



# THE BUS RIDE HOME PROJECT

Developing supports for  
Ontario's child welfare  
change-makers in &  
from care

## Consultation Findings & Top Solutions

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“ *MAYBE US FOSTER KIDS HAD THESE HARDSHIPS BECAUSE WE ARE MEANT FOR GREATNESS. MEANT TO BOLDLY BARE OUR EXPERIENCED HEARTS. TO GIVE OF OURSELVES ‘CAUSE WE KNOW WHAT IT’S LIKE TO BE LEFT BEHIND. MAYBE WE ARE MEANT TO BE THE LEADERS OF THE FUTURE. THE POETS, ARTISTS, MOVERS AND SHAKERS, INVENTORS, INSPIRERS, GIVERS AND LOVERS, THE NEXT PRIME MINISTER.... MAYBE THE DEPTH OF OUR EXPERIENCE, BOTH LIGHT AND DARK, IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PIECE IN THE CREATING OF A BETTER WORLD. ‘CAUSE I THINK WE KNOW THINGS THAT NO ONE ELSE KNOWS. MAYBE I’M WRONG....BUT MAYBE I’M RIGHT.* ”

**Stephen Jackman-Torkoff**, Ontario Children and Youth in Care Day five14Talks spoken word artist and host

CAN WE ACKNOWLEDGE YOU  
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THE  
**BUS RIDE  
HOME**  
PROJECT

## I. PROJECT ORIGINS

In 2015, leadership at prominent Ontario child welfare agencies—including the Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies (OACAS), the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS), the Children’s Aid Foundation (CAF) and the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth (OPACY)—began discussing the urgent need to better support the young people they engage in their work. There are an estimated 600-900 young people with lived experience who are working for change in child welfare across Ontario at any given time, improving our system and communities. While we work to improve the lives of all young people in and from care, many in these roles are facing particular distress. We as a community, have lost young change-makers to mental health, addiction and suicide—the horrific and heartbreaking consequence of communities lacking adequate supports. The initiating partners heard from their young people\* the urgent need for greater supports and they committed to work together to make sure we do better and learn directly from young change-makers how we can.

The Children’s Aid Foundation, with support from the other initiating partners, led a five-month project to research support gaps and develop support solutions (services, programs and resources) in consultation with young child welfare change-makers and a few of their key agency allies.

***Why is the project called “The Bus Ride Home?” Leading up to this project, the initiating partners heard from their young people that being a child welfare change-maker who grew up in the system, can perhaps be best captured when imagining what happens for them when they leave behind their advocacy role for the day and go back to their lives, often on a long bus ride home.***

Many youth described the bizarre and painful contrast of having a respected role within a supportive community in the child welfare sector and then, outside of that role, feeling like their life is a mess. What is it like to work to improve a system that has affected your life when change takes a long time and you miss out on reaping the benefits? When traumas are relived and shared among peers, and you continue to experience the barriers, stigma, instability and isolation faced by so many from care? How does it feel to head home with all that weighing on your shoulders? How do you keep showing up for tomorrow—never mind your other goals and your own success— when you have to focus on survival? What will happen for the kids if you don’t show up for tomorrow? This project is all about what we need to do to improve the bus ride home and beyond.

*\*Please note: For the purposes of this project, “young people,” “youth” and “change-makers” refer to anyone who identifies as a young person with lived experience of CAS/government care who spends time working to improve child welfare, unless otherwise specified. They could be 12 or 32, in Kingston or Kenora, in care for 5 months or 15 years, a program participant, volunteer, nominal professional service provider, advisor, board member or staff. We are not strictly defining this category.*

## I. PROJECT GOALS

To create the conditions for Ontario’s young child welfare change-makers with lived experience to lead child welfare change and thrive in their lives through support services, programs and resources that promote healing, connection, security and stability.

## II. PROJECT PROCESS

### Whom did we consult?

Staff at the Children’s Aid Foundation and the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth curated a list of prominent change-makers and agency allies who would likely be interested in generating insights and recommendations. Those consulted were also invited to recommend others to include, many of whom were later interviewed. In total, we consulted 144 individuals, 101 of whom are young change-makers in and from care and 43 staff representatives from a variety of child-welfare agencies, some of whom also have lived child welfare experience.

## How did we consult?

Listed contacts were contacted and, if available, participated in one-on-one or group consultation sessions, in person or over the phone. Also, to reach as many young change-makers from across the province, we distributed a survey to youth in and from care (48 completed) and we hosted a cross-agency leadership summit to bring 23 hard working, young change-makers together from across the province, representing the initiating partners and a couple others: the Foundation, OPACY, OACAS, the Voyager Project and the Nipissing-Parry Sound Children's Aid Society.

## What did we ask?

We asked all participants to identify what is working, not working and missing in how we support Ontario's young child welfare change-makers with lived experience to lead and thrive in their lives outside of their leadership. We then asked what kinds of supports (services, programs and resources) they would like to see implemented that doesn't already exist. Of the 101 young people consulted, 71 completed the survey or attended the summit; these participants were asked to rank proposed ideas (see Appendix for combined rankings).

## How did we choose and develop the proposed solutions?

Most of the solution ideas recommended here are ideas that came directly from young people before and during the project, and all of them are based on the most commonly identified and highest ranked support needs. Once we generated a support solution list, we invited young people to rank these through the survey and then, once updated with survey input, during the summit. The seven proposed solutions reflect the priorities and ideas we heard time and time and time again (see the Appendix for the complete proposal list and how they were ranked).

## Research limitations and challenges

While most young people reached identified with racialized cultural backgrounds and many along gender and sexuality spectrums, we did encounter barriers to reaching a truly representative population, in addition to other limitations:

- Consultations were only conducted with fluent English speakers.
- While there were a number of young people consulted who identified as having special needs, most were related to mental health and few identified with having a physical disability.
- The survey distributed required high-level reading, writing and comprehension skills.
- Given the short project window and limited budget, it was challenging to reach more youth than were consulted and to reach more youth in remote areas outside of the province, particularly in Northern communities and reserves.
- Most young people consulted are known to at least one of the initiating partners; we did not reach many young people who are pushing for child welfare change or leading their own initiatives entirely outside of the sector.
- It was tricky to keep consultation discussions focused solely on child welfare change-makers and their needs, as many of them overlap with the needs of all young people in and from care. Discussions and survey input often shifted to discussions about all children and youth in and from care and their needs.
- Not all youth consulted in groups or in the survey had spent time working for child welfare change (they all identified with having CAS care experience).

