



*Youth Leaving Care: An
OACAS Survey of Youth
and CAS Staff*

April 2006



**Ontario Association of
Children's Aid Societies**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS) gathered the comments and advice of over 300 youth and over 300 Children's Aid Society (CAS) staff about the issues facing youth leaving the care of CASs. Twenty-three agencies participated in forming youth focus groups comprised of former crown wards who were on Extended Care and Maintenance (ECM) agreements with a CAS. Youth in these groups told us what the experience of leaving care was like, what were their worries and what would work to make it better. Each participating agency also asked their staff to comment on current practice and to make suggestions for improvement in the ways CASs help youth to prepare for independence. These results form the content of this paper.

In general terms, the findings of this broad survey of youth who are on ECM and of the staff who serve them can be concentrated in three statements: 1) Agencies should treat the youth "as a good parent would." Many youth in Canada today continue to receive the support of their parents well into their twenties. 2) The transition to independence should be gradual; and 3) Youth should be permitted to make mistakes

Both youth and staff groups agreed that the primary concern for youth leaving the care of CASs is that they have at least one supportive adult relationship of support as they make the transition to independence. Youth have told us that they face significant anxiety when anticipating and then living with the abrupt and permanent severance from the emotional and social supports they have had while in care. Youth feel that, unlike their peers who have parental support throughout the transition and well into their mid-twenties in many cases, they have no assurance that they will have the support, the coping skills or the resources to make a successful move into independence.

Financial support was also mentioned as a significant concern for youth leaving care. In particular, the ability to live on the small amount of money that they are provided was mentioned by youth as concerning especially if financial restrictions threatened to prevent their finishing secondary and post secondary schooling.

The survey provides rich data that cannot be fully mined within this paper. Here, the focus has been on defining a set of minimum standards for service to youth leaving care. A subsequent compilation is expected to identify best practices with regard to these youth.

The recommendations of the Youth Leaving Care Project of the OACAS include the following minimum standards:



- **Emotional support:** Each youth should leave care with a significant relationship in place with a supportive adult. Increased worker time should be available to ECM cases. An agency policy should be maintained of ‘door always open’ to former Crown wards beyond ‘emancipation’.
- **Financial assistance:** Establish a minimum provincial base rate for ECM and ensure that the rate is indexed to the cost of living. Allow the ECM rate to flexibly match the needs of youth including provisions for a foster parent to continue to receive the same per diem if a youth remains in their home until finished school.
- **Educational supports:** Tuition for post secondary programs should be paid in full for all Crown wards. There should be no required change of homes while the youth is still attending high school.
- **Extended age of eligibility:** Extend ECM funding and/or worker support to age to 25 from 21. Ensure that all former crown wards, including any who have terminated Crown wardship before their eighteenth birthday, be eligible to receive ECM supports as needed after they turn 18
- **After care:** Youth should be able to return at any time to CAS to connect with workers, receive referrals, enjoy youth meals, make holiday arrangements, develop further life skills, or just “drop in” (i.e., have a place where they belong.) With youth consent, agencies should continue to provide follow-up contact with youth for at least 5 years for their assistance and to enable longitudinal research about how they fare after care.
- **Health/mental health:** All medical/dental care should be provided until age 21 (or 25). Former Crown wards should have free priority access to mental health therapy until at least until age 25.
- **Case work/planning:** Decisions regarding termination of involvement with youth should be made by senior management in consultation with the youth, worker and supervisor. Case work should include the establishment of a minimum contact requirement for workers with youth on ECM. Youth must be assisted to find housing by direct involvement with agency staff. An effective assessment tool for determining readiness of youth for independence should be created and youth who are *not* ready to move to independence should not be expected to do so.
- **Recording and Reviews:** Keep ECM youth within the Crown ward review, review these cases annually and review all ECM files closed in the past year. The Ministry should review all ECM files annually.
- **Government documentation:** All youth should leave with government documentation (SIN, birth certificate, health card and landed immigration papers or Canadian



citizenship.) Legal immigration costs should be covered for youth over the age of 21 when needed.

Parental responsibility is seen to be adequately addressed for Crown wards of Ontario until the age of 18. At that point, for those who are ready, independence offers a challenge that can be capably met. But for many youth, age 18 is too young to expect successful independence particularly given the disrupted early lives of these young people. Youth and staff together express concern for what will be the outcome for young people who are expected to become independent while still needing, like so many of their peers, to remain dependent on parental supports for a little longer to ensure their success as adults.



YOUTH LEAVING CARE: An OACAS survey of youth and CAS staff

Labeled the “Crowded Nest Syndrome,” about 41 per cent of young Canadians aged 20-29 were living with their parents in 2001. Twenty years ago, the proportion was only 27 per cent. Statistics Canada analysts offer several explanations: adult children returning home after failed marriages, delayed marriage, more people in their 20s still in school, the difficulty of those young adults in finding jobs.

Youth leaving care have life challenges and experiences much more traumatic than the general population yet they have no “nest” to return to and no one to support them to learn from their “mistakes and failures.” They offer their perspective on this, and on ideas about what would help them make successful transitions to independence.

INTRODUCTION

In 2005, in Ontario, there were almost 19,000 children in the care of Children’s Aid Societies (CASs). Of these over 7,500 were aged 13 – 17 and anticipating “leaving the nest” and 1,500 were over 18 and struggling with early emancipation.

Across Canada and the US, much study has been done over the past 15 – 20 years on “youth leaving care,” giving us a body of research with entirely consistent findings. The research tells us that youth leaving care don’t do as well as other young people; young people have told us what challenges they face, what they need and want, and their worries about their future.

In the Autumn of 2005, the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) approached the Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies (OACAS) to ask for policy and program design advice from youth and staff in CASs. The Ministry also provided limited funding to support the involvement of youth in the project. This report represents the voices of over 300 youth in care¹, and is supported by input from over 300 staff. It is the single largest survey of views and advice from people who are directly affected by the system intended to support them. In this study we have asked them, once more, about their concerns. More than this, we asked for advice on what helps, what has worked for them, and what best practices they would put in place for themselves and their peers.

