

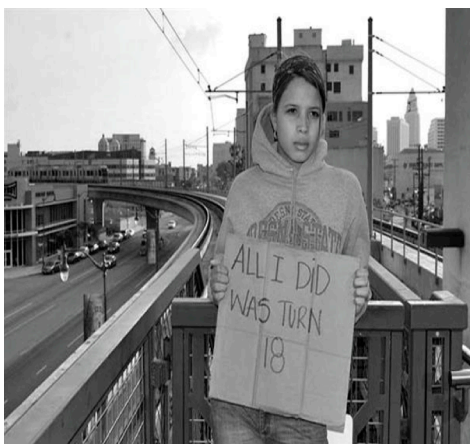
In the Fast Lane towards Adulthood: Supporting Youth Aging out of Foster Care in New Brunswick

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REALITY CHECK

Youth who have been involved with the child protection system are **up to 8 times more likely to be affected by post-traumatic stress** compared to their peers.

Homeless people are up to 7 times more likely to indicate they were in care during their childhood than the general population.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Support for the transition to adulthood is especially valuable for youth in foster care, who come from a troubled background and must deal with a complexity of issues and mental health problemsⁱ. Their journey to adulthood is often accelerated and compressed due to legislated service cut-off issues between the ages of 16 and 19; this is a very unique challenge compared to their peers, who remain at home well into their 20sⁱⁱ. Although certain voluntary support services are offered to youth transitioning out of care in New Brunswick, current and former youth in care indicate the transition period remains a high needs phase that is not appropriately resourcedⁱⁱⁱ. This policy brief is a follow-up to the New Brunswick Youth in Care Network November 2013 report, and looks specifically at how supports and services can be improved through articulate additions and modifications to current child protection legislation and policy, as well as tracking outcomes of youth in care in order to ensure evidence-based policy reform.

A HARSH REALITY

Former youth in care are a particularly vulnerable population, with reduced life chances for success as adults compared to their peers. The degree, length and quality of support received during the transition phase into adulthood have crucial long-term impacts on former youth in care outcomes such as post-secondary education achievements, employability and overall well-being^{iv}. Foster youth are especially vulnerable since they often have to deal with ongoing mental health issues arising from traumatic events experienced during their childhood; they are up to 8 times more likely to be affected by post-traumatic stress than their peers, and near a quarter of youth who are in the process of exiting the child welfare system express concerns about their own mental health^v.

For many youth aging out of care, the transition period marks a final stage in receiving supports and services; unlike their peers who can seek assistance and support from their families, for the foster youth there are no other options to return under the care of the State in times of difficulty. Youth often leave care unprepared for the realities of the real world and independent living responsibilities. Many do not know where they will live; studies have shown that nearly a quarter of former youth in care have been homeless for one or more nights within the first year of leaving care and that homeless

AN UNNECESSARILY COMPLICATED PROCESS

Current child protection legislation, regulations and policy are **needlessly complicated, limiting and unclear**, leaving much room for interpretation and confusion for front-line social workers.

people are up to 7 times more likely to have been in foster care during their childhood than the rest of the population^{vi}.

Current legislation in most jurisdictions in Canada mandates child protection services for youth in care up to the age of 18; in New Brunswick, the cut-off age is 19, with services available to those between 16-19 years of age on a voluntary basis. Since the average teenager remains at home until the age of 24^{vii}, youth in care are at an obvious disadvantage. Studies have also shown that former youth in care often indicate extended periods in foster care as a major need when preparing for the transition into adulthood^{viii}.

*“I really don’t feel ready to be on my own. My foster parents have already told me I’ll have to leave once I age out. I don’t know what the next step is.” -
Anonymous foster youth*

CURRENT SITUATION IN NEW BRUNSWICK

Child protection services in New Brunswick include any care and support services that meet the child’s physical, emotional, religious, educational, social, cultural and recreational needs^{ix}. In the *Connecting the Dots* report released in 2008, the New Brunswick Child and Youth Advocate recommended that the Government of New Brunswick resolve a long-standing issue relating to the gap in child protection services for youth ages 16-18; this gap was identified as a significant root cause for youth homelessness in the province and the involvement in the youth criminal justice system.

