

IMPROVE THE LIFE CHANCES FOR ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

investments are needed not only in child welfare but also in children and mental health, addiction services and justice programs

SUBMISSION

increase worker/foster parent awareness and skills to address mental health issues

train teachers to better help meet our learning needs

make sure group homes operate more like 'homes' than 'jails'

DO NOT CRIMINALIZE YOUTH

don't cut pregnant girls off ECM

children and youth should not leave care without having citizenship

help more of us to be adopted, no matter what our age

MAKE SURE WE HAVE PERMANENT RELATIONSHIPS WITH POSITIVE RELATIVES, ADULTS, MENTORS, PEERS

adoption should mean being able to maintain relationships with biological parents and relatives as long as it is safe

provide post-adoption support to adoptive families as needed

government should provide subsidies and access to specialized services to those families who want to adopt

SUPPORT CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN CARE TO IDENTIFY MENTORS

all children and youth should be considered "adoptable" if they don't have at least one solid support person when their Crown wardship expires

build relationships with workers

work with our families to help us go home if it is possible

nurture connections

PUT MORE TIME AND CARE INTO MATCHING HOMES WITH OUR NEEDS, CULTURE, RELIGION, VALUES

put more effort into kin care help us keep family connections

HELP US WHEN WE WANT TO TRY TO RETURN TO OUR FAMILIES

SOUNDBITES

encourage supportive attachments to foster family and family

HELP US VISIT OUR SIBLINGS

teach us more about our mental health - we need to know

adults need to be more comfortable to speak about our spirituality with us

increase cultural competence and sensitivity of workers/foster parents

work with us to understand that family can take many shapes and we can create family with the people who care about us

try more initiatives, like mediation, to keep us in a stable home

LET US STAY IN FOSTER HOMES UNTIL WE'RE OLDER

reduce staff turnover

help ease the transition for children moving homes

make sure we actually understand what is going on in our lives

make sure we are aware of CAS policies

GIVE US A ROAD MAP OF HOW WE WILL BE RAISED, WHAT WE ARE ENTITLED TO AND WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN COMING INTO CARE

build in more life skills training at an earlier age

work with the child rather than against them

give us access to our bank accounts

INVOLVE US IN DECISION MAKING

teach us what healthy love is, what a permanent home feels like

give young people support according to their needs, when they need it

TEACH US TO COOK IN A HOME LIKE OTHER KIDS

make sure we are informed and understand about medication, side effects and have a say in our health care

give us a say in whether we should take medication

change rules so that we can go to the post-secondary school that is right for us, not the one that falls within a certain radius eliminate aging out altogether

STOP REQUIRING POLICE CHECKS TO GO ON SLEEPOVERS

push for us to be in mainstream school, not special classrooms

HELP US GET INVOLVED IN DIFFERENT EXTRACURRICULAR PROGRAMS

allow us to try and fail when we are still under the protective umbrella of the agencies

educate us about how to emotionally and neurologically recover from trauma

conduct exit interviews for children who leave care

provide an educational support liaison for Crown Wards in public and high school to help us stay in school

GIVE US A SAY WHEN IT COMES TO FOSTER HOMES OR GROUP HOMES

children in care have an enhanced need to be a part of the decision-making

hold private meetings with children in care regularly so they do not feel under pressure from their foster parents

there's a need for a foster youth council

ASK KIDS HOW THEY ARE BEING TREATED

tailor support to the unique individual

have drop-in counsellors available at CAS offices

create a 'youth in and from care' online/hotline to find out about rights, resources, job opportunities and other help

THE SYSTEM SHOULD COME TO THE CHILD, NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND

it should be compulsory for workers to provide their youth with knowledge of things like resource centres, volunteering opportunities, and programs to get involved in

CAS should be able to work with youth and their families and help them make connections in the community to access supports and services

support should be carefully connected to the ongoing particular developmental needs of the individual

there should be options made available for counselling later... youth are ready to deal with problems at different times

youth with mental health issues need smoother transitions

PREGNANT YOUTH NEED ADDED SUPPORTS

respond to the individual needs and concerns of each young person

lower case loads for workers so they have the opportunity to spend more time with their youth

youth and workers need to know more about mental health - our bodies are taken care of, what about our minds?