### III. KEY PROJECT FINDINGS: WHAT WE HEARD

In our conversations, we heard many things over and over again about what's working, what's not working and what's missing when it comes to how we support young child welfare change-makers to thrive in their roles and in their lives. Young people shared their enthusiasm around many positive new initiatives and shifts in youth engagement practice while also noting many gaps and areas for improvement. Overall, they emphasized the urgent need for support to develop real and permanent connections and access to funds and resources they need to thrive. Young people are worried—worried about their peers, the children growing up in care and themselves. Over and over we heard pleas for quick changes; we heard that we will continue to lose young change-makers to mental health, addiction and suicide if we as a sector and community fail to step up and provide better supports. We have an opportunity to make sure these valuable community leaders lead and thrive for the long haul.

**“ YOUNG PEOPLE ARE WORRIED—WORRIED ABOUT THEIR PEERS, THE CHILDREN GROWING UP IN CARE AND THEMSELVES. OVER AND OVER WE HEARD PLEAS FOR QUICK CHANGES; WE HEARD THAT WE WILL CONTINUE TO LOSE YOUNG CHANGE-MAKERS TO MENTAL HEALTH, ADDICTION AND SUICIDE IF WE AS A SECTOR AND COMMUNITY FAIL TO STEP UP AND PROVIDE BETTER SUPPORTS. ”**

### WHAT'S WORKING? WHAT DO WE NEED MORE OF?

**The support gaps and solutions to address these gaps are outlined in the Top Proposed Support Solutions section, but we also heard lots about what's working and what we need more of.**

#### **Programs, Services and Resources: Initiatives, organizations and people...**

- Pape Adolescent Youth Resource Centre (PARC)
- YouthCan and OACAS' Youth Policy, Advisory and Advocacy Group (YPAAG)
- OPACY initiatives, youth roles and reports
- Ryerson's Voyager Project
- Scholarships and other CAF funding-programs, especially those that provide wrap-around support, support to those who've aged out, and that support non-traditional success
- Tuition waivers
- After Care Benefits Initiative
- Youth councils at agencies like CASs, Children's Aid Foundation, OPACY, OACAS, etc.
- Ontario Children and Youth in Care Day and associated events
- Youth in Transition Workers
- Mentorship programs
- Life skills development programs
- Supportive housing for youth in and from care
- Family Group Transition Conferences
- Early and ongoing permanency and transition planning (i.e. Youth Plans)

- Youth Leaving Care Hearings, My Real Life Book and promotion of the recommendations
- The Blueprint for Fundamental Change and reporting out on that, etc.
- Seeing that this Bus Ride Home Project is happening and feeling heard about the urgent need for adequate supports to young child welfare change-makers and being brought together from across agencies
- Knowing that there are those in leadership who “get it” (who have taken the time to truly understand what it’s like to be in and from care) and “stay up at night worrying about us”
- Knowing there are many staff at agencies who feel their work with young people is an honour and joy, not “just a job”

### **Practices: Young people appreciate when those who engage them...**

- Offer meaningful roles with the ability to choose work that is needed and is relevant to interests and where engagement is a win-win partnership between adults and youth
- Offer youth-staff positions, regular positions and hiring practices that prioritize hiring people with lived (child-welfare) experience as a qualification or asset
- Create supportive pathways to employment for the population they serve, meeting young people “where they’re at” in their development and capacities, at various access points (e.g. job shadowing, mentorship, project interns, youth researchers, and regular staff roles), and then support them to graduate or connect to graduated roles so they can “level up” and not be left hanging after a position ends
- Have lived (child-welfare) experience or who have invested in learning from young people to “get it” and what being an ally means
- Hire staff—from care or not—solely or in partnership with youth in and from care
- Create youth leadership roles where young people are elected or hired by their peers as representatives when possible and who represent diverse models of success, avoiding tokenism and creating a “special class” of leaders
- Provide support for youth-led and youth-driven initiatives where young people can participate and lead child welfare change including honoraria, travel reimbursement, meals and even transit passes and cell phones when appropriate
- Engage youth in a welcoming, inclusive, safe and anti-oppressive environment (“no spaces are automatically neutral”) where there is time and space to support youth to build relationships with staff and peers
- Identify clearly when a role is a volunteer role, a staff role, or a paid advisory/nominal professional service, and work with young people to identify which should be what; allow young people to identify how/if they want to be compensated; payment in advance or day-of as reimbursements for costs are a major barrier
- Host meetings at youth-friendly times and outside the GTA (rotate locations)
- Support young people to cut-down on advocacy, take a break and come back as needed, within a culture that promotes and acts on self-care-first
- Provide supports, programs and services when a young person is ready and not within a specific age range because they recognize young people from care need to navigate many more barriers than most and often pursue goals later on (e.g. a four-year funding program should be available at the age a young person is ready)
- Create safe one-on-one and group spaces where young people can discuss difficult topics, including grief, discrimination and suicidality
- Host low-barrier, walk-in, community-based support hubs for youth in and from care (e.g. PARC, local youth in care networks)