In September 2010, the Department of Social Development amended the New Brunswick Family Services Act to extend child protection services from the age of 16 to the age of 18; the department can also continue to provide child protection services to youth up to the age of 21^x if the youth is still enrolled in public high school. However, these services are voluntary in nature and youth have the right to refuse participation in any protection service, unless the youth is assessed as a disabled person^{xi}. Youth older than 15 years of age will often refuse protection services since the caveat often entails living in foster care, group homes or residential drug treatment centres in order to access services; previous negative experiences within the system and frequent placement disruption in foster care often discourage youth from accepting further placements. There are currently no specific policies or regulations outlining alternatives for youth who do not wish to remain or enter the child welfare system under protection status in order to access protection services.

The Department of Social Development offers an independent living service for youth who have reached 18 years of age; this service is offered as a transition service until the age of 19 and is not mandatory. The department also offers a post-guardianship program, which requires the youth to sign a voluntary support agreement and be enrolled in a post-secondary institution,



AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Amongst NB Youth in Care Network members, those who have already aged out of the foster care system expressed that the **supports were cut-off without any true transition period**, while those who are approaching the transition phase are anxious and **have no clear idea what next steps should be taken in order to prepare them for independent living**.



unless the youth is deemed unable to be self-sufficient by reason of a physical, mental or emotional disability^{xii}. The program however has several limitations. Applications for the post-guardianship program must occur no later than 6 months after leaving care; if a former youth in care decides to pursue post-secondary education after the 6 month timeframe, the department will not provide support. In addition, funding only applies to post-secondary education within a New Brunswick institution; only in circumstances where a particular program is unavailable in the province are out-of-province institutions deemed acceptable. As part of the program, funding for post-secondary education can be accessed up to the age of 24; however, this is only pertaining to the first degree. If a former youth in care wishes to further pursue post-secondary education after the attainment of a first degree, the department will not fund subsequent programs. The post-guardianship program completely excludes those who wish to enter the work force upon completion of high school^{xiii}.

This is especially problematic for shorter term college programs, but can also be relevant for university undergraduate programs. In situations where a former youth in care wishes to change academic programs while under the post-guardianship agreement, lack of specificity in the regulations allows much discretion and can cause funding to be withdrawn. There is currently no scholarship or grant program for former youth in care who wish to pursue graduate studies.

Stemming from the November 2013 New Brunswick Youth in Care Network Report, nearly all members of the network, with the exception of the few who were adopted, expressed that transitioning out of care is an area of major concern. Those who have already aged out of the foster care system expressed that the supports were cut-off without any true transition period, while those who are approaching the transition phase are anxious and have no clear idea what next steps should be taken in order to prepare them for independent living.

It is clear that current child protection legislation, regulations and policy are unnecessarily complicated, limiting and unclear, leaving much room for interpretation and creating confusion at the front-line. Although some social workers might go above and beyond by using professional discretion, this is not always the case; some might not pursue alternatives for fear of being reprimanded. The lack of specificity also provides loopholes for alleviating Ministerial and front-line responsibility for youth aging out of care, and does not allow for the root causes of issues experienced by youth leaving care to be examined and addressed. In addition, there is currently no tracking of outcomes of youth leaving care, and the standards for child protection services have not been updated since 1999. These issues must be addressed if the Government of New Brunswick truly wishes to eliminate gaps in services for children and youth in care.

WHAT OTHER JURISDICTIONS ARE DOING

Many jurisdictions across Canada are currently having debates and discussions regarding the provision of continued supports and services to youth aging out of care, from British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario to Newfoundland. Some

INVESTING IN THE FUTURE OF YOUTH IN CARE

Cost benefit analyses have demonstrated that **if \$34,500 is spent on a single youth under extended care for four more years until the age of 25:**

\$77,000 could be saved or earned over one person's lifetime (\$44,000 in present dollars).

