Blueprint for Fundamental Change to Ontario's Child Welfare System

Final Report of the Youth Leaving Care Working Group

January 2013
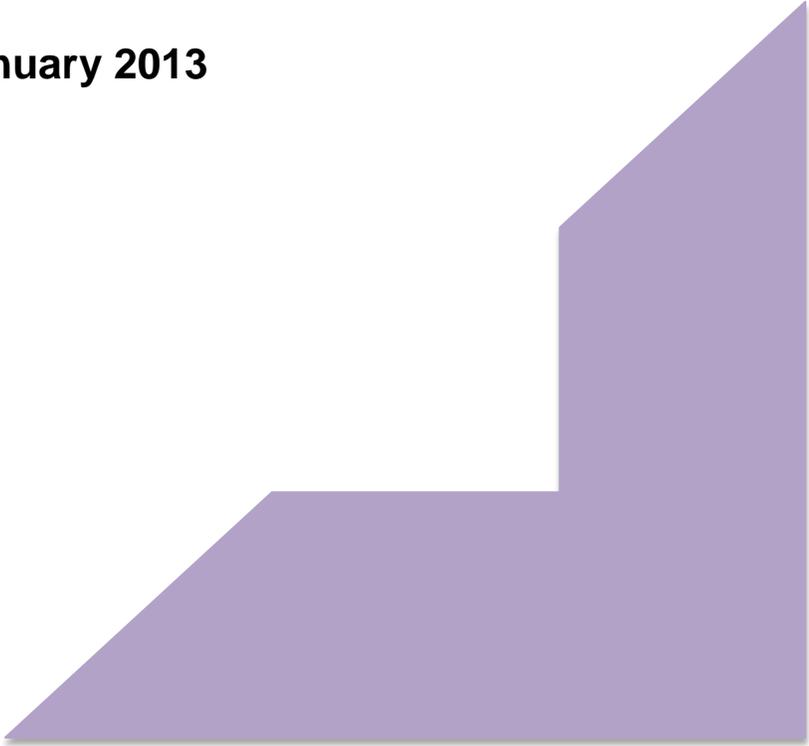
INTRODUCTION

In July 2012 the Youth Leaving Care Working Group was established by the Minister of Children and Youth Services in conjunction with the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth. Its mandate was to act on the first recommendation of *My REAL Life Book – Report of the Youth Leaving Care Hearings*,[1] which was received by the Provincial Legislature in May 2012. Recommendation 1 states:

> *The province of Ontario should recognize that the current system needs to fundamentally change to better prepare young people in care to succeed. To this end, the province should work with young people in and from care and other stakeholders to complete an Action Plan for Fundamental Change by November 2012.*

The Working Group included nine youth in and from care and seven community representatives from across the province. The youth represented a range of places, identities and experiences from within the child welfare system; all had participated in the hearings and/or related youth processes. The community representatives were from a wide range of youth-serving organizations including children's aid societies, mentoring organizations and counselling agencies. In addition there were observers from the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies and the Association of Native Child and Family Services Agencies of Ontario. The group met 11 times between July 30th, 2012 and January 4th, 2013. A list of members and observers is included as Appendix A.

Working Group members were given the responsibility of building a plan for fundamental change to the child welfare system on behalf of children and youth across Ontario. Members worked with passion and dedication to do justice to this task.

The group was conscious of the importance of respecting the various ages, locations, cultures, identities, sexual orientations, abilities and experiences of children and youth in and from care across the province. It consistently considered who was not reflected in each discussion and how to include them in the recommendations.

The Working Group did not rely only on the experience of its own membership. It was informed by *My REAL Life Book* and all the consultation that went into that

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[1] My REAL Life Book: Report from the Youth Leaving Care Hearings. Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth May 2012

process. It had input from government and agency observers who were asked to provide further information and a continuous flow of support from ministry staff from the Child Welfare Secretariat. Members also sought feedback from individuals and organizations across the province on an earlier draft of the recommendations. A list of these individuals and organizations is included as Appendix B.

The Working Group considered the input from all of these sources and developed recommendations that would lead to fundamental change. As part of its mandate, the Working Group has provided advice on the relative priority of these changes to the ministry.

The Working Group's mandate was to develop an action plan, or "Blueprint for Fundamental Change." This report contains the Working Group's recommendations to the ministry about what should be involved in that change.

Addressing the Needs of Aboriginal Youth

The Working Group acknowledged from the outset that First Nations, Métis and Inuit children and youth in care, particularly those coming from on-reserve communities, continue to face distinct and in many cases extreme challenges in housing, health, education and access to culturally-appropriate services and supports. It recognized that the development of recommendations for these children and youth needed to be considered in relation to the broader issues and inequities faced by their communities. Given this, it was clear that the Working Group could not do justice to its mandate in this area.

