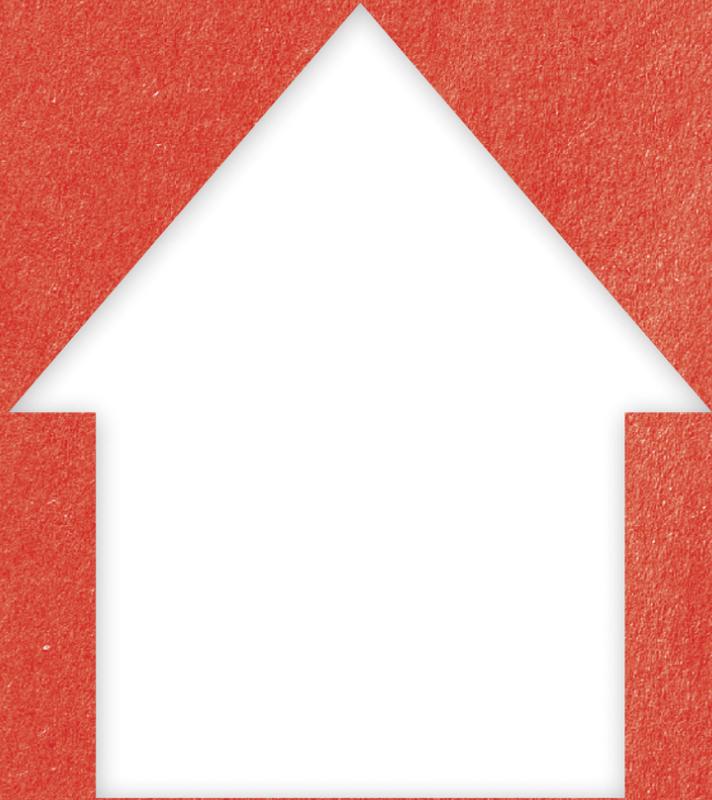




SEARCHING FOR HOME

REIMAGINING
RESIDENTIAL CARE



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Provincial Advocate
for Children & Youth

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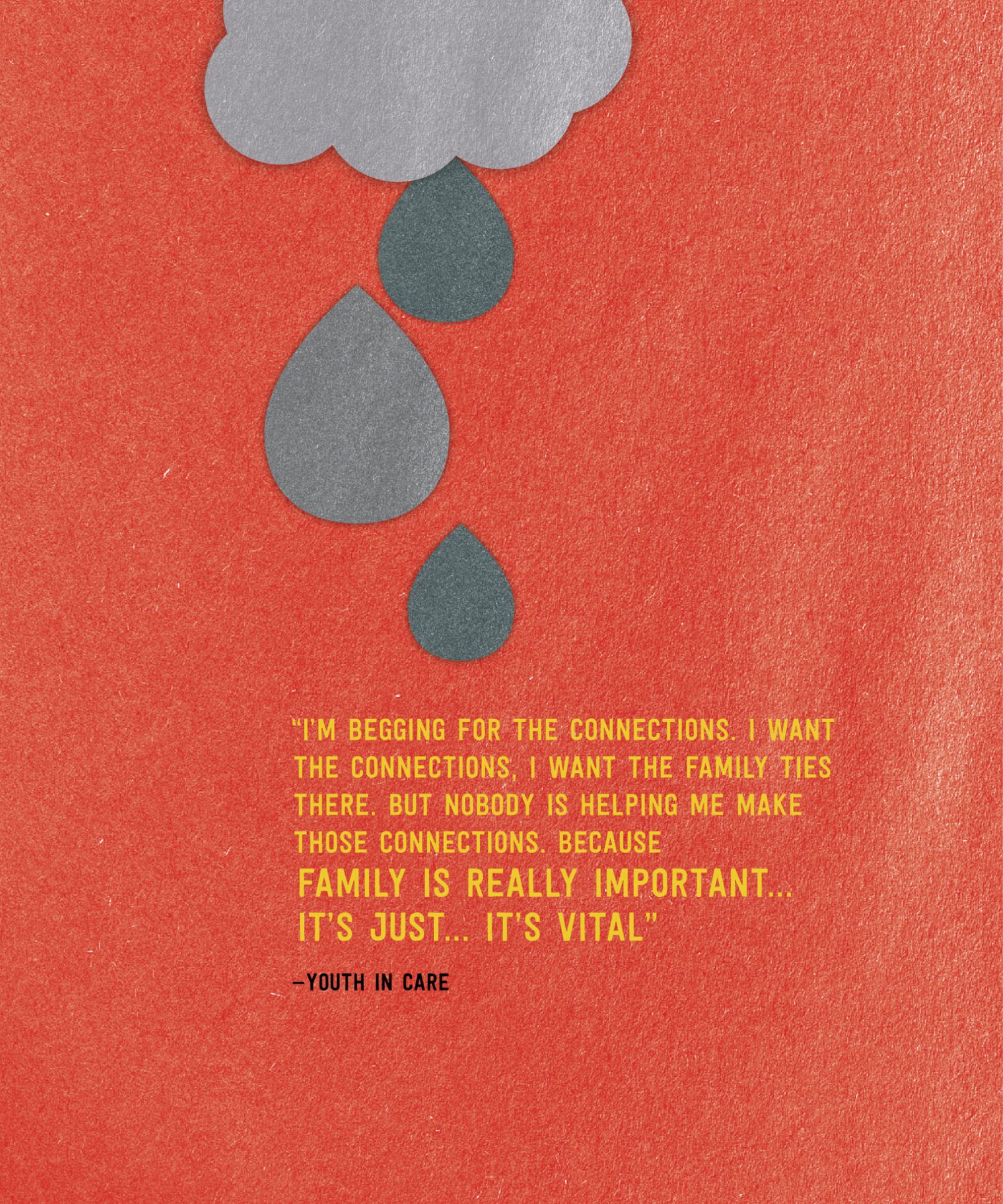
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"I'M BEGGING FOR THE CONNECTIONS. I WANT THE CONNECTIONS, I WANT THE FAMILY TIES THERE. BUT NOBODY IS HELPING ME MAKE THOSE CONNECTIONS. BECAUSE FAMILY IS REALLY IMPORTANT... IT'S JUST... IT'S VITAL"

—YOUTH IN CARE



LETTER FROM THE PROVINCIAL ADVOCATE

DEAR FRIENDS,

Recently, my Office published a memoir by a former resident of an orphanage run by Dr. Janus Korczak in 1930s-40s Poland. Dr. Korczak is known as the founder of modern children's rights. The orphanage was operated in a manner he referred to as a "children's republic." It was a place where children were considered "human beings today, not tomorrow", had rights and were encouraged to reach their full potential. The orphanage operated in dark and tragic times — World War II and the holocaust — but offered children love and respect grounded in a framework of rights. The memoir was published by my Office as an example for the government of Ontario — and all Canadians — of what is possible when children and youth are treated as full citizens and rights bearers.

Fast forward to Ontario today where the government has selected three "experts" to form a "panel" to review residential care in Ontario and are expected to report back at the end of February, 2016. We are pleased and hopeful that the panel decided to base their work in the voices of young people living in residential care. Holding a review was a recommendation made in the **Blueprint for Fundamental Change in Child Welfare**.¹ The blueprint was produced by a working group of youth in and from care and professionals; its development was led by the Ministry of Children and Youth with support from our Office. The need to form this youth working group was a recommendation contained in a report written by young people — **My REAL Life Book**,² and also published by my Office.

¹ "The Blueprint for Fundamental Change in Child Welfare" can be found here: <http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/topics/childrensaids/childrensaidsocieties/reports/youthleavingcare.aspx>

² "My REAL Life Book" can be found here: http://www.provincialadvocate.on.ca/documents/en/ylic/YLC_REPORT_ENG.pdf



In keeping with the vision for reforming child welfare brought forward by the young people who wrote or helped prepare these documents, and inspired by work of Dr. Korczak, we wanted to ensure that the Review Panel's work was informed by the same young people who brought these documents to fruition. Their thoughts are contained in the pages of this report and remind us of what is possible when young people are provided with an opportunity to contribute as equal partners in creating change.

We are indebted to our two Youth Amplifiers, Chelsea and Sheldon, who took on the responsibility for listening to young people in meetings we held across the province and who helped lead the development of this report. I am always struck by the remarkable strength young people exhibit in returning to difficult experiences and times in their lives, to reflect, glean the wisdom there, and use that wisdom to create change for others. We are honoured by those who shared so willingly.

We were fortunate to have a former Youth Amplifier from our Office travel with us to a meeting with young people that was held at a mental health residential treatment centre. He shared with us that he had once lived there more than eight years ago. This young man asked to facilitate the meeting and discussions at this facility.

His courage and strength was a beacon. When he told the young people from the facility that he once lived in that same place, they were stunned, slack-jawed and silent. At the end of the meeting, after a great deal had been shared, the most articulate boy in the group looked at the facilitator and, choking back tears, said, "You don't know what this means to us. That you would bother to come back here, despite what it did to you...to listen to us and to show you care about us...no one cares about us. You changed my life."

It is true that there are many caring individuals both leading and working in residential settings in Ontario. I believe that there is good practice happening in residential care settings in the province. However, I also believe there is need and a desire for change and improvement. As one staff put it, "I wish I could do the work that I went to school to learn how to do". I believe we can do better.

Sincerely,

IRWIN ELMAN
PROVINCIAL ADVOCATE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

LETTER FROM THE YOUTH AMPLIFIERS

As Youth Amplifiers on the Our Voice Our Turn project, working with young people on this project has been eye-opening. Having our own personal familiarity with Ontario's residential care system, we know that individual experiences differ among youth. Our mission was to amplify the voices of young people in these settings who all too often find themselves silenced. This report is for these youth.

Having an opportunity to take part in this report has been both amazing and difficult. We met so many young people who openly shared their experiences in Ontario's residential care system and their thoughts on how things can be better. We heard the voices of young people from as far north as Kenora and in communities across southern Ontario and in Toronto.

Everywhere we went, we heard one key message: change is needed and it is needed now.

The report is a reflection of what we heard in our meetings with these young people. By producing this report with the support of the team from the Advocates Office, we hope that we have created an accurate and heartfelt reflection of the voices of the young people we met. It is our hope that the young people who spoke with us will see their voices have been accurately represented.

We went into each meeting nervous about what we would hear and not knowing what to expect. However, when it was time to go — none of us wanted to leave. Leaving was the hardest part for us because we knew that at the end of our session we would be going back to our lives and the young people who participated in the group discussions would have to go back to the difficult situations they spoke about.

We want to extend a personal "thank you" to every young person who participated. This report and our conversations with all of you have reminded us just how important listening is. Without your voices, none of this would have been possible. For everyone who works with young people, we ask you to stop and take the time to really listen to young people because they truly are the experts in their own lives.

Thank you,

SHELDON AND CHELSEA
YOUTH AMPLIFIERS¹

1. Youth Amplifiers are unionized staff of the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth. They have diverse backgrounds and provide unique insights, lived experiences and skills that enrich the Office's advocacy and project work. Youth Amplifiers work as part of advocacy teams, mobilizing youth to join youth advisory committees, participate in dialogue sessions and work with our adult project staff.