¹ Youth focus groups and/or individual interviews were held in a broad cross-section of agencies representing youth from every region of the province, including Aboriginal youth in Northern settings and youth in urban and rural settings.



Despite the fact that many youth demonstrate remarkable resiliency and succeed in making the transition to independence, the research² tells us that youth leaving care are more likely to:

- be undereducated - many have not completed high school
- be unemployed or underemployed
- if employed, have low earnings and live below the poverty line
- be dependent on social assistance
- become a parent at a younger age
- be homeless or live in unstable housing arrangements
- have mental health issues
- be at risk for substance abuse
- be incarcerated/involvement in the criminal justice system

The research also tells us that youth leaving care have needs similar to those of other youth when moving toward independence. But most face conditions which are complicated or made more difficult by lack of family support, family and personal disruption, and by bureaucratic restrictions of state 'parents'.

Despite these challenges, these youth still hope to be successful adults. In general, they need more time and – like other youth – they need the chance to learn from their mistakes. For the youth that do very well, they report that services, supports and on-going relationships help them to succeed.

All youth have experience and ideas that could help improve outcomes for themselves and others. In November 2005 OACAS invited its member agencies to participate in the study. Twenty-three of fifty-three agencies responded and subsequently organized separate focus groups for staff and youth. In all, over 300 youth and 300 staff participated, offering their views on what would best support the youths' transition to adulthood. The following provides the summary of the advice both groups provided.

ADVICE FROM YOUTH

Many might expect that the predominant themes in the advice from youth would be related to instrumental supports: financial assistance to continue high school, financial assistance to access and complete post secondary school, access to affordable and stable

² See Appendix C for specific highlights of research related to youth leaving care.



housing, information about budgeting, and basic documentation (identification and health card). These were definitely included in the responses. The response to these areas is straightforward, and could be facilitated by a financial response – either from the CAS or the Province.

However, the strongest theme imbedded into the responses to all questions in all focus groups is relationship. What helps most? The answer was consistently – on-going and long-term emotional and social support – someone to call, someone to care, someone who would help when help was wanted or needed. Youth cited foster parents, group home staff, CAS workers and family members as those they wanted to be able to go to for help. Peers were mentioned as being a form of emotional support, but youth appeared to favor supportive adults as those they would want to be able to turn to for emotional support.

Youth often said they wanted to be able to continue to call their worker “24/7/365”, for five to ten years or more after formally leaving care. The response to this theme is more challenging – it is very difficult to program “caring.”

SUMMARY OF YOUTH RESPONSES

In reviewing the responses from over 300 youth on ECM or recent graduates of CAS, it was expected that the primary concern voiced by youth would be that of financial insecurity and insufficiency. And although finances were high on the list of concerns for the youth, the primary concern voiced as response in every question area was for the lack of support especially the lack of reliable emotional support from a parent or worker. Underlying all the worries and plans that youth have for their futures, issues of loneliness, having no one to talk to, having no one to turn to when uncertain or confused were most commonly and poignantly expressed by youth. Many youth commented that they just did not have the same ease going into independence as their peers who live in families. For many there was a sense of looming severance from the agency which had supported them in various ways until now, but which was going to ‘terminate’ involvement leaving the youth with unresolved anxiety about how they would cope with myriad new experiences associated with moving to independence.

What follows is a summary of responses to the seven questions asked of youth. The response areas identified for each question appear in order of their relative frequency in youth focus groups.



Question #1: What has helped you so far?

The responses to this question emphasize what the youth already have learned in preparation for independence.

- **Emotional /social support**

Very often the youth's worker (or sometimes an independence worker) was mentioned as being most significant in providing various forms of emotional support – talking about “anything”, someone to call when needed, assisting with moves and apartment searches, checking in to see how the youth is doing, helping with budgeting, and setting goals. Support was found to be helpful from foster parents, group home staff, family members and other youth who have already made the transition from care.

Mental health services were seen as helpful to several youth. Peers and “having a social life” were mentioned as forms of emotional support. Emotional support tended to blend with the provision of instrumental support as youth felt emotionally supported by having “someone” who could help them, for example, in apartment searches, in gaining knowledge about rights as a tenant and in knowing what to look for in a living space.

- **Knowledge/Life Skills**

Budgeting knowledge was noted frequently, including the opportunity to save money before independence. Often budgeting information was provided by foster parents; school programs such as math, business and life skills were mentioned as helpful to several. Life skills were seen as very important especially how to find housing, how to cook, how to shop for groceries, how to look for a job (resumes, interviews) and learning what community resources are available and how to access them. Having the opportunity to *practice* skills (laundry, cooking, making doctors' appointments etc.) was important. Several mentioned that moving to independence from a group home was very difficult since they had little opportunity to practice independence skills beforehand. Youth also welcomed the chance to take independence programs before moving out.

- **Financial support**

Financial support was seen as having been very helpful to youth, particularly planning for or understanding how to obtain bursaries and other financial assistance for educational pursuits. Financial (or in-kind) support was seen as helpful for transportation and for start-up when making the transition to independence. A



number of youth indicated that they wanted or appreciated having someone (foster parent, worker) save money for them while in care so that they had something to draw on as they went to independence.

Question #2: What would have helped?

- Emotional /social support

Emotional or social support as reported by youth included

- staying in foster home longer;
- staying in care longer;
- more worker time/involvement/ knowledge/interest;
- a steady friend;
- someone to keep close contact (even daily, one youth suggested);
- someone with them on first night out on own;
- more time to transition into independence;
- mentors;
- some support provided for after care;
- information about what they are entitled to regarding money and services from the CAS and from community (to be provided well before the youth leaves care.)

Youth reported a range of needs – from needing to be given more privacy from intrusive workers to needing someone who would check in frequently and provide support as they need it. Many youth expressed a sensitivity to the workers’ heavy workload and implicitly did not want to “ask for too much” despite the fact that they needed more help. Where support existed (e.g., from foster parents that would be available to support the youth after they leave, or from a worker maintaining close contact) youth felt ready to take on the challenge of moving to independence. However, for many youth, the sense of readiness was undermined by the need to move out whether they were ready or not and for these there was often the expressed need to have much more time with workers, (or someone else – a mentor, a child and youth worker, a consistent long term adult who is “not a student or a volunteer” ...) and for workers to be better informed about what youth are going through and might need.