The Working Group therefore recommends that the ministry immediately implement a separate process in partnership with youth, relevant organizations and leadership from First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities to identify issues, develop recommendations and produce a separate action plan for fundamental change.

Why Change is Needed

The youth who shared their stories at the Our Voice Our Turn Hearings spoke powerfully about the challenges faced by children and youth in and from care. My REAL Life Book captured these voices from across the province. Youth members on the Working Group confirmed through their own experiences and those of their peers that, while there are many committed workers, effective agencies and positive initiatives under way across the province, there are policies that need to change, and inconsistencies in practices that require urgent attention.

Statistics support their stories: many children and youth in and from care struggle compared to other Ontario youth. Only 44 per cent of youth in and from care graduate from high school compared to 82 per cent of Ontario youth. Youth in and from care are over-represented in the youth justice system and more likely to experience homelessness. Aboriginal children and youth in care often face additional challenges, and are more likely to come into contact with the child welfare system in the first place: although only 2 per cent of Ontario's population is Aboriginal, Aboriginal children and youth make up 22 per cent of Ontario's Crown wards.[2]

To underscore the need for change, youth members identified links between their recommendations and the articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.[3] The Working Group as a whole agreed to the importance of acknowledging these links as further evidence of the urgency of the requirement for fundamental change in Ontario's child welfare system and recommends that the spirit of the Convention be followed as the Blueprint is implemented.   A summary of key articles from the Convention is included as Appendix C.

How the Blueprint is Organized

The Working Group was established to build on the goals and recommendations from *My REAL Life Book* to prepare an action plan that included strategies, timeframes, and the relevant parties required for implementation. The Working Group recognized that it would be the responsibility of the ministry, working with other ministries, children's aid societies, youth and a wide range of other community stakeholders to implement the Blueprint. It therefore focused on naming the areas of the child welfare system that needed to change and on providing guidance to the ministry on the critical components of that change. The Blueprint can be seen as a map that shows the destinations; the ministry's task, with its partners, is to choose the right vehicles to reach those destinations.

The Blueprint is organized under the following themes:
- **RELATIONSHIPS**
- **EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT**
- **HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT**
- **TRANSITION SUPPORT**
- **YOUTH JUSTICE**
- **GROUP CARE**
- **MINISTRY POLICY**

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[2] Statistics collected in My REAL Life Book: Report from the Youth Leaving Care Hearings. Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth May 2012, p 33.
[3] See United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, available at http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm.

Recommendations are organized into short-term (1-3 years), medium-term (4-6 years) and long-term (7-10 years) time frames. These time frames recognize that while some recommendations are relatively straightforward to implement, others will require additional consultation, development of new policies, processes, or partnerships, and in some cases may require legislative change.

The Working Group believes that these themes and recommendations are all necessary areas for change and must be acted on together. To be successful, the child welfare system must allow every young person in and leaving care, no matter where they are, who they are, or what their circumstances are, the best possible opportunity to achieve their potential.

The Scope of Work

The Working Group's mandate was to develop a blueprint for fundamental change to the child welfare system that built on the recommendations of *My REAL Life Book*. From the beginning, the Working Group was aware that, in order to complete the Blueprint on time and within its Terms of Reference, there were areas that it would not be able to cover and population groups whose needs and issues they would not be able to address sufficiently. The recommendation above relating to Aboriginal youth is a prime example. Limitations to the scope of the work are noted below, with the recommendation that the ministry and the reader take them into account as they read the Blueprint.

The Fiscal Situation
In recognition of Ontario's current economic reality, the Working Group was asked to work within the Ministry of Children and Youth Services' fiscal allocation. However, some of the key recommendations from *My REAL Life Book* and others that emerged in discussion were considered too central to the wellbeing of children and youth in and from care to omit, despite having significant financial implications. The Working Group balanced the urgency for system change against financial constraint in the following ways:

- Where there were significant costs, the pace of implementation (short, medium and long-term) is intended to allow for phasing-in of some of the changes.
- The emphasis on partnerships across ministries, levels of government and between sectors is another strategy to share resources through increased collaboration.
- Recommendations in each category and time frame are categorized into four categories, listed below, according to how central each recommendation is to fundamental change:

It is essential and urgent that…
It is very important that…
It is important that…
It would support fundamental change if….

The Complexity and Range of Experiences of Children and Youth in and From Care

The Working Group realized that the complexity of the child welfare system and the variety of experiences of young people in and from care meant that they could not examine every issue. While the Blueprint identifies many of the most pressing issues and recommends actions, it does not address all aspects of care or the experiences of all children and youth.

In particular, the Working Group found that many youth in and from care expressed concerns about their experiences in group care. The Working Group came to believe that the group care system, and the policies and practices across the various kinds of group care settings, in many cases did not support the best outcomes for youth. While many group care providers offer high quality care, during the hearings and while seeking feedback on the draft blueprint, the Working Group heard about inconsistencies in what was available to youth in group care and how it was offered. There was not the opportunity in this process to explore fully how the group care system could be improved to meet the needs of children and youth more effectively. As a result, the Working Group recommends that **the group care system be evaluated to make sure that it focuses on the best outcomes for youth, starting with a process that listens to the voices of youth in and from group care**.

