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VOICES FROM THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM: Community Engagement to Address Systemic Barriers and Improve Outcomes for Youth Leaving Care

WOODGREEN COMMUNITY SERVICES' REPORT OF FINDINGS

VOICES FROM THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM:

Community Engagement to Address Systemic Barriers and Improve Outcomes for Youth Leaving Care

ABOUT WOODGREEN

Founded in 1937, WoodGreen Community Services is one of Toronto's largest community services agencies and affordable housing providers, serving 37,000 people each year across 37 locations. WoodGreen's vision is a Toronto where everyone has the opportunity to thrive and its mission is to enhance self-sufficiency, promote well-being and reduce poverty through innovative solutions to critical social needs. Through 75 programs, WoodGreen helps people find safe, affordable housing, supports seniors to live independently, assists internationally-trained professionals enter the job market, provides parents with childcare, assists newcomers with settling in to Canadian life, helps homeless people get off the streets, and has developed highly innovative and collaborative program models to address our society's most complex social problems.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report provides a synthesis of key literature findings, as well as specific feedback from the project's stakeholder engagement activities. The report also provides key recommendations to inform policy and service delivery aimed at improving outcomes for youth leaving care.

HOW TO CITE THIS DOCUMENT

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BACKGROUND

In 2015, WoodGreen Community Services began to investigate a critical gap in services for young people transitioning out of the child welfare system in Toronto. With extensive experience developing and delivering highly innovative wrap-around programs, WoodGreen began to engage key stakeholders in the child welfare sector, to explore whether there were opportunities to leverage our assets to improve outcomes for youth leaving care in the community. In September 2016, in partnership with Covenant House Toronto, and with support from the Toronto Children's Aid Societies and the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth, WoodGreen received funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation to conduct a one-year community-based action research project to design an evidence-based model in order to improve the outcomes of youth transitioning out of care.

PURPOSE

Each year in the City of Toronto, approximately 700 youth transition out of care. These young people face systemic barriers as a result of their involvement with the child welfare system, complex trauma, and a lack of cohesive program delivery and service coordination to effectively respond to their multi-faceted needs. In Toronto, there is limited research on youth in care, youth transitioning out of care, and the outcomes for young people transitioning out of the current child welfare system¹. Most of the research to date is from across Canada and has focused on the reasons children and youth come into the system as well as the mental health implications of being in care. This lack of research warranted a deeper exploration of the needs and barriers of youth transitioning out of care within the Toronto context. With this in mind, WoodGreen Community Services in partnership with Covenant House, undertook a community engagement process to address this gap in knowledge and to inform the design and development of a new program model to support young people as they transition out of care.

Over the course of the project, WoodGreen and project partners worked collaboratively with youth with lived experience of the child welfare system to:

1. Implement a youth engagement strategy;
2. Conduct broad stakeholder engagement activities, and;
3. Provide recommendations to inform a program model for service delivery for this population.

METHODOLOGY

From September 2016 to June 2017, WoodGreen Community Services led a community-based action research project, which deployed a mixed methods research design. This included a literature review, focus groups, and one-on-one stakeholder interviews to inform policy and service delivery recommendations. This project was implemented in three phases:

Phase 1: A literature review was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the population of young people exiting the child welfare system and the challenges associated with transitioning out of care. The key findings have been incorporated into this report. WoodGreen also did a scan of Canadian and international program models and best practices to support youth leaving care. While not the focus of this report, these findings will inform WoodGreen's approach to program design for youth transitioning out of care.

¹ During this project, Jane Kovarikova's research *Exploring Youth Outcomes After Aging-Out of Care* (2016) was released which reinforced WoodGreen's community-based findings and provides a historical and international benchmarking of the dismal outcomes for youth transitioning out of care.

Phase 2: Extensive stakeholder engagement activities were conducted with young people who have lived experience of the child welfare system as well as stakeholders that are connected to the child welfare sector (youth homelessness sector, government, academic researchers, etc.) to determine if the key findings identified in the literature were aligned to the Toronto context, and to gain feedback on how to best serve this population.

Phase 3: Research and feedback were synthesized to highlight common themes that would help inform the design and development of a new program model.