- **Financial**

The most common short answer was: “just more money,” in addition to:

- more start-up funds to get established;
- not losing the ECM funds when working part-time (in some agencies ECM is reduced if youth has income from a job);



- help to understand and complete taxes;
- more information regarding money and budgeting
- help to get a part-time job;
- financial and other support for post-secondary undertakings;
- savings;
- more low income housing
- Opportunity to live semi-independently.

Although the suggestion that those preparing for independence be permitted a ‘trial period’ was raised seldom, it is a suggestion that seems inherently positioned to address a number of concerns raised by youth (and staff) in terms of emotional supports required to successfully guide the transition to independence for some youth. Such a plan would permit youth to live in an independent setting with substantial staff support, either by living nearby or through 24-hour availability of staff for concerns as they arise and for instrumental support, coaching, instruction through a transition period of several months, depending on the youth need.

Question #3: What are your worries, fears?

- **Emotional support**

“No one is going to push me to do stuff and I might not know what to do or where to go for help. I will be lost.”

“Who do you belong to when you’re cut off?”

The most common worry expressed by youth is that they will lose their worker and the continuation of personal (rather than financial) ‘support’ from the agency and that “I can’t call my worker any more” for help. For some, the worker felt like the only person that cared about them and they were going to have to end that relationship. The most repeated worry about being independent in this regard was that of being lonely, living alone and having no relationships.

Other worries and fears included: feeling too young and not ready to leave even at age 21; not being able to come back after you are cut off; giving up the good things when you lived at home; not feeling secure; feeling unable to motivate myself; losing all the structure and routines; having no one to check in on me; no safety net; no one to call when I need help/no one to answer questions; missing other people (that I used to live with in foster or



group home); worrying that I could end up with wrong people to live or hang out with; not confident that I can cope/take care of self.

- **Financial**

“When I left care I did not have any fears, but now that I have been cut off for a year, I have.”

The two most common financial fears were;

- not having enough or not managing the money to pay bills and
- not having enough financial support to finish high school or pay for post secondary schooling.

Other worries and fears included: being broke; ending up on welfare; ending up in a shelter; not being able to find safe affordable housing; having to look for a home in the “bad parts of town because that’s all I can afford;” failing; having to pay for everything; not getting a job; having to pay back loans.

- **Education**

“I have been abused and am trying to heal and getting into trouble and not able to focus on school as a result of so many other impediments, but I got back on track and now I’m two years into my school and aged out of the system. *WHY is my parent a system?*”

Worries included: finishing high school; getting “cut off” just as you are starting college/university; not having enough money to go to or to finish school; having to work while going to school; paying for but then failing school.

Question #4: What supports should be available for all youth leaving care?

- **Health**

Extended benefits for dental, eye care, drugs, birth control supplies and transportation to medical appointments

- **Financial /employment**

Clothing allowance; recreational allowance; financial support to celebrate birthday and Christmas (or other culturally relevant festival); help to save money while still in care; help in finding employment before leaving care.



- **Access to community services/mental health services/therapy**

“I think therapy should be available once you’re out of the system...Issues usually come up when you’re older and that’s when you need to talk to someone.”

Counselling or therapy was the dominant service that was mentioned for childhood issues, anger management, grief work, crisis help and ongoing psychotherapy. Access and financial assistance to obtain therapy should continue as long as needed into adulthood.

Other access that should be provided to all former youth in care: help in locating resources, in knowing what is available in the local community; independence programs; an easily accessible community station/drop-in for independent youth; access to medical help established before leaving care especially in communities where there is a shortage of doctors; support finding housing; available low income housing; free transportation

- **Government documentation**

Minimum requirement for documentation that should accompany youth when they are leaving care includes: SIN, birth certificate, health card, driver’s license and landed immigrant papers or Canadian citizenship.

- **Emotional supports**

Youth generally wanted more time with their worker and availability of their worker on short notice; more training of workers to understand the needs of independent youth.

Question #5: What are the barriers to your becoming successfully independent?

- **Emotional issues/Lack of support**

When considering barriers to success, many youth pointed out personal habits that might work against them. Frequent reference was made to being lazy, lacking discipline, fear of failing, not working hard enough, “my attitude,” lack of confidence, procrastination, having poor coping skills, lack of motivation, “my own stupidity.” Although youth tended to provide self-critical measures, their statements reflect the lack of preparedness that they feel when leaving care before they are ready, and before their peers are required to leave home. At a young age, they are often poised to assume responsibility for their failure.

Other emotional barriers included stress; not having enough support; loneliness; depression; not being able to set limits with family; being unable to be with family members.



- **Financial**

Youth mentioned the need for financial support to “match what you need;” funds should not be clawed back if youth is working; money management problems; debts; being cut off when 21 when still in school; first and last months’ rent; being unable to afford post secondary schooling.

Question #6: What role do you see for your worker? (How often contact? How should you spend time together? What would be helpful?)

- **Emotional support**

Youth looked to their workers to provide the following:

- Advice and knowledge
- Contact more than once a month

Youth indicate a range of responses to considerations of worker involvement – from wanting daily or 2-3 time weekly contact (when newly independent) to wanting workers to provide the cheque and then leave them in privacy. The largest number of youth wanted more contact than once a month when they are independent and many wanted to ensure that they would have access to a worker based on their need as it arises. There were many notations of workers not meeting youth needs; not having enough time for youth, not knowing what resources are available within the community, not pushing hard enough with expectations for youth, and sometimes asking too many questions about a youth’s private life.

Many youth indicated a positive relationship with their worker – one in which they are able to make plans for the future, have uncertainties explored and addressed, and deal with problems whether emotional or concrete in nature. There were a number of youth-and-worker relationships that have lasted over a number of years in which youth feel that even after age 21, they will be able to maintain contact with the worker.