Implementation

To provide the ministry with the fullest picture of the changes necessary in child welfare, the working group focused on **what** needed to change, not **how** to change it. The creation of specific implementation plans has been left to the ministry, to be guided by the discussions and recommendations of the Working Group and input from relevant stakeholders.

Despite the Working Group's efforts at representing the diversity of youth in and from care in the development of the Blueprint, many initiatives will require consultation with youth and other stakeholders before they can be implemented. Few issues have one-size-fits-all solutions that address such matters as the diversity of language, race, culture, health, sexual orientation and identity, physical and/or intellectual ability, regional differences and immigration status. The Working Group recommends that implementation of the Blueprint includes consultation with stakeholders who reflect the range of children and youth in and from care and their circumstances, as well as the key organizations and systems that work with them.

Additional Considerations

Some specific areas that the reader is asked to consider in reviewing this document are:

Asset-Based/Strengths-Based Approach
The Working Group was committed to an asset-based approach to developing solutions for all children and youth. It focused on assets and abilities, seeing "problem behaviour" as a shared responsibility between youth and caregivers. This approach avoids the risk of reinforcing negative assumptions about people's abilities and motivation. The Blueprint attempts to build on the strengths and potential of every child and youth and to recommend changes to the child welfare system from a place of trust and respect.

The Working Group also recognized that there is a risk when focusing on "what is wrong with the system" of failing to recognize the many positive examples of practice among staff, volunteers, programs, agencies and institutions across the province. Its approach was to identify the barriers that prevent these good practices from being applied consistently and to recommend strategies to integrate them throughout the system.

Anti-Oppression, Inclusion and Human Rights
The Working Group respected the principles of anti-oppression, a framework that recognizes that there are assumptions embedded in society that lead to exclusion, discrimination and denial of opportunity for many people. In the child welfare system and for youth leaving care in particular, this approach means consistently creating systems, programs and policies that are inclusive and that break down barriers to achievement. The Working Group strongly recommends that when working to find solutions, the ministry and its partners apply an anti-oppression framework to ensure that all groups who may be affected by each issue are included. The objective is to respect and support everyone's culture, race, identity and circumstance, and to address barriers to equitable inclusion in all aspects of community life.

Partnership
The areas of change identified in the Blueprint are not limited to the Ministry of Children and Youth Services and children's aid societies. Some recommendations require collaboration with other ministries (Training, Colleges and Universities; Community and Social Services; Health and Long Term Care; Education; Community Safety and Correctional Services; and the Ministry of the Attorney General) and other child and youth-serving sectors. The Working Group expects the Ministry of Children and Youth Services to take the lead in bringing the relevant parties to the table and moving the agenda forward. The Blueprint also refers to the "broader community" to recognize the roles of all sectors that affect the lives of youth in and transitioning from care.
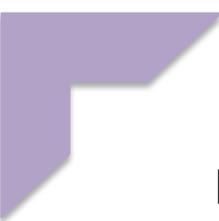
RELATIONSHIPS

Supportive, long-lasting relationships are critical to the success of children and youth in and from care. Children's aid societies, caregivers[4], and the ministry[5] need to commit to keeping children, youth and families as the central focus of their work and to provide them with guidance and support.

Short-Term Recommendations

It is essential and urgent that….

➢ **…every child and youth in and from care has permanent lifelong relationships that meet their personal and cultural needs.**
- Children and youth have stable homes.
- Children's aid societies work to find permanency for every child or youth through return to the family home, kinship placements, formal customary care, adoption, or legal custody.
- Children's aid societies provide the supports that parents or other caregivers need to keep children and youth in their homes.
- Children's aid society boards of directors make permanency a key goal of their organizations.

➢ **…children and youth in care grow up with many opportunities to develop permanent, supportive relationships with caregivers, staff, community members and extended family.**

To support stable relationships
- *Children's aid societies …*
  - match children and youth as quickly as possible to the best possible placement culturally, socially, developmentally that reflects the distinct nature of their identity;
  - train caregivers and children and youth in conflict resolution skills and work with them to resolve issues;
  - recruit caregivers from diverse backgrounds and those who want to foster older youth to reflect the needs of children and youth in care;
  - support children and youth to maintain relationships with members of their families of origin, such as siblings, when possible;
  - use kin searchers/family finders to help children and youth connect with family members;

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[4] "Caregiver" is used to refer to foster care, group care, kin and customary care providers.
[5] "The ministry" refers to the Ministry of Children and Youth Services.