Research Questions

During our community engagement process, four key research questions were used to guide the sector stakeholder and youth with lived experience focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Those questions were:

1. What barriers and challenges did youth experience during their transition out of care?
2. What should the goals of a new program for youth transitioning out of care be?
3. What program elements should be included to support youth transitioning out of care?
4. Should housing be offered in this program? If so, how should it be structured?

For the focus groups of youth with lived experience, these key research questions were adapted to be more strengths-based and solution focused. Recognizing that many of the young people in the focus groups did not have positive experiences with the child welfare system, the goal was to minimize the potential for re-traumatization and place emphasis on a vision forward. The four questions that guided those discussions were:

1. Thinking about your transition out of care, what would have made your transition easier?
2. What does success look like to you? What are your goals for your life?
3. What should be included, if we were to develop a new program for youth transitioning out of care?
4. Should housing be offered in this program? If so, how should it be structured?

Community Engagement Consultations

More than 60 young people with lived experience, and 209 sector stakeholders from 52 organizations, provided input to support the development of the new program model to assist youth transitioning out of care. Over the course of 100 meetings and 11 focus groups (five with youth with lived experience and 6 with sector stakeholders), individuals had the chance to provide insight into the barriers that youth face transitioning out of care, and to offer feedback to inform the design and development of a new program model. Please see Appendix B for more information about the focus groups.

Youth Transitions Advisory Council Feedback

To ensure that youth voice is truly at the core of program design and decision-making, WoodGreen created a Youth Transitions Advisory Council (YTAC), made up of 10 young leaders with lived experience of the child welfare system.

THE REALITY OF TRANSITIONING OUT OF CARE – WHAT WE HEARD

In recent years the Province of Ontario has made a number of significant policy changes and investments to support better outcomes for youth in care. These investments include the creation of the Youth-in-Transition worker program, financial support for post-secondary education, extended financial benefits to age 21, and the aftercare benefits initiative. Most recently (two weeks before the release of this report), the Province of Ontario increased the age of protection to include 16 and 17-year-olds.

Although there have been significant developments in this sector, there is a large body of research that demonstrates that when youth leave the child welfare system, the majority still do not have the tools and skills they need to thrive on their own. Research on outcomes for youth transitioning out of care in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia over the past 40 years has shown universally poor outcomes across several key indicators (Kovarikova, 2016). Due to a lack of research regarding the Toronto context, provincial, national and international studies were used to understand the key challenges facing this population. The feedback provided by sector stakeholders and youth with lived experience reinforced the finding from other studies and articulated some common themes that exist for young people leaving care, which result in undesirable outcomes.

The common themes identified by youth, sector stakeholders, and research in this project were:

- Safe, affordable housing
- Educational attainment
- Employment and skills development
- Mental and physical health
- Criminal justice
- Isolation

The following pages of this report will highlight some of the key findings from our research for each of these themes and will conclude with recommendations on how to improve policy and services delivery moving forward.

SAFE, AFFORDABLE HOUSING

“When I left care I felt like I was lost. I didn’t know where to go. Where I would get housing, furniture, child care, and food? I had to do everything on my own.”
– Youth from Care, 20

Youth from care are the most vulnerable cohort of youth in Canada, and are more likely to experience homelessness or unstable housing compared with other youth in the community (Kovarikova, 2016). The 2016 National Youth Homelessness Survey found that 57.8% of homeless youth had previously had some involvement with child protection services. Research has shown that the most vulnerable time for a young person from care to become homeless is within six months of transitioning out of care (Kovarikova, 2016). Since youth in and from care are not a priority population for housing, they can expect to spend an average of seven years on an affordable housing waitlist (Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2012). Of the youth that are able to obtain housing once they transition out of care, it is estimated that a quarter will lose their housing within the first year if they are not supported.²

WHAT CHILD WELFARE STAKEHOLDERS SAID

Stakeholders noted that for youth transitioning out of care, the first 6-12 months is particularly difficult regarding securing and maintaining housing. Staff from children’s aid societies also identified a lack of information within their organizations regarding community-based programs and services for youth. Focus groups further identified the following challenges:

- Lack of affordable housing and long wait-list times – former youth in care do not have a formal “priority” designation for affordable housing
- Lack of financial resources to secure housing (e.g. first and last month rent)
- Lack of landlord references and low credit scores
- Inexperience finding and getting housing – susceptible to housing scams
- Need for additional knowledge and skills to live independently

WHAT YOUTH WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE SAID

Youth focus group participants articulated similar frustrations and barriers to housing as those mentioned above. Youth also identified these additional challenges:

- Insufficient financial resources to live in Toronto (e.g. Continued Care and Support for Youth was not enough)
- Landlord discrimination (e.g. ageism, racism, sexism, and stigma)
- Sub-standard housing due to limited financial resources (affordable places were moldy or poorly maintained)
- Eviction as a result of not receiving one’s financial benefits on time (i.e. if a worker processes benefits late then a young person risks losing their housing)
- Not having a co-signer for a lease

SERVICE DELIVERY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recognizing these housing challenges, service providers and young people were asked what could be done to improve their circumstances. The key recommendations that emerged were the need for more affordable housing and that youth in and from care should be given priority status for affordable housing. Stakeholders advocated for a continuum of housing options where young people have voice and choice, and for youth to receive housing support that includes rent supplements, individual support to find housing and landlord-tenant support.

² This point was articulated by a practitioner within the Toronto child welfare context during a key informant interview.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

“Being in care was traumatic. I moved homes and schools 7 times while in care and they wonder why you don’t do well and are angry. Then when you are 18 they want you to move out at the same time as exams and prom. I didn’t graduate and missed prom with my friends because I was kicked out of my house and had to focus on surviving”.

– Youth from Care, 23

Youth in care face many barriers to completing their education and often lag behind their peers. A report by the Ontario Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth from 2012, found that 21% of crown wards under the age of 18 were not enrolled in school, and only 44% had completed high school which is nearly half the provincial average³. The average number of placement moves during their time in care was 2.4 to 9.5 times (Curry & Abrams, 2015). These moves often create educational challenges as every time a young person moves schools, they on average lose 4-6 months of academic coursework, which over time puts them at a disadvantage (Kovarikova, 2016). As a result, youth in and from care have a much more challenging time completing high school and moving on to post-secondary education. An American study also found that youth from care who attended post-secondary education struggled in comparison with their peers during the first semester, with 87% of former youth in care withdrawing from courses (Unrau et al., 2012).

WHAT CHILD WELFARE STAKEHOLDERS SAID

During our focus groups, many people identified that youth in and from care had difficulty completing high school. There was also a lot of the discussion about the barriers to enrolling in and attending post-secondary education. Stakeholders identified the following challenges:

- Too many moves while in care disrupted young people’s learning
- High prevalence of learning disabilities
- Lack of knowledge or familiarity with post-secondary institutions and programs

WHAT YOUTH WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE SAID

Youth in our focus groups also articulated that completing high school education was a challenge and also critical for their future success. Overwhelmingly, youth identified that financial supports were a supportive factor in being able to attend school. They also outlined the following barriers:

- Feeling alone or not having someone to help during times of conflict in school
- Lack of support for academic development and performance by foster parents and group home staff
- Insufficient support and mentorship to pursue post-secondary education
- Lack of support to complete OSAP forms and post-secondary applications

SERVICE DELIVERY RECOMMENDATIONS

The key service delivery recommendation that emerged from these discussions was the need to provide young people leaving care with opportunities and support to complete their high school diploma. Furthermore, young people leaving care need help navigating and enrolling in post-secondary institutions, as well as intensive educational support while in post-secondary to ensure they are successful in achieving their goals.

³ The Province of Ontario’s average graduation rate is 86.5% (Ministry of Education, 2017).

EMPLOYMENT & SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

“In order to get a job you have to go to school. And in order to do good in school you need to have mentors to guide you and encourage you. Youth in care don’t have that. A lot of kids never had the guidance they needed, and now they can’t get any jobs”.