In general, youth wanted a worker who respected their opinion and wishes and who provided concrete assistance in achieving goals related to independence (help with finding apartments, jobs, budgeting as well as genuine nurturing and emotional support through the different passages.)



Question #7: If we could create the perfect youth leaving care kit what would be in it?

- **Household items**
Including furniture, dishes, linens, supplies etc., to establish a living space; computer; personal hygiene supplies.
- **Information**
Books on learning on how to cook, clean, find community resources, budget; a list of emergency numbers; an on-line resource kit; nutritional guidelines; a leaving care resource book.
- **Financial support**
Some start up funds; savings while in care so that there is a safety amount when leaving; access to emergency funds.

There were different understandings of this question, with some groups addressing the idea of a “start-up” kit for moving into independence, while others thought of a kit broadly including services, emotional support and concrete assistance. Youth mentioned the following additional items as helpful in starting up: first and last month’s rent; help with transportation; no abrupt ‘cut-off’ but rather a gradual letting go of CAS support; clothing allowance; drivers’ license; not linking the cut off date with the birthday of the youth; unlimited emotional support – with extended welcome to come back to visit [CAS] at any time; gift certificates (hardware, housewares, groceries).

CAS STAFF RESPONSES

CAS Staff (including a small number of foster parents) were asked to give their perceptions of the policy and practice needs of youth leaving care in the following four areas: best practices, minimum standards, staff needs, and barriers to youth success.

When asked to indicate both best practices and minimum standards for youth leaving care, CAS staff produced long and detailed lists recommending improvements in current practice and policy. For the purposes of this paper, the issue of minimum standards will be addressed by highlighting the most consistent themes gathered in this survey. Best practices as defined by CAS staff and in conjunction with the youth input of this survey will be the subject of a more thorough paper in future.



PRIMARY MESSAGES FROM CAS STAFF

A review of the responses by CAS staff to the questions of youth leaving care reveals a common philosophical orientation shared or implied by almost every respondent and can be expressed in three primary statements:

1. The philosophical underpinning for any approach to youth leaving care must be that CASs treat the youth “as a good parent would.”
2. The transition to independence should be gradual, and should include a continuum of supports extended to youth based on their individual needs and readiness for independence. The continuum of supports should include periods of semi-independence, supported independence, and continued emotional support provided by the agency after financial support is withdrawn.
3. Youth should be permitted to make mistakes. Youth who leave care to become independent should be entitled to return to agency support if they find that they are not ready at any time before they are discharged.

MINIMUM STANDARDS

“Our relationship with youth often terminates when they need support the most.”

“Too many of our kids just disappear and we don’t know what happens to them. We are not good parents.”

Independence should be a celebration; but “most kids [in care] approach age 18 with dread”.

“These kids are not included in the Crown Ward Review and they are not in the press so they are...forgotten kids.”

Staff of Children’s Aid Societies recognize that those youth who make a successful transition to independence are usually supported by family, foster parents or other adults well beyond their 18th birthday and are helped to link to community services such as housing, education, social engagement, health and mental health resources. Nevertheless, there are a significant number who turn 18 and have the same needs as they did before their 18th birthday. They may have been in group homes with high levels of structure, they



may have mental health needs, or be developmentally younger than 18 based on early trauma and disruption in family life and they may not yet have completed milestones such as secondary education.

Faced with challenges exceeding those of other youth, Crown wards can become focused on the idea of independence at the earliest possible opportunity. They may move out on their own only to discover that they lack the skills and resources to succeed at age 16 or 18. These youth then require an avenue for return to the support of CAS until such time as they are prepared for true independence. CAS staff strongly believe that we must ensure a system of corporate parenting that is understanding and tolerant enough to allow youth to make mistakes. CAS should be able to welcome them back when they have encountered obstacles to their success. And we should be able, within our parental role, to stay connected with them when they act in rebellious or “non-compliant” ways rather than eagerly showing them the door which will remain thereafter permanently closed.

The significant themes identified by CAS staff as minimum standards for youth leaving care included the following:

- Relationship/emotional support
- Financial support
- After Care
- Age of Eligibility
- Education supports
- Case work/planning
- Other

For each theme, several of the key points, shared by many of the responding agencies are provided below.

Relationship/emotional support

- CAS staff, like youth, found that youth leaving care needed to have at least one significant relationship with a caring adult (aside from their worker) to provide emotional support and continuity when moving to independence.
- Workers must be enabled to have more time with youth for time-intensive activities such as graduations, birthday dinners, shopping for clothes, attending medical dental appointments, job and apartment searches and working to link the youth with family of origin where possible.



- The provision of emotional support through the agency was seen to be important even when the youth is no longer receiving financial assistance from the agency.
- Foster parents should be permitted and supported financially to maintain a youth in their home so that youth do not need to leave a stable home particularly when they are still involved in educational pursuits.

Financial support

- Allow a foster parent to continue to receive the same per diem if a youth remains in their home until finished school.
- Youth should leave care with a minimal amount of savings (\$2000.00 was suggested by one agency.)

After Care

- Youth in transition to independence need to remain linked to the CAS informally and according to their individual wishes to maintain contact. Youth should be able to return to the CAS at any time to connect with workers, receive referrals, drop in (have a place where they belong).
- The same after care service should be available through any CAS to youth who have moved to a new region to be independent.
- Alternatively, programs such as PARC in Toronto could provide an ongoing place of belonging along with a range of services to youth leaving care for as long as they need such support.
- Each agency should seek the youth's written consent within the ECM contract to follow up with them after they leave CAS care. Follow-up contacts should continue for a minimum of 5 years to understand how they are doing and to intervene with assistance as needed. This practice would facilitate longitudinal research on how youth fare once out of care.

Age of Eligibility

- The age of eligibility for youth leaving care should relate to the norm in society for other youth who frequently receive parental assistance into their mid-twenties and beyond.
- Extend ECM and agency supports to age 24-25 or until youth finishes post secondary education or equivalent. It was felt that if the age for receipt of ECM were extended, CASs would not see a significant increase in numbers but this would keep open the door to those who need or may want to 'come back' when a little more mature.