- o partner with community agencies to provide opportunities for children and youth in care to be matched with peer-mentors who have been in care or adult mentors from the community through formalized mentoring organizations that meet their individual needs (e.g. sexual identity and orientation, cultural identity);
  - o whenever possible, keep children and youth assigned to the same children's aid society worker if they move residences;
  - o make relationships between children and youth and their workers a priority when determining service delivery models and caseloads;
  - o track data on placement stability to identify and address issues and concerns.

- *The ministry …*
  - o make available the option and supports for youth to stay in their foster or group homes past the age of 18.

- *Caregivers …*
  - o help children develop the skills to form healthy relationships;
  - o treat children and youth in care as members of the family;
  - o support children and youth to remain connected to their families of origin when that is best for the child or youth;
  - o support children and youth to remain connected to their cultural and faith communities of origin; explore and develop their individual identities with respect to culture, race, religion, gender and sexual orientation and identity; and support them to be connected to the broader community in which they live;
  - o participate in plan-of-care meetings;
  - o encourage and support every child and youth to be physically active and to take part in extracurricular activities and hobbies.

➢ **…children and youth in group care have consistent and stable relationships with group care staff.**
  - For specific recommendations related to group care, please see the Group Care theme on page 19.

It is very important that…

➢ **…young parents who are receiving child welfare services are provided with consistent information and assistance (pre- and post-natal) to support them in caring for their children and to help create permanency for their families.**
  - Young parents receive support to become good parents.
  - Youth eligible for Extended Care and Maintenance continue to receive supports if they become parents.
  - As a best practice, young parents and their children are supported in the community through the same plan of care.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Children and youth in and from care have a right to education. They need support to help them achieve their full educational potential from elementary school through to post-secondary education, training and employment.

Short-Term Recommendations

It is essential and urgent that…

➤ **…children and youth in and from care are supported to participate fully and successfully in elementary and secondary school.**
- Children's aid society workers connect children and youth with educational supports (e.g. tutoring) as soon as they need or request them.
- Building on the success of the Crown Ward Education Championship Teams, the ministries of Children and Youth Services and Education require children's aid societies and school boards to work together to develop Student Achievement Protocols for children and youth in care that will address:
  - Guiding principles and common expectations to make sure that children and youth in care are treated fairly and supported in their educational goals in ways that do not stigmatize them;
  - Providing supports, including transportation, to allow children and youth to stay in their schools of origin when their residence changes if this is the best option for them;
  - Enrolling children and youth promptly when they must change schools with required documents (including their Ontario student record, transcripts and Ontario Education Numbers);
  - Transitioning into and out of Section 23 classrooms[6];
  - Tracking the educational achievement of children and youth in care.

➤ **…caregivers demonstrate the importance of school success to children and youth in care and support them to meet their full educational potential.**
- Caregivers follow best practices in promoting student success, such as setting goals and expectations and creating supportive study environments.
- Children and youth have access to study space (e.g. a desk and quiet space) and the technology that they need to participate fully at school.

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[6] Section 23 classrooms are directly supported by the Ministry of Education to provide education to students whose needs are not best met in regular or special education settings.

- ➤ **…teachers and school staff are knowledgeable about mental health, emotional health, social, cultural and educational challenges that children and youth in and from care may face and are able to connect them to appropriate programs offered in the school and the community.**
  - Teachers receive training on supporting children and youth in care in university and through ongoing professional development.
  - Children's aid societies and schools work with their Crown Ward Education Championship Teams to share information.

- ➤ **… youth in and from care and their teachers, workers, and caregivers have information about options and supports for post-secondary education, training and apprenticeships.**
  - Post-secondary and training institutions and youth from care can provide presentations to children's aid societies, schools, and Section 23 classrooms on options for post-secondary education, training and apprenticeships.

- ➤ **… youth in and from care and their teachers, workers and caregivers have ongoing discussions about career plans and options starting from an early age.**
  - Youth are supported to explore and pursue their career goals through formal and informal mentorship, internships, part-time work, job shadowing, educational supports and other programs.
  - Youth receive financial and other supports to pursue the careers that interest them. Children's aid societies and their foundations adopt broad criteria for programs offering financial support for training to cover the full range of traditional and non-traditional careers that interest youth.
  - Children's aid societies work with local youth-serving and employment agencies to connect youth to employers in their fields of interest.

- ➤ **… the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities make the Ontario Student Assistance Program application process as easy and accessible as possible for youth in and from care.**
  - The ministry work with the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to simplify the Ontario Student Assistance Program application process.
  - Ontario Student Assistance Program funds are made available as quickly as possible at the beginning of each academic term.

- ➤ **… Aboriginal children and youth have access to distinct and culturally appropriate educational supports in their communities.**
  - If attending school away from home, youth are supported to remain connected to their communities and culture (e.g. through an Elder).