WE WANT TO FEEL PART OF A COMMUNITY AND HELP OTHER YOUTH IN CARE

youth who have grown up in care should be able to remain connected to that network of care until they are 24

offer more peer mentoring or role models to check in with and talk to

offer more peer networking groups, support groups, youth-led programs we can relate to

more times like this [the Hearings] where more youth would come out, because when I see everyone, I see my brothers and sisters

develop after-care action plans consisting of funding, commitments, legislation, supports, and regulations to ensure smooth transition to adulthood

TAKE THE TIME TO TEACH US THE SKILLS WE NEED TO BE READY TO LEAVE CARE

youth should be able to see their worker during the transition

provide more scholarships, grants, bursaries

PROVIDE US WITH A TRUE TRANSITION PERIOD OF PREPARATION

provide workshops or classes regarding finances

help us better prepare for leaving: job training, financial assistance, life skills education, support for medications, dental care, mental health

teach us through more home-based modelling, not through artificial, system courses

WE NEED MORE WORKER TIME WHEN WE TURN 18 NOT LESS

provide services and resources that help us to achieve academic success

encourage adults to use their personal connections to help us get jobs

pay for education in full

help all children become eligible for funding through Canada Education Savings Program, including the Canada Learning Bond

provide more financial support so we can balance everyday expenses and also stay involved in other extracurricular activities

provide support until we've completed post-secondary education

do not cut us off ECM if we aren't in school

create transition worker positions

NO CROWN WARD SHOULD HAVE TO LEAVE CARE OR ECM WITHOUT STATUS IN CANADA

provide ECM allowance at a rate that allows youth in care to live with dignity above the poverty line

PROVIDE ACCESS TO SUPPORT EVEN AFTER WE'VE TURNED 25

the system should be changed to allow youth to remain at home until they finish high school, at whatever age that ends up being

MORE SUBMISSION SOUNDBITES

wean us off the system instead of cutting us off

LOOK AT THE INDIVIDUAL, NOT THE AGE

help us get into and stay in post-secondary education

consider that many children and young adults with disabilities are not ready

TEACH YOUTH TO BUDGET

show youth how to apply for and get a job, get youth involved in job oriented workshops

support any meaningful relationship a youth has through transition (either case worker or friend or family). A strong relationship will facilitate transition.

HELP TO OPEN DOORS OF OPPORTUNITY INSTEAD OF CLOSING DOORS

foster homes should continue to be paid until the YOUTH determines they are prepared to move out; not on their 18th birthday

"25 is the new 21"

extend age of ECM to 30

universities and colleges could provide access to residences during May to Aug so that we have additional housing options

stop pro-rating our cheques to the day of our 21st Birthday - all Crown Wards should receive a full cheque on our last month of eligibility

give us access to our files even after we leave care

non-citizen former youth in care should be personally informed about their risk of deportation for criminality

provide more housing support for youth on ECM

give us more access to and support from CAS workers daily, 9-8

more staff training is needed for how to work with people from different cultures, how to be sensitive to their needs

PROVIDE FUNDING FOR FOSTER FAMILIES TO STAY INVOLVED IN A SUPPORTIVE ROLE

ECM Rates should increase with the cost of living

regulations of the forthcoming Housing Services Act should expressly give priority for affordable housing services to youth leaving care

give us the right to re-enter care after withdrawing

enhance safeguards

DETERMINE THE EFFICIENCY OF EXISTING PROGRAMS

we need different approaches to handling children and youth other than sentencing them to jail time or detention centres

the government should develop a computerized tracking system to monitor movement of youth across residential service sectors

ensure that the first out of home intervention is decisive and is of sufficient intensity to meet identified needs of child and family

CAS workers need to be well trained and educated in the realities of the grim statistical outcomes for our youth

the Child and Family Services Act should include a preamble or statement of principles that specifically incorporates the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

DECREASE WORKER CASE LOADS

reduce the movement of young people in care

if children have ever experienced 13 weeks in total care then they should have the right to access extended care and maintenance