**RESIDENTIAL CARE
FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH
IN ONTARIO INCLUDES
FOSTER CARE, KINSHIP
CARE, GROUP HOMES,
RESIDENTIAL SECURE
TREATMENT FACILITIES
AND YOUTH JUSTICE
FACILITIES.**

It's difficult to obtain precise numbers for young people in residential care in Ontario. A 2010 study estimated that in March 31, 2007, there were 67,000 children in residential care across Canada, and that this number was increasing steadily.¹

1. Mulcahy, Megan, and Trocmé, Nico, "Children and Youth in Out-of-Home Care in Canada", Centres of Excellence for Children's Well-Being Information. www.cecw-cepb.ca/infosheets

GROUP HOMES

are staffed residences that provide a supervised living environment for young people.

FOSTER PARENTS

provide day to day care for children who are in the care and custody of a children's aid society (CAS).

FORMAL KINSHIP

care is provided by a biological relative or significant person in the child's life who has been approved by the CAS to provide care for a child.

YOUTH JUSTICE FACILITIES

are places of custody and/or detention to which young people up to the age of 18 are sentenced, or held awaiting sentencing, in youth criminal court matters.

CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH RESIDENCES

are institutions run directly by the province or by non-profit or for-profit organizations. They are home to young people who have mental health needs that require them to live in a less intrusive environment where they can receive specialized care.

DEMONSTRATION SCHOOLS

are operated directly by the Ministry of Education and provide educational support for children with severe learning disabilities and who need to live in residence.

In 2013, there were 23,000 children and youth in residential care in Ontario, including 7,000 living in foster care or group homes, according to a freedom of information request conducted by the *Toronto Star*.²

2. Contenta, Sandro, Laurie Monsebraaten and Jim Rankin, "Shedding light on the troubles facing kids in group homes", *Toronto Star*, July 3, 2015.

OUR FINDINGS

"I THINK IT STARTS OFF WITH
PEOPLE JUST CARING
HOW YOUR DAY WENT, AND
STUFF LIKE THAT."

— YOUTH IN CARE

Over a period of several months, the Residential Care Project team travelled across the province to hear from young people directly about their experiences in residential care.

We met young people where they were at —literally; in mental health secure treatment settings, custody facilities, mental health treatment centres, group homes, youth shelters and youth group sessions in children's aid societies and children's mental health centres. Some meetings were attended by a few young people while at others as many as 45 youth showed up to participate in discussions. We asked young people at each meeting if they wanted staff from the hosting organization to be present; some said "yes", but often they wanted to meet with us alone. We asked the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth to sit in and listen at each meeting.

Each meeting was facilitated by a Youth Amplifier or former Amplifier. We appreciated the support we received from Child and Youth Advocates at the Advocate's Office and saw the initiative as a real working partnership.

We chose the theme of 'searching for home' for our report because everywhere we went we heard young people talk about wanting more supportive connections with those who worked in the settings that were providing their care. Many expressed wanting to experience a sense of belonging and to feel respected, safe, seen and heard. Others expressed a desire for real and lasting relationships with caregivers with whom they were placed, more stability in their lives and the opportunity to put down some roots and make friends. Some expressed wanting to feel genuinely loved. What we heard in all the wishes expressed by participants was for the kind of lasting, supportive or caring connections that many youth felt provided a sense of home. Even for those in youth justice settings there was a desire on the part of young people for more respectful, caring and supportive relationships with staff.

Young people's search for these closer ties or feelings of connection and belonging was strongly evident but it was often hard for them to find. We heard stories from young people about staff who they thought perhaps had chosen a career that was not for them. Young people often pointed out that the internal culture of organizations and residences prevented staff from working with youth in a manner that would create the kinds of supportive connections and sense of belonging or stability they sought.

Government says that it cannot legislate love. While this may be true, we believe that government can help create the policies, standards and practices through which services can be made more human and responsive to the physical, mental and emotional needs of young people and that create the experience of belonging and connection, improve safety and provide more stability for young people. That is the hope of this report.

HOME MEANS ROOTS



**"FAMILY CAN MEAN
DIFFERENT THINGS TO
DIFFERENT PEOPLE."**

— YOUTH IN CARE

Everywhere we went on the residential care listening tour young people shared how they felt about not having roots or stability, being far from family or having no sense of home.

When the journey to residential care begins abruptly, and the chance to make connections of any kind is prevented by the constant moving and change, young people do not develop the opportunity to establish roots of their own, even after leaving residential care. Rootlessness, even in adulthood, seems to be a lasting legacy of involvement with Ontario's residential care system.

TORN OUT BY THE ROOTS

Many young people spoke about being placed in residential care without any explanation and not knowing why they were taken from their home or who made the decision to place them in care. Some mentioned that they thought it was because they did something wrong or that there was something wrong with them — that it was their fault that they were taken away. Regardless of why they entered residential care, many felt they were violently and abruptly torn away from everything that was familiar to them. Some said that knowing the reasons why they were placed in residential care or being offered some kind of choice would have made these abrupt changes easier to cope with.

Young people spoke about yearning to be part of a family, though some said that, "Family can mean different things to different people." Family is not limited to biological relatives. Depending on their lives and circumstances, a family can take many forms. Some young people define family as the people around them who care about them. For others, it might be their foster mother, their biological family or the family of people they have created around them.

For some young people no attempt was made to explore possible extended family connections or connections to other meaningful individuals in their lives before placement decisions were made. They spoke about what they thought could have been options that offered stability and familiarity, but that were never explored. A number of young people talked about people in their lives who were not biological family members, but who might have taken them in even temporarily. Had they been asked, these young people might have offered more beneficial options to explore as an alternative to being placed in residential care.



A recent study comparing placement stability in kinship and non-kin foster care in Ontario showed that kin placements were significantly more stable than non-kin placements and were much more likely to end successfully by discharge to parents.¹

1. Perry, Gretchen et al., "Placement stability in kinship and non-kin foster care: a Canadian study", *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 34, Issue 2 (February 2012) Pages 450-465.

A lot of the young people in residential care talked about having siblings that either remained at home or were placed elsewhere. They worried about the well-being of their brothers and sisters and mourned the loss of relationships with their siblings, some of which were severed completely. Many missed having ongoing contact with their brothers and sisters. If interaction with siblings was possible, it never seemed to happen often enough to maintain any close relationship or took place only by phone or Skype. A lot of the youth we spoke with were housed in placements that were a great distance from their homes, which hindered contact with brothers and sisters. Most young people wished for more frequent and less formal ways of making contact with siblings, contacts they felt would help maintain bonds between the only remaining family members they felt close to. They feared losing any connection to their last remaining family members.

A number of young people spoke about the importance of understanding their life stories. Many explained that they were not really aware of the history that brought them into residential care. Some were in custody just being held on remand. Some who were in children's mental health residences felt they'd just been "dumped off" because there was "nowhere else to go." Some in child welfare care felt swept up in a system that just pushed and pulled them to and fro for no apparent reason. Many felt that if they had some understanding about why this was happening it might help them build a healthier sense of self. This understanding needed to come through dialogue with someone who knew them and with whom they felt trust. A trusting relationship can be hard to find in residential care settings because young people often don't spend long enough in the placement or the policies or rules of the home are based on controlling young people — not on forming positive supportive relationships.

"I WAS UPROOTED AND BROUGHT INTO THE WHOLE SYSTEM AND EVERYTHING CHANGES FOR YOU AND IT'S SO CRAZY HOW MUCH CHANGE YOU GO THROUGH IN A MATTER OF DAYS. WE'RE NOT TRAINED TO GO THROUGH THAT, LET ALONE THE GROUP HOME STAFF THAT HAVE TO TAKE CARE OF A TEENAGER THAT'S LITERALLY, PROBABLY OFF THE RAILS BECAUSE THEIR PARENTS HAVEN'T BEEN AROUND OR THEY'VE BEEN LIVING ON THE STREETS OR WHATEVER, RIGHT?"

—YOUTH IN CARE

One youth spoke about how his past accomplishments played a huge role in determining where he was today in life. He felt that documenting a young person's achievements, accomplishments and positive life experiences would help them feel as if they had a history with roots and memories to look back on. It's important that such practices include having photographs and videos or other things that can be shared and spoken about in conversations with others. These accomplishments then become part of the young person's ongoing narrative and history — not something superficial in a file or official book that someone had to create in order to just check off a box on a list.

We heard a lot about how moves and changes within residential care were frequent and confusing, often happening without warning. In many instances young people were asked to move with no preparation, sometimes in the middle of the day, interrupting school or other life activities, with no chance to say goodbye to anyone. Sometimes they didn't even know why the move was happening and no one would tell them the reason.

Numerous youth talked about the number of foster care placements or moves they had endured. It was not unusual to hear that they had lived in as many as ten homes over the course of their time spent within the residential care system. There was a prevailing belief that moves appeared to be based on what was convenient for the organization and system, rather than on what would most benefit the young person. The young people often mentioned that they felt rootless as a result of such changes, without stability or a chance of any degree of permanence.



"FAMILIES ALWAYS HAVE FIGHTS. IT'S JUST LIFE. BUT FAMILY IS WHERE EVERYBODY WELCOMES YOU INTO THE HOUSE. A FAMILY IS PEOPLE WHO LOVE YOU. A FAMILY IS WHO KEEPS YOU WARM."

— YOUTH IN CARE

"I'VE BEEN HERE FOR 13 YEARS. REGARDLESS OF WHAT YOU THINK IS BETTER FOR ME OR NOT, MAYBE YOU SHOULD LOOK INTO SOME OTHER ALTERNATIVES BEFORE RIPPING ME OUT OF MY HOME."

— YOUTH IN CARE

"IT'S PRETTY ROUGH WHEN YOU LOSE SOMEONE. I LOST SOMEONE AND CAN'T DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT. OR WHEN YOUR FAMILY CAN'T COME SEE YOU CAUSE IT'S THREE HOURS AWAY FROM HERE, WASTING GAS AND WASTING THEIR MONEY. IT'S NOT WORTH IT. PHONE CALLS AND VISITS ARE PRETTY SHORT AND IT'S NOT ENOUGH."

—YOUTH IN CARE

ISOLATION

Without any feelings of permanency or stability in relationships, community, or even where you sleep at night, it's difficult to make any enduring connections; it's isolating. Many of the youth, sometimes quite young, told us that they were living in residential care far from family and community, sometimes from out of province, and rarely received family visits. Family contact depended not only on proximity but on the shifting rules of the residential care placement.

Some young people said that they felt unsafe because residential care was inconsistent. The rules changed, sometimes without explanation. In some residential care facilities, the rules appeared to vary depending on who was working or how a particular staff interpreted their behaviour. In many residences, young people had to negotiate very confusing point systems that monetized good behaviour in return for privileges, sometimes in seemingly arbitrary ways. Their 'level' of points would determine such privileges as access to an iPod or the number of phone calls to family that could be made.

In some cases rules for phone use were inflexible, regardless of who they were contacting - family member, social worker or lawyer - and the young people were only allowed to call back in the late afternoon, regardless of family or professional availability, with a limit on the minutes they could talk or the number of calls they could make. In some residential facilities, extra calls were not granted even in cases of the death of a family member.

Sometimes family were only allowed to visit on one particular day, regardless of the distance they needed to travel or the weather. We heard that family visits were sometimes cancelled as a form of punishment, even if the visits were only permitted every three months.