– *Youth from Care, 19*

There is a strong correlation between educational attainment and employment. Due to low educational attainment rates, a lack of work experience and limited social networks, the long-term employment trajectories for youth transitioning out of care project significant disadvantages in the labour market. Anecdotal evidence suggests that youth transitioning out of care have a much higher unemployment rate than the provincial average. The Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth often references an American study from 2010 which found an unemployment rate of 52% for former youth in care at ages 23–24 (Courtney *et al.*, 2009). Youth in care also face barriers to working during high school because of numerous school and placement moves, educational difficulties, and the stigma associated with being a ‘youth in care’ (Dewar, L., Goodman, D., 2014). Less than 5% of youth in care are likely to gain work experience during their high school years, resulting in many young people leaving care with no prior work experience (Goodman, 2017).

WHAT CHILD WELFARE STAKEHOLDERS SAID

When discussing the barriers that young people in care face in the labour market, community stakeholders felt that youth in care did not have the essential skills, education or experience necessary to secure work experience (e.g. entry-level jobs, internships, etc.). Focus group participants identified the following barriers to employment for youth:

- Lack of soft skills needed for gaining and maintaining employment
- Not having the educational credentials needed
- No previous work experience

WHAT YOUTH WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE SAID

Many young people expressed frustration and defeat regarding their ability to enter the workforce. Young people in the focus groups described the following challenges:

- Lack of pre-employment and job readiness skills
- Not having a social network or connections to help access employment opportunities
- Barriers related to mental and physical health challenges and learning disabilities

SERVICE DELIVERY RECOMMENDATIONS

To better support youth transitioning out of care in gaining employment, youth and service providers suggested pre-employment and job readiness skills should be provided while in care. There should also be better service coordination between children’s aid societies and community-based youth employment programs that already provide young people with support to create resumes, develop pre-employment skills, build social networks and connect with employers that will provide work experience. It was also suggested that young people be given access to career planning and counselling support so they can better understand how to reach their employment goals.

MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

“I got kicked out of my foster home because I was gay. I had nowhere to go. I started to do drugs. I was lost. Transitioning to adult mental health was hard. I’m learning to accept myself for who I am; I’ve been hating myself for a long time.”

- Youth From Care, 28

Most young people enter the child welfare system with a history of trauma. For crown wards, this trauma is often compounded by separation from family and natural supports, and being parented by the state. Many young people involved in this project reported the experience of being apprehended from their home was traumatic. Research shows that over one-third of Ontario’s permanent youth in care have a mental health disorder (Burge, 2007) and 49% of these youth also have another type of disability (25 is the New 21, Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2012). In an American study of youth transitioning out of care, the rate of PTSD was as much as twice as prevalent for youth transitioning out of care compared to war veterans (Kovarikova, 2016). Based on discussions with young people with lived experience, it is evident that many struggle with their mental health which negatively impacts their daily life.

WHAT CHILD WELFARE STAKEHOLDERS SAID

Service providers for youth in and from care emphasized that all the youth coming out of care were dealing with complex trauma. Stakeholders identified a number of key barriers to accessing mental health services or support. These barriers included:

- Limited access to food, shelter, and support during the transition out of care, which has negative impacts on their physical and mental health status
- Loss of prescription drug coverage and other benefits at a certain age, which has negative mental and physical health impacts
- Accessing counselling due to long waitlists (especially for OHIP covered therapists), financial barriers to fee for service counselling
- Accessing substance abuse treatment and related services due to wait-lists and costs

WHAT YOUTH WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE SAID

Many of the youth we interviewed were dealing with or had dealt with various mental health and substance abuse challenges. Through our focus groups the following barriers were identified:

- Difficulty transitioning to the adult mental health system
- Feeling stigmatized by their diagnoses (many young people admitted they struggled with anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and post-traumatic stress - a few of them mentioned trauma-induced psychosis and schizophrenia)
- Difficulties accessing health and dental care supports after aging out of care, lack of financial resources to pay out of pocket for clinical supports

SERVICE DELIVERY RECOMMENDATIONS

The key programmatic recommendation that emerged from these discussions was the need for better access to mental health supports and addiction services. There is also a need for better training for individuals and organizations working with youth in and from care in trauma-informed approaches and how to support youth with various mental health issues.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

“You’re treated like a criminal while in care. They invade your privacy, they don’t care about you and everything you do gets you in trouble. There’s no dignity.”