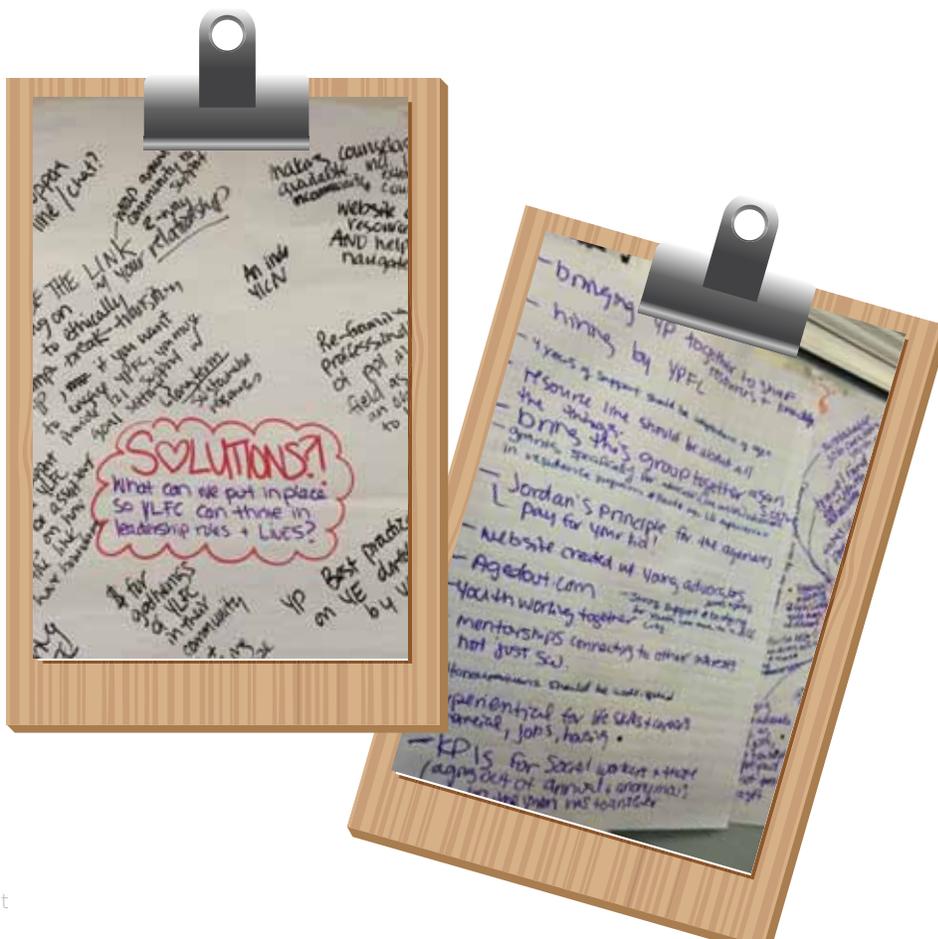
- Provide wrap-around, Positive Youth Development support around key resilience indicators (relationships, housing, education and employment), connecting youth to resources, relationships and working together to plan and check-in on goals outside of their child-welfare advocacy; staff supports work collaboratively with other supports in each young person's life
- Take a trauma-informed and attachment-informed approach, knowing that instead of pathologizing young people from care with challenging behaviours, that they are often predictable, normal responses to trauma
- Provide services and programs and leadership roles to all those touched by residential care, not just Crown Wards, those who are outspoken or those in crisis
- Make time to prioritize and build their relationship with them and are part of a work culture that allows them to love their young people unconditionally, with boundaries that are also in the best interest of the young person, where staff can maintain life-long connections with their youth when youth are interested
- Can be reached during crises and pro-actively check in and follow up during tough times
- Are clear and up-front about expectations, the youth's sphere of influence and decision-making power in the project or organization
- Help young people develop their identity and skills to prepare for "real world" jobs and life challenges beyond child welfare advocacy
- Do not pressure youth to share personal details and share their story for any reason, including internal organization conversations or support, awareness and fundraising efforts
- Avoid creating tokenized foster care "poster children"
- Offer media and story-telling training and have lots of conversations with youth whom they recruit to share their story for fundraising and engagement purposes about whether they are truly interested in such a role, think through the potential implications, support them to identify for themselves when along their healing journey they may be to be ready to share (i.e. raw trauma versus processed trauma), offer options to share their story in other less public and more supportive spaces and options to volunteer and give back in other ways.
- When youth decide to go ahead with public story-telling, providing lots of support to do so safely, including options to speak about collective experiences instead of individual, identifying for themselves what kinds of things they may want to share (strategic sharing around what's still raw or will have ramifications versus what's processed and will have minimal ramifications), ways to share anonymously, how to work with the press, develop talking points, and who attend with them and are available for support after, etc.
- Provide support to stay housed, out of poverty and to access healing and self-care practices (counselling, mindfulness practices, cultural medicines, etc.), especially to a range of accessible, self-selected counselling and healing support options
- Provide skill development and training, including life-skills and leadership skills (which includes story-telling and peer mentorship/support training)
- Provide accolades, certificates, awards and recommendations that don't out youth as from care so they can be used in professional contexts
- Connect them to mentors and supports in the community
- Connect them to peers and peer mentors, hosting spaces where youth can support each other, build relationships and advocate for change together
- Provide support to explore various identities and share those with others, particularly cultural practices
- Recognize that if we require expertise from a population that's traumatized and in poverty, we need to accommodate them where they're at as we would with any accommodation; that may

mean ensuring they have wrap-around support for housing, liveable incomes, a support system and an on-site mentor who is not their supervisor.

- Recognize that young people are typically busy, strapped and in poverty, so we need to pay them accordingly if we want their expertise
- Foster welcoming, youth-friendly, anti-oppressive, accommodating, inclusive environments where the pressures associated with certain identities are acknowledged and cultural learning and exchange takes place
- Foster cultures that encourage asking for help and identifying accommodation needs for all staff and volunteers—whether from care or not. Who acknowledge that we all have accommodations from time to time, and supports young people, and young people from care, may require at times are no different than any other accommodations
- Foster cultures where it's safe to make complaints, give feedback, say no to opportunities and identify challenging dynamics and experiences; create programs and services with key performance indicators that young people know about and can evaluate
- Foster loving, learning cultures where folks (staff and volunteers alike) are encouraged to be vulnerable, get it wrong, acknowledge mistakes, learn together and keep trying
- Normalize diverse success and create space for healing and self-care as part of success, avoiding creating a pedestal for only some youth
- Help connect youth and maintain relationships with their people, including ongoing conversations about permanency and/or adoption
- Support them to identify/find “that one caring adult” who can provide a healthy, unconditionally loving relationship; who can go “above and beyond” and be available when needed; to help them develop a safety net—people and resources to access during crises and emergencies
- Support cross-agency collaboration, working together focusing on solutions and build bridges between youth and adult services
- Promote respectful, de-stigmatizing public engagement and awareness
- Support access and connection to older people from care for mentorship and support; it's important that older people from care continue to have a role after they're no longer “youth”
- Support youth and their allies to gather in person and stretch meetings over two or more days when possible to minimize stress and promote relationship building—trust and relationships are better built with youth in and from care especially in person and over time
- Funders are okay with building capacity and relationships as the outcomes
- Create expectations, terms of reference and community guidelines collaboratively, including safety containers around group disclosures
- Provide sufficient training and mentorship for leadership roles, particularly more sophisticated roles like sitting on boards and staff teams
- Avoid “one-size-fits-all” approaches and opportunities, tailor support to each youth, their interests and needs
- Go to where the youth are, and engaging them where they're at so we don't continue to prioritize only the most resilient and/or resourced young people and those who live in convenient urban centres; young people need not always carry the travel burden

## WHAT'S MISSING:

- Financial supports and benefits that allow leaders to participate and lead sustainably while practicing self-care and avoiding burn-out including honoraria, travel and child-care expense coverage and health, wellness and recreation benefits
- 24/7 crisis support
- Goal planning and support to pursue interests, connections and identity beyond the child welfare sector
- An independent, youth-driven Ontario youth in care network (although that is in the works) that you don't "age out" of—alumni can stay involved
- Retreats, institutes, programs and/or regular gatherings for youth and young change-makers from care led by adults with care experience and allies hired by youth, to build leadership and life skills, have fun, form friendships and mentorships, strengthen the youth in care movement and strategize around child-welfare change
- Low-barrier drop-in gathering spaces, including local youth in care networks or support groups, for youth in and from care in communities across the province
- "Alumni" roles for adults who are no longer youth but want to support youth in and from care and help lead change
- A simple, accessible youth-friendly website listing all relevant resources for youth in and from care across Ontario
- More training and regulation on youth-engagement practice when involving youth in and from care
- More career and relational mentorship connections for youth and ongoing permanency/social capital planning especially after "aging out"
- Opportunities for allies to provide support, raise awareness and solidarity, including pro-bono professional services and supportive landlord opportunities



## IV. NEXT STEPS:

These consultation findings and support solution ideas were presented to the initiating partners on May 9th, 2016. These partners are committed to working towards the recommended solutions proposed in this report with the art of what is possible as their guide. They will need to work towards piggy backing, expanding and improving existing supports where possible and appropriate and will work together to set short term and long term objectives. Those consulted who want to stay in the loop will receive progress updates.

