



THE CHRA CONGRESS SESSIONS SERIES 2015

**Preventing and Addressing Homelessness by
Supporting Youth Aging Out of Care**

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BC Housing

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Speakers

Stephen Gaetz: *Director, Canadian Observatory on Homelessness & Professor, Faculty of Education, York University (ON)*

Kelly Holmes: *Executive Director, Resource Assistance for Youth (MB)*

Irwin Elman: *Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth of Ontario, Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth (ON)*

Mark Gifford: *Director, Grants and Community Initiatives, Vancouver Foundation (BC)*

Moderator

Brian Gilligan: *CHRA Director-At-Large & Executive Director of Community Development, Ottawa Community Housing (ON)*

Date

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Without proactive, linked interventions, many systems of child protection may contribute to the number of young people aging out of care and entering into homelessness. These youth face unique circumstances that are different from those that define adult homelessness, and as such require exploration into their particular situation.

This workshop begins with an examination of research on the relationship between homelessness and individuals aging out of the child welfare system. Then, a street-level agency representative highlights the on-the-ground-impacts and the programs they have developed in response. Next, a Provincial Advocate speaks to the importance of including voices from youth with lived experience in the debate for systemic change. The workshop concludes with ideas on how to build public awareness and foster community capacity to appropriately support young people aging out of care.

Stephen Gaetz: Director, Canadian Observatory on Homelessness & Professor, Faculty of Education at York University (ON)

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) is a non-profit, non-partisan research institute that works with service providers, policy makers and people with lived experience to find solutions to ending homelessness across Canada. The COH has found that across Canada, 40 to 50 percent of all homeless youth aged 13 to 24 were at some point in the provincial foster care system. The significant over-representation of homeless youth formerly in foster care presents a major concern for the adequacy of provincial systems of childcare in preparing youth for independence once they age out of care. To assess the impacts and scope of the problem, the COH is looking at the links between current child welfare systems and youth homelessness at the national level in order to better understand why such a high percentage of youth are aging out of care and into homelessness, and to advocate for responsive policy changes.

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Although child protection policy and legislation falls under provincial jurisdiction, the COH suggests many provinces face similar outcomes that stem from a common set of shared child welfare policies. The two most problematic policy areas that emerge are first, that at 18 or 19 years of age, depending on the jurisdiction, youth in provincial childcare are discharged from the system and into independence at an early age. Secondly, while under the care of the province, youth are not receiving the supports required to equip them to become independent, such as ensuring that they are in education, healthy relationships, and have access to other

supportive services, such as health care and employment services. In order to understand why these two common components of provincial child protection policy are resulting in high rates of youth homelessness, the COH has examined how the social, economic and cultural climate in Canada has changed since the introduction of the current system for answers.

One socio-economic shift affecting child welfare policies is the extended period of time in which Canadian youth are remaining in post-secondary education. This is in part due to the rise in the value of post-secondary education in obtaining and retaining living-wage employment. The COH suggests that this increased emphasis on post-secondary education, coupled with the declining availability of full-time jobs that pay a living wage, has changed the nature of adolescence for all Canadian youth. The impacts are realized in that currently in Canada over 42 percent of all youth aged 20 to 29 live with their parents as they either pursue post-secondary education, or work to become financially independent.

Despite the generational shift of youth living at home longer, the COH states that current child welfare policy is still aligned with dated socio-economic trends that uphold unrealistic expectations of youth independence. As a result, by eliminating supports at 18 or 19 years of age, and by not adequately planning for their transition into adulthood while in care, current provincial systems of child protection are pushing ill-equipped youth into an unfavorable socio-economic climate. This structure is thus driving youth into a life of potential homelessness and poverty.

In order to reduce the number of youth aging out of care and into homeless, the COH is advocating for a series of policy recommendations directed at the upstream prevention of homelessness, rather than at down-stream responsive emergency supports.