- ECM should be available to all former Crown wards when they reach age 18, including those who voluntarily terminated Crown wardship before they turn 18. Youth should be able to “make a mistake” and return for the assistance they need until they are ready for independence.

Education supports

- Tuition at college and university should be fully paid for former Crowns Wards.
- Youth should not be required to move into independence while they are still completing high school.

Case work/planning

- The final decision to terminate involvement with any youth before age 21 should be taken very seriously and should rest with the Director of Service or the Executive Director in consultation with the youth, the assigned worker and supervisor. There was some feeling that the agency should not terminate involvement with *any* youth before age 21 unless the youth initiates the termination.
- Youth must be assisted to find housing by direct involvement with agency staff.
- Continue to offer life skills/ independence planning groups to youth who have left care and started to live on their own.
- Establish a minimum contact requirement for workers with youth on ECM. In the first six months of independence, contact level would be very high and would decrease according to youth ability to manage independence. Contact would not be determined by funding formula provisions for 3 hours of time per month on an ECM file.
- Start independence planning early in child’s life including in OPRs.
- Create an effective assessment tool for determining readiness of youth for independence and do not expect youth who are not ready to move to independence.
- All youth should leave with knowledge of their personal history, their “story,” through a life book, material from the file shared by the worker and any other relevant means.

Health/Mental health care

- All medical/dental care should be provided until age 21 (or 25)
- Former Crown wards should have priority access to therapy, treatment for addictions, and other mental health services
- CAS should cover the cost of such treatment the youth may need at least to age 24-25, since it is recognized that as they get older, youth will be better able to make use of some therapeutic services.



DISCUSSION

The needs of youth leaving the care of Children's Aid Societies as depicted by a broad review of Ontario's youth and the staff who serve them, are in many ways the same needs of all youth preparing for independence. Youth leaving care, however, are challenged by two additional factors: 1) they have to manage the emotional and other impacts upon them of early disruptions in their familial life, often including serious forms of abuse and neglect and 2) the system which provided for their care during the necessary childhood separation from birth families, requires that these youth leave care in an arbitrary fashion unrelated to the readiness or capacities of the youth.

Results of the surveys of both youth and staff indicate that the primary concern of both groups is for the emotional support of youth making the transition to independence. Although they sometimes used different language, both youth and staff noted the difficulty for youth of having an abrupt cut off of supports and a move to independence based on their 18th birthday; similarly both groups noted the harmful effects of anticipating and then arriving at the final cutoff of all supports at the 21st birthday.

Youth frequently remarked that they worried about who would help them deal with the many hurdles (housing, finances, school completion, loneliness, routines) when they are required to leave their foster or group homes at age 18. Quite often, youth assumed responsibility for a range of possible failures blaming themselves or worrying about their being unmotivated or lazy. They also mentioned feeling unprepared, with nowhere to go once they are "cut-off" from CAS and their worker's support.

Staff, on the other hand, frequently took a firm stance against the practice of requiring youth to be independent at age 18 noting that the usual parental involvement with youth at this time in our society extends well into their mid-twenties for most youth. Staff very strongly indicated that as a corporate parent, child welfare fails the test of a good parent by abandoning too soon those they are meant to nurture. Most youth are not expected to leave home at age 18; expecting Crown wards to leave before they are ready overburdens youth with responsibilities they cannot handle well. Furthermore, the support offered to youth - through worker time or case review - is reduced when the youth leaves care.

In an additional appeal to good parenting, staff and youth expressed the need for youth to be able to make mistakes. Thus, if a youth insists on moving to independence (sometimes against the advice of their worker), they should be permitted to come back to agency support at any time until they are age 21 (or 25) if they want agency support. Youth who



choose to terminate Crown wardship before they are age 18 should be eligible to return to ECM supports if needed. The move to independence should also be gradual with youth having a range of possibilities to accommodate their readiness for independence. For example, youth as needed, should be able to “try out” living independently, perhaps in a semi-independent, staff-supported setting in which life skills are practiced and learned before the youth is expected to move to full independence.

In addition, staff feel they do not have enough time to adequately support the youth who are living independently and consider the agency resources to be drastically reduced for this population. As corporate parents, staff report, we are far from exemplary and we are operating below the standard of ordinary parenting with regard to the cessation of supports, financial and emotional.

The absence of emotional supports (or uncertainty about relationship connections), while first on the lists of both youth and staff, cannot be separated from the importance of financial supports to youth leaving care in this survey. Youth often did not feel informed about what they are entitled to receive; they were struggling to live on the amounts of money they did receive; they were having trouble finishing high school or attending post secondary school because they had to work to supplement their meager allowances. Staff too were generally concerned that the amount of money available to youth is very low (though the amounts vary considerably from agency to agency). When staff were asked about what youth need, in addition to recommending job preparations, staff frequently advised ensuring that youth be set up with welfare and access to food banks: clearly even CAS staff do not imagine many of the youth at age 18 or 21 being truly independent from social service systems.

Yet it is the provision of inadequate financial resources in combination with insufficient emotional supports which is of gravest concern to the youth who leave CAS care. For youth leaving care, and for all youth moving to independence, it is a shared experience that financial resources will be somewhat stretched for several years until the young person is more established in terms of employment and housing. But most youth who reside with their parents have the emotional security of knowing that they *can* obtain additional supports including a return to the parental home for several years if needed. Youth leaving care reported significant anxiety regarding the sense of being “cut off” from any person or group to whom they could unconditionally turn for the range of supports they may need.



The absence of emotional and of adequate financial supports impacts significantly on the likelihood that a youth will be able to complete post-secondary schooling, and sometimes even high school. And even for those young persons who have emotional support of foster family, birth family or worker, post-secondary education is seen as so important that it was felt that all former Crown wards should be entitled to free tuition and as much financial support as an agency can provide.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MINIMUM STANDARDS FOR YOUTH LEAVING CARE

We provide the following recommendations as minimum standards for a program for youth leaving care. The survey dealt with the issue of best practices as well as minimum standards for youth leaving care, and it is our intention to address the larger field of best practices in a subsequent paper directed to Children's Aid Societies. For the purposes of this paper, and in hope of influencing the development of policy at the level of provincial regulations and directives, minimum standards as derived from the input of the current survey of youth and staff, are recommended:

1. Emotional support

Youth should have adequate emotional support in preparing for independence and while living in independence. The following are considered necessary provisions to ensure that any youth has the minimum security and nurturance with regard to emotional support:

- Each youth should leave care with a significant relationship in place with a supportive adult. This relationship should be developed long before the youth is age 18 and should be a concern of the Plan of Care for each youth.
- Increased worker time should be dedicated to ECM cases (at least the same time as allowed for children in care.)
- Youth living independently should have frequent contact with their worker or an assigned independence worker. Contact may need to be daily or weekly at the beginning and in times of transition or crisis.
- Continue to assign a worker to offer support to each youth for one year beyond the point of discontinuation of ECM funds.



In addition, the following agency supports would be emotionally helpful to many youth:

- Availability of one-to-one independence or child and youth workers
- Access to a 24 hour on-call system of support
- Each agency should have an after care program (see recommendation below). After care programs would extend services to all independent youth including those who have been emancipated.
- Agency policy of 'door always open' to former Crown wards beyond 'emancipation'. Agencies should develop means by which any former Crown ward can return to talk to a worker or supervisor, feel welcome to return and receive services such as referrals or information about community supports (housing, jobs, income, therapeutic assistance.)

2. Financial assistance

- Establish a minimum provincial base rate for ECM and ensure that the rate is indexed to the cost of living. Such a rate should be set well above the poverty rate. The Youth Leaving Care steering committee members felt that youth on ECM should receive the full amount that is provided by the Ministry to CASs for all youth in care, a per diem of approximately \$41.00.
- Allow the ECM rate to flexibly match the needs of youth including provisions for a foster parent to continue to receive the same per diem if a youth remains in their home until finished school.
- Do not claw back ECM automatically when a youth is employed.
- Provide transitional funds for moving, annual clothing allowance, transportation, etc.
- Ensure every youth has first and last months' rent and start-up furnishings for their new home.

3. Educational supports

- Tuition for post secondary programs should be paid in full for all Crown wards.
- There should be no required change of homes while the youth is still attending high school.
- Structures and funding should be in place to assist children throughout their tenure in care to achieve their highest possible educational potential.³

³ Educational assistance needed by children may include tutoring; in-class educational supports for those with special needs; modified programs to help with the disruption of coming into care, with grief and abuse. As well, agencies must develop good working relationships with their local boards of education to address critical issues such as limiting the number of school moves for children in care.



4. Extended age of eligibility

- Extend ECM funding and/or worker support to age to 25 from 21.
- Ensure that all former Crown wards, including any who have terminated Crown wardship before their eighteenth birthday, be eligible to receive ECM supports as needed after they turn 18.

5. After care

- Youth should be able to return at any time to CAS to connect with workers, receive referrals, enjoy youth meals, make holiday arrangements, develop further life skills, or just “drop in” (i.e., have a place where they belong.)
- The same after care service should be available through any CAS to youth who have moved to a new region to be independent.
- Each agency should seek the youth’s written consent as part of the ECM contract to follow up with them after they leave CAS care. Follow-up contact should continue for a minimum of 5 years to understand how they are doing and to intervene with assistance as needed. This practice would facilitate longitudinal research on how youth fare once out of care.

6. Health/mental health

- All medical/dental care should be provided until age 21 (or 25)
- Former Crown wards should have free priority access to mental health therapy, treatment for addictions, other mental health services at least until age 25.

7. Case work/planning

- The final decision to terminate involvement with any youth before age 21 should be taken very seriously and should rest with the Director of Service or the Executive Director in consultation with the youth, the assigned worker and supervisor.
- Establish a minimum contact requirement for workers with youth on ECM. Contact should not be determined by the previous funding formula provisions based on 3 hours per month.
- Youth must be assisted to find housing by direct involvement with agency staff.
- All youth should leave with knowledge of their personal history, their “story,” through a life book, material from the file shared by the worker or other relevant means
- Continue to offer life skills/independence planning groups to youth who have left care and are living independently.



- Create an effective assessment tool for determining readiness of youth for independence and do not expect youth who are *not* ready to move to independence.
- Start independence planning early in child's life including in OPRs. Youth must be integrated into the community and demonstrate an ability for self-sufficiency without staff support before they leave care.
- The agency should provide for every youth leaving care concrete knowledge of community supports and how to access them (a resource book, list of numbers to call, emergency numbers, etc.).

8. Recording and Reviews

- Keep ECM youth within the Crown ward review so they remain visible to the Ministry
- Reduce recording requirements on ECM files so that workers are freed to be with the youth.
- The Ministry should review all Crown ward/ECM files closed in the past year to ensure an overview of the critical last few months of care.
- The Ministry should review all ECM files annually.
- Develop a detailed list of expectations for the review of ECM files to allow both monitoring of standards and case planning for independence.⁴

9. Government documentation

- All youth should leave with government documentation (SIN, birth certificate, health card and landed immigration papers or Canadian citizenship.)
- Legal immigration costs should be covered for youth over the age of 21 when needed.

CONCLUSION

Over 300 youth have told us what their needs are as they leave the care of Children's Aid Societies; they have provided information about the shortcomings of the present system and what can be done to make it better. CAS staff too have offered their consideration of what would improve the experience and outcomes for the Crown wards with whom they work so closely.

The changes that we recommend here represent a preliminary step toward a practice of good corporate parenting beyond the protection and in-care services which are so amply

⁴ See Appendix D for an example of a list of requirements for review of ECM files.



accorded to Crown wards until they are 18. We seek to ensure that those children who are the parental responsibility of the Province, have the opportunity to complete their growing up with the requisite emotional, financial, educational and social supports they need to offset the early disruptions in their lives and to continue to contribute their understanding, their voice and their unique gifts to our shared society.