## VI. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We spent three months meeting with 144 prominent individuals working in Ontario's child welfare sector, 101 of whom are young change-makers, advocates and leaders in and from care and 43 who are individuals representing a variety of child-welfare agencies, some of whom have lived child welfare experience. We are so grateful for the time, energy, expertise and ideas contributed to this project. We are especially grateful to those with lived care experience, many of whom have long been speaking out about the need for greater supports to young people leading change in child welfare. The irony that this consultation process may have been draining and triggering is not lost on us. We hope this project, its consultation findings and recommended solutions result in the kinds of meaningful supports they deserve.

Also special thanks goes to our partners at OACAS, OPACY, the Voyager Project and the Children's Aid Society of the District of Nipissing and Parry Sound for helping support and host the Cross-Agency Leadership Summit and to the summit's skilful, compassionate co-facilitator Anayah Phares, founder of the CHEERS tri-mentorship program.

We are proud to acknowledge the following people\*, plus 67 others who participated anonymously or are acknowledged as part of a group, for your leadership in our community and taking the time to share your expertise with this project:

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**Toney;**

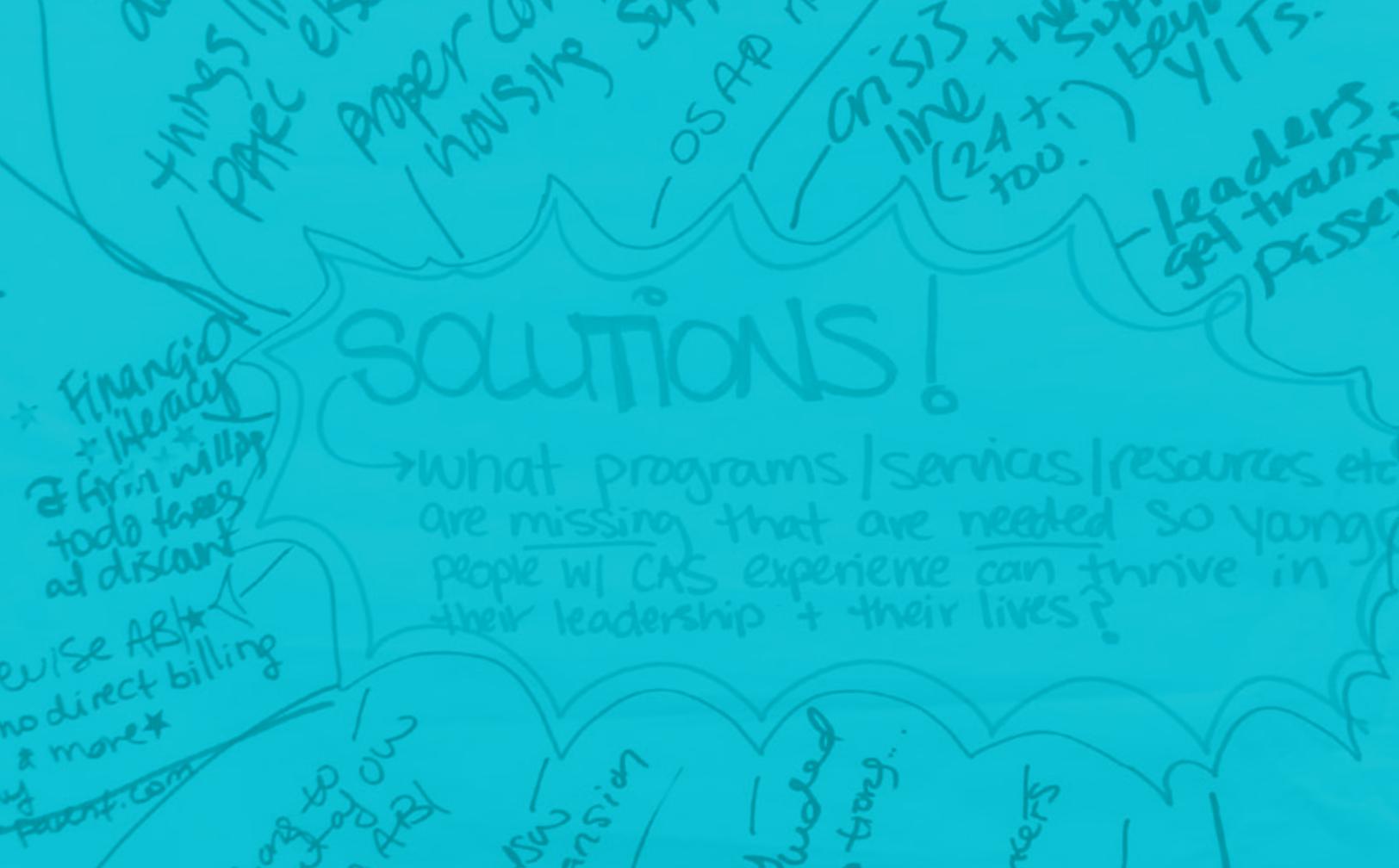
**Weber;**

**Zainab Godwin** (For Youth Initiative);

*\*Names appear as requested. Individuals listed as an organization representative may also be involved in work at other organizations. Young change-makers in particular are often affiliated with several child-welfare organizations. Participants are listed as part of whichever organization they were representing on the consultation date.*