- *Youth From Care, 19*

Numerous stakeholders attested that by virtue of a young person being in the child welfare system, they are more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system. Whereas natural adolescent behaviours in the context of a family are often addressed without police involvement, regulations governing group homes and foster care have direct implications for police and the justice system. One Ontario study showed that 11% of crown wards had had charges laid against them (Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2012). An American study on youth transitioning out of care showed that 42% of young men who had transitioned out of care had been arrested and 23% had been convicted of a crime (Courtney *et al.*, 2009). Characteristics such as gender, race, cultural background, placement type and stability are strongly correlated to later criminal activity after transitioning out of care. Evidence suggests that police intervention has a greater impact on later criminality than delinquency or academic aptitude (Kovarikova, 2016).

WHAT CHILD WELFARE STAKEHOLDERS SAID

Community stakeholders noted that too often youth from care end up in the correctional system, which may not be the most appropriate place for these young people. When discussing some of the reasons why young people end up involved with the criminal justice system, the following gaps in support were identified:

- Lack of intensive support for youth with mental health challenges
- Lack of stable housing and supports after young people are released from corrections
- Lack of a safety net or people to look out for youth as they navigate young adulthood (e.g. family, natural supports, social networks, meaningful relationships, etc.)

WHAT YOUTH WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE SAID

Youth noted that being in care increased their likelihood of being involved in the criminal justice system. Young people that had been in the correctional system spoke very negatively about their experiences and emphasized the need for better supports to avoid further traumatizing young people. Focus group participants identified the following factors as increasing the likelihood of their involvement with the criminal justice system:

- Normal behaviours are criminalized at a greater rate for youth in care (e.g. getting a criminal record for breaking a curfew, whereas families usually deal with this at home)
- Lack of safe and supportive spaces for youth in and from care to “fail” or struggle
- Stigma or labelling of youth in/from care as “bad” or “troubled”
- Trauma and degradation associated with juvenile detention which had negative mental health impacts during detention and after release

SERVICE DELIVERY RECOMMENDATIONS

Service providers and youth with lived experience advocated that there should be more training and engagement between children’s aid societies and the police to better understand the unique needs of youth in care. There is also a need for more community-based services (such as alternative dispute resolution and alternative sentencing programs) to deal with criminal matters and a recommendation that juvenile detention centres have mandatory educational access.

ISOLATION

“I felt so alone while in care. It also didn’t help that I have anxiety, and when I am anxious, I shut people out...and that’s when I need them most. But I didn’t have anyone to check up on me. People need people”.

- Youth From Care, 25

Connection to friends, family and the unconditional support that accompanies life-long relationships provides youth with healthy attachment, a sense of security and the stability needed for growth. This process is interrupted and distorted for youth in care due to trauma, numerous placement changes, and the loss of meaningful relationships. This can result in emotional detachment, educational and social disruptions, and behavioural outbursts (Fallis, 2012). As a result, youth in care often struggle to establish trusting and secure attachments. The loss of family, as well as friendships and community, is further compounded when placement relationships break down and youth are forced to move yet again. These experiences must be taken into account to help young people continue to develop meaningful relationships and avoid isolation as they transition out of care.

WHAT CHILD WELFARE STAKEHOLDERS SAID

The stakeholder feedback indicated that youth lacked connection to meaningful relationships, natural supports and isolation while in care and after their transition out. Some key factors that led to feelings of isolation were:

- Having a worker as one’s primary supportive relationship
- Loss of support and connection to one’s worker as a young person gets older
- Challenges and traumatic experiences involved in reconnecting with family
- Risk of crisis at 21, when young people are unprepared to lose financial support after being dependent on the system for so long
- Lack of support system for young people outside of care/in the community

WHAT YOUTH WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE SAID

Youth from care expressed that often professional care providers disregarded their input and opinions which made them feel disempowered and not cared about. Some challenging experiences that young people identified were:

- Being pulled from their families, instead of parents having support to keep kids at home
- Disconnection from siblings, both in care or those still in the family home
- Relocation to foster homes outside of one’s hometown or city
- Difficulty reaching out to new agencies and workers as a result of lost confidence in workers over the years, or not feeling that paid professionals have actually been helpful
- Provincial Youth in Transition (YIT) Workers have short-term mandate, too many young people on their caseloads, and cannot provide the care and support needed

SERVICE DELIVERY RECOMMENDATIONS

To help reduce isolation and support development of meaningful relationships, stakeholders suggested that it would be beneficial for young people to be supported in making connections with community-based services while still in care. It was also recommended that there be supports in place for young people in care to develop long-term supportive relationships with adults who are not workers, in their community. Focus group participants also suggested that the child welfare system should evolve to better support long-term meaningful relationships and ensure that youth have natural support systems in place for when they leave care.

RECOMMENDATIONS

“We’re all strong enough to be whoever we want to be and not let the system get us down.”

- *Youth From Care, 21*

The results of this community-based action research project point to one important conclusion: the experiences of trauma and multiple placements, combined with a lack of sufficient support and resources, have resulted in deplorable outcomes for youth leaving care.

We must do better.

To better support young people transitioning out of care, changes need to be made at the policy and service delivery level. There is an opportunity to align systems and services more effectively so that youth can be deeply supported and set up for long-term success. Listed below are some recommendations inspired by the research and feedback gained over the course of this project.

Policy Recommendations

- 1. *Make Youth From Care a Priority Population for Housing:*** On their 18th birthday, young people exiting care often have no place to go. With few supports and limited financial resources, these young people are extremely vulnerable to homelessness. By giving youth from care status as a priority population, young people will receive accelerated access to affordable housing which should provide greater housing stability as they transition out of care.
- 2. *Reduce the Number of Placement Moves:*** Every time a young person has to move homes, it causes further trauma, mental health challenges, educational disruption, loneliness, and attachment issues. Limiting the number of times a young person can move should reduce the amount of trauma experienced while in care.
- 3. *Locate More Placements in Young Peoples’ Communities:*** Currently, over 70% of group and foster homes are located outside of the City of Toronto, resulting in young people not only being removed from the communities they are familiar with, but also being cut off from pre-existing meaningful relationships they may have had. We must work to find solutions so that placements are in close proximity to a young person’s home community, enabling them to stay connected to natural supports, resulting in better outcomes.
- 4. *Reduce the Number of School Moves and Transition Time:*** Research demonstrates that every time a youth moves schools while in care they lose 4-6 months of academic progress. Reducing the number of school moves and working with schools to accept youth into a new school within a quick timeframe (within 72 hours for example) should reduce the negative impact that moving will have on a young person.
- 5. *Meaningful Transition Supports:*** In the current child welfare system in Ontario, a young person can legally sign themselves out of care at 16 and are otherwise formally transitioned out of the system at 18. Many young people have said that they did not have the skills or readiness to live completely independently at age 18. It is important that

young people in care receive skills and knowledge as early as possible to support them in preparing for their eventual transition out of care. Young people would like to know that they will have support available to them, whether or not they are in care. This means that transitional supports should be available both within the child welfare system as well as in the community for young people after they leave care.

Service Delivery Recommendations

- 1. Provide a Variety of Housing Options:** As youth in and from care are not a homogenous group, there should be a variety of housing options available to better support the unique and individual needs of young people. This could range from providing rent supplements, developing dedicated apartments or houses, or having dedicated units in a mixed building.
- 2. Youth Voice & Choice at the Core:** Often youth from care do not have a voice or choice in things that happen in their lives; from placement moves, who they are placed with, or where they go to school. Many young people have said this makes them feel disempowered and unimportant. By placing value on young people's voices and supporting them in making their own choices, youth will feel empowered and be able to get the supports and services needed to achieve their articulated goals.
- 3. Individualized & Flexible Supports:** Youth from care articulated that it was very helpful to have programs that are designed around a person's specific needs and goals rather than programs that pre-establish program milestones. This way they can get the supports they need to reach their goals and feel empowered. This could include support around education, employment, mental health & wellbeing, life skills, developing meaningful relationships, etc.
- 4. Flexible Transition Times:** Many youth from care have gone through multiple transitions and moves over the course of their life. Youth recommended that programs have flexible transition times that are based on a young person's readiness, not on how many years are spent in a program. This way young people will be well prepared to be independent when they leave the program.
- 5. Consistency of Services (Physically and Virtually):** For most youth, trying to access and navigate the various services within the city is overwhelming and difficult. As such, it was suggested that there be a single point of access for youth in and from care to access services and supports throughout their transition out of care.
- 6. Consistent Long Term Relationships:** Youth articulated that it would be extremely beneficial to develop more long-term meaningful relationships in their lives; both with workers and with individuals within the community. As such, workers would need to have smaller caseloads, more resources, and more time to contribute to the youth they are working with, and more opportunities need to be made available to make relationships with individuals within the community.
- 7. Comprehensive Interventions:** There is a general consensus from service providers and youth that given the complexity and multiple barriers faced by youth transitioning out of care, there is a need for comprehensive, wrap-around programming that can holistically address a young person's multiple needs under one roof.

CONCLUSION

“I’m lucky, I somehow made it through the system. I can think of other kids I knew who didn’t have the support or strength that I had...some of them aren’t with us anymore. They went through so much trauma, and felt so alone...Nobody should ever have to go through that.”

– Name Withheld, Former Youth in Care

Youth from care are one the most vulnerable groups in Canada and experience poor outcomes across a number of areas relative to their peers. The findings of this research project, which focused on the Toronto context, reached similar conclusions documented in national and international research. Youth aging out of care face a wide range of intersectional barriers that are derived from a fragmented child welfare system that is ineffective in providing supports and resources to successfully help them transition into adulthood. The large disadvantages that these young people face point to limited socioeconomic trajectories, reinforcing cycles of poverty and personal hardship which is unacceptable. As a society, we have a civic imperative to ensure that young people in care have equitable opportunities and similar likelihoods of success as those who were raised at home with their families. Youth in care deserve every opportunity to thrive and look forward to the future like any other youth as they transition into adulthood.

Changing outcomes for youth in and from care in Toronto is a collective responsibility that requires a systems-level response; no single organization or institution can do this alone. Moving forward requires collaboration and partnerships of substance between youth, government, children’s aid societies, community services providers, funders and other key stakeholders. A positive step in this direction would be for funders and community-based services providers to partner together to create innovative youth-centered interventions that are comprehensive in nature and provide holistic, wrap-around programming with a continuum of housing options to better support young people in achieving their personal goals.

Making a difference in the lives of these young people starts with truly caring about them and understanding their needs. There is an opportunity to do things collectively and differently, to create long-term impacts and improve the lives of youth in and from care. We cannot leave young peoples’ lives up to luck. The only way forward is together, with young people at the core.

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APPENDIX A: Focus Group Sessions

The eleven focus group sessions that were conducted over the course of this project occurred on the following dates:

1. Pape Adolescent Resource Centre (26 October 2016)
 - a. Agency Staff Focus Group
2. Native Child and Family Services (07 November 2016)
 - a. Agency Staff Focus Group
3. WoodGreen's Rights of Passage (08 November 2016)
 - a. Agency Staff Focus Group
4. Jewish Family and Child Services (09 November 2016)
 - a. Agency Staff Focus Group
5. Children's Aid Society of Toronto (10 January 2017)
 - a. Agency Staff Focus Group
6. Catholic Children's Aid Society (24 January 2017)
 - a. Agency Staff Focus Group
7. Covenant House Toronto (31 January 2017)
 - a. Youth with Lived Experience Focus Group
8. The 519 Community Centre (16 February 2017)
 - a. Youth with Lived Experience Focus Group
9. Sherbourne Health Centre (03 March 2017)
 - a. Youth with Lived Experience Focus Group
10. Queen West Central Toronto Community Health Centre (20 March 2017)
 - a. Youth with Lived Experience Focus Group
11. WoodGreen Community Services (13 April 2017)
 - a. Youth Transitions Advisory Council Focus Group