In terms of preventative policy recommendations, the COH is advocating to extend care to youth within the child welfare system to the age of 24, or until they have completed post-secondary education. Furthermore the COH advocates for governments to provide financial support for post-secondary education to youth in care to further eliminate additional barriers to education. This emphasizes the need for continued supportive services in the current economic climate and is more in-line with the reasons for the current belated independence for youth.

The COH also recommends that while in the child welfare system, policies support youth to establish healthy relationships with at least one consistent adult, be it a grandparent, aunt, or foster parent, who can support their transition out of care. By implementing these policy recommendations, the COH believes provinces can more adequately provide youth with the services and supports they require to be independent adults in Canada's current social, economic, and cultural climate. In doing so, the COH suggests child welfare systems can successfully encourage youth to obtain an education, secure employment and establish healthy relationships, which can drastically mitigate their chances of becoming homeless.

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Kelly Holmes: Executive Director, Resource Assistance for Youth (MB)

Resource Assistance for Youth (RaY) is a non-profit, street-level agency that works with street-entrenched youth in Winnipeg, Manitoba. RaY works with youth who often come to the organization with limited supports, to gain the skills and resources they require to not only become independent, but to achieve their personal ambitions.

In order to better understand the population they serve, RaY recently conducted a survey with participating youth. Among their findings, RaY discovered that over half of the youth in its

programs have been wards of Child and Family Services (CFS) in Manitoba, and of those, 63.5 percent were Aboriginal youth. It was also found that being of Aboriginal decent significantly increases the chances of becoming homeless. There are currently 10,293 Manitoban children in provincial care, and 87 percent of those are of Aboriginal ancestry. It is therefore important to understand why the current system is producing these outcomes.

Youth who were previously in the care of CFS had on average 12 different placements in foster care homes, with one participant having moved through a staggering 54 placements. Among the youth it serves, RaY has recognized that these numerous placements, which are commonplace in the current system, are having lasting implications that contribute to a pattern of homelessness.

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Even before individuals enter the provincial child welfare system, they have often faced various forms of abuse at home. When CFS is called in to respond, the child may then be removed from their home, causing feelings of anxiety and abandonment, which can persist as they move from placement to placement. These constant transitions do not allow for the development of social or family supports, and without these supports, youth feel isolated, leading them to seek out friends with shared experience, or other coping mechanisms, which can eventually lead to substance abuse or criminal activity.

Ultimately, by the time they age out of care, RaY has witnessed that these youth no longer trust government systems, as their experiences with CFS have not provided them with any positive outcomes. Additionally, these youth are often leaving care with low-self-esteem, limited work experience, no positive tenancy record, and limited to no health, or financial skills. As a result youth remain dependent and vulnerable, yet are without the necessary supports.

RaY works with these youth to overcome these obstacles by using a multi-pronged approach that integrates services for youth on the full continuum from homelessness to independence. RaY begins by establishing a trusting relationship by delivering their services through a voluntary non-judgmental harm reduction model, meaning that RaY does not turn anyone away, regardless of their level of sobriety.

RaY's non-judgmental, voluntary approach to delivering services to youth at their personal level of need has helped to reduce the persistence of youth homelessness in inner city Winnipeg.

At RaY, youth can access mental health care and primary health care, as there is a Winnipeg Regional Health Authority (WRHA) nurse on sight. This lowers barriers to meeting basic health needs, which is the first step to allowing youth to be in the position to address more complex issues around homelessness, substance abuse, education and employment. As basic needs are being met, RaY also provides access to resources to develop life skills with youth on a voluntary basis. RaY has further encouraged interactions with supportive systems and services into their approach by facilitating meetings between youth and Manitoba Housing to help youth secure tenancy when they are ready.

Although RaY is working with youth to help them become stably independent, they believe the demand for their services could be drastically reduced with upstream policy changes to CFS. Therefore, RaY is advocating for a twelve-point CFS Exit Checklist that must be complete before youth are allowed to leave the province's care. This checklist includes youth having: 1) proper identification (SIN, Birth Certificate); 2) a high school diploma; 3) a life map; 4) a housing plan; 5) a healthy family network; 6) a resume; 7) a drivers license; 8) the ability to cook meals; 9) knowledge of tenants rights and responsibilities; 10) established supportive relationships; 11) budgeting and financial management skills and 12) a bank account.