**Crystal**, Young  
People's Advisory  
Council Member



## SUPPORTING ONTARIO'S CHILD-WELFARE CHANGE-MAKERS IN AND FROM CARE:

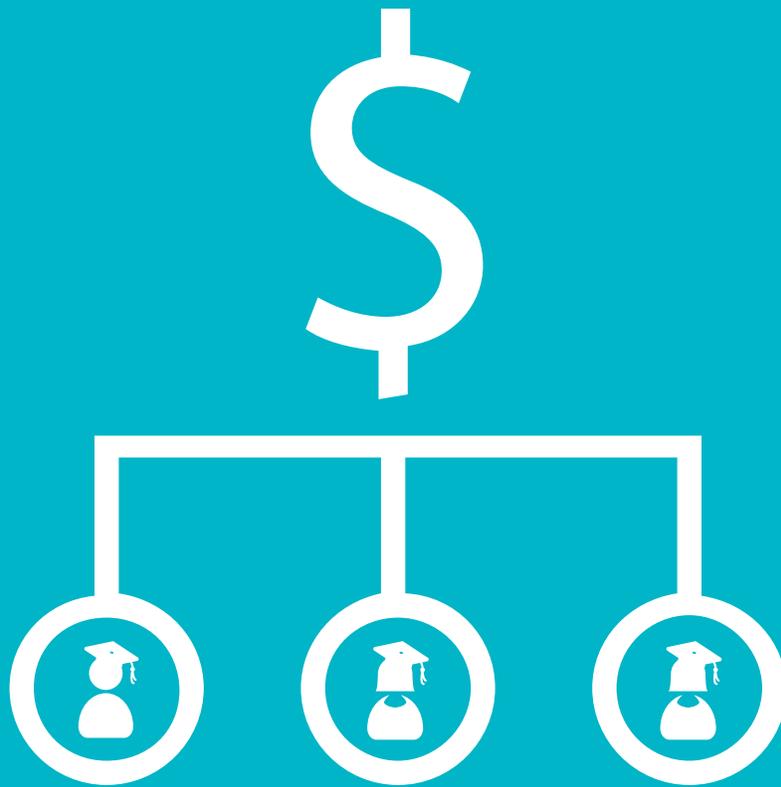
### TOP PROPOSED SUPPORT SOLUTIONS

Based on input gathered in consultation with 144 individuals from across Ontario's child welfare sector, we identified the most commonly and urgently expressed gaps in support and developed seven support solutions—programs, services and other resources—to address these gaps. The following ideas include solutions young people and their allies proposed directly, while others are solutions we developed to address the other most frequently expressed gaps. Certainly these will not close the support gap, and many young people will not want or need these supports. These supports address the gaps the young people consulted identified most and would be available to those who are looking for additional support.

There are a number of ways these support solutions could be rolled out: individually, grouped or all together as a single program (potential name: Launching Child Welfare Leaders program), hosted by a single agency or funder or partner coalition. A partner coalition would also help remove attachment to particular organizations and their mandate limitations, and demonstrates to young people that there is a cross-sector, youth-centred collaborative commitment to have their back, beyond political limitations.

Yellow highlighted sections indicate where additional or “sub” programs would need to be developed; these could be included under their current program umbrella or pulled out as a separate program.





# 1. STUDENT DEBT REPAYMENT

## **Potential Program Titles: Graduate Reim-bursury Fund; Launching Graduates Fund**

**The Need:** We heard that young people from care age out into poverty. It's nearly always automatic, and forces youth to focus on surviving instead of exploring their goals. While their peers—even those from low-income families—who've grown-up outside of the child welfare system can typically rely upon some financial support or supports that ease the financial burden during post-secondary schooling and the transition to independence (including free rent, help with groceries or bills, presents and birthday money, hand-me-down furniture and clothes, a place to crash during tough financial times or holidays, family benefits plans, drives and train tickets, free child-minding, family vacations, connections and social capital that can lead to jobs, etc.), young students from care typically rely on scholarships, bursaries and student loans alone. Further, with resumes that often lack stable school and job experience—due to frequent moves in the system—we heard that it can be trickier to get hired for well-paid positions or at all. Without family support and all those big and little things that ease expenses, it is easier to wrack up student debt and harder to pay it off.

We heard students from care continue to find themselves stuck in the cycle of poverty after graduation as they struggle to make their loan payments. This makes it difficult to try the internships, lower paying entry level jobs and volunteer positions often needed now to enter preferred careers because they need to focus on making money. Also, when many young people leaving care are healing from childhood traumas and losses, we heard they often bear additional health and mental health expenses or need to take time away from work.

Further, we heard that many young people in and from care navigate life without caring adults who teach, model and check in on money management. It's easier for anyone to misspend and accumulate more debt without folks who check in and help plan.

Throughout this project, the top reason young people reported not getting involved in or limiting their child welfare advocacy was the need to focus on making money. Those estimated 600-900 young people who make it a priority to go above and beyond and give back through child welfare advocacy have even less time to pursue other sources of income. We heard that many youth have to drop-out or contribute less than they would like. We lose out on leaders and leadership because young people need to focus on making money.

Thanks to young people and their allies who have long been fighting for the kind of education support that would address these inequities, several key initiatives and supports have been implemented like tuition waivers, scholarships, and bursaries. Now, they are celebrating these alongside government plans to minimize or waive tuition for all low-income students. They are the ones who fought for tuition waivers, but they have never benefitted from their efforts. These are the students whose own advocacy accomplishments have left them behind.

**Solution:** A bursary program that pays off part or all remaining post-secondary debt for those who volunteer in the child-welfare sector.

**Objective:** Frees young people who pursued degrees and diplomas before tuition waivers, or whom did not receive scholarships/bursaries to help with schooling to pursue the community leadership and career goals of their choosing.

“ WE HEARD THAT YOUNG PEOPLE FROM CARE AGE OUT INTO POVERTY. IT'S NEARLY ALWAYS AUTOMATIC, AND FORCES YOUTH TO FOCUS ON SURVIVING INSTEAD OF EXPLORING THEIR GOALS. ”

*\*The quotations appearing throughout this report were contributed anonymously by participants through Bus Ride Home Project consultations and survey.*

“ THESE ARE THE STUDENTS WHOSE OWN ADVOCACY ACCOMPLISHMENTS HAVE LEFT THEM BEHIND. ”



**Eligibility:** Students who have pursued a degree or diploma in Ontario before tuition waivers came into effect and who have spent a year or more in residential government care. No age cap but we need to determine if it will be open only to those who have spent time advocating for child welfare change and, if so, how much time they are required to have spent?

**Planning Process:**

1. Identify and map out which similar supports currently exist, to help people from care pay off student debt (e.g. The Children’s Aid Foundation’s Graduation Award).
2. Determine eligibility: The population affected here are in a bubble—a finite group of people. How much time do they need to have worked to improve child welfare? Within which time period (years) did they have to have attended school? Which graduates—any program? Trades? Specific programs? Any university? Only those who borrowed from OSAP or lines of credit or credit cards, etc. as well? How do they prove the debt is student related?
3. Determine what’s included in the program. Does it include financial planning/coaching?
4. Draft a proposal and ask eligible young people about potential barriers and challenges.
5. Discuss how to frame it to make funders understand and sympathetic to a cause where most people have student debt.
6. Identify which funders and partners would be most sympathetic and have the capacity to support this cause.
7. Determine who to approach to host and fund and/or possibly put out an RFP (request for proposals), potential to banks.
8. Determine how to let young change-makers know this program exists.