- > \$166 would be saved in incarceration expenditures
- > \$17,000 would be saved in social assistance expenditures
- > \$61,000 of tax revenue would be added



jurisdictions are also starting to make changes to their child protection policies and regulations. For instance, Ontario is currently developing amendments to increase extended child protection agreements from the age of 21 to the age of 24, regardless of enrolment in post-secondary education or identified disability. In addition, a new program has been established where post-secondary institutions can opt in and obtain funding for students who are former youth in care. However, this is not a mandatory program and not all post-secondary institutions take part since it is fairly recent.

POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO OVERCOME

In a time of economic austerity, it can be quite challenging to argue for increased spending of minority populations. Departments are constantly under pressure and stress to reduce budgetary expenses, with significant reductions in budgetary allowances each year. In such a time of restraint, focus is often shifted to reducing duplication as well as increasing program effectiveness and financial efficiencies. However, research has shown that investing in youth transitioning out of care can result in significant cost savings and avoidance, benefits to both government and society, as well as improved long-term outcomes for youth leaving care^{xiv}.

“Increased investments in services for youth transitioning from care will result in future cost savings, numerous benefits to society and improved long-term outcomes for youth leaving care.”

Ontario Child & Youth Advocate

Some may view the amendment of legislation and making regulations and policies clearer and more specific as trivial, unnecessary and potentially further limiting access to post-guardianship services. However, in its present state, New Brunswick child protection legislation and regulation provides too much room for interpretation and confusion in addition to its admissibility limitations. In a fiscal climate of restraint, it is very important to ensure that all youth aging out of care are provided with the services and supports they need in order to become successful young adults, regardless of budget cuts and ever fluctuating departmental priorities. Regional managers and social workers should also be given more discretion in the allocation of resources and encouraged to invest further into youth preparing to transition out of care; this would allow them to meet each individual youth's unique needs and utilize a wider variety of resources. It is clear that we need to reintroduce the fundamental importance of investing in our children and youth in the budgetary equation.



“I’m forced to spend far too much time doing paperwork and justifying my allocation of resources. It takes me away from what I’m really hired to do – working with youth.” – Anonymous social worker

Contact Us

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OUR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YOUTH AGING OUT OF THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

1. Since the average age of emancipation for young adults had increased in the past few decades, it is recommended that foster care legislation and policy also reflect this new modern reality while also taking into account the particular vulnerability of children and youth in care. **Transition support services should be provided** to all post-guardianship youth **up to the age of 24** in order to ensure adequate foundations are in place for positive outcomes in adulthood, and the current cut-off ages (19 and 21) should be eliminated.

2. An educational program for youth who are preparing to transition out of care should be developed, which should include components on career development, life skills, financial literacy and independent living. All youth should complete this **transition from care program** prior to the withdrawal of post-guardianship funding.

3. **Post-secondary funding** should be made available to all post-guardianship youth up until the age of 24, with no restrictions on the number of degrees attained, change of program, or timeframe of enrollment into post-secondary institutions. Extended post-secondary education funding should also be made available to those who wish to pursue graduate studies in the form of scholarships or research grants.

4. **Exit interviews** should be offered and encouraged to all youth exiting care; the feedback provided should inform policy development and improvement in service delivery.

“There needs to be more attention given to the aging out of care transition. Many youth who grew up in care are not prepared for the real world. They’re having a lot of trouble once they’re out of the system.” – Anonymous foster parent

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The New Brunswick
Youth In Care Network
Le Réseau des jeunes
pris en charge du N-B



RECOMMENDED ADDITIONAL READINGS:

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- ^x *New Brunswick Education Act*, Section 1.
- ^{xi} *New Brunswick Family Services Act*, Part III Protection Services, Section 29.2
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