APPENDIX A: OACAS Youth Leaving Care Project 2006: Questions to Guide Youth Focus Groups

1. What has helped you prepare for independence so far? What is working for you now?
2. What would be / would have been helpful? What else would help you to be prepared?
3. What are you worried about for the future? What are your fears about leaving care?
4. What supports should be available to you when you are living independently while still in care or on ECM?
 - (Health [dental, glasses], education, therapy, housing, financial, other?)
 - What are the programs in your community that might be helpful to you?
 - Have you got a S.I.N. card and a copy of your birth certificate?
5. What are the barriers to your becoming successfully independent?
6. What role do you see for your worker? How often should you have contact? What should be talked about? What would you like to happen during your time together? What is the most helpful thing your worker does or provides? How could they be more helpful?
7. If we could create the perfect youth leaving care kit, what would be in it?



APPENDIX B: OACAS Youth Leaving Care Project: Questions for CAS Staff

1. What would Best Practices look like to ensure the optimum experience for youth leaving care? (Talk about your ideal picture, dreams, the best possible world)
2. What should be the *minimum standards* for all youth leaving care in the province? (Include comments on educational supports for youth as well as areas of physical/mental health care, community supports, housing, length of CAS involvement, financial support etc.)
3. What do staff need to assist youth as they leave care?
4. What barriers prevent youth leaving care from receiving the best services or attaining their best outcomes?
5. Please provide any other comments you feel are important to our considerations regarding youth leaving care.



APPENDIX C: Research and contextual foundation for OACAS youth and staff surveys

The paper prepared by Anne Tweddle entitled *Youth leaving care-how do they fare?*⁵ points out that “youth in care face considerable challenges in making the transition from state care to independence and adulthood. They bear the scars of physical and emotional trauma, yet are expected to function independently, usually with little social or financial support, once they reach age 18.”⁶ Outcomes for youth leaving care are poor in the areas of education, employment, housing, and financial support, according to Tweddle’s review of Canadian, United Kingdom and US literature.⁷ At the same time, many youth, despite difficulties in childhood, demonstrate high levels of resiliency. The experience of resiliency is important in understanding factors which strengthen the capacity of a young person to overcome obstacles and move successfully into independence. It is intuitively felt among workers and reported by many youth that few placement or worker changes, the presence of at least one significant nurturing relationship and access to resources for education and meaningful recreation contributed to successful outcomes for youth leaving care.

Background: Ontario context for youth leaving care

In Ontario, there were 18,834 children in care at March 31, 2005 of whom 9,301 were Crown wards. Of the total number of children in care, 40% (or 7532 children) were ages 13-17 and 8% (or 1506 youth) were over age 18.⁸ Youth can leave the care of Children’s Aid Societies to become “independent” at any time after their sixteenth birthday but Children’s Aid Societies can offer services to youth who are permanent or “Crown” wards until the age of 21 under current provincial legislation. Crown wards are entitled to remain in care until they turn 18 at which time, to continue to receive services, they may enter into an “extended care and maintenance” (ECM) agreement with the agency serving them. ECM is available, within agency determined parameters (usually the youth must be in school or seeking fulltime employment) until the youth turns age 21.

Youth leaving care face the same life challenges as most youth, yet they are very often coping with a multitude of additional challenges and barriers beyond the experience of other youth. Several studies have recently been completed providing some information on

⁵ Tweddle, Anne. (March 2005). *Youth leaving care-how do they fare? Revised briefing paper*. Prepared for the Modernizing Income Security for Working Age Adults (MISWAA) Project with recommendations from the Laidlaw Foundation. Toronto.

⁶ Ibid, p. 3

⁷ Ibid, p.3

⁸ CAS Facts. April 2005. OACAS website www.oacas.org



the circumstances of youth leaving care. Anne Tweddle⁹ compiled a brief overview of research and studies examining outcomes of youth who “age out” of the child welfare system. Her report on findings within Canada (as well as in The United States and the United Kingdom) indicate that former youth in care demonstrate the following concerning characteristics when compared with their peers¹⁰: they are more likely to be undereducated, unemployed or in low-paying jobs, more likely to become parents at a younger age, to be incarcerated, homeless, on social assistance, have mental health issues.

Tweddle’s report includes some statistics pertinent to Ontario particularly in Toronto where “ 48% of ‘street youth’ seeking post-transition services from Covenant House in Toronto were former children in care (Leslie and Hare, 2000)”¹¹ Tweddle also refers to a study of former youth in care of the Toronto CAS, completed in 1995 by Fay Martin. Martin found that of the 29 former youth in care in her sample, 66% were still in high school and none had completed high school, 50% of the females were parents and 38% of all participants were parents, 90% had moved in the previous year.

Data from the Ontario Looking After Children (OnLAC) pilot project involving 6 Children’s Aid Societies over 3 years, indicates that for children in care, educational outcomes are significantly poorer than for other children whereas in the other domains addressed by Looking After Children (such as health, identity, emotional and behavioural development) children in care score the same or above other children.¹²

Poor educational outcomes for children in care are significant since early educational failure can be associated with early school leaving^{13, 14}. The Early School Leavers report of the Hospital for Sick Children¹⁵ finds that while reasons for leaving school are complex and layered, failures to obtain educational goals at elementary levels can contribute to a continuing pathway of educational failures culminating in leaving without completing high school. While the Early School Leavers report did not overtly address a cohort of youth in

⁹ Tweddle, Anne. (September 2005). *Youth leaving care-how do they fare? Briefing paper*. Prepared for the Modernizing Income Security for Working Age Adults (MISWAA) Project with recommendations from the Laidlaw Foundation. Toronto.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 9

¹¹ Quoted in Tweddle, p. 7

¹² Flynn, R., Moffat, S., and Petrick, S. (November 2005) *Looking After Children, Ontario Report (Year 3)*. Centre for Research on Community Services, University of Ottawa. Pp 34-54.