## 2. INDEPENDENT, YOUTH DRIVEN CHILD WELFARE CHANGE-MAKER RETREATS + ONLINE COMMUNITY

### **Potential Program Titles: Change-Maker Leadership Retreats; Stronger Together Retreats**

**The Need:** Over and over again, young people identified a great need to connect with their brothers and sisters from care involved in child welfare advocacy work from across agencies in person. They noted that in-person gatherings would create the conditions for them to build meaningful and long-lasting relationships and chosen family, and build greater momentum and collaboration in their child welfare efforts and in the youth in care movement. Youth also identified that meeting those from care helps address the internalized stigma and shame of the “foster kid” identity.

They also frequently identified the need for ongoing, self-directed life-skills development to build on or develop skills they may or may not have developed in care as they navigate adulthood. Further, young people regularly expressed an interest and need to develop their leadership skills to more sustainably and skilfully lead child welfare change and the work that that involves, including public speaking, facilitation, peer support, anti-oppression, advocacy processes, campaigning, etc.

Throughout consultations, young people emphasized that experiential learning—learning by doing—was a more effective way to learn and led to real life improvements.

Young change-makers spoke regularly about the need to expand their identities and goals beyond their child welfare experiences and advocacy, and to share these with each other (e.g. sharing cultural/ancestral teachings or artistic skills).

Additionally, participants spoke about not having access to or time for fun and exploring their identity and interests. While many of their peers outside the system are supported to take on adult responsibilities gradually, freeing them up to travel, go on adventures, explore hobbies and socialize, young people from care find themselves suddenly on their own and confronted with the full “adult plate” at 21 or earlier, forced into a constant hustle of navigating a confusing and overwhelming menu of supports and resources (that often come with their own barriers) to avoid poverty, stay in school and access healing and self-care resources.

Further, those who work with change-makers consistently voiced the need to create time and space to build relationships with their youth so they can lead change together from within a healthy, trusting bond. This requires time, funding and support to just hang out and have fun together.

Older people from care, 30 and older, also identified that they feel they lose their role as they “age out” of child welfare advocacy roles, pointing out how unfortunate that is when they may be able to offer more to child welfare and provide mentorship to younger youth from care as they get older and have spent more time healing and building stability. Youth under 30 overwhelmingly identified a desire to learn from older people with lived experience as a way to learn from and be supported by adults with lived experience because it is lonely, exhausting and frustrating to seek support from people who “don’t get it.” Further, as youth grow out of their identities as youth, they still want to have the option to have a role in the child welfare change-maker-from-care community (which to many becomes family) and have permanency in the community supported. While they identified some adults without lived experience do “get it,” that is not always the case and it can take a long time to get them there. There’s a strong, mutual desire from older and younger cohorts of child-welfare change-makers with care experience for cross-generation (i.e. youth and alumni) connection and mentoring.

Finally, youth voiced that they want the opportunity to gather in youth driven spaces that are independent of government-affiliated organizations so that they are free to express themselves and take action without prohibitive regulations. They want these gathering spaces to be safe and inclusive, anti-oppressive, de-colonized and intentionally address the pressures and realities attached to certain identities including through creating community guidelines, doing anti-oppression learning and sharing cultural practices and teachings with each other.

**Solution:** In-person retreats specifically for child welfare change-makers. Regular gatherings (at least three times per year) for young, child welfare change-makers from care where young people engage in experiential leadership and life skills learning, and build friendships, community, share cultural teachings, explore their identities and have fun. Retreats are youth driven, youth led and/or a youth-adult partnership where possible with support roles staffed by people with lived experience and allies who “get it” hired by the youth. Youth would spend their first session as participants and then be encouraged to graduate to facilitator roles. After 30, they would have the option to move to adult-support roles.

**a. Leadership Training:** including peer support, boundaries, self-care, advocacy, public speaking/storytelling, anti-oppression, group dynamics/conflict modules—experiential learning where possible; youth get to practice in a safe space and build leadership gradually; youth would also

explore a “Leadership Fair” with a menu of all the child-welfare change-maker roles in Ontario and be supported to assess and match themselves to roles based on where they’re at.

- i. First Retreat: Currently active youth leaders, facilitated by older adults from care and their allies (hired by youth in and from care).
- ii. Subsequent Retreats: Lead by former retreat participants, includes prospective leaders, with support from adult allies (hired by youth in and from care).

**b. Life Skills:** including healthy relationships, financial literacy/taxes, self-care, mindfulness, healthy coping strategies, food security and nutrition, cultural modules—experiential learning where possible)

**c. Fun and relationship building:** including trust and team-building activities, talent shows, jam sessions, communal art projects, crafting, cultural exchanges and ceremony, board games, outdoor adventure and recreation, and free/down time

- i. Moderated online community with participant-created community guidelines to help maintain the relationships and community between gatherings; could simply be Facebook
- ii. Could be related to support line and/or independent youth in care network

**Objective:** Young change-makers and their allies can develop their life and leadership skills, relationships and the youth in care movement.

### Planning process:

1. Identify and map out existing, similar retreats (e.g. YouthCan and Jane Kovarikova’s Institute concept)
2. Determine eligibility. How much time do they need to have worked to improve child welfare? Could we include prospective change-makers? How long would they have to have been in care? How old would participants be—16-30? If such a broad age range, perhaps facilitator roles go to the 25-30 year olds and those over 30 would focus on adult support roles.
3. Determine logistics and program design. Would these require full-time staff? Could this be connected to the Support Line or existing programs? Identify which funders and partners would be the best fit to host and have the capacity. What could we build on or with whom could we partner?
4. Discuss how to frame it to make funders sympathetic to this cause.
5. Draft a proposal and ask eligible young people about potential barriers and challenges.
6. Identify which funders and partners would be most sympathetic and have the capacity to support this cause.
7. Determine how to let young change-makers know this program exists and develop a promotion/recruitment plan.