MORE SUBMISSION SOUNDBITES

CAS needs to ensure that child protection work is balanced with nurturing

more consistency and stability of workers

we need workers with more flexibility

CAS NEEDS TO BE MORE ACCOUNTABLE AND TRANSPARENT

do more monitoring of foster parents and what a child's day-to-day routines look like in the home

workers need to be more accountable for their actions

stricter rules and checks for foster parents would help ensure more successful placements

develop clear guidelines for supportive admission processes to any residential setting and recognize that admission is a crisis to the child

a single case manager should be assigned to follow each child from point of entry into the system to discharge

investigate allegations of excessive force in the management of children under the age of 16

the Ministry should conduct research to determine the psychological impact of isolation on children to determine what is appropriate

training and supervision in de-escalation strategies must be provided to all front line staff

publicize a list of all policies and procedure documents from each agency on the Ministry of Children and Youth Services website

set reasonable call back times when youth need to speak with their social workers

raise more awareness about children and youth in care... the community would be more accepting

support families to keep children in their home...First Nations children will always return home

conduct a child rights impact assessment before any policy change

consider *UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children* - new ideas and approaches to plan for transition out of care

Time for change

We have created a vision for the change **WE** would like to see. Rather than children and youth in care feeling vulnerable, isolated and left out of our lives, we want to feel protected, respected, supported and so much more.

These are the goals we want everyone to work together to achieve. They are aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹ We want every youth in care to be supported to define these goals within their own lives.

Our Goals

From the moment we begin our journey in care, to the moment we leave, please ensure:

- 1 We are safe, protected and respected as equal human beings.
- 2 We have people in our lives who are **THERE** for us.
- 3 We have stability and connections to family, roots and culture.
- 4 We are part of our lives and have a say in what happens to us.
- 5 We have access to the information, resources and options we need.
- 6 We are supported throughout care to become successful adults.
- 7 We are part of a strong and proud community of youth in and from care.
- 8 That the best experiences for some children and youth in care, become the standard for everyone in care.

¹ United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the international law that protects children's rights, ratified by Canada in December, 1991. "Children are entitled to the freedom to express opinions and to have a say in matters affecting their social, economic, religious, cultural and political life. Participation rights include the right to express opinions and be heard, the right to information and freedom of association. Engaging these rights as they mature helps children bring about the realization of all their rights and prepares them for an active role in society." - UNICEF http://www.unicef.org/crc/index_30177.html

Our recommendations

Our #1 recommendation is:

The Province of Ontario should recognize that the current system needs to fundamentally change to better prepare young people in care to succeed. To this end, the Province should work with young people in and from care and other stakeholders to complete an **ACTION PLAN FOR FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE** by November 2012 that addresses our concerns and goals.¹

In the meantime, here are 6 recommendations for changes that can be made immediately:

- ◆ **Raise the age for Extended Care and Maintenance — “25 is the new 21”**
This would involve providing Extended Care and Maintenance (ECM) to youth until the age of 25.
- ◆ **Allow youth to stay in foster care and group home care until they are prepared for independence**
This would provide youth with the option to remain in foster homes and group homes until we are ready to leave.
- ◆ **Declare “Children and Youth in Care Day”**
This would help raise awareness, reduce stigma and recognize children and youth in care. It would also help keep the issues affecting our lives in the public spotlight and provide for regular updates on the Action Plan for Fundamental Change.
- ◆ **Commit to ensuring that every child in care has ongoing health and education services**
Plans would be developed and agreed upon by the child, health care providers, school, CAS and caregivers to provide all needed supports to help us succeed with our goals.
- ◆ **Commit to collecting and publishing information on how children and youth in care are doing**
This would involve gathering, tracking and publishing research-based information about how we are doing in order to monitor and improve our experiences in care and beyond. This information must be publicly available.
- ◆ **Create an online resource for children and youth in and from care**
This would provide youth in and from care with easy access to information about rights, jobs, volunteer openings, scholarships, extracurricular activities, advocacy opportunities, etc. Access to this much-needed information means we wouldn't have to rely on our agencies as the only source for information.