¹³ Community Health Systems Resource Group of the Hospital for Sick Children. (May, 2005). *Early school leavers: Understanding the lived reality of student disengagement from secondary school*. Prepared for the Ministry of Education and Training Special Education Branch (Ontario). Toronto.

¹⁴ Flynn, R. and Byrne, B.A. (April 2005) *Overview and findings to date of research in the Ontario Looking After Children project* in OACAS Journal, Vol. 49, No.1, p.16.

¹⁵ Community Health Systems Resource Group of the Hospital for Sick Children, p.48



care, their sample of 193 participating youth, ages 17-18, identified 54% who were not living with their primary caregiver at the time of the study, and we might assume that many of this number had connections to CAS or shared characteristics of youth leaving the care of CAS.

In recent discussion groups sponsored by Hamilton CAS and the local community¹⁶, over 100 staff working with youth when asked about their perceptions and recommendations for youth leaving care, raised the intersecting concerns that independence be connected to youth readiness and that youth be permitted to make the normal 'mistakes' that other youth make. The Hamilton survey (2006) as well as the reports of Tweddle¹⁷, and Leslie¹⁸ mention the discrepancy in state care offered to youth whether to age 16 for protection or to 18 for permanent wards compared to common practice of parents maintaining various levels of responsibility for youth into their mid twenties.

A recurring theme in studies of youth leaving care is the importance of (and frequent absence of) at least one sustaining adult supportive relationship for each youth as they enter the transition from in-care to out-of-care status. Leslie¹⁹ and Tweddle²⁰ have noted the need for youth to have significant relationships with supportive adults before and beyond the point where they leave care. Researchers in the area of resilience²¹ point to the presence of significant relationships in the lives of those youth who do well despite the difficulty of early life experiences. Youth too have identified the importance to them of long term relationships whether with kin, worker, foster parent or mentor. Several presentations^{22, 23} by youth in Ontario have highlighted the importance felt by them of connection to siblings as persons with whom the youth has the possibility of a life long attachment and shared heritage.

Youth in the care of CASs are 'emancipated' from care, regardless of individual level of preparedness, at age 21. Anecdotal information from youth who have left care indicates that some have been in the middle of post-secondary studies when their twenty-first

¹⁶ Wingard, J. and Reid, E. (March 2006). *Transitions to adulthood: summary of the consultation session February 22, 2006 hosted by the Children's Aid Society of Hamilton*. Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton. Website: sprc.hamilton.on.ca

¹⁷ Tweddle, p.6

¹⁸ Leslie, B. and Hare, F. (2000). *Improving the outcomes for youth in transition from care* in OACAS Journal, Vol.44, no. 3. p. 24

¹⁹ *ibid*, p.24

²⁰ Tweddle, p. 6, 15, 16.

²¹ Kufeldt and Silva-Wayne In Tweddle, p. 8

²² unrecorded youth presentation at *Voices of Youth* forum, Autumn 2005. Limbo Task Force.

²³ youth presentation to OACAS CFSA committee, October 2004.



birthday arrives and they are abruptly cut from the support of the agency purporting to be 'parent' to them²⁴. That this severance occurs on the birthday of the youth adds unsavoury irony to a policy more driven by calendar and funding framework than by parental regard for the youth under its protection.

Selected Resource Material related to Youth Leaving Care

CAS Facts. April 2005. OACAS website www.oacas.org

Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare. (March, 2006). *Building a future together: issues and outcomes for transition-aged youth*. With Child Welfare League of Canada and national Youth in Care Network.

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Courtney, M., Dworsky, A., Gretchen, R., Keller, T., Haylicek, J., and Bost, N. (May 2005). *Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: outcomes at age 19*. Chapin Hall Centre for Children at University of Chicago. www.chapinhall.org

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Goar, C. (2005) *Smoothing a brutal transition*. Toronto Star, Oct. 28, 2005.

Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. (2004). *Aging Out : a discussion guide for youth, communities and employers*. To accompany the documentary film *Aging Out* (2003) by Roger Weinberg and Vanessa Roth. See Casey Family Services website.

²⁴ *ibid.*



Leslie, B. and Hare, F. (2000). *Improving the outcomes for youth in transition from care* in OACAS Journal, Vol.44, no. 3. p. 24

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Rutman, D., Hubberstey, C., Barlow, A., & Brown, E. (August 2005). *When youth age out of care - A report on baseline findings* School of Social Work. University of Victoria.

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APPENDIX D: Sample Standards List for Youth Leaving Care

The following are provided as examples of concrete measures of the ability of a youth to make a successful transition to independence and emancipation. Such a list is intended to provide structure to worker involvement and a means by which a Ministry reviewer might have an overview of a youth's needs and progress toward independence.

1. Documentation of worker private contact every X months.
2. Yearly annual medical
3. Yearly dental
4. ECM contract on file. Review of goals linked to previous goals with results briefly noted.
5. Child has the following ID: SIN, Health Card, Birth Certificate, etc.
6. Youth has X in savings.
7. Youth has means to be financially self-sufficient post-21.
8. Youth has X number of long-term relationships post-21 which the worker finds supportive and safe, and the youth finds meaningful and of value.
9. School grade/level reached
10. Youth currently attends school.
11. Youth takes any required medication independently and can financially afford to continue this post-21.
12. Youth can function independently in the community in a safe and self-reliant manner without staff support.
13. Youth has had X part-time and X full-time jobs.
14. Youth currently has a job.
15. Youth has filed taxes X times.
16. Youth has moved X times since moving out independently.
17. Youth has stable and ongoing housing post-21.
18. Foreign-born Crown wards have completed legal process of Canadian citizenship.
19. Youth can complete daily living skills such as making food, doing laundry, shopping, basic budgeting, taking public transportation.
20. Is there a mental health or developmental diagnosis and can youth self-manage or have supports in place to manage post-21?
21. Does youth need any adult supports/services and are these in place and approved in anticipation of emancipation?

OACAS, in support of its members, is...

the voice of child welfare in Ontario, dedicated to providing leadership for the achievement of excellence in the protection of children and in the promotion of their well-being within their families and communities.



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