RaY believes that by ensuring this checklist is completed before youth leave CFS, that the amount of youth aging into homelessness will be drastically reduced by eliminating some of the major issues they witness in youth experiencing homelessness today.

By integrating supportive services into the process of gaining independence, RaY works to remove barriers to essential resources while working with youth to re-establish their trust in government systems. This non-judgmental, voluntary approach to delivering services works with individuals at their personal level of need in order to overcome barriers, and has helped to reduce the persistence of youth homelessness in inner city Winnipeg.

Irwin Elman: Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth of Ontario, Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth (ON)

The Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth is an independent office of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. Their work is guided by the principles expressed in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. A primary focus of their work is to be an exemplar for meaningful participation of children and youth through all aspects of advocacy services.

The children and youth who fall within the mandate of the Advocate's Office include those who are seeking or receiving services from the children's services sector in areas such as child welfare, youth justice, children's mental health, developmental services and children's treatment services.

The jurisdiction of the Office also includes students of the provincial and demonstration schools, youth in court holding cells or being transported to and from court holding cells, First Nations children and youth, and children and youth with special needs.

The Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth have heard from youth who say they feel isolated, receive unpredictable levels of support, and that most importantly, feel they had no power to make important decisions about their future during their time in care.

The Office has heard from these youth that they feel they have little control over their own lives, beginning from the time they are removed from their homes. Youth say they feel isolated, receive unpredictable levels of support, and that most importantly, feel they had no power to make important decisions about their future during their time in care. First Nations youth have also expressed feelings of disconnect from their culture while in care.

The main work of the Advocates Office is in individual rights advocacy, answering thousands of calls each year from children and youth, their families, caregivers and others. Children and youth in Ontario's systems of care often feel that they are invisible to the province and that their voices go unheard. It is the job of the Advocate's Office to make sure that young people have a voice and that youth within the care of Ontario's residential services system know they have the right to speak to an advocate from the Office.

As a way of raising the voice of children and youth in Ontario's systems of care, the Advocate's Office supported a youth-led *Youth Leaving Care Hearing* in November 2011 at the Ontario Legislature — a first in Canada. Over 700 people attended the hearings over a two-day period to discuss issues and concerns around the child welfare system. A final report provides a vivid account of the child welfare system as experienced by youth who live in it every day. The report, entitled *My REAL Life Book* was written in 2012 by seven youth with support from the Advocate's Office, and is based on 183 submissions and the personal testimony provided at the youth-led hearings held at the Legislature.

Among the recommendations in the final report is that to extend the age of care from 18 to 25. Although they noted this was not a panacea for ending homelessness, youth believed it was an obtainable first step to implementing more widespread change, allowing for a life-trajectory approach within the system that would aid youth to achieve their goals while in care and beyond.

Advocacy projects like this have helped facilitate other changes among government departments. In hearing that youth want more educational opportunities, in 2014 the Government of Ontario agreed to pay 50 percent of the tuition for the first degree for any youth currently or previously in provincial childcare. In response to youth voicing the difficulty of finding employment, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry has offered affirmative action programs to hire youth from care for jobs in provincial parks.

Ultimately, by providing a place for youth to voice their concerns, the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth is giving youth a platform to become active participants in fundamental change in the child welfare system. Youth are now raising their voices in a process they have historically been left out of.

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Mark Gifford: Director, Grants and Community Initiatives, Vancouver Foundation (BC)

The Vancouver Foundation is a registered charity and the largest community foundation in Canada, seeking to build healthy, vibrant and livable cities across British Columbia. One of the Foundation's approaches to establishing such communities has been to reduce youth homelessness by looking at the systemic issues within provincial childcare.