¹ Within 60 days from the release of the report, the Minister of MCYS should name a Working Group to create the Action Plan. This group will need to include the Youth Leaving Care Hearings Team, youth in and from care, and representatives from all relevant parts of the system (government, sectors, services) and community members. The Youth Leaving Care Hearings Team, supported by the Advocate's Office, will ensure that youth groups and organizations are represented and that youth in and from care across the Province actively participate in the process.

Key Statistics ON YOUTH LEAVING CARE

- ◆ Almost **17,000** of Ontario's **3.1 million** children are in the care of Children's Aid Societies (CAS). This means that on any given day, 1 out of every 182 children in Ontario is in care. (OACAS, *Children in Care and Permanency Survey Fact Sheets, 2010/2011*)
- ◆ Of the **16,825** children living in care in 2010, half were Crown Wards who have been permanently removed from their families and homes. (OACAS, *Funding and Services Analysis, 2011*)
- ◆ The Province of Ontario is the legal guardian of more than **8,300** Crown Wards; these are children and youth who are living in various parts of the care system. (Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth)
- ◆ The average annual cost of maintaining a child in foster care is **\$45,000**. (OACAS, *Funding and Services Analysis, 2011*)
- ◆ Of all children in care under 18, just over **16.5%** (or approximately 2,770 youth) fall into the placement category of 'living independently.' These are 16 and 17 year olds. In contrast, Canadian youth on average begin to live on their own in their mid-20s. (OACAS, *Children in Care and Permanency Survey Fact Sheets, 2010/2011*)
- ◆ Just **44%** of youth in care graduate from high school, compared to an 81% graduation rate for the general population. (OACAS, *An Agenda for Children and Youth Pre-Budget Consultation, 2011*)
- ◆ Fully **43%** of homeless youth have previous child welfare involvement and 68% have come from foster homes, group homes and/or a youth centre. (Raising the Roof, *Youth Homelessness in Canada: The Road to Solutions, 2009*)
- ◆ Up to **71%** of homeless youth have had previous criminal justice involvement. Street youth have identified their living arrangements as “unsafe” about 20% of the time. (Raising the Roof, *Youth Homelessness in Canada: The Road to Solutions, 2009*)
- ◆ **Numerous reports** going back to the mid-1980s recognize that youth leaving care are over-represented in the youth justice, mental health and shelter systems. (OACAS, *Annual Report, 2009*)
- ◆ The **two fastest-growing** groups in the homeless population are youth and seniors. Almost a third of Canada's homeless are between the ages of 16 and 24. (Kirby, *The Homeless and Mental Illness: Solving the Challenge, 2008*)
- ◆ Fully **82%** of children in care have diagnosed special needs and, while in care, receive health, dental, education and treatment supports. (MCYS, *Crown Ward Review, 2008*)
- ◆ Approximately **46%** of children in care with special needs rely on psychotropic medication to help them manage. This makes attending and succeeding in school even more challenging. (MCYS, *Crown Ward Review, 2008*)
- ◆ In the province of Ontario, Aboriginal people represent 2% of the population but **22%** of Crown Wards. (OACAS, *Children in Care and Permanency Survey Fact Sheets, 2010/2011*)
- ◆ Youth suicide rates in some Aboriginal communities are up to **five times higher** than the national average. (OACAS, *An Agenda for Children and Youth Pre-Budget Consultation, 2011*)

Glossary

Adoption - "Adoption is the permanent legal transfer of all parental rights from one person or couple to another person or couple. Adoptive parents have the same rights and responsibilities as biological parents, and adopted children have all of the emotional, social, legal and kinship benefits of biological children." (Adoption Council of Ontario). Children who are Crown Wards may be adopted.

Age of Protection - A child in need of protection is defined in section 37 (2) of the *Child and Family Services Act*. The current age limitation for a child in need of protection is under 16. This means that if a young person was not receiving services from CAS prior to his or her 16th birthday, he or she will not be eligible for services. An order for Crown wardship cannot commence after the young person's 16th birthday.

Aging Out - Within the context of this report, aging out refers to when a youth reaches age 18 and is no longer considered a child and therefore cannot remain in a foster or group home. The youth may qualify for Extended Care and Maintenance (ECM) until age 21. At 21, youth 'age out' of the system completely and lose all support, services and relationships they have come to know.

CAS - Children's Aid Society, also sometimes referred to as Child Welfare or Family and Children's Services. Established under the authority of the *Child and Family Services Act*, there are 47 Children's Aid Societies in Ontario. They are non-profit agencies working in local communities to "protect children from abuse and neglect and help parents and caregivers build healthy families so that children and youth have a safe, nurturing place to grow up" (Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies).

Child and Family Services Act (CFSA) - The legislation which gives authority to child welfare agencies such as Children's Aid Societies and Family and Children's Services to provide protective services to children. The paramount purpose of this Act is to "promote the best interests, protection and well being of children." The Act also outlines licensing and other requirements for foster and residential group care. (*Child and Family Services Act*, R.S.O. 1990, Chapter C.11, as amended).

Crown Ward - A Crown Ward is a child or youth for whom "the Crown [Province of Ontario] has the rights and responsibilities of a parent for the purpose of the child's care, custody and control . . ." unless this order is terminated by a court. A Crown wardship order expires automatically when a young person reaches the age of eighteen - the age of majority in Ontario or when the person marries, whichever comes first. (CFSA sections 57 (1) and 65 (2) and 63 (1)).

CYW - Child and Youth Workers provide direct support to children and youth throughout the care system, including working in group homes, foster homes, school and hospital settings. They are often graduates of a college or university Child and Youth Worker program. CYWs play a range of support roles—they may be foster parents or provide programming or counselling support in different settings.



ECM - Extended Care and Maintenance. Once a young person turns 18, he or she can be eligible for an Extended Care and Maintenance (ECM) agreement. This agreement is set up to give youth a monthly 'allowance' to fund day to day living expenses such as rent, food, etc. in addition to emotional support and case management. This agreement can be customized by the social worker depending on the circumstances of each youth. Each youth is required to sign a contract and meet agreed upon goals in order to continue receiving ECM allowance. There is no regulatory guidance about the content of these agreements.

Family - Within the context of this report, a social unit consisting of supportive people involved in one another's lives. There are many kinds of families. Some involve biological relationships, others are made up of the people that we feel closest to. Youth in care often describe their foster parents, foster siblings, social workers, child and youth workers or mentors as family. Many youth in care refer to their peers as their "brothers and sisters."

Foster Care - Foster Care is defined under the *Child and Family Services Act* as the placement of a child or young person in the home of someone who receives compensation for caring for the child but is not the child's parent.

In Care - For the purposes of Part V of the *Child and Family Services Act*, a "child in care" is a child or young person who is receiving residential services from a service provider including foster parents and youth justice facilities. The term can also be used to describe a child or young person who is

"in the care and custody of a CAS" and is a commonly used short form to describe the services provided by Children's Aid Societies including Foster Care, Group Homes, Semi-Independent and Independent Living. At any one time, there are approximately 8,300 children and youth living in care in Ontario.

Life Book - A Life Book is similar to a scrapbook and is created for children and youth in care to help them become aware of their pasts and to highlight important events in their lives such as where they went to school, camp memories, etc. Having a Life Book can be a fantastic source of information for instilling pride and self-worth in a young person and provide ways to connect to past experiences. According to ministry policies and procedures for children in care dated June 21, 1985, the Life Book is the property of the child and should accompany him or her on all moves. Through the Hearings, we learned that while some youth have beautiful Life Books, others do not receive one at all. One youth received his in the form of a file folder full of things collected by his worker, another youth was told she couldn't have hers.

The 'System' - A term used here to describe the overall picture of how government, ministries, agencies, services, policies, regulations and rules are inter-connected.

Worker - Within the context of this report, a Social Worker and/or Child and Youth Worker is assigned to each child and youth or family involved in Children's Aid.

YIC - Youth in Care.

This report is very important to us, and we are not letting it go. Let's make change together!

Youth Leaving Care Hearings Team

We're not stopping here!

Share our story with others in your network who have the power to help make change happen.

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**Provincial Advocate
for Children & Youth**

401 Bay Street, Suite 2200

Toronto, Ontario M7A 0A6

Phone: (416) 325-5669 Toll-free: 1-800-263-2841

Fax: (416) 325-5681 TTY: (416) 325-2648

Email: advocacy@provincialadvocate.on.ca

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