
Office of the
Children's Advocate

“STRENGTHENING OUR YOUTH”
Their Journey to Competence and Independence

A Report on Youth Leaving
Manitoba's Child Welfare System

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10. RECOMMENDATIONS

10.1 Policy Implications

It is ironic that youth in care upon attaining the age of majority at 18, suddenly step outside the jurisdiction of *The Child and Family Services Act*, and the child and family services system assumes no more responsibility for them. They age out of the system of public care. This does not happen to most of the children in care, who return to their parents after a relatively brief time in care. Many find alternative care within their extended family. Some find other families through adoption. Children with a developmental delay that is severe may begin to receive services through Adult Supported Living Programs. But the majority of youth approach the age of majority without any of these outcomes and many of them face profound challenges. These children may not have recovered from the effects of abuse and neglect. They may continue to have diagnosed (or undiagnosed), disorders such as attachment disorders, oppositional defiant disorders, borderline personality disorders or fetal alcohol spectrum disorders to name only some. They may be anxious, depressed or suicidal. Because of the difficulties they have lived through they may be involved with alcohol and drug addiction and they may be struggling with school if they are attending school at all. However, they arrive at their 18th birthday and stop being the responsibility of government. The lack of services for youth who have been in the care of the child and family services system and had to leave the system at the age of majority is an example of a practice that creates both individual hardship and a host of ensuing problems that are preventable through the provision of appropriate services. Other initiatives, particularly in the US and the United Kingdom, where responsibility for the outcomes of youth leaving care has been acknowledged and legislated, have demonstrated that the outcomes for youth leaving care can be turned around to give them more opportunity and a brighter future outlook.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. That the Department of Family Services and Housing develop a policy outlining responsibility for children in care who are reaching the age of majority and leaving care.
2. That the Department of Family Services and Housing develop a policy outlining responsibility for post age of majority support and assistance to youth formerly in care.

3. That the Department of Family Services and Housing develop a policy on youth leaving care. It should outline the responsibilities of Agencies and Authorities for services to youth leaving care including independent living preparation prior to leaving care and post care services up to the age of 21 years.
4. That the Department of Family Services and Housing develop a policy on youth leaving care, enrolled in educational or training programs. It should outline the responsibilities of Agencies and Authorities for services until the age of 25 years.
5. That the Department of Family Services and Housing extend the maximum age eligibility for Extended Care and Maintenance (ECM) from 21 to 25 years, to enable youth to achieve higher education and develop work skills.
6. That the Department of Family Services and Housing ensure that the policies for youth leaving care and the Extended Care and Maintenance provision is consistently applied across all Child and Family Service Authorities in the province.
7. That the Department of Family Services and Housing broaden the Extended Care and Maintenance provisions to include temporary wards of the province that will be in care until the age of majority.
8. That the Department of Family Services and Housing, along with the four Authorities develop standards to prepare youth for leaving care and incorporate these standards as a regulatory requirement.
9. That a Committee with representatives from the Department of Family Services and Housing and the Authorities, along with service providers, youth in care, or formerly in care and stakeholders, be established to develop standards for youth leaving care, including post care services. The Committee should embark on a review of national and international policies, programs and services to learn from these experiences and incorporate strategies that have proven to be effective for sustained positive outcomes.
10. That standards for services to prepare youth for leaving care provide for the diverse needs of Aboriginal youth in care, and youth with disabilities who are not eligible for adult supported living programs.
11. That standards for services to prepare youth for leaving care outline a flexible and functional process for graduating from dependence to interdependence and include mandatory needs assessments; individualized transition plans and post care services.
12. That standards for services to prepare youth for leaving care have provisions for the active involvement of the youth leaving care and for the inclusion of a team of individuals significant to the youth and willing to be a part of independent living planning with the youth.

10.2 An Accountability Framework

As provincial legislation is scant in defining its legal obligation to youth in care reaching the age of majority, day to day practice is guided by standards and policy manuals that outline case planning principles but provide little direction on preparing youth for adult responsibilities and life after care. This review found that there is no consistency in when a youth starts receiving preparation and training in independence, or how the youth is prepared for entering adult life. With little direction and lack of accountability procedures, it is possible that youth leave the system at the age of majority without any preparation or assistance for independence. Most often independent living preparation occurs with little direction, and at the discretion of the caseworker. There are no measurements within the child and family services system to assess a youth's readiness for independence, no expectations for documenting how the youth is being prepared for independence, and no outcome measures to evaluate how the youth is doing in independent living, or most importantly, after aging out of care. Reports from service providers and youth in care clearly identify gaps in this area and the majority of youth leaving care feel unprepared for life after care.

Standards are key for the establishment of policy and practice. Operational procedures and quality assurance standards and outcome measurements are needed for effective service provision. Accountability and compliance standards should allow little room for discretion in ensuring all youth in care are adequately prepared and supported through the transition process and following entry into adulthood. All youth in care must leave care in a planned and supported manner to enable a successful and sustainable transition.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 13. That the Department of Family Services and Housing develop compliance and quality assurance standards for services to youth leaving care, including post care services.**
- 14. That a comprehensive and consistent tracking system be implemented for all children in care measuring their progress in key areas of development while in care. The Canadian Looking After Children (CanLac) is an example of a nationally endorsed measurement of progress in seven key areas of development – education, health, identity, family, social relationships, social presentation, emotional and behavioural development and self-care skills.**

- 15. That a comprehensive and consistent tracking system be implemented for youth leaving care measuring their progress in preparing for independence while in care and after leaving care. The tracking system should be based on the determinants of health.**

10.3 Cooperation and Coordination between Departments

Youth in care issues cross several government departments providing an opportunity for a coordinated government-wide effort for an effective and efficient response to these issues. Cooperation and coordination must occur across jurisdictions for successful outcomes. Although, collaborative planning and integrated approaches are already in place, or in development, in many service areas, these tend to miss the youth aging out of care that are not eligible for supported adult living programs or special needs programs. As the majority of youth leaving care are not connected to supported adult programs, integrated services are required to assist and sustain them in adult living. Youth in care utilize a wide array of services such as social, educational, medical, none of which are coordinated to operate together. Due to privacy restrictions little information is shared between agencies often leaving the youth as the only substantial connection between these organizations. Working together government departments can more effectively address the issues faced by youth leaving care. Partnering in developing adequate housing for young people, paving the way for former youth in care to access health, mental health, and financial systems without having to deal with rigid expectations and eligibility requirements, providing educational opportunities and supporting involvement in the workplace are only a few of the responses that can develop through joint initiatives between government departments or within government departments.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 16. That the Department of Family Services and Housing, along with the Manitoba Housing Authority, develop a number of housing units in the province solely for youth leaving care.**
 - a) Housing units should include short-term transition and emergency housing options and long-term apartments, and
 - b) Housing units must be affordable and located in areas that are safe and in close proximity to transportation services.
- 17. That the Department of Family Services and Housing, create a program within its Employment and Income Assistance Program, with flexible and supportive admission rules and expectations, providing counseling, guidance and emotional support to former youth in care, to engage them in planning for a career. It is essential that the program is responsive to issues**

of youth development, youth engagement and the varying needs of this special population group.

18. That the Departments of Family Services and Housing and Education develop a policy paper on reducing school moves due to placement changes, supporting youth in care to complete high school and improving academic outcomes for children in care.
19. That the Departments of Family Services and Housing and Education launch a review of the poor education outcomes for children in care and make recommendations on improving these outcomes.
20. That the Departments of Family Services and Housing, Education, Health and Healthy Living launch an exploratory research initiative on the health and mental health needs of street-involved youth.
21. That Healthy Child Manitoba extends its Healthy Adolescent Development Strategy to address the needs of youth in care and former youth in care.

10.4 Preparing Service Providers and Caregivers

While child and family service providers are keenly aware of the issues facing youth transitioning from care, the availability of tools, intervention methods, resources and strategies for preparing youth for independence are sorely lacking. As a result, preparation services for independent living vary across the province creating inconsistencies in services and causing havoc in the lives of the youth leaving care. As indicated earlier, standards for preparing youth leaving care would help ease the debilitating effect of these transitions. The provincial government must take the lead in providing education and support to establish a consistent standard of service delivery to prepare youth leaving care. These standards must include education and training for service providers, the availability of assessment tools, intervention skills and outcome measurements. Social Workers should have the opportunity to receive training in developing skills and competencies for facilitating and supporting the transition to adulthood. Foster parents and youth care workers would benefit from learning strategies for ways they can play a larger role in helping youth develop toward adulthood including optimizing decision-making, teaching problem-solving skills and maximizing opportunities for personal growth. Sufficient funding is necessary to ensure that these standards are applied and reviewed as needed. Furthermore, these standards must be supported and claimed by Authorities and agencies in the province if they are to be successful.

A review of services to youth leaving care in several international jurisdictions points to the advances that have been made in this area. Some jurisdictions have set best practice standards for services to youth leaving care; others have designed training programs and developed competencies in life skills beginning at the age of 15 years. Service providers and caregivers are required to work with youth as early as 15 years developing life skill competencies, setting goals for independence and establishing relationships with parents, extended family and other key individuals who can be a support for the youth.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 22. That the Department of Family Services and Housing develop training programs for Social Workers, Support Workers and Youth Care Workers on preparing youth for transitioning from care.**
- 23. That the Competency-Based Training (CBT) program includes a module on preparing youth in care for independent living.**
- 24. That the Child Protection and Support Branch, or designate, develop a core set of life skill competencies for youth aged 15 years, 16 years, 17 years and the age of majority. These competencies should provide guidance to caregivers in developing appropriate life skill activities with youth at each age level.**
- 25. That the Manitoba Foster Parent Association receive funding to develop training programs for foster parents to assist youth in care with achieving life skill competencies and preparing for independent living.**
- 26. That Authorities and Agencies ensure that all youth in care are aware of Voices, Manitoba Youth in Care Network by providing information material to all new admissions and having information brochures available at all agency offices and placement resources.**

10.5 Independent Living Preparation for all Youth Leaving Care

A successful transition to adulthood requires that the development of independent living skills begin as early as possible. The process of acquiring these skills is ongoing and subject to trial and error. Although it may be considered as a separate activity, occurring in the last two years of a youth's life in care, it is essential that we begin to view independent living work as an integral part of the child's daily life. To be a constructive participant in society, each individual needs to master skills for self-directed living. Preparing youth for this should be incorporated into the day-to-day practice of social workers, foster parents, youth workers, teachers and

others in regular contact with the youth. The preparation for the transition to adulthood and the development of independent living skills is an ongoing process beginning when a child enters adolescence and continuing through to adulthood. The gradual acquisition of these skills needs to be incorporated into the care plans for each child.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 27. That Authorities and Agencies review their case management practices to ensure that all youth in care, at the age of 15, have a transition plan for leaving care. This plan should contain an assessment of the youth's needs, a plan for acquiring life skills, time frames and goals for independent living.**
- 28. That Authorities and Agencies develop a practice standard that involves youth, upon reaching the age of 15, to participate with the case worker in developing a transition plan for independence from care.**
- 29. That Authorities and Agencies develop a practice standard that promotes educational achievement as a priority for children in care, and support this by providing practical assistance such as educational assessments, tutoring, counselling, learning aids and tools and assistance with learning.**
- 30. That Authorities and Agencies develop a practice standard that promotes reconnections with biological and extended family, former foster parents or other significant persons in the life of the youth. Every effort should be made to ensure that youth leaving care have a support system.**
- 31. That the Department of Family Services and Housing increase funding to reduce the workload of Social Workers enabling them to increase time in direct service work with youth in care.**
- 32. That the Department of Family Services and Housing provide funding to Authorities to develop independent living programs for youth leaving care.**
- 33. That Authorities and Agencies increase the number of specialized foster homes for youth over the age of 15 preparing for independent living.**
- 34. That foster parents, caring for youth preparing for independent living, are provided with a clear description of responsibilities and attend training in strategies and methods for effective independent living preparation.**
- 35. That foster parents caring for youth preparing for independent living be paid an increased per diem rate, established through a review of responsibilities, training expectations and the needs of the youth preparing to leave care.**

36. That Authorities review the transition plans for youth in care aged 15 and over and based on the identified needs, develop a range appropriate independent living services or programs to ensure successful transitions to adulthood.

37. That the Department of Family Services and Housing develop a directory of independent living programs and resources in the province.

10.6 Favouring Positive Outcomes

Along with prescribed independent living standards, educated staff and supportive practice methods, social and life skill programs, independent living preparation services based on best practice standards, and post care services are needed to assist youth in care in their transition to adulthood. Problems associated with the transition of leaving care are well documented, through research, surveys and national statistics; and are widely known to professionals working with young people in care. Many young people leave care to face imminent hardship, social exclusion and vulnerability. Generally, evidence from comparative studies points to the fact that former youth in care are over-represented in statistics showing young adults at risk of homelessness, lost attachments with family, poor educational attainment, unemployment, dependency on social welfare, imprisonment, young parenthood and incidence of self-harm. Some countries have taken steps to take responsibility for youth in their care after the age of majority. Through the introduction of very strong legislation like the *Foster Care Independence Act (1999)* in the United States and the *Children (Leaving Care) Act (2000)* in the United Kingdom, youth leaving care in those countries have a safety net allowing them to obtain an education and find employment. These youth can receive financial support and personal advice and assistance until the age of 25 years. Researchers and organizations supporting youth in care in Canada have strongly conveyed the negative outcomes of youth aging out of care in this country and have received favourable responses from many Canadian provinces. Several Canadian provinces are extending the age limit for extended care and maintenance, introducing incentives for youth to remain in education programs and assisting with support and guidance after the age of majority.

Preparation and planning and the availability of essential resources that support youth after leaving care are associated with more positive outcomes for youth. In addition, stability and continuity are important prerequisites to achieving positive outcomes and youth in care should be able to leave on a gradual basis, with supportive social networks and with financial stability. Equally important is the availability of and access to post care services. Not all resources in the community are available or accessible to youth. Many have inflexible policies and rigid

eligibility criteria or are simply not youth-friendly. Although considered to be adults when leaving care, most of the youth function well below their chronological age. Once the youth has left care, they have few resources to turn to in the event of a crisis or problem. Post care services provide additional support to youth if they need it. Some youth may require more intensive support after the age of majority such as a mentor or support worker. Aftercare is an integral part of the transition process and should be available to all youth in care. This program should be detached from the child and family services system and available through external community organizations.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 38. That the Department of Family Services and Housing work with the Social Planning Council to establish a Committee to review the independent living rates for youth in care and, based on a review of actual living costs, adjust the living allowance in accordance with the recommendations of the Committee.**
- 39. That the Department of Family Services and Housing, through the Employment and Income Assistance Program, provide the same adjusted living allowance to youth leaving care until the youth is able to earn a comparable or better living allowance through employment or the youth reaches the age of 21 years.**
- 40. That the Department of Family Services and Housing introduce financial incentives to enable youth in care to pursue higher education or training. This can include tuition waivers, education vouchers, bursaries, grants or loans.**
- 41. Education funds should be started for all children in care with those born after 2003 eligible for the Canada Learning Bond.**
- 42. That the Authorities review the admission to care standards at JIRU, Intake Services, to allow for the admission of youth under the age of 18, in need of shelter and support.**
- 43. That the Department of Family Services and Housing provide funding to increase the number of transitional and emergency bed spaces in the province for youth under the age of majority.**
- 44. That the Department of Family Services and Housing establish a fund for aftercare services to former youth in care. This funding should be available to community organizations to develop programs offering services to meet the varying needs of former youth in care.**
- 45. That the Department of Family Services and Housing increase funding to Voices-Manitoba Youth in Care Network to develop a peer support program,**

that is, matching former youth in care with those who are preparing to leave care for support, mentoring and role modeling.

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