Medium-Term Recommendations

It is essential and urgent that…

➢ **… youth in and from care have access to increased financial supports for post-secondary education that allow them to attend school part-time or to take more than four years to graduate.**
- The ministry work with the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to extend eligibility for the Ontario Access Grant for Crown Wards (available to youth eligible for Extended Care and Maintenance) to part-time students and students beyond their fourth year of study.
- Children's aid societies, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and post-secondary institutions work together to provide increased financial support for youth in and from care.
- The ministry work with the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to clarify the Ontario Student Assistance Program eligibility of former youth in care who are studying out of province.

➢ **…children's aid societies partner with businesses, trade associations, and youth-serving community agencies to provide meaningful work experience/internship opportunities for youth in and from care.**

HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

Children and youth in and from care need support to maximize their healthy physical, emotional, social and cultural development.

Short-Term Recommendations

It is essential and urgent that…

➢ **...the ministry reviews all current and any new policies to ensure that they "let kids be kids".**
- The needs of children and youth are individually assessed throughout care and not determined solely based on age.
- The ministry and children's aid societies work together to find new ways of assessing risk so that children and youth in care can participate easily and safely in sleepovers, field trips, and other activities.

➢ **…children and youth in and from care have ongoing opportunities to learn life skills from their caregivers and through locally-developed programs based on a provincially-mandated skills inventory.**
- Caregivers are trained and encouraged to integrate life skills learning into the home or residence in practical ways (e.g. doing laundry, cooking, banking).
- Children's aid societies work with community agencies to deliver life skills programs.

➢ **…children and youth in care have ongoing, culturally-sensitive and age appropriate conversations with caregivers, children aid society workers and supportive community members about important topics including sexual identity and orientation, gender, and healthy behaviour.**
- Children and youth are engaged in discussions on topics such as building healthy relationships and identity.

➢ **…children's aid societies provide comprehensive support for the mental, emotional, and physical health and wellbeing of children and youth in care.**
- Children and youth experiencing mental health challenges are assessed on an ongoing basis to make sure they are receiving the appropriate, evidence-informed treatment that considers counselling and other non-medical therapies.
- Supports address any attachment- and trauma- related issues that a child or youth may have experienced.

- Children and youth are aware of their right to make an informed decision regarding treatment (including medication) and are actively engaged in their treatment plans.
- Children's aid societies connect children and youth to the right services with community partners (e.g. community mental health services).
- Children's aid society workers and caregivers receive training about mental health issues and how to address them.
- Children's aid society workers and caregivers encourage and support children and youth to participate in physical activities.
- Children's aid societies work with health providers to meet any specialized medical needs.

➢ **…children and youth in and from care have an age-appropriate written roadmap that describes what to expect as they enter, live in, and leave care.**
- Workers provide the roadmap and have ongoing discussions with children and youth about what they can expect to experience while they are in care. This package includes information about the rights of and supports available to children and youth in care.

➢ **...children and youth have access to important information about their own lives.**
- Children and youth have access to their own files in a timely way.
- Children and youth have emotional supports when accessing their files.
- Children and youth have access to information about their families and treatment histories.
- The ministry work with children's aid societies to develop best practices on how staff can share important information with children and youth about their lives (e.g. verbal history, written case file).

➢ **… youth who face additional barriers to independence, such as mental health needs or physical or developmental disabilities, are provided with individualized support as they leave care.**
- When available and appropriate, youth are connected to relevant transitional-age or adult support systems or services.

It is very important that…

➢ **…children and youth have access to culturally appropriate services and the opportunity to develop their identities with respect to their culture, race, gender, sexual identity and orientation, spirituality, religion and community of origin.**

TRANSITION SUPPORT

Youth in and from care require support to successfully transition to independent living.

Short-Term Recommendations

It is essential and urgent that…

➢ … **the ministry raise the age of Extended Care and Maintenance (ECM) to 25 in phases.**
  - The ministry immediately revise the Extended Care and Maintenance policy so that it is focused on promoting the goals of youth and is consistently applied across the province. Revisions include changing the rules so youth cannot have their Extended Care and Maintenance terminated as long as they meet the age requirement and requiring children's aid societies to have an appeals process regarding decisions to end Extended Care and Maintenance agreements.
  - In Phase 1, the ministry extends eligibility for Extended Care and Maintenance to all youth from care until age 23 and to those enrolled in post-secondary education or training until age 25.
  - In Phase 2, the ministry extends eligibility for Extended Care and Maintenance to all youth from care until age 25.

➢ … **youth in care have transition plans that relate to their goals and that identify and prepare them to access relevant supports long before they leave care**.
  As part of the transition process, youth, with the support of their children's aid society workers and caregivers:
  - receive a package that includes all of their necessary personal documents: social insurance number, birth certificate, health card and photo identification (driver's license, passport, or government issued identification);
  - have their immigration status resolved by their children's aid society before age 18 so that they can access employment, education, and health care;
  - identify housing options and develop a plan for stable housing;
  - create a plan for health needs (e.g. physical, prescriptions, etc.);
  - are connected with caregivers, extended family members, friends, and community members who are willing and prepared to act as support people; participate in transition conferences with them to plan their next steps; and
  - are connected to and supported by the local children's aid society and other community resources, including health care providers, in the communities where they choose to live after they leave care.