*“ WHEN YOU NEEDED ME, I WAS THERE...NOW THAT I'M OLDER, THERE'S NOTHING FOR ME TO DO. ”*

*“ LEADERSHIP ROLES ARE GOOD, BUT A COMMUNITY IS BETTER. ”*

*“ WE NEED TO STOP ASSUMING OUR SPACES ARE 'NEUTRAL'—THERE'S NO SUCH THING... ACKNOWLEDGE OUR DIFFERENCES AND THE PRESSURES THAT COME WITH THOSE IDENTITIES. ”*

*“ THERE'S A STRONG, MUTUAL DESIRE FROM OLDER AND YOUNGER COHORTS OF CHILD-WELFARE CHANGE-MAKERS WITH CARE EXPERIENCE FOR CROSS-GENERATION CONNECTION AND MENTORING. ”*



### 3. CHILD WELFARE CHANGE-MAKERS PARTICIPATION AND HEALING FUND

**Potential Program Title: Child Welfare Change-Makers Fund; Community Leaders Fund; Launching Leaders Fund; Wrap-Around Leaders Fund; Leadership Support Fund; Healing our Healers Fund**

**The Need:**

We all know people with lived experience of the child welfare system should be steering child welfare and child welfare change. Only they have the expertise of knowing what it is really like to navigate the unique experience of being raised by a system and what would have made it better to experience. Young people from care are remarkably independent and resilient—more so than anyone should have to be—and incredibly compassionate towards their brothers and sisters in care. Many are determined to make change so others behind them can have a better experience. Many, young people from care want to get involved in child welfare advocacy and can be found in all corners of the province working away to direct and deliver programs and services, sit on advisory councils, educate others and conduct their own outreach and advocacy.

The child welfare sector has learned the value of youth engagement, both to improve their efficacy, but also as part of demonstrating their commitment to best practice. The child welfare sector, now more than ever, needs and relies upon young people's expertise, stories and hard work to improve services and rally community support. Thanks to these young change-makers and their supportive allies at these agencies, we have seen many positive changes to the system.

Their advocacy has improved our communities, but at what cost? Throughout this project we often heard that young people have been asked over and over for their opinions, ideas and work on the same topics. Young people expressed how exhausted and demoralized they feel, pushing for the same change year after year and feeling like they see little more than pilot programs and small steps toward fundamental change. They have told us, as they have told others, "enough is enough." They want to stop being consulted only to see reports sit on shelves while they and their peers struggle with poverty, mental health, isolation, hospitalization and suicide.

We also heard that young people from care face years of healing with few natural supports and must spend a lot of their time navigating through bureaucracy for available support like scholarships, services and health benefits. It's a constant, exhausting hustle. Nearly every support requires a form, a wait time, and even then they are not guaranteed while many of their peers outside of the system are a phone call away from family who will jump to provide whatever they need. Young people from care need to manage alone and be more on top of their expenses and their supports than other youth; it's like a part-time job. Young people in and from care are perhaps the busiest young people in our province and yet we require, and they require of themselves, that they give back with very little compensation.

Once they are involved in child welfare advocacy, they often find themselves steeped in their peers' traumas and stories and are required to identify as a person from care in order to create change. Instead of spending their early adulthood focusing on exploring their well-rounded, self-directed identities and goals (moving beyond their time in care and seeing it as one chapter of many to come), their commitment to child-welfare change keeps them focused on their experience and immersed in their traumas, their peers' trauma and their "foster kid" identity. It can be a struggle to find the light and the joy of their future, not to mention find the support and time to focus on their other life and career goals.

So what do we do? Like all social change, those with lived experience need to lead the way. At the same time, not all young people will want to or be able to get involved. We should not expect them to and we should not foster cultures where all young people feel they ought to get involved in child welfare advocacy. But we heard from many young people from care who are committed and are strong and ready to lead this work—there just needs to be a greater, cross-sector acknowledgement of the toll this work can take. We need better supports in place so they can thrive in their leadership roles and in their lives outside of those roles for those roles to be sustainable. Without that support, we will keep losing vital leaders. Sustainable leadership requires support to participate and maintain self-care practices, particularly when we ask folks to draw upon their expertise from difficult lived experience. Young people from care also need support to heal and access self-care. And our communities need these compassionate, wise leaders—whether they lead child welfare or move on to other roles—for the long haul.

**Solution:** Flexible, quickly accessible participation and self-care funds, mimicking the kind of support kids outside the system typically rely upon, so young people can sustainably lead child welfare change. The following apply to youth who volunteer (or receive nominal fees for professional services, i.e. honoraria) for more than 25 hours per year in child welfare and who do not otherwise

have access or full access to these supports. These could be parsed out, as they are below, or bundled under a single fund.

#### **a. Participation Funds\***

**i. Safety Net Fund:** To access when young people who do not earn a livable income run into sudden challenges in their lives where, without quick access to funds, they may slip into precarious situations like homelessness, staying in an abusive living situations, food insecurity and poor health. As young people outside child welfare grow-up, these are the kinds of situations where families are called upon to step in, whether it be through a loan, warm meals, help with moving, or a place to crash; young change-makers do not typically have access to that kind of support. Funds could be used in situations like losing housing or leaving an abusive domestic relationship and needing first and last month rent, movers, travel assistance to get to a job interview, needing groceries at the end of a month, needing assistance with car repairs, etc. The key here is that money is quickly accessible without a lot of bureaucratic process (e.g. once they've signed up, it could be a direct deposit). The fund could be capped (example: \$1,500 per year) and young people are able to access it with a short explanation and trust that they will use it appropriately; failure to do so could result in temporary cut-off from the program. This could be built on the Children's Aid Foundation's Alumni Fund.

#### **ii. Liveable Income/Sustainable Income Top-Up Fund—Two options:**

1. Sustainable income: for those who do not make a liveable income, volunteers could access \$300 to \$500 per month, potentially depending on need and volunteer hours.
2. Liveable income: for those who do not make a liveable income, volunteers could access a "top-up" to their monthly income to reach liveable wage amount in their community. In Toronto, that's \$18.25 per hour or \$3,009 per month.

**iii. Accessibility fund:** Youth who do not earn a liveable income would have access to funds covering the costs associated with volunteering; for example, tokens, gas money, transit pass and child care. This fund helps involve young people in grass -roots work or organizations where such financial support may not be available.

**iv. Professional Development and Certification Fund:** Volunteers would have access to funds that support their professional development goals related to their advocacy work and broader career goals, which could include First Aid, Smart Serve, facilitation training, trade certifications, etc.

#### **b. Healing + Self-care Funds**

**i. Health and Wellness Benefits/Holistic Healing Fund:** Access to a broad spectrum of self-selected health and wellness practitioners and resources, including counselling, dental, physiotherapy, chiropractic, massage, yoga, meditation, gym memberships, etc., for those who do not access such benefits or where their access to benefits is more restrictive. For example, many benefits plans cover counselling but it amounts to fewer than five sessions per year. The emphasis with this fund, as identified by those interviewed, is on frequent (up to two counselling sessions per week), long-term, self-selected (including a range of alternative counselling options as some mainstream practices, like CBT, are not a fit for some young people), accessible, trauma-informed, attachment-informed counselling with counsellors who "get" the government care experience. Youth consulted emphasized that the counsellor should be of their choosing and not assigned. Could build on the Children's Aid Foundation's Health and Wellbeing Fund or the OACAS's Aftercare Benefits Initiative.