In Vancouver, 40 percent of young people experiencing homelessness were at one point in the province's child welfare system, and this disproportionate representation reflects a significant opportunity to reduce homelessness by improving preventative policies.

According to Vancouver Foundation's research, 71 percent of those polled underestimated the amount of youth living in care.

In order to improve the outcomes of youth transitioning from care to adulthood, the Vancouver Foundation is investing in four strategies intended to influence policy, practice and community. These strategies include: 1) delivering grants to increase the collective capacity of community organizations to strengthen their resources and relationships; 2) engaging with youth in all facets of planning and decision-making; 3) developing and sharing knowledge through research and evaluation and 4) launching Fostering Change, an on-line and face-to-face public engagement campaign to raise visibility and constituency about youth homelessness.

In order to execute these strategies, the Vancouver Foundation recognized that it was necessary to be informed about the current perceptions of youth homelessness amongst the public. In order to achieve this the Vancouver Foundation interviewed 1,820 residents in 2013 to understand public attitudes, values, and perceptions of youth aging out of government care.

The research found that there was a general lack of knowledge pertaining to youth in care amongst the public, as 71 percent of respondents underestimated the amount of youth living in care, and over 66 percent did not know if any foster care youth lived, or went to schools in their neighborhood. Furthermore, only 28 percent were aware that youth in care lost most forms of support by the age of 19. However, when questioned about extending care, 70 percent of respondents supported extending care to the age of 21. This response is in-line with the fact that 71 percent of the respondents believed that 19 year olds have not yet established the required skills or resources to live independently, such as post-secondary educational attainment, job skills and financial independence.

The lack of public awareness surrounding youth homelessness highlights a significant barrier to generating public support for policy change. However, the research noted that willingness to support policy change doubled when people knew that foster kids lived in their neighborhoods, as well as when they understood the risks associated with homelessness. Since awareness and proximity to the issues spurred empathy and support, the Vancouver Foundation developed a series of public campaigns that incorporated the lived experiences of youth, and were delivered in a way that public audiences could empathize with.

Campaigns such as the 19th Birthday Party have not only generated awareness about youth homelessness amongst the public, but have also empowered youth with lived experience to participate and guide the conversation toward ending youth homelessness.

One such campaign is entitled *The 19th Birthday Party*. The campaign, which began in 2013, invites the public into a pop-up gallery with a dinner table furnished to celebrate a fictional 19th birthday, which marks the point at which youth age out of the child welfare system in BC. The public participates in the celebration by sitting down at the table and listening to pre-recorded stories by youth who have aged out of government care. The format of the campaign not only allows youth to share their stories, but it also focuses on barriers caused by the system rather than the individual. This experience repositions the public to reflect on the potential outcomes that youth in BC could experience as they age out of care. Originally an installation piece, the campaign has since been converted into a year round mobile workshop that can be brought out to communities to facilitate discussion and raise awareness across BC.

Campaigns such as this one have not only generated awareness among the public, but have done so by empowering youth with lived experiences to participate and guide the conversation toward ending youth homelessness. By engaging the public through such interactive campaigns, the Vancouver Foundation is building an informed constituency, and increasing the capacity of local organizations to help mobilize informed policy changes oriented around strengthening the child welfare system in British Columbia.

Conclusion

Regardless of the provincial context, it is evident the current systems of child protection across Canada are disproportionately contributing to the number of youth experiencing homelessness. These outcomes are in part a product of a system that upholds unrealistic expectations of independence at 18 or 19 years of age. Child welfare systems across Canada also do little to encourage post-secondary retention rates, while leaving youth out of the decision-making processes, ill-equipping youth for independence while increasing the potential of ageing out of care and into chronic patterns of homelessness and poverty.

However, the organizations presented here are helping to better understand the systemic barriers present within current child welfare systems, and to facilitate policy change by listening to youth with lived experience. In doing so, they are providing youth with the opportunity to be at the forefront of the conversation about youth homelessness, as well as to how child protection systems across the nation could reasonably change to better support youth aging out of care.

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