- ➢ **… youth from care have prescription and dental health insurance coverage from age 18 to age 25.**
  - Coverage should include a program that provides basic counselling, legal advice, and connections to outside service providers.

- ➢ **... youth from care have the option to be connected to youth in transition workers**.
  - Youth in transition workers are available to help youth find employment supports, housing, educational opportunities and community resources when they leave care.

- ➢ **... youth from care have access to information about services that meet their specific needs (e.g. LGBTQ, faith and cultural identity) available to them in the communities where they live.**

It is very important that…

- ➢ **…children's aid societies work with youth to explore housing options before they leave care, including connecting them with supportive or transitional housing.**
  - Children's aid societies work with community agencies, municipalities and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing if required, to give priority access to social housing and transitional housing to youth from care.
  - Children's aid society workers assist youth to be placed on the social housing waiting list, if appropriate and desired.
  - Children's aid societies explore partnering with housing agencies to provide transitional housing for youth in and from care.
  - Transitional housing is available for more than one year.

Medium-Term Recommendations

It would support fundamental change if…

- ➢ **…youth have access to a fund for housing start-up costs and emergencies.**
  - Children's aid societies or community agencies create funds that youth can access for emergency housing costs. Youth are able to request funds more than once if needed.

YOUTH JUSTICE

Caregivers and workers need to help youth in and from care stay out of the youth justice system. The recommendations in the Blueprint are designed to improve the positive experiences and opportunities for youth in and from care and will serve as prevention strategies. If youth become involved in the justice system, however, they require support to prevent further involvement and to transition to successful adulthood.

Short-Term Recommendations

It is essential and urgent that….

➢ **…youth are encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities at an early age, as a prevention strategy.**
- Children and youth have the freedom, support and resources to participate in different activities that interest them.

➢ **…caregivers are trained in conflict resolution, crisis prevention and de-escalation to prevent situations from escalating to the point where police are called to residences.**
- Policies and best practices on handling conflict are communicated to staff and caregivers on an ongoing basis.
- Responses to conflict are tailored to the youth and the situation (e.g. allowing youth to cool off).
- When youth are considered "absent without leave" caregivers have options that do not involve calling the police, to prevent unnecessary contact with the youth justice system.

➢ **… children's aid society workers, police, probation officers and healthcare professionals work with youth and caregivers to develop protocols that create common expectations about responses to issues involving youth in care.**
- Protocols address expectations about charging youth and how to identify the case manager (e.g. CAS worker, probation officer) for each youth based on his or her relationships and needs.
- Children's aid societies work with local lawyers, judges, and caregivers so that when it is appropriate youth are able to return to their group or foster homes after they have been charged.

➢ **…children's aid societies and the justice system see detention as the last resort.**
- CASs explore ways to keep youth in and from care out of detention when possible and address barriers to securing bail.
- Building on existing successful models, make diversion programs available across the province to give youth an alternative to detention, offering them participation in constructive programs that identify and build on their assets and interests.
- Workers and caregivers support youth to identify and address the root causes that brought them into contact with the justice system and use this to inform decisions about diversion programs and other positive interventions.

➢ **… children's aid societies support youth in and from care in detention and when they return to the community.**
- Children's aid societies have regular visits and contact with youth while they are in detention; youth have mechanisms to contact their workers.
- Children's aid society workers, probation officers, caregivers and the youth develop a discharge plan for the youth's return to the community. Plans emphasize education, residential stability, continued connections with caregivers, and other appropriate supports and programs.
- Youth have access to financial and non-financial supports, such as Extended Care and Maintenance, when they leave detention to help to transition to independent living. Children's aid societies continue to provide support to youth in contact with the justice system over the age of 18 while they are eligible for Extended Care and Maintenance.

➢ **… caregivers and children's aid society workers understand the youth justice system and the implications of involvement with it.**
- The ministry work with children's aid societies, provincial associations, and community partners to develop a resource describing how the youth justice system works;
- Children's aid societies or community partners create a support network for caregivers of youth involved in or at risk of becoming involved in the youth justice system;
- Foster parents support youth in care while they are going through the youth justice system and after they return to the community.

➢ **…children's aid societies appoint a court-based worker to support youth involved in the justice system.**
- Court-based workers who are familiar with the youth's history work with the youth's lawyer and are involved throughout the case and resolution meetings.

GROUP CARE

Inconsistent practices across group care settings prevent some youth from receiving the supports and opportunities that they need to transition from care successfully. The Working Group sees the recommendations below as a starting point for positive change.

Short-Term Recommendations

It is essential and urgent that….

