



SYSTEM PATHWAYS INTO YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

CASE STUDY: CHILD & FAMILY SERVICES

Youth who have been in the care of child welfare are much more likely to experience homelessness than youth who grow up in the care of their family. This has been recognized as a major problem by The Office of the Children's Advocate, residential care programs in Winnipeg, youth-serving organizations, and Child Welfare Authorities themselves. It is of particular concern given that children are taken into care to protect them and prevent harm, yet as adults they remain significantly disadvantaged. There have been programmatic changes, many of them innovative and effective. More substantive change is still required.

In 2013/2014, a research project titled *System Pathways into Youth Homelessness* interviewed 22 youth (aged 18-29) who have experienced homelessness and 12 individuals working in front-line agencies, policy developers, and Government staff.

WHAT YOUTH TOLD US

Involvement in CFS and youth homelessness

Of the 22 participants in the research, 18 indicated significant involvement with Child and Family Services (CFS). Of these former youth in care, 10 youth experienced homelessness within the first year of aging out of care. The others lived with partners, family, or independently for 2-5 years before becoming homeless.

Lack of stability

A common theme, especially among participants who had been involved with the CFS for very long periods of time, was the lack of stability. Participants indicated they felt they had very little control or trust in their interactions with CFS. Some participants indicated they regularly "ran away" from placements, which was seen as a way of increasing their own control over their situations, yet further contributed to instability. Two participants said the misinformation they received contributed to their running away. "I was supposed to be able to have contact with my mom, like where the heck's my mom... that never happened. That's why I ran away, really, 'cause you know when you're supposed to have contact and you're supposed to be making progress. [But] you're basically trapped there waiting for them to do something for you and they're not."

Transitioning to age of majority

While a few participants had assistance from CFS workers

in transitioning out of care, most of the participants were critical of their lack of preparation for living on their own. Of the 14 participants who spoke about CFS life skills training for transitioning into independent living, 9 either did not receive transition support, didn't understand what they were taught, or found it was insufficient. For example, one participant stated that he was put into an independent living program through CFS at 17 but felt like he was not supported and not taught any life skills: "They didn't really [teach me life skills]. I just had to learn on my own." And a 19 year old woman stated: "I just think that they let go of their kids unprepared, like at [age] 18 or whatever a lot. That's why you see a bunch of homeless people."

Attempts to return / seeking help at old foster homes

Some participants described attempts to return to former supports when circumstances began to break down. Several were able to access previous foster-home relationships

for housing or resources. When asked where she was currently staying, one female reported residing "in an older foster home that I was in... that one out of the three was the best that

I've been in because they're like a really loving family. I felt like they made me feel like I was part of the family too... and it's nice to have that still."

"I just think that they let go of their kids unprepared."

19 year old female participant

ANALYSIS OF POLICY

The majority of youth participants felt there were problems with their transitioning out of the child welfare system. Nine of the eighteen former youth-in-care either indicated that they had received no preparation or that this preparation was inadequate. A systemic intervention into transitioning may reduce risk of youth homelessness.

One area of need that service providers pointed to is the lack of a mandated standard. "There are no policies that go over what it should look like to grow up in Child Welfare System. I think it's one of the weakest areas in the mandate." Several agency-level participants perceived a significant lack of resources for transitioning youth. Many agency staff we spoke to believed extensions of care were only available to youth continuing their education, despite this not being explicit in legislation. We heard

about very promising programs, some being developed by Child Welfare Authorities, which will improve outcomes for many youth. These are exceptional and no youth we interviewed had accessed these supports.

Based on the reports from former youth-in-care in this study, an eighteenth birthday signals a significant change in circumstance for youth in CFS. For many youth, the attainment of age of majority triggers complete cessation of government's responsibility for a youth in care, a legal function enabled by the Child and Family Services Act. Several agency participants argued the current legislation represents a significant barrier to improving services for youth aging out of care.

WHAT AGENCY WORKERS TOLD US

Extend responsibility for care

All of the agency representatives who worked directly with the child welfare system, or who worked with youth as they were leaving CFS, indicated that continuation of care should extend beyond age 18 for all youth in care. Extensions are contingent on continuing school or participation in programming. Those who are probably the most vulnerable to negative outcomes may not qualify for, or may lose extensions of care. Extensions are also limited to one major decision about whether or not to remain a ward of CFS at the age of 18. If youth miss that option, either because they want to try out their independence and opt not to have care extended, or because their guardian (CFS worker) decides that the youth does not require an extension, the decision is irreversible. When youth receive extensions of care, there are more financial resources available for safer, healthier housing. There is also someone or somewhere that a youth can consistently turn to for assistance.

Improve effectiveness of life skills training and exit planning

Agency workers told us life-skill training should be more substantive and flexible to meet the needs of a range of youth.

They encounter youth on a regular basis who lack basic skills for successful independent living. Agency staff indicated that many youth are leaving care with inadequate exit planning. Youth in care require earlier and more comprehensive exit planning, beginning at or before age 16, yet youth may come to them two weeks before they turn 18 without a real plan for the future. Staff from CFS related that they try to negotiate a case plan with them as the youth turn 15 but

“Trust is a big issue for youth aging out of care—they don’t trust that we care.”

Front-line child care agency worker

sometimes they're not interested, they're AWOL, or simply not ready to engage with the process. As well, agencies that have an age of majority unit experience very high caseloads.

Rethink expectations of independence

Agency staff expressed concerns about how living independently is conceptualized and understood in the child welfare infrastructure. Some expressed concern that youth were being streamed into income assistance programs, and missing out on opportunities for employment or education. Others noted that youth with high needs, often due to mental illness and/or trauma, do not qualify for adult services yet need additional supports. They say there is very little funding to provide these “gap” services for medium-risk young people.

Build trust with youth

One front-line staff said “trust is a big issue for youth aging out of care—they don't trust that we care. They don't trust

that we can support them. They don't want to follow rules or they feel like they're not safe in the environment they're in.”

Another agency participant related, “I've had youth who tell me that they don't trust me, they

don't believe what I say. I need to work to build that trust, make sure that I deal with their priorities, not my priorities.” In particular, youth who have had very unstable placements struggle to engage genuinely with staff. Staff pointed to youth who are incarcerated as they are aging out of care. They are often not interested in having another agency looking over them, watching them. This speaks to the need for flexible supports, based on the youth's goals and needs rather than government or funding requirements.

ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Issue: Many of the youth in this study began living independently shortly before or after they turned 18. Many of these youth experienced homelessness within their first two years of independence and continued to struggle with stable housing.

Recommendations: CFS should ensure that youth exiting care are prepared to live independently. These services should be fully available to all youth in care, regardless of permanency status and ability to participate in educational programming. This could be through ending the automatic termination of care at 18 and giving youth the choice to continue to receive services until the age of 25.

Issue: Several of our youth sought assistance, as adults, with former foster families. Others found support from other available sources such as biological family members, partners, friends, and gangs; some of these relationships led to negative outcomes. Currently, policy does not allow for these youth to receive support from the Child Welfare System after termination of care.

Recommendation: Youth formerly in care should be able to re-engage with CFS when they are in need, and have support reinstated. In addition, the mandate of the Office of the Children's Advocate should also be available for former youth in care. Youth that refuse continued care should have their files suspended rather than closed, and should be able to return to CFS for support if needed.

Recommendation: Youth also need informal supports. This can be supported through programs to assist youth

in establishing and setting expectations for family reconnection prior to exiting care.

Issue: Agencies currently attempt to offer a variety of services for youth transitioning out of care. The approach, capacity, and outcomes of these programs vary widely across the agencies. Several of these programs have been implemented outside of the child welfare purview.

Recommendations: There needs to be a body within government responsible for this. Quality of transitional care in child welfare should be part of a system level mandate, with accountability mechanisms in place. Exit planning should be a client-centered activity, with gradual process and clear communication about shifting responsibilities. Training for foster parents and group home staff should be mandatory to ensure all facilities exit-plan to a mandated standard. Suggestions for mandated transitional supports include connecting youth with a range of educational options, planning for sufficient income in adulthood, appropriate housing, and stable, capable supports based on the intensity required by the youth. The community organizations providing this support need adequate, stable funding.

While these recommendations endeavor to improve the existing system framework to better serve youth transitioning to adulthood, they do not address other issues embedded in the established structure. Though they are clearly important, it was beyond the scope of this study to make recommendations on increasing stability for children and youth while in care, nor ways to reduce the numbers of youth, and particularly Aboriginal youth, in the care of CFS.