"I KNOW FOR MYSELF, THEY'RE FAMILY, BUT THEY WOULDN'T INVITE US... THEY WOULD DO FAMILY REUNIONS, BUT WE WOULD NEVER BE INVITED. WE WOULD HAVE TO BE SENT TO A PLACE, TO AN EMERGENCY OR TEMPORARY HOME WHILE THEY WERE AWAY ON THEIR FAMILY REUNION OR FAMILY TRIP."

–YOUTH IN CARE



Increasing isolation from family or community made no sense to the young people. Without these outside connections, many felt they were without roots or lacked stability and a feeling of permanence in their relationships. The profound insecurity created when links to family and community were denied contributed to feelings of instability for many youth within the residential care system. As well, through the experience of constant and unpredictable changes while in residential care, children learned to abandon positive relationships without warning and without looking back.

Young people in justice facilities outside of main urban areas also talked about the isolation of being incarcerated, particularly youth who were on remand, often for many months, without seeing their charges go to court for trial. If they were found guilty, the time already served was counted toward their sentence. If they were acquitted, or the case was withdrawn, those months were lost to them. They felt abandoned within the system, without rights, and told us that it was very difficult to find out why their case did not go to court.

"I KNOW IT'S HARD FOR A LOT OF YOUTH IN CARE, BECAUSE FAMILY TIES ARE BROKEN VERY QUICKLY WHEN APPREHENSIONS HAPPEN. MY MOTHER INSTITUTIONALIZED ME WHEN I WAS 12, AND AT THAT POINT I REALIZED THAT MY PARENTS WEREN'T REALLY THERE FOR ME BECAUSE THEY WERE REALLY USING THE INSTITUTION AS A BABYSITTER."

–YOUTH IN CARE

"I GUESS AT MY TREATMENT HOME THEY DEFINITELY DIDN'T NURTURE THE FAMILY CONNECTIONS THAT WERE ALREADY THERE. OVER TIME, I HAD BUILT NEW ONES, AS MUCH AS IT'S DIFFICULT TO BUILD CONNECTIONS WITH STAFF IN GROUP HOMES. I BECAME REALLY CLOSE WITH THE CLINICAL DIRECTOR AND ONE OF THE STAFF. I STILL VIEW THE CLINICAL DIRECTOR AS A FATHER FIGURE. HE'S GOING TO WALK ME DOWN THE AISLE."

–YOUTH IN CARE

It was striking and heartbreaking to us to see the number of First Nations youth living in homes or residential care settings so far from their communities. Severed from their culture, community, family and friends, it was almost impossible to imagine the courage and strength it took for them to cope with their life circumstances. We feel that First Nations children and youth need to be closer to their communities and that they deserve a support and intervention strategy of their own.

Some youth spoke about the need for more or better connections to outside services such as support groups, social services, the Advocate's Office or other organizations that help young people make decisions about their care. They wanted more information about their specific cases, rights, available grants and access to any information about themselves. They wanted anything that would reduce the isolation and feelings of invisibility or that provided them with a sense of empowerment.

YOU CAN'T MAKE PHONE CALLS AT 9:00 PM. IF YOU CALL AND HAVE TO LEAVE MESSAGES THEY COUNT AS CALLS AND YOU CAN'T MAKE NO MORE CALLS AFTER LEAVING THAT MESSAGE, UNTIL THE MESSAGE IS RETURNED BACK."

– YOUTH IN CARE

"A LOT OF THE STAFF GIVE YOU MIXED MESSAGES. ONE SHIFT YOU HAVE AN 8:30 BED TIME, ANOTHER SHIFT YOU HAVE A 9:00. IT'S JUST LIKE 'WHAT DO I HAVE? AN 8:30 OR A 9:00?' THEY GIVE YOU MIXED MESSAGES, THEY CONTRADICT EACH OTHER."

– YOUTH IN CARE

"I DON'T GET TO SEE MY PARENTS BECAUSE THEY PASSED AWAY WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, BUT I HAVE SIBLINGS AND THEREFORE I'D EXPECT THE CAS TO LET ME SEE MY SIBLINGS MORE OFTEN. BUT I ONLY SEE MY SIBLINGS THREE TIMES A YEAR. I DON'T FIND THAT'S FAIR BECAUSE THAT'S THE ONLY THING I HAVE LEFT OF MY FAMILY, OF ANYTHING."

– YOUTH IN CARE

"I'VE BEEN INVOLVED MY WHOLE LIFE SINCE I WAS TWO AND THE LONGEST I'VE BEEN AT A PLACEMENT IS TWO YEARS, AND THAT'S ONLY HAPPENED ONCE. I MOVE EVERY YEAR, AND I JUST FEEL THEY EXPECT US TO BE GOOD, THEY EXPECT US TO GET ALONG WITH PEOPLE, AND NOT GO INTO CRISIS AND STUFF, BUT I JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND HOW THEY CAN EXPECT THAT FROM US WHEN WE'RE GETTING MOVED SO OFTEN AND YOU DON'T GET TIME TO SETTLE IN."

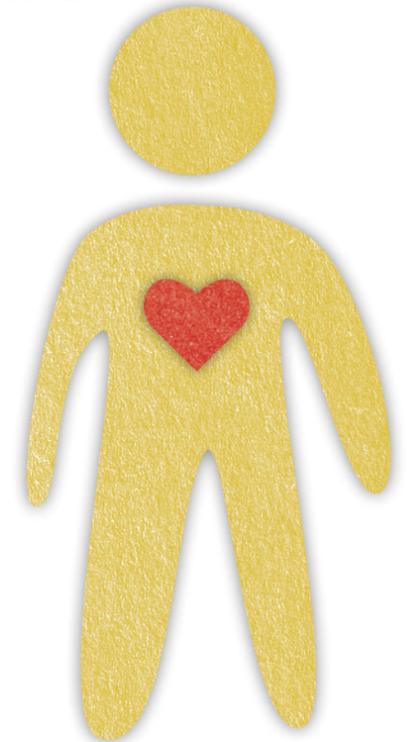
– YOUTH IN CARE

"THEY DIDN'T GIVE ME A SENSE OF FAMILY FOR MY MOTHER. WHEN I WOULD TALK ABOUT HER, THEY WOULD ESSENTIALLY BE LIKE 'WELL, SHE'S A CRACKHEAD, YOU SHOULDN'T TRUST HER.' THAT'S THE IMPRESSION OF MY FAMILY THAT THEY GAVE ME."

– YOUTH IN CARE

"THIS IS A REMAND PLACE. YOU GET SENTENCED, YOU COME HERE... FOURTEEN MONTHS IN. ON REMAND. IT'S NOT THAT BAD. WHEN YOU'RE STUCK IN HERE IT STILL COUNTS AS TIME, RIGHT?"

–YOUTH IN CARE



WE HAVE NO CHANCE TO SHOW THEM OUR MATURITY LEVELS, BECAUSE THEY ARE DOING EVERYTHING FOR US. WE'RE BEING TREATED LIKE WE'RE NINE YEARS OLD, WHICH ISN'T FAIR TO US

– YOUTH IN CARE



In Canada, most of the accused people in youth court (62%) are 16 or 17 years old, and most are young men (78%)¹

1. Youth Court Statistics, 2013/2014, Released in "The Daily", Monday, Sept. 28, 2015. www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotient/150928/dq150928b-eng.pdf

NO CHANCE TO GROW

Young people talked to us about the ways in which they felt disconnected and isolated being in care. They talked about ways they felt could help them grow roots or establish connections with the world outside of residential care. Some talked not just about the frequent moves without notice, but also that their belongings would just be stuffed in a garbage bag and they were given no time to say goodbye to anyone. Frequent moves taught them to avoid getting too close to anyone and that relationships were dispensable. They learned to burn bridges and became desensitized to letting go. They did not have an opportunity to acquire the skills they needed to build relationships with others, grow roots or form connections with other people they cared about in the residence or in a community.

There was a tremendous desire among youth in residential care to be better supported so they could remain in their living situation instead of constantly being moved and being forced to cut any roots they felt they were starting to put down.

The youth we met in our travels were articulate and capable. They demonstrated a remarkable level of courage and strength. We saw great potential in all of them but sometimes felt they did not see that potential in themselves. Few received any encouragement in the environments in which they lived, encouragement that would help them see the strengths that we were seeing in them. Young people told us that they had little chance to build skills or make decisions. In many places, food was prepared for them and choice was not an option. Clothes were provided without input, school goals were chosen for them and house rules were created without their input or consultation. They felt they had no opportunity to make decisions about their own lives. Most had never held a job. Some worried about what their lives would be like when they had to leave the system at age 18. Others just seemed resigned to living a difficult life and numb to the sense of hopelessness that they lived with on a daily basis.

“A GROUP HOME IS LIKE AN INSTITUTION. WELL, THAT’S BASICALLY WHAT IT IS. IF THE GOVERNMENT IS GOING TO APPREHEND YOU AND TAKE YOU FROM YOUR HOME, FROM YOUR PARENTS, THEN THEY SHOULD PROVIDE YOU WITH PARENTS, NOT STAFF. THAT’S NOT A PLACE FOR A CHILD TO GROW UP, THAT’S NOT A PLACE WHERE A CHILD WILL BE LOVED OR NURTURED.”

–YOUTH IN CARE



“THEY APPREHENDED ME, THEY DIDN’T APPREHEND MY TWO LITTLE SISTERS. THAT WAS WHAT I WAS WORRIED ABOUT MOST, BECAUSE FOR ME, MY SISTERS WERE LIKE MY CHILDREN, BECAUSE I HAD TO TAKE CARE OF THEM.”

–YOUTH IN CARE

When asked about goals, some said that they wanted to be a social worker or a youth care worker. These young people were often able to point to workers who inspired them to make this choice. Others pointed to a need for change in the system and that because they understood the experience of living in residential care, they would be in a good position to create the change that was necessary. When a young person has been separated from family and community, it is often difficult to return or rejoin either easily. Additionally, young people in residential care are often not raised within their own culture and have no associations with their identified ethnicity. This makes it difficult to find acceptance and belonging in their particular cultural group, so they struggle to find a sense of identity and belonging.

Numerous young people expressed a desire to receive more support once they left care, support that would help them return home or to their communities and create new roots. Of course practical resources were important too: money, housing, access to education and opportunities for personal growth; but it was not just that. They did not want to be alone. They wanted to continue relationships that they formed and considered important while in care and they wanted an opportunity to feel that they belonged somewhere. Some youth mentioned re-entering the residential care system because that was the environment in which they felt they progressed in life.

“IT’S LIKE A TREE. HAVE YOU EVER SEEN A TREE GROW WITH NO ROOTS? DO YOUR BEST NOT TO MOVE THE KIDS SO THEY CAN MAKE THE FRIENDS THAT THEY ARE GOING TO NEED FOR THE REST OF THEIR LIFE. IT’S HARD ENOUGH LIVING IN A SITUATION WHERE YOU DON’T HAVE A FAMILY.”

– YOUTH IN CARE

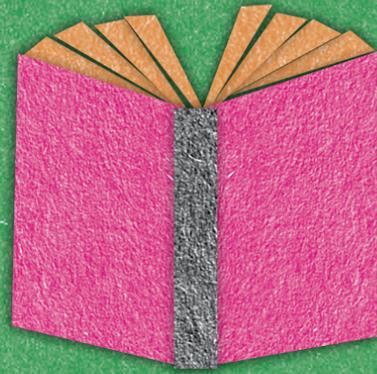
“WHAT IS MY FAMILY NOW, I FIND IT HARD TO NAME ANYONE. I’VE ONLY JUST RECENTLY REKINDLED MY RELATIONSHIP WITH MY BROTHER AND HE’S MORE LIKE A SON TO ME. SO THAT’S WHAT IT COMES DOWN TO, A FAMILY IS REALLY JUST WHOEVER’S IN YOUR LIFE AT THE CURRENT TIME, AND WHOEVER SHOWS YOU LOVE. IT’S DIFFICULT BECAUSE THERE’S NO PERMANENCY BEING IN CARE.”

–YOUTH IN CARE



“I’VE BEEN HERE FOR SO LONG. YOU’RE SO USED TO EVERYONE DOING THINGS FOR YOU, COOKING MEALS, CLEANING UP THIS AND THAT. HOW DO YOU MANAGE THAT ON YOUR OWN WHEN YOU GET OUT OF HERE, JUST LIKE WHO’S GOING TO COOK FOR ME NOW, I’M ON MY OWN?”

– YOUTH IN CARE



"YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE ABLE TO DO THINGS IN A MANNER THAT A TEEN OR CHILD REALLY WOULDN'T NORMALLY. IT'S IMPORTANT TO HAVE STRUCTURE. BUT WHEN YOU'RE SAYING, OKAY, YOU ONLY HAVE TWO HOURS OF COMMUNITY TIME, WHEN ARE THEY EXPECTED TO LEARN SOCIAL SKILLS? WHEN ARE THEY EXPECTED TO GO OUT AND ACTUALLY SEE THINGS FOR THEMSELVES?"

– YOUTH IN CARE

"THERE'S THE OTHER STAFF THAT JUST DON'T REALLY CARE. THEY'RE LIKE JUST THERE TO MAKE SURE YOU'RE NOT DOING ANYTHING WRONG. THEY'RE NOT THERE TO HELP YOU. I'VE HAD STAFF TELL ME, "I'M NOT HERE TO HOLD YOUR HAND"

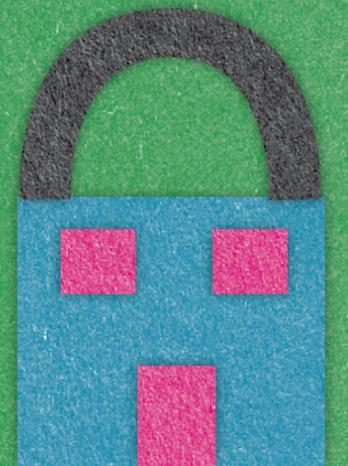
– YOUTH IN CARE

"YOU START OUT WITH GOALS. YOU WANT TO GO TO SCHOOL, YOU WANT TO LOOK FOR WORK, YOU WANT TO MAKE FRIENDS, YOU WANT TO KEEP FRIENDS, AND THEN THEY MOVE YOU. AND THEN IT SLOWLY TRANSFORMS FROM DECENT WHOLESOME GOALS TO WANTING TO JUST "SCREW SCHOOL, I'M GOING TO GO GET DRUNK". I'M GOING TO HANG OUT WITH FRIENDS, GOING TO TRY NOT TO GO TO JAIL. ALL OF A SUDDEN, THE MOVING STOPS. THEY PICK YOU UP AND THEY DROP YOU IN LIFE. IT'S LIKE THEY LITERALLY PICK YOU UP, DROP YOU ON AN ISLAND, SURROUNDED BY ALL THE SHIT YOU HAVE TO DO FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE, AND THEY NEVER TAUGHT YOU HOW TO SWIM."

– YOUTH IN CARE

"THERE'S NO TRAINING TO INTEGRATE SOME OF THE PREVIOUS LIFE OF THE CHILD INTO LIFE IN CARE, OR INTO THAT GROUP HOME. IT'S A WHOLE NEW SETTING."

– YOUTH IN CARE



HOME MEANS RESPECT



"I THINK WE NEED SOME MORE PATIENT STAFF, ESPECIALLY FOR THE YOUNGER GUYS AND STUFF LIKE THAT. PEOPLE WHO WILL ACTUALLY DO ACTIVITIES WITH US. EVEN SMALL THINGS LIKE GOING FISHING AND WHATEVER. I THINK THAT WOULD ACTUALLY IMPROVE HOW WE BEHAVE, I THINK."

– YOUTH IN CARE

Everywhere we went, we heard from young people who desperately wanted to be respected as individuals, to be informed, able to make their own decisions and have some measure of control over their lives. Many young people were extremely articulate about the changes that they would like to see in a system that they felt both supported and trapped them.

INDIVIDUALITY IS LOST

Many youth told us that they were perceived through the lens of the singular event that brought them to the home in which they were “placed,” not as the whole person whom they are. They urgently wanted people to look past their previous experiences in residential care, see them in the present moment and take a positive approach in interactions with them. Everyone we spoke with wanted to be recognized as an individual. They wanted to be treated as a unique person, rather than one of many. They did not want to feel dehumanized.

A lack of being treated as an individual came up in every location that we visited. Young people talked about everyone being treated exactly the same, regardless of need or personal circumstances. They spoke about staff using overly rigid approaches in running the homes where they lived, approaches that left no room for individuality. For many, a generalized plan of care was developed for each young person by staff, regardless of young people’s individual needs, just so they could “check off all of the boxes.”

Some young people told us that their personal positive coping strategies were not allowed, in favour of generalized strategies preferred by staff, who never considered their effectiveness on a youth. In some locations, if one individual broke the rules, all of the young people would lose privileges or suffer punishment.

“IT REALLY DOES COME DOWN TO HAVING THAT ONE PERSON THAT LOVES YOU, AND THAT YOU CAN SAY IS ALWAYS THERE BECAUSE FOSTER PARENTS ARE GREAT, BUT I DON’T KNOW IF SOME OF YOU HAVE CHILDREN, BUT BEING A PARENT DOESN’T END WHEN YOUR CHILD REACHES 21, OR WHEN YOUR CHILD LEAVES YOUR HOME. YOU KNOW, THAT CHILD NEEDS THAT PARENT WHETHER IT’S TO BE WITH THEM WHEN THEY GET MARRIED, OR YOU KNOW, JUST TO TALK TO THEM ABOUT LIFE.”

– YOUTH IN CARE



We also heard from young people who felt they had just been “dumped” at a children’s mental health setting as a last resort. Many said that if they weren’t placed there, they would have ended up dead, on the street or in jail. They also said clearly that, “This place stole my childhood.” They felt as if they were being warehoused. In fact, one young person overheard a youth worker referring to her residence as being “storage”. Given these types of experiences, many youth found it hard to find inspiration for their futures or even to imagine a better life outside of the facility. Young people were concerned with fairness and being treated by staff as people rather than “clients.” They simply wanted to be treated humanely. There were many stories about staff or foster parents arbitrarily changing rules or not taking the time to consider their needs. On a positive note, there were also stories shared about staff or foster parents really taking the time to get to know each young person, to see them as an individual deserving of respect and to build the trust necessary for an authentic human connection.

“I’VE BEEN IN A LOT OF OPEN CUSTODY AND PLACES LIKE THAT WHERE STAFF HAVE BEEN WORKING FOR A LONG TIME AND IT’S JUST LIKE THEY BASICALLY FEEL LIKE THEY’VE HEARD IT ALL, SO THEY DON’T EVEN WANT TO CARE, THEY DON’T WANT TO HEAR ANYTHING BECAUSE THEY THINK THEY KNOW HOW YOU ARE; BUT THEY DON’T. YOU ARE YOU, AN INDIVIDUAL, NOT THE HUNDRED KIDS BEFORE YOU.”

– YOUTH IN CARE

“ESSENTIALLY MY FOSTER MUM IS MY FAMILY. MY FOSTER BROTHER, I’VE LIVED WITH FOR SEVEN YEARS, AND HE IS MY BROTHER. WE HATE EACH OTHER, BUT WE’RE BROTHERS. SHE DIDN’T FORCE THIS ON US. SHE REALLY KIND OF LET US DEVELOP OUR OWN RELATIONSHIP. IF YOU WERE IN CONTACT WITH YOUR BIRTH FAMILY, SHE WOULD SUPPORT YOUR CHOICE TO STAY IN TOUCH. SHE ABSOLUTELY SUPPORTED US 100%, NO MATTER WHAT. SHE WAS SUPER BIG ON LETTING YOU MAKE YOUR OWN CHOICES.”

– YOUTH IN CARE

“SOMETIMES WHEN YOU TRY AND SUGGEST A CHANNEL AND STAFF ARE WATCHING FOOTBALL BUT YOU WANT TO WATCH HOCKEY THEY SAY ‘NO, I’M WATCHING THIS.’ LIKE EVEN BASEBALL, TOO, LIKE WHEN THE BLUE JAYS ARE PLAYING AND WE ASK ‘CHECK ON CHANNEL 2 REALLY QUICK’ AND THEY GO ‘NO, WE’RE WATCHING THIS.’ IT’S NOT EVEN THEIR TV. THEY’RE SUPPOSED TO BE WORKING. WE’RE THE ONES STAYING IN HERE AND WE’RE LIVING IN HERE, EATING HERE, SLEEPING HERE. THEY CAN WATCH THEIR OWN TV BEFORE THEY COME TO WORK.”

– YOUTH IN CARE

“IN GROUP HOMES, YOU’VE GOT STAFF THAT COME IN FOR EIGHT HOURS, GET THEIR PAYCHEQUE, GO HOME, AND DON’T CARE WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU FOR THE REST OF THE DAY, UNTIL TOMORROW WHEN THEY HAVE TO DEAL WITH YOU AGAIN.”

– YOUTH IN CARE

INFORMATION IS WITHHELD

Young people in every location we visited talked to us about needing to know what was happening to them, about the decisions being made concerning their lives. They often felt that they were uninformed about their rights or weren’t provided with the resources they needed to discover them on their own.

Many young people did not understand the details or significance of their plans of care, and there did not seem to be any follow up or focus to make the plan of care relevant to their lives beyond the present moment. In some cases, plans of care were generalized for all of the youth or created without the input or the involvement of the young person for whom it was designed. One young person said that the plan was just brought out for her to sign. Another young woman said that her parent, with whom she had no contact whatsoever, was brought in to meet with her and the worker and allowed to arbitrarily change her plan of care into something she didn’t recognize or want.

A number of young people mentioned that things in their plan were explained so quickly, especially when they first came into residential care, that they did not really understand what they were being told or why it was significant. It was as if the information was just rattled off or thrown at the young person just to say that the task had been completed. They either had no idea what they were agreeing to or had to fight for the time to read what they were about to sign.

We were also told that some youth had not been informed about how or where to reach out for help to obtain better understanding of their situation. They were not given an opportunity or any information about how to file a complaint. In a couple of instances the youth as a group said that when they asked to call the Advocate’s Office’s 1–800 number the staff would laugh at them. In another, a young woman stated that the staff of her group home would hide the phone so that she couldn’t call our office.

Numerous youth expressed anger about being moved without notice or explanation, especially when the move involved changing schools as well. Not only was it incredibly difficult to move to another living situation, the difficulty was intensified by having to start over again at yet another school, making new friends and adjusting to new teachers and different classes.

"I'VE BEEN IN A BUNCH OF OTHER TREATMENT CENTRES, BUT THIS IS KIND OF THE END OF THE LINE. YOU'RE HERE UNTIL YOU LEAVE TREATMENT COMPLETELY."

– YOUTH IN CARE



"I HAD NEVER HEARD OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE'S OFFICE UNTIL TONIGHT. WHO DO YOU COMPLAIN TO WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW WHO TO COMPLAIN TO? I CALLED THE OMBUDSMAN, AND THEY SENT THE REPORTS, AND THAT WAS IT. THAT'S ALL THAT HAPPENED, AND I JUST GOT HATED ON FOR THE REST OF MY THREE MONTHS IN THAT GROUP HOME. SO THERE NEEDS TO BE MORE AWARENESS, NOT ONLY OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE'S OFFICE BUT THE PROGRAMS AVAILABLE TO KIDS."

– YOUTH IN CARE

The young people would have preferred to know the issues behind the need for them to be moved and to have had an opportunity to work through those issues rather than being forced to change their living situation yet again. They felt that every time an issue came up they were just moved. These sudden moves felt like punishment and that they were being moved because they had done something wrong.

We learned from many youth that trying to keep up their education while in residential care was difficult. Frequent moves during the school year affected their marks, educational achievement and relationships with teachers and peers, and often put successful completion of their school year at risk. We also heard that school performance could be seriously affected because at some group homes, treatment and custody facilities there was no support for an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or anyone to help them with their individual learning needs. In some locations, teachers were supportive but made no effort to create interest in the curriculum or show youth how it might be relevant to their lives.

Young people, particularly older youth, felt that being taught life skills was very important and would help them be successful when leaving residential care. However, because everything is done for them in residential care, they do not learn even the most basic life skills. Being informed about available services as well as their rights while in care was considered extremely important.

Young people said that their files were difficult to obtain or information about their cases was often withheld leaving them feeling discouraged and hopeless.

Many youth wanted information about issues concerning sexual health and sex education. Not only did many young people feel uninformed, they felt that asking staff questions about sex or sexuality would stigmatize them or get them kicked out of their foster home or residence. Some did not feel comfortable disclosing anything about their sexual health or asking any sex-related questions.

Without information about their rights, services or life histories, the youth told us they could not self-advocate or feel that they owned their own lives. They wanted to be taken seriously and they wanted their efforts to advocate for themselves to be treated seriously and with respect. Withholding information not only disempowered young people it dehumanized them.



"PUNISHMENTS ARE UNREALISTIC IN THE GROUP HOME. IF YOU DON'T EAT YOUR BREAKFAST, YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED TO GO TO SCHOOL. I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU GUYS BUT I CAN'T EAT BREAKFAST AS SOON AS I OPEN MY EYES IN THE MORNING. I USED TO EAT BREAKFAST AT 10:30 ON MY FIRST LUNCH BREAK AT SCHOOL. I WOULD BRING MY OATMEAL TO SCHOOL WHEN I WAS LIVING WITH MY FAMILY, MY REAL FAMILY."

– YOUTH IN CARE

"I ALWAYS HAD TO ASK FOR THE CLOTHING MONEY. I REMEMBER I DIDN'T ACTUALLY KNOW THAT I HAD CLOTHING ALLOWANCE THE FIRST TIME. IT WAS TO THE POINT WHERE I HAD SUCH MASSIVE HOLES IN MY SHOES THAT I COULDN'T WALK ANYMORE ANYWHERE BECAUSE THEY WOULD TEAR UP MY SOCKS, SO ALL MY SOCKS HAD HOLES IN THEM. ALL MY PANTS WERE RIPPED UP FROM WORKING. MY WINTER JACKET RIGHT NOW DOESN'T EVEN FIT ME AND I'M FREEZING OUTSIDE AND IT'S NOT EVEN COLD YET."

– YOUTH IN CARE

"I WAS CROWN WARD EXTENDED CARE, WHICH MEANS I GOT SUPPORT WITH THE APARTMENT UNTIL I WAS 21, AND JUST RECENTLY I FOUND OUT THAT I'M A YEAR OLDER THAN THE REQUIRED SUPPORT WHERE THEY PAY FOR FOUR SEMESTERS OF COLLEGE. I WOULD HAVE LOVED THAT. I'M NOT A STUPID PERSON."

– YOUTH IN CARE



"WHEN I TRY TO CALL MY LAWYER AND HAVE TO LEAVE A MESSAGE, I GET TOLD THAT WAS MY CALL AND I WILL HAVE TO WAIT TO GET CALLED BACK, BUT THEY NEVER PHONE BACK, EVEN PROBATION OFFICERS. WE'RE ALWAYS CALLING THEM AND LEAVING A MESSAGE, BUT IT MIGHT BE A MONTH LATER OR AFTER WE GO TO COURT, BEFORE WE HEAR BACK OR MY PROBATION OFFICER WILL ASK, 'SO HOW'D COURT GO?'"

– YOUTH IN CARE

"THERE SHOULD BE A TRIAL PERIOD FOR PLACEMENTS WHERE YOU CAN COME AND STAY HERE FOR A WEEK AND SEE IF YOU LIKE IT OR NOT AND HAVE THE CHOICE TO LEAVE OR STAY, LIKE YOU DON'T JUST DROP SOME KID OFF AND THEN EXPECT THEM TO KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE. YOU SHOULD LET THEM TRY IT FOR A WEEK. IT'S LIKE IF YOU WERE GOING TO BUY A NEW CAR, YOU GET TO HAVE IT FOR THE WEEKEND."

– YOUTH IN CARE

“WHEN I FIRST CAME INTO CARE I WAS APPREHENDED AND BROUGHT TO THE YOUTH HOME. NOBODY ASKED ME ANYTHING, HOW I WAS DOING, IF I WAS OKAY, AND I WAS READY TO HAVE A PANIC ATTACK. THEY JUST THREW A BIG HUGE BOOK OF PAPERWORK IN FRONT OF ME THAT I HAD TO READ, ABOUT MY RIGHTS IN THE GROUP HOME. THEY’RE LIKE ‘OH, JUST SIGN THE BACK’. THEY DIDN’T EVEN ENCOURAGE ME TO READ IT. THEN WHEN I TRIED TO READ THROUGH IT, AND I WAS ASKING QUESTIONS, THEY GOT ANGRY WITH ME. TIME TO READ THIS?’ BECAUSE EVERY KID THAT CAME IN AFTER ME THAT I WATCHED THEM GIVE THIS BOOK TOO – THEY WOULD JUST GIVE THE BOOK TO THEM, AND THE KID WOULD JUST GO TO THE LAST PAGE AND SIGN IT OFF, SIGN THEIR LIFE AWAY. NOBODY ACTUALLY KNEW WHAT THEIR RIGHTS WERE IN THE GROUP HOME. I WOULD CONSTANTLY BE LIKE ‘NO, YOU CAN’T DO THAT TO THAT KID. THAT’S IN THE BOOKLET. ‘YOU CAN’T TALK TO THEM LIKE THAT’ OR ‘YOU SHOULD BE CALLING THE ADVOCACY OFFICE ON THE STAFF BECAUSE THEY’RE NOT TREATING US RIGHT HERE’.”

– YOUTH IN CARE

DECISIONS THAT AFFECT US ARE MADE WITHOUT US

In all areas of residential care, we heard that decisions are often made without the young person’s involvement, or that young people feel they do not have the ability or opportunity to make informed decisions about their own lives.

We heard many times that the system does not foster the ability to think independently or make decisions, resulting in young people who cannot direct their own lives when they leave care. Poor decision-making skills contribute to young people returning to some form of residential care.

One major area of concern with respect to decisions being made on behalf of a young person was in the administering of medications. While a young person might be told the names of the medications they were taking, they were not provided with enough information about the medications themselves. They were not empowered to make decisions about whether or not they should take certain medications, nor were they given the choice to do so. Often there was little or no follow up once the young person left care to see if they were managing their medications properly.

Young people also felt that they needed to be given a proper period of time to adjust to being in residential care. If there was such an adjustment period provided, it was often too short and did not give them enough time to get to know all the rules. They felt that it was unrealistic to expect them to abide by the setting’s rules whether they knew them or not. The young people also felt that the choice of where they went in the system was always made for them, not with them, with no effort to match them with the best placement option. When the placement failed to work out, they would just be quickly moved to the next place, again, without choice or discussion.

When speaking about this issue of decisions being made without their involvement, young people felt that it was difficult to ask for help without feeling vulnerable. They also did not know who to ask for help. In many cases we were told that staff were not supportive and did not seem open to providing the young person with knowledge about their rights with regard to decision-making on their own behalf.

It is incredibly difficult to grow into adulthood without the capacity or ability to make decisions. There is need to create more rights-based environments within systems of care and to place equal importance on young people’s wants and needs in discussions about their care.

Young people were clear in saying that they have no voice. They desired not only the right to be heard, but to participate regularly in the creation of services designed to assist them.

“MY FOSTER HOMES THAT I WAS SET UP WITH WERE VERY, VERY CONSERVATIVE ABOUT THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY, AND I IDENTIFY WITH THAT COMMUNITY AS WELL. LIVING IN THAT HOUSEHOLD, BEING LGBTQ, WOULD HAVE BEEN NICE TO KNOW BEFORE I WAS TOLD THAT I HAD TO GO LIVE THERE. “

– YOUTH IN CARE

“WHAT ALWAYS FRUSTRATED ME WITH THE PLAN OF CARE PROCESS WAS THAT STAFF AT THE FACILITY WOULD DRAFT A PLAN THEN BRING IT TO ME TO REVIEW AFTERWARDS. I WAS NEVER ACTUALLY INCLUDED IN THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS. I WAS JUST KIND OF THERE FOR THE REVIEW PIECE AT THE END.”

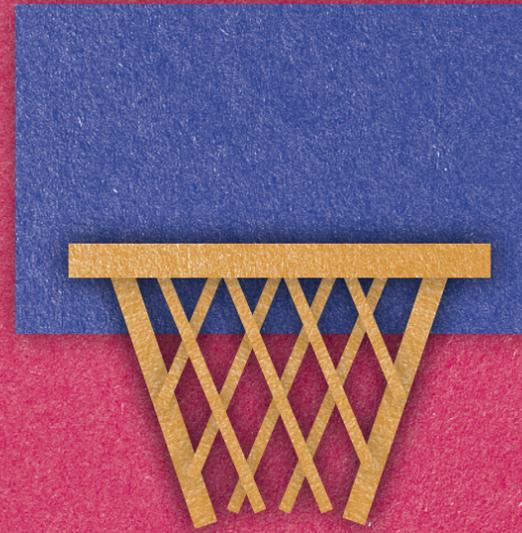
– YOUTH IN CARE

"I FIND IT'S HARD FOR THE STAFF TO RELATE TO THE YOUTH. I THINK THE STAFF TRAINING IS VERY IMPORTANT FOR STAFF. YOU HAVE TO REALLY CHANGE YOUR PERSPECTIVE BECAUSE IT'S NOT JUST A REGULAR JOB. **YOU REALLY HAVE TO LEARN TO CONNECT WITH THE YOUTH** AND SOME STAFF MAYBE ARE WORKING THERE JUST THERE TO GET A SCHOOL PLACEMENT DONE. WHETHER STAFF REALIZE IT OR NOT, THEY HAVE A HUGE IMPACT ON YOUNG PEOPLE AROUND THEM AND THE YOUTH REALIZE THAT."

– YOUTH IN CARE

"MY FIRST PLAN OF CARE MEETING WAS IN THE GROUP HOME AND **THEY INVITED MY FATHER, WHO HAD BEEN BRUTALLY BEATING ME FOR YEARS.** I HAD GONE THROUGH THE PLAN OF CARE ALREADY AND DECIDED WHAT I WANTED TO LOOK FORWARD TO IN MY TIME IN CARE. BUT AFTER THAT MEETING, THE PLAN CHANGED COMPLETELY BECAUSE MY DAD ENDED UP SCOFFING AT EVERYTHING THEY READ OFF OF MY LIST AND SO THEY DECIDED TO CHANGE IT BASED ON WHAT MY FATHER WANTED. I WASN'T EVEN IN HIS CUSTODY ANY MORE. **I DIDN'T WANT TO BE IN HIS CUSTODY. I DIDN'T WANT ANYTHING TO DO WITH HIM OR MY FAMILY AT THAT POINT ANYMORE AND HERE THEY WERE STILL MAKING DECISIONS ABOUT MY LIFE EVEN THOUGH I'D BEEN TAKEN AWAY.**"

– YOUTH IN CARE



"DECISIONS... OH MAN. YOU DON'T GET TO MAKE ANY FOR YOURSELF."

– YOUTH IN CARE

"I CAME BACK FROM SOME TRIP OR SOMETHING FEELING SUPER EXCITED BECAUSE WE HAD JUST GOT OUR ROOM PAINTED, WE GOT NEW SHEETS AND A NEW VIDEO GAME. EVERYTHING WAS SUPER AWESOME, THEN I GET SAT DOWN AND TOLD, 'YOU'RE GOING TO BE MOVING IN THE NEXT THREE DAYS. YOU'RE GOING TO LIKE THIS NEW PLACEMENT, YOU'RE GOING TO BE CLOSE TO YOUR SCHOOL, YOU'RE GOING TO MAKE NEW FRIENDS.' SO I GOT TO BE IN THAT NEW ROOM FOR THREE DAYS, BUT **DIDN'T GET TO SAY GOODBYE TO MY BROTHER OR ANYTHING.** EVENTUALLY, WHEN I GOT OLDER, I HAD A DISCUSSION ABOUT THIS TRANSITION WITH MY FIRST FOSTER MOTHER, WHO SAID, 'YEAH, I ORIGINALLY JUST WANTED YOU PICKED UP AND BROUGHT STRAIGHT THERE.' MY NEW FOSTER MOTHER SAID, 'ABSOLUTELY NOT, YOU'RE GOING TO SAY GOODBYE TO YOUR KID, AND THEN I'LL TAKE HIM.' I JUST REACTED TO THIS STATEMENT 'TAKE HIM' WITHOUT REALIZING THAT **TRANSITIONING IS KIND OF A BIG DEAL, AND THAT IF YOU DO IT BADLY, IT CAN REALLY MESS A KID UP.** I'M STILL NOT PARTICULARLY FOND OF THAT [FIRST] FOSTER PARENT."

– YOUTH IN CARE

HOME MEANS A SAFE PLACE

“IN OUR ESTIMATION THE ISSUE OF THE USE OF RESTRAINTS AND WHAT THE SYSTEM CALLS ‘SERIOUS OCCURRENCES’ SAYS MORE ABOUT THE CULTURE OF A RESIDENTIAL SETTING AND THE LEVEL OF SKILL OF STAFF THAN IT DOES ABOUT THE YOUNG PEOPLE THEMSELVES.”

Safety and feelings of not being safe were echoed by young people everywhere. Some spoke of feeling unsafe physically, while others added that they felt unsafe in less tangible ways. These expressions of feeling vulnerable were communicated across a number of areas of the young people’s lives.

VIOLENCE IS AROUND US

Many of the youth in residential care talked to us about the violence in their lives. They told us about living with and witnessing violence on a daily basis. Bullying, fighting and the use of restraints, both physical and chemical, were common. Whether they were a victim, a witness or a perpetrator, or all three, they recognized that it could be traumatic for them and others on many levels.

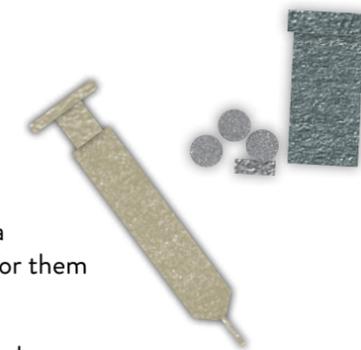
A number of young people felt that they had come into residential care already traumatized. They felt that their issues were either made worse or that they were re-traumatized while in the residence. Some younger children were housed with older youth who often displayed anger management issues or mental health needs.

Many young people felt that positive interactions with staff seemed to be conditional on their behaviour and, as a result, there was no consistency in their interactions with staff. In some instances they felt that staff had not been properly screened or that new hires did not have the appropriate training to take a therapeutic approach in their interactions with young people who were struggling. In addition, punishment seemed to be applied without explanation or any attempt to understand the reasons for the young person’s behaviour. We were told that in many cases staff never asked “why” and just administered punishment.

We heard stories of staff using restraints to manage the behaviour of young people in ways that seemed arbitrary. In many cases the young people said that the use of restraints or isolation was warranted, but that sometimes staff used restraints in a punitive way, just because they were in a bad mood or felt provoked by the young person. One youth said that if he was angry and acting out, touching him made everything worse, so the staff had learned to help him calm himself without needing to resort to restraints. Other young people talked about the traumatic effect of witnessing young people being restrained.

All of the uncertainty, the arbitrary application of punishment and a lack of consistency in terms of staff behaviour contributed to young people feeling unsafe in many residential care settings. They worried about bullying and staff were often unaware of what was happening on the floor. They talked about the need for staff to help build better relationships among peers in residential care settings.

In our estimation the issue of the use of restraints and what the system calls “serious occurrences” says more about the culture of a residential setting and the level of skill of staff than it does about the young people themselves.



In Toronto in 2013, one in three serious occurrence reports filed by group homes and residential treatment centres was for use of a physical and/or chemical restraint, according to an analysis conducted by the Toronto Star.¹

1. Monsebraaten, Laurie and Sandro Contenta, “Physical restraint common in Toronto group homes and youth residences” Toronto Star, July 3, 2015.

WE HAVE NO CONTROL

Regardless of the setting, many youth told us that they felt unsafe specifically because they had little or no control over what was happening in their residential care environment. A lack of information about their rights, decisions made without their involvement and a lack of control over even small elements of their day to day life all contributed to their feelings of helplessness and vulnerability.

We heard that when young people felt unsafe, they often wouldn't speak up out of fear. Reasons given for feeling fear included: feeling that nothing would change; worry that they would be moved again; or uncertainty because there was no clear procedure in the residential setting for reporting their concerns. In many cases they learned it was just better to keep a low profile rather than calling attention to themselves and risking retaliation from staff or other youth.

We heard a number of stories where the young people said that they were unaware of any advocates in their lives. They were not just unaware of the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, but unaware of any individual who would be interested in speaking up for them or acting on their behalf. We also heard stories from young people about staff laughing at them or actively preventing or delaying them from calling the Advocate's Office.

“MOST OF THE TIME WHEN YOU DO A REVIEW OR A CHILD MAKES A COMPLAINT IT GOES NOWHERE. OR IT'S FOUND UNFOUNDED, YOU'RE NOT BELIEVED, BY WHICHEVER LEVEL OF POWER, WHETHER IT'S THE STAFF THEMSELVES, A POLICE OFFICER OR A WORKER. IT DOESN'T MATTER IF OTHER KIDS AGREE WITH YOU. EVEN IN FOSTER HOMES, OR GROUP HOMES. THERE'S NO ACCOUNTABILITY TO BELIEVING THE CHILD.”

–YOUTH IN CARE

“WHEN I'M IN MY ROOM, WHEN I'M HEARING THESE KIDS GETTING RESTRAINED, THEY'RE SCREAMING LIKE THEY'RE DYING AND THEY'RE SAYING 'PLEASE, PLEASE STOP', IT'S REALLY MESSED UP. YOU'RE HEARING THEM BEGGING FOR THE STAFF TO STOP.”

–YOUTH IN CARE

“WHEN I FIRST GOT HERE AND SAW A KID BEING RESTRAINED, I LITERALLY ALMOST RAN TO MY ROOM AND STARTED CRYING. IT WAS A BIG SHOCK. I WAS SHOCKED, AND THEN ONCE I GOT INTO A RESTRAINT, I WAS LIKE, THIS IS FOR MY OWN SAFETY, I GET THAT, BUT THEY COULD GO ABOUT THIS IN SUCH A DIFFERENT WAY.”

–YOUTH IN CARE

“I THINK IN AN EFFORT TO TRY AND PROTECT YOUTH, THEY DEPRIVE THEM OF NORMAL CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES. I REMEMBER I HAD TO GET MY FRIENDS TO GET A POLICE CHECK TO HAVE A SLEEPOVER. IT'S NOT THE END OF THE WORLD. IT'S JUST NORMAL CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES THAT SHOULD BE REGULAR FOR EVERYONE, BUT THEY'RE NOT HERE.”

– YOUTH IN CARE

“THEY ENDED UP GIVING ME THESE SHEETS OF PAPER, SAYING I HAD TO SIGN IT SO THAT I COULD BE IN THE GROUP HOME. I TOLD THEM I WASN'T GOING TO SIGN IT. I DON'T WANT TO BE THERE. I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY YOU'RE FORCING ME TO DO SOMETHING LIKE THIS. THE WORKER I HAD AT THE TIME SAID, “IF YOU DON'T SIGN IT, I'M GOING TO MAKE YOU GO SOMEWHERE FARTHER FROM YOUR FOSTER HOME, WHERE YOU DON'T NEED TO SIGN ANYTHING.” SO THEY ACTUALLY THREATENED ME.”

– YOUTH IN CARE

“I THINK CAS SHOULD WORK HARDER TO HELP KEEP THE FAMILIES TOGETHER, INSTEAD OF JUST APPREHENDING THE CHILDREN. I THINK THEY DON'T TRY AND HELP THE PARENTS GET THEIR CHILDREN BACK ENOUGH. THEY DON'T TRY AND HELP THEM WITH THEIR PROBLEMS.”

–YOUTH IN CARE

“I WAS JUST RESTRAINED SATURDAY, AND WHEN THEY WERE RESTRAINING ME, I WASN'T MOVING AT ALL. I WASN'T TRYING TO GET OUT, BUT THEN WHEN I SAID A SNOTTY COMMENT, THEY LITERALLY TIGHTENED UP THEIR GRIP AND TWISTED MY ARM DURING THE RESTRAINT. THAT'S NOT RIGHT.”

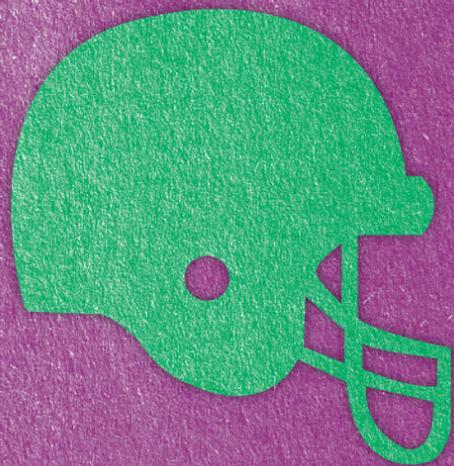
–YOUTH IN CARE

"SOME STAFF, INSTEAD OF JUMPING INTO RESTRAINT AND GETTING YOU ON THE GROUND RIGHT THERE, THEY WOULD TRY TO TALK TO YOU FIRST, AND SEE WHAT THE HECK THE PROBLEM IS. I PREFER THAT TO BEING THROWN ON THE DAMN GROUND."

– YOUTH IN CARE

"YOU TAKE A KID WHO'S UPSET WITH HIS PARENTS, AND YOU TAKE HIM AWAY FROM THAT, AND DROP HIM IN, ESSENTIALLY, KIDDIE JAIL, WITH A BUNCH OF OTHER PISSED OFF KIDS, AND YOU EXPECT HIM NOT TO CHANGE. THE ONE PERSON THEY COULD COMPLAIN TO IN THEIR HOME JUST GOT REPLACED BY THE ONE PERSON WHOSE JOB IS SPECIFICALLY TO MAKE THEIR LIFE MISERABLE. WHO HERE HASN'T HAD THAT ONE STAFF WHO WAS SPECIFICALLY OUT TO GET YOU?"

– YOUTH IN CARE



"I WAS IN A VERY GOOD HOME WITH LONG TERM CARE WITH PEOPLE THAT WERE GOING TO TAKE CARE OF ME UNTIL I GRADUATED FROM COLLEGE. THEN JUST OUT OF THE BLUE THEY WERE HAVING THIS BIG FIGHT WITH MY AGENCY AND THEN THEY DIDN'T WANT ME ANYMORE. I DID NOTHING TO THEM. THEY WERE MAD AT THE AGENCY SO THEY THREW ME TO THE CURB."

– YOUTH IN CARE

"I HAVE PROBLEMS OF MY OWN, BUT I COULD NEVER DISCLOSE ANY OF THEM BECAUSE I WAS SCARED TO LEAVE MY FAMILY. I LOVED MY FAMILY MEMBERS. BUT THERE WERE TIMES WHERE I THOUGHT THINGS WERE UNFAIR. I DIDN'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT BECAUSE I DIDN'T WANT TO GET ANYONE IN TROUBLE. SO YOU'RE KIND OF STUCK IN A POSITION WHERE YOU THINK THINGS CAN BE BETTER, AND YOU WANT TO DO SOMETHING BETTER, BUT YOU CAN'T, BECAUSE YOU'RE SCARED TO. YOU DON'T WANT TO BE GOING FROM HOME TO HOME, BECAUSE THIS IS THE ONLY KIND OF PLACE THAT YOU FEEL SAFE."

– YOUTH IN CARE

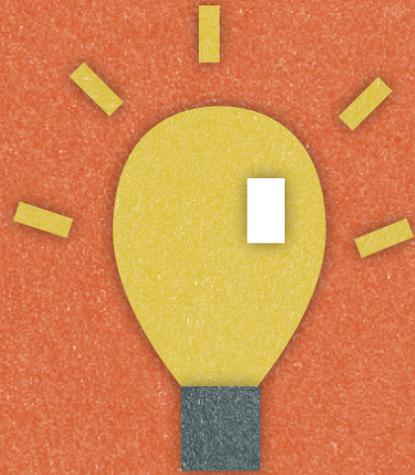


"ONE OF THE THINGS I DEALT WITH WHEN I WAS YOUNGER I CONSTANTLY HAD TO TAKE DIFFERENT TYPES OF MEDS TO SEE WHAT WOULD FIX THE PROBLEM. THEY SHOULD ACTUALLY LOOK INTO THE KID'S PSYCHOLOGY, SEE WHAT HAPPENED IN THEIR LIFE TO THIS POINT. MAYBE THE KID JUST HAS ADHD. MAYBE THAT'S WHY HE'S HAVING THESE ISSUES. REALIZING THAT AND ACTUALLY LOOKING INTO POSSIBLE TREATMENT AND SEEING HOW THE FOSTER PARENT OR GROUP HOME CAN USE OTHER WAYS TO HELP THE KID AS A FIRST STEP BEFORE JUMPING INTO MEDICATION. IF MEDICATION IS NEEDED THAT SHOULD ALWAYS BE CHECKED, ESPECIALLY WHEN MAKING ANY TRANSITIONS OR AFTER LEAVING CARE."

– YOUTH IN CARE



HOME MEANS UNDERSTANDING



"THE OTHER THING IS, DON'T TREAT US ANY DIFFERENTLY THAN ANYBODY ELSE OUT THERE. JUST BECAUSE WE HAVE THE FOSTER KID LABEL OR THE GROUP HOME KID LABEL, DOESN'T MAKE US BAD PEOPLE."

– YOUTH IN CARE

Young people spoke to us about gaps they saw in the system, including a lack of availability or access to supports and services they needed and a lack of skill and training on the part of staff.

WE FEEL LABELED

We spoke to a number of young people who felt that staff or other young people looked at them solely through the lens of their diagnosis or the reason they were brought into residential care. In some cases they felt that they had been misdiagnosed and that the inaccuracy of their diagnosis harmed them in some way. Many youth told us that they felt this focus on their diagnosis or the issue that brought them into residential care made them feel stigmatized and labeled. They felt that staff or peers would focus on this label and it became their identity while in care.

Some young people said that they and other youth deliberately identified themselves with these labels and acted out accordingly. They felt that the labels sometimes reinforced certain behaviours that they wouldn't otherwise manifest, simply because of the expectation that went with that label. In many cases the younger children diagnosed themselves, and referred to themselves and others with their clinical labels.



"IN MY EXPERIENCE, I ENJOYED BEING IN A SECURE CUSTODY SETTING MORE THAN OPEN CUSTODY, BECAUSE WHEN WE WOULD GO TO THE YMCA OR BLOCKBUSTER. ANYTIME WE WENT OUT INTO THE COMMUNITY WE WERE ALMOST OSTRACIZED. LIKE IF THERE WERE OTHER TEENS AT THE YMCA WE WEREN'T ALLOWED TO COMMUNICATE WITH THEM, WHICH COULD GET EMBARRASSING. WHILE IN SECURE CUSTODY WE WERE ALWAYS IN THE FENCE BUT WE STILL HAD A GYM, SPORTS OR MOVIE NIGHTS."

– YOUTH IN CARE

"I ONCE HEARD THAT THE RCMP APPARENTLY SAYS THAT ABOUT ONLY 20% OF THE CALLS THAT GROUP HOME STAFF MAKE WHEN THEIR YOUTH ARE MISBEHAVING ARE LEGITIMATE. SO THEY MAKE THESE CALLS BECAUSE THEY DON'T HAVE THE PROPER TRAINING TO HANDLE YOUTH WHEN THEY'RE UPSET OR IF THEY PUNCHED A WALL. IF YOU WERE IN YOUR NORMAL FAMILY, YOUR PARENTS WOULDN'T CALL THE COPS ON YOU FOR LASHING OUT WITH SUCH ANGER OR TALKING BACK."

– YOUTH IN CARE

GAPS IN THE SYSTEM HARM US

Many of the young people worried that they had no connections to people who understood their circumstances or could help them manage their lives while in the system. They also worried about falling through the many cracks in the system that became apparent the longer they remained in care.

A number of young people talked about the huge gaps between clinical staff and nursing or front-line staff. They felt that clinical staff did not take the time necessary to understand their situation and simply imposed plans of care that were meaningless, had no relation to their actual needs or that had no connection to their day to day reality.

In some cases the young people felt that once the plan of care was established, it was put on the shelf and abandoned until the next time they met to discuss it. In the interim, no actions were taken towards implementing the actual goals of the plan of care.

The Toronto Star's analysis of serious incident reports involving children and youth in residential care showed that in Toronto, 39% of such reports involved police, and showed a disturbing tendency to turn outbursts from children usually suffering from trauma and mental health issues into police issues.¹

"EVEN WITH THE PARENT TRAINING THEY GET, LOTS OF FOSTER PARENTS ARE NOT REALLY PREPARED FOR THE SITUATIONS THEY'RE GOING TO BE HANDLING WITH KIDS. THEY DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO, BECAUSE THEY'RE STUCK WITH THIS KID, THEY HAVE NO IDEA, THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND HIM, THEY'RE GOING OFF THE WALL, AND THEY CAN'T RELATE TO HIM AT ALL. IF THEY HAD A MENTORSHIP WITH SOMEONE WHO HAS DEALT WITH THESE SITUATIONS, THEN MAYBE BURNOUT RATES WOULD FALL AND THE FOSTER PARENTS WOULD ACTUALLY CONTINUE SUPPORTING YOUTH."²

– YOUTH IN CARE

THE NEED FOR MORE PROFESSIONALISM

A number of young people mentioned a lack of professionalism on the part of the staff they saw every day. They felt that some staff lacked any skill to work with young people while others were "just in it for the pay cheque". They worried that some foster parents or staff working in residential care settings saw their work as being "just a job". They wanted to see consistency and caring on the part of those who interacted with them every day, not someone who they felt was just "going through the motions." To the young people, professionalism meant being able to demonstrate caring and supportive behaviour toward young people in care.

Some young people, especially those who had been in the system for long periods, felt that staff and/or foster parents sometimes had the wrong kind of training to do their jobs. In one location staff in a therapeutic facility had been hired almost exclusively from a correctional program where no therapeutic skills were taught. The youth worried that in many cases staff or foster parents were not being properly screened for their skills and abilities. They also worried about staff who did not know how to do restraints properly or when to use them.

"I'VE BEEN PUT ON MEDICATIONS SINCE I WENT TO THOSE GROUP HOMES. I'VE BEEN ON SO MANY DIFFERENT MEDS, SO MANY DIFFERENT THINGS, THAT IT'S JUST MESSING UP MY BRAIN. SOME I'VE BEEN ON MADE ME WORSE, SOME MADE ME BETTER."

–YOUTH IN CARE

"A LOT OF TIMES I FOUND IN GROUP HOMES THAT A MAJORITY OF STAFF ARE WOMEN. I THINK IT'S IMPORTANT FOR YOUNG MALES TO HAVE POSITIVE MALE ROLE MODELS. IT'S A GAP BECAUSE A LOT OF THE HOMES THAT I WAS IN THE KIDS DIDN'T HAVE FATHER FIGURES."

–YOUTH IN CARE

"THEY TRY TO ACT LIKE COPS. THEY'LL HAVE A FOOT ON YOU OR BOTH KNEES OR SOMETHING AND COMPLETELY LAYING ON YOU AND FLATTENING YOU OUT TO THE POINT WHERE YOU CAN'T HARDLY BREATHE. A COUPLE OF WEEKS AGO I HEARD THIS KID BEING RESTRAINED BY A COUPLE OF STAFF. I HEARD IT FROM IN MY ROOM. I WAS DOING A LITTLE WORKOUT AND I HEARD THIS RUCKUS. THE WHOLE EVENT DIDN'T SOUND RIGHT TO ME I ALMOST WANTED TO JUST OPEN MY DOOR, AND JUST TELL THEM 'LEAVE HIM ALONE, STOP IT', COOL IT OFF A BIT."

–YOUTH IN CARE

1. Contenta, Sandro and Jim Rankin, "Toronto group homes turning outbursts from kids into matters for police", Toronto Star, July 3, 2015.

2. Also known as PRIDE training. PRIDE is a nine part training program used to educate families interested in providing kinship care, fostering, and adoption care to children and youth. It is provided free of charge by a children's aid society.

"I PARTICIPATED IN MY PLAN OF CARE. WHEN I WAS YOUNGER I WASN'T A GREAT FAN OF IT. BUT AS I GOT OLDER I ACTUALLY PARTICIPATED, TO PLAN OUT, I DON'T KNOW, KIND OF WHAT MY NEXT STEPS WOULD BE. I'M A PLANNER, SO THAT KIND OF BENEFITED ME. SOMETIMES I DIDN'T LIKE THE PLAN OF CARE BECAUSE WHEN I WOULD READ WHAT THEY HAD PREVIOUSLY WROTE, I FELT LIKE A CLIENT. I DIDN'T FEEL LIKE A PERSON, I FELT LIKE A CASE NUMBER, A PAY CHEQUE... I FELT THAT THEY WERE CATEGORIZING ME AS SOMETHING, THEY WERE LABELING ME SOMETHING... IF I ACTED OUT, AUTOMATICALLY SOMETHING WAS WRONG WITH ME."

– YOUTH IN CARE

Young people told us that the police were called in many situations where their involvement was unnecessary. They felt the situations could have been diffused if the staff or foster parents had paused and taken a few moments to try and understand the cause of the situation. In many cases the young person said "no one asked me why", they just punished or moved me. Some believed the use of police to diffuse situations in residential care reflected a lack of staff training in de-escalating situations in which youth act out.

Young people also called for more staff training in the area of supporting young people through the various transitions they faced coming into and leaving care, when moving from placement to placement or when staff, foster parents or co-op students were leaving the setting or ending their placements. They felt that staff and foster parents needed to be more aware of the impact of significant life changes on young people in residential care and the skills necessary to help make transitions less emotionally painful or traumatizing.

In every case young people felt strongly that they and other youth should not accept the status quo regarding the quality of services and care in residential care settings in Ontario. They wanted the system to do better.

"I WOULD GET A GIFT BASKET FROM MY DAD, WHO I DON'T TALK TO FOR YEARS ON END, AND THEN I WOULD GO DOWN, INTO THE BASEMENT, KNOCK ON THE OFFICE DOOR AND BE LIKE 'YEAH, SO CAN I HAVE SOME OF MY CANDY?' AND I WOULD CATCH HIM EATING MY GIFT. AND I WOULD GET UPSET, RIGHTFULLY SO, YEAH, BECAUSE THAT'S MY STUFF, THAT IS THEFT. YOU SEND ME TO JAIL FOR THEFT. WHY ARE YOU SITTING THERE IN YOUR LITTLE CHAIR? AND THEN HE WOULD CALL THE COPS ON ME."

–YOUTH IN CARE

RECOMMENDATIONS

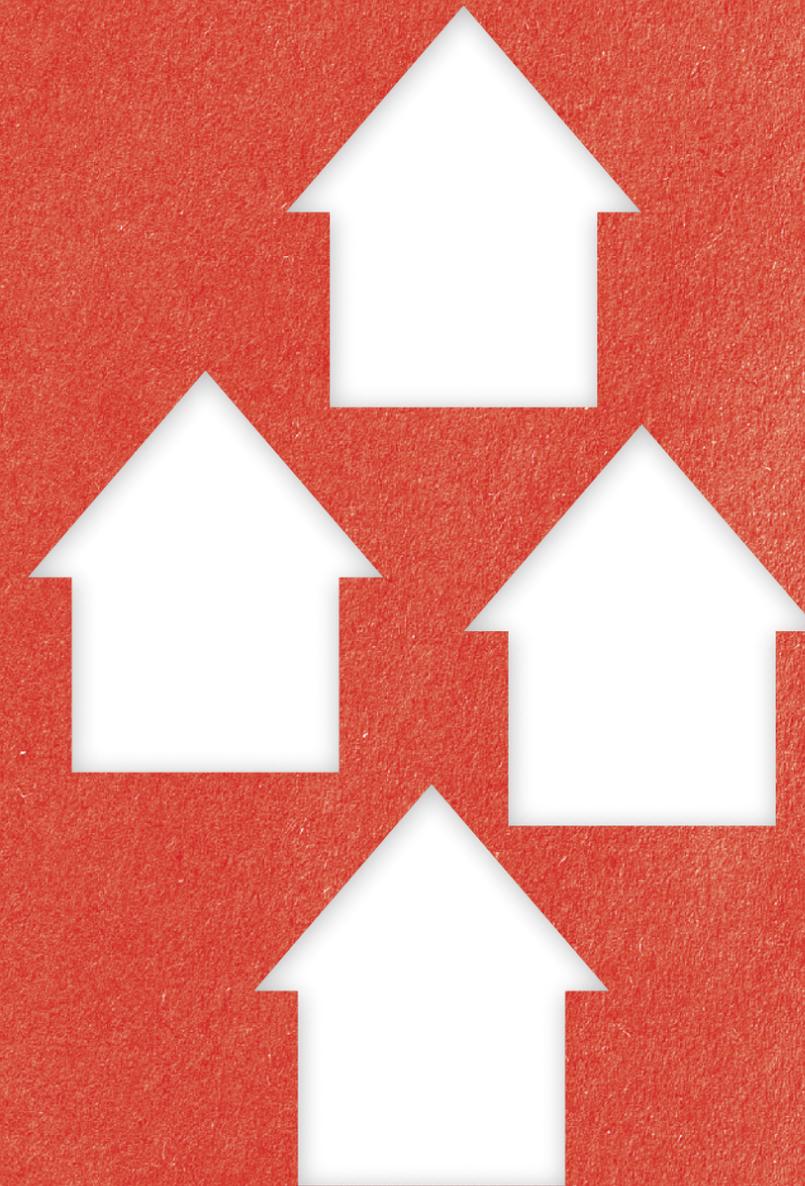


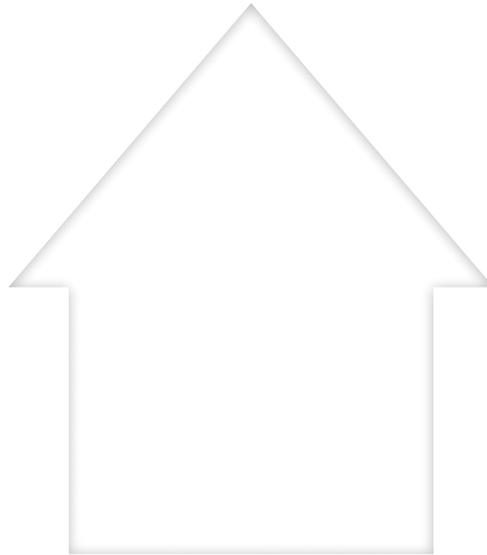
“THERE COULD BE A LOT OF GOOD THINGS THAT COULD BE FOR GROUP HOMES IF THERE WAS A DIFFERENT COMMUNITY ASPECT TO THEM. IF THEY WERE ACTUALLY BENEFITING THE CHILDREN AND GIVING THEM RESOURCES AND HELPING THEM MAKE A DEVELOPMENT PLAN FOR THEIR LIFE.”

– YOUTH IN CARE

- 1.** Every service agency and every residence must be required to have policies and procedures (practice guidelines) that make clear the philosophy guiding their approach to providing services. These policies and procedures should cover, but not be limited to: the development of “plans of care”; supporting young people’s moves into and out of residence; establishing the rules for the residence; use of restraints; recording and reviewing of files and reports; programming; expectations about the conduct of residents and of staff; and access to the community including friends and “family”.
- 2.** Policy and procedures must be developed by each service provider and residence ensuring children and staff are aware of the rights of children and youth under the *Health Care Consent Act*. These policies and procedures should be developed with young people in and from the organizations involved.
- 3.** Exit interviews must be offered to all children and youth leaving a place of residence. These interviews must be conducted by MCYS staff.
- 4.** Each service or residential care provider must develop policies and procedures that ensure children and youth have a record of their life experiences during the time they spent involved with the service or residence. This record should be given to the young person when they leave. The record should include, but not be limited to, acknowledgement of any important celebrations or milestones that occurred in their lives or recognition of any special accomplishments or achievements of the child.
- 5.** Feedback from young people in and from services and residences must be incorporated more fully into the licensing review process of those services and residences.
- 6.** Child and Youth Care, Education, and Social Work departments of all post-secondary education institutions must offer mandatory courses in child and youth participation for diploma and degree programs.
- 7.** All forms of “family” should be considered before or when placing children and youth in residential care.
- 8.** Whenever possible sibling relationships and other biological family relationships should be encouraged and supported by residential care service providers.
- 9.** Visits with family must be seen as an undeniable priority where possible and all measures must be taken to ensure that these visits take place. Where visits with family are scheduled they must never be denied for any reason.
- 10.** The development of positive peer relationships must be supported and encouraged among young people in residential care settings.
- 11.** Every child in residential care must be supported in developing at least one stable permanent relationship in their lives prior to leaving that place of residence.
- 12.** Policies and procedures for residential service settings must incorporate an acknowledgment of the fact that participation and confidence in children is built through positive relationships. Staff working in residential care must make the development of supportive relationships with youth a core aspect of their work.

- 13.** The Ministry of Children and Youth must adopt a principle that children and youth living in residential care must live as close as possible to their home communities. This is especially critical for First Nations, Aboriginal and Métis children from remote and fly-in communities. Funding and resources must be provided to communities, service providers and residential care providers to ensure this fundamental need is met.
- 14.** Every residential care setting must have a designated staff member accountable for ensuring that all youth are informed about and can access their rights and entitlements.
- 15.** Service providers must engage and educate children in residential care within their own “self-identified” culture. Training focused on “cultural respect and knowledge” must be mandatory for everyone engaged in the provision of care in residential care settings.
- 16.** All youth must receive developmentally appropriate information concerning sexual orientation and sexual health. It must be presented in an unbiased manner without stigmatization.
- 17.** Services and residences must be required to work with young people to develop a statement about the importance of creating ‘safe space’ in the setting where children are able to embrace their cultural or gender identities. Services and residences must also be required to display the LGBTTIQQ2SA safe space triangle symbol in a prominent place.
- 18.** The Ministry of Children and Youth must develop a plan and timetable to work towards the establishment of a “zero use of restraint” philosophy for all residences and services. Staff in all service settings must be trained and supported to encourage the use of positive coping, de-escalation and prevention strategies to help children and youth manage their behaviour.
- 19.** The province must support the development of a regulatory body for child and youth care practitioners.
- 20.** In funding residential care consideration must be given to the wages and benefits required to attract and retain well-trained, experienced and capable staff to work in residential care settings.
- 21.** Young people in foster care must be given the opportunity, up to the age of 25, to return to a residential care setting if their exit plan breaks down.
- 22.** Residential care settings must build on the strengths and skills of each child and youth. Decision-making, site operation and programming must revolve around building life skills for children and youth at every stage of their development thereby readying them for the time when they will leave care.
- 23.** Police are over-involved in the lives of young people in residential care and are called in many situations where they are not required. Police departments must not be used as a behavioural management technique and must only be contacted as a last resort or when all other options have been exhausted.
- 24.** Young people in and from services and residences must be involved more fully in the development of criteria for licensing services and residences.





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