➢ **… the group care system is evaluated to make sure that it focuses on the best outcomes for youth, starting with a process that listens to the voices of youth in and from group care**.
 • A third party, in consultation with the ministry, children's aid societies, group care providers and youth, examines practices and policies in group homes to identify strengths and weaknesses in the sector and focus on how group care providers can provide consistent, appropriate, high quality care.

➢ **...the ministry improves oversight of group care providers to ensure that children and youth have consistent, high quality care within a clear licensing and accountability framework.**
 • Additional methods of oversight are considered, such as unannounced inspections or third-party accreditation.

➢ **...group care providers are supported to have the skills and tools to respond constructively to challenging youth behaviour**
 • Staff respond to behaviours constructively and attempt to understand the needs behind the behaviour. Staff work with youth to address behaviour issues in the manner most likely to encourage the youth to accept and change their behavior willingly.
 • Caregivers in group homes are trained in conflict prevention and de-escalation and best practices in providing care.
 • Youth feel confident that group care is set up to promote healthy relationships and development.

➢ **... children and youth in group care have consistent and stable relationships with group care staff.**
 • Worker assignments take into account the needs and preferences of children and youth.
 • Group care providers make staff retention a priority.

➢ **…group care providers increase partnerships with community agencies to link children and youth with relevant programs, services, supports and opportunities in their communities.**

➢ **...the ministry work with group care providers to clarify and reinforce policies and best practices to make sure they are followed, particularly the policy on the use of restraints.**

➢ **...the ministry provides updates on ongoing ministry investigations at group care facilities to help children's aid societies plan for alternative arrangements for children and youth staying in those residences.**

MINISTRY POLICY

Children and youth in and from care need child welfare policies that are responsive to their needs and promote the best outcomes.

Short-Term Recommendations

It is essential and urgent that…

➤ **…every children's aid society have an internal person and clear process to hear and respond to complaints from children and youth.**

It is very important that…

➤ **… the voices of children and youth in and from care are heard and included when developing policies that impact them.**
  - The ministry engages with existing youth networks, such as YouthCan and the Youth Policy Advisory and Advocacy Group, when developing policy.
  - Children's aid societies have a way, such as using Youth Advisory Committees, to influence agency policies and programs.
  - The ministry and children's aid societies find ways to hear feedback from children and youth in care with diverse backgrounds (e.g. from across the province and different cultural backgrounds) and address barriers to their participation (e.g. engaging youth with developmental disabilities, language barriers).

➤ **…the ministry track outcome data about children and youth in and from care.**
  - The ministry publicly post performance indicators that show how children and youth in care are doing.
  - The ministry track the outcomes of youth in and from care and use this information when deciding what policies to create or change.

It is important that…

➤ **…ministry and children's aid society policies be posted publicly.**
  - The ministry post policies online in one location.
  - Children's aid societies post their child and youth policies related to ministry directives online.
  - Group care providers make their child and youth policies related to ministry directives available.

Long-Term Recommendations

It is essential and urgent that…

➢ **…the ministry extends the age of protection to 18.**
  • The *Child and Family Services Act* to be amended.

It would support fundamental change if…

➢ **…the ministry implements an accountability framework that promotes consistent child welfare practices across the province.**
  • The ministry explores a variety of accountability frameworks to find and implement one that best meets the need of children, youth, families and children's aid societies.

➢ **…caregivers (including foster parents and biological parents) participate in the Blueprint implementation process and any future consultation or feedback process.**

NEXT STEPS

The Working Group sees this Blueprint as the starting point for the next stage of fundamental change to the child welfare system. These changes are necessary to support all children and youth in and from care. The Working Group recommends that as the ministry develops implementation plans, it continues to work with all relevant partners, including youth with diverse experiences in care, academic experts, partner ministries, community agencies and children's aid societies. The Working Group further recommends that ministry staff meet with Working Group members and observers quarterly to review progress on Blueprint implementation.

To address issues that need more attention than the current process could provide, it is essential and urgent that....

➤ **... a separate Blueprint development process is supported for First Nations, Métis and Inuit children and youth.**

➤ **.... the group care system is evaluated to make sure that it focuses on the best outcomes for youth, starting with a process that listens to the voices of youth in and from group care.**

APPENDIX A – WORKING GROUP MEMBERSHIP

Members

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Youth Member

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Executive Director, Thunder Bay Counselling Centre

Lisa Doran
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Jessica del Rosso
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Cathy Denyer
President & CEO, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Toronto

Michele Farrugia
Youth Member

Thaile-Paige Dixon
Youth Member, Youth in Care, The Voyager Project

Rebecca Harris
Executive Director, Ontario Association of Residences Treating Youth

Stacey Lauridsen
Assistant Director, Community Services, The Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa

Brian Quinney
Youth Member, Former Youth in Care

Jesse Ranville
Youth Member

Juanito Jiggy Reyes
Youth Member

Mandy Richard
Youth Member, Our Voice Our Turn Hearings Panel Chair, co-author My REAL Life Book