- ii. **Loved Ones Travel Fund:** Young people can have access to funds to visit loved ones during holidays, for milestone moments and events, during tough times or family/friend crisis. Could build upon the Children’s Aid Foundation’s Holiday Season Support Fund.
- iii. **Recreation, Cultural and Community Connection Fund:** This fund allows young people to access activities to explore and support their identities and interests. Most youth connect and identify with a number of interests and communities, many of them marginalized, and we heard many were not supported to connect with these during and after their time in care; examples include, queer groups, arts groups, cultural communities, hobbies, outdoor adventure, etc. Could build on the Children’s Aid Foundation’s Enrichment Funds.

\* Where possible, we heard that volunteer honoraria and fund disbursements should be coded for tax purposes (i.e. on T4s) as “other income” to minimize tax deductions.

\*\* Where possible, we heard that where direct billing is not available, young people would be supported to deliver payment at the time of the appointment; this could happen through direct deposit or a specific debit card with receipts regularly submitted.

**Objective:** So young people have the financial, accessibility and self-care resources to thrive in sustainable child welfare leadership roles for as long as they want.

**Eligibility:** Youth who volunteer or receive nominal fees for professional service (i.e. honoraria) for more than 25 hours per year and who do not otherwise have access or full access to these supports (i.e. non-restrictive benefits) or access to a livable income. There is no age limit—access available as long as they volunteer within the sector and their need persists.

**Planning process:**

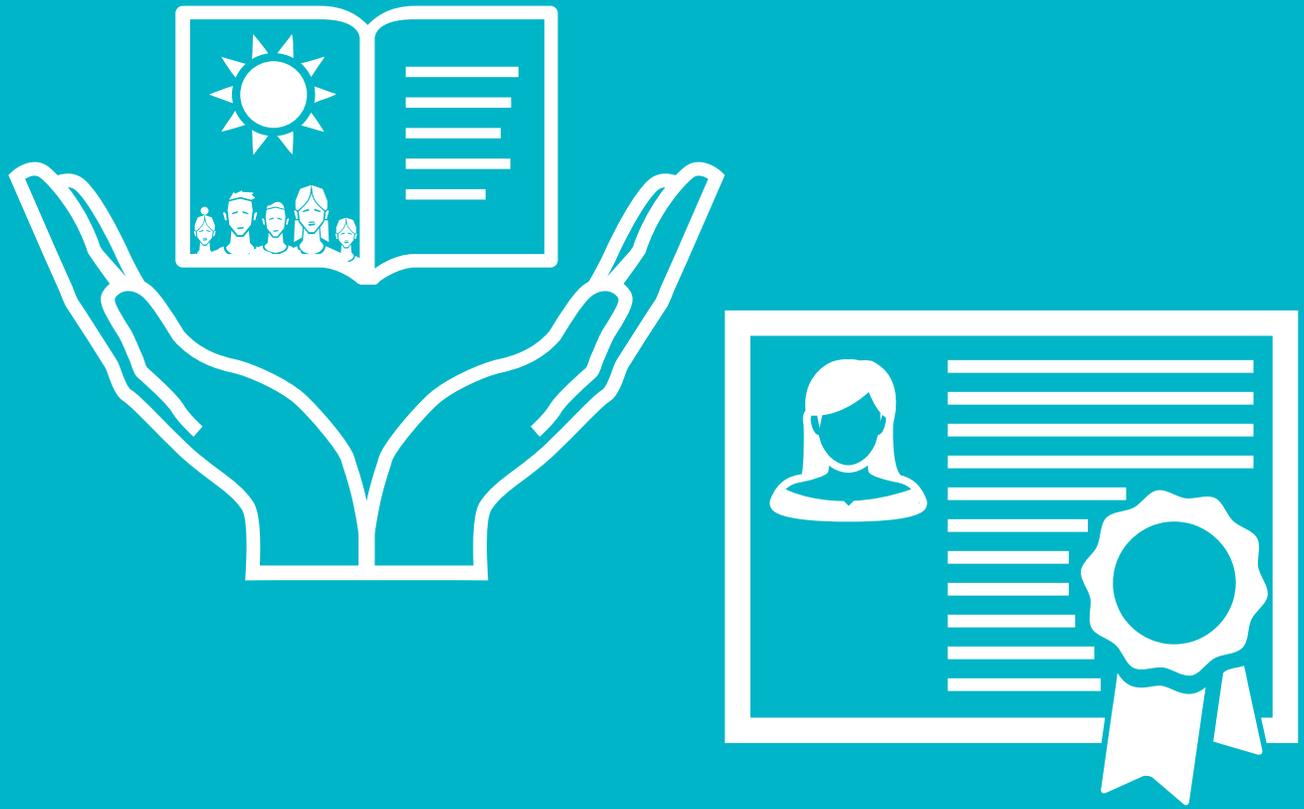
1. Mapping where available similar funds currently exist and determining where partnerships and expansions could be made. For example: the OACAS’s Aftercare Benefits Initiative, Children’s Aid Foundation’s Alumni Fund, Health and Well-Being fund, Holiday Season Support Fund, Kids in the Community Enrichment Fund and HSBC Youth Opportunities Fund, etc.
2. Determining Eligibility: Are they referred by their agency or would they apply directly? If directly, would we expect them to “prove” their involvement in child welfare change? How would they prove their income is not at “livable” amount and do not have access to sufficient benefits?
3. Draft a proposal and ask eligible young people about potential barriers and challenges
4. Determine who to host and fund.
5. Discuss how to frame it to make funders sympathetic to a cause.
6. Identify which funders and partners would be most sympathetic and have the capacity to support this cause.
7. Determine how to let young change-makers know this program exists



*“ HOW MANY YOUTH ARE WE GOING TO LOSE? WE ARE LITERALLY DYING TO LEAD. OR IS IT LEADING TO DEATH? ”*

*“ YOUNG PEOPLE IN AND FROM CARE ARE PERHAPS THE BUSIEST YOUNG PEOPLE IN OUR PROVINCE AND YET WE REQUIRE, AND THEY REQUIRE OF THEMSELVES, THAT THEY GIVE BACK WITH VERY LITTLE COMPENSATION. ”*

*“ IT'S A CONSTANT, EXHAUSTING HUSTLE. ”*



## 4. YOUTH IN/FROM CARE ENGAGEMENT PRACTICE GUIDELINES + CERTIFICATION TRAINING

### **Potential Program Titles: Engaging Youth in and from Care: Practice Guidelines**

**The Need:** Feedback about youth engagement practices came up in nearly every single consultation—young people typically sharing a mix of appreciative feedback and areas to improve. In terms of areas to improve, young people and those who engage young people have overwhelmingly identified that youth in and from care need specific supports, accommodations and practices in place to thrive in their leadership, advocacy and change-making roles. They described frustration around inconsistent youth engagement practices