Bruce Rivers
Executive Director, Covenant House Toronto

Mike Stephens
CEO, Chatham-Kent Children's Services

Vera Williams
Youth Member, YouthCAN Program Coordinator, Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies

Facilitator

Tony Boston

Observers

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Wendy Miller
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Jennifer Morris
Director, Child Welfare Secretariat, Ministry of Children and Youth Services

Theresa Stevens
Board President, Association of Native Child and Family Services Agencies of Ontario

Kevin Panton
Youth Support Lead, Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth

Staff from the Child Welfare Secretariat

APPENDIX B – INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS WHO PROVIDED FEEDBACK ON THE DRAFT BLUEPRINT

- Adoption Council of Ontario
- African Canadian Legal Clinic
- Alternative Dispute Resolution Provincial Network
- Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada
- Big Brothers Big Sisters Ontario Agencies
- Bruce Grey Child and Family Services
- Bruce-Grey Youth in Power Teens in Care
- Children's Aid Societies South West Zone – Executive Directors
- Catholic Children's Aid Society of Toronto
- Catholic Children's Aid Society of Hamilton
- Chatham-Kent Children's Services
- Children's Aid Society of the District of Thunder Bay
- Children's Aid Society of London and Middlesex
- Children's Aid Society of Simcoe County
- Children's Aid Society of Simcoe County - First Nations Métis Inuit (FNMI) Resource Team
- Children's Aid Society of Toronto
- Children's Aid Society of the United Counties of Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry
- Children's Centre Thunder Bay – Management and staff representatives
- Covenant House – Youth and Staff
- Eritrean Youth Collective
- Family and Children's Services of Frontenac, Lennox and Addington - Staff
- Family and Children's Services of Lanark, Leeds and Grenville
- Family and Children's Services Niagara
- Family and Children's Services of St. Thomas and Elgin County
- Family and Children's Services of the Waterloo Region – Staff, Foster Parents and Youth
- Family and Children's Services of the Waterloo Region - Youth Advisory Board
- Family Group Decision Making Coordinators in North Western Ontario
- Foster Care Council of Canada
- Foster parents
- Frontier College
- GEORGE Program - Children's Aid Society of Brant
- Grand River Children and Youth Services
- Highland Shores Children's Aid Society - Staff
- Jewish Family and Child Services
- Jewish Vocational Services Toronto

- Kawartha-Halliburton Children's Aid Society - Staff
- Kinark Child and Family Services
- Native Child and Family Services of Toronto
- Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies - YouthCAN Team
- Our Voice Our Turn Youth in and from Care
- Peel Children's Aid Society
- Peel, Dufferin, Halton Crown Ward Education Team
- Pregnancy and Health Program at Thunder Bay Counselling Centre - Participants
- Sarnia Youth in Care Group
- Sexual and Gender Equality (SAGE) Committee in Thunder Bay
- Thunder Bay Counselling Centre – Leadership Team
- Turning Point Youth Services
- UNICEF
- Valoris for Children and Adults of Prescott-Russell
- Waterloo-Wellington Crown Ward Education Championship Team
- Weechi-it-te-win Family Services
- Youth Justice Ontario
- Youth Leaving Care Hearings Submissions Youth and Professionals, Family and Friends
- Youth Shelter Interagency Network (10 agencies located in Toronto)

APPENDIX C – UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

The Convention on the Rights of the Child sets forth the fundamental rights of every child, building on the statement in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that children are "entitled to special care and assistance." The Convention emphasizes that each child "should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding" to support "the full and harmonious development of his or her personality." It includes specific articles for children and youth who do not grow up with family, noting that they "shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the state" that considers "the child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background." According to the Convention, decisions about children should be in their best interest and take into account their views.

The recommendations in this document and the articles in the Convention share the vision that children and youth should be supported to develop into active healthy adults who have a sense of themselves and their place in their communities. Both emphasize the importance of children retaining connections to their cultures, languages, and families.

Many of the recommendations in the Blueprint connect directly to specific rights in the Convention. For example, recommendations on extracurricular activities are supported by the right of child to play and to participate in recreational activities, cultural life and the arts. The Convention's statement that youth justice systems should aim to "reinforce the child's respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of others" and promote "the child's reintegration and the child's assuming a constructive role in society" underscores the recommendations concerning youth justice. The Convention also emphasizes the importance of keeping youth out of detention when possible and appropriate. Children have a right to education that supports "the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential." The Convention's statement that higher education should be made accessible supports the Blueprint's recommendations regarding post-secondary education and training. Under the Convention, children also have the right to access information that is important to their lives, a theme that is echoed though the Blueprint.

The Convention came into force on September 2, 1990. Canada ratified the Convention in 1991. The full text of the Convention is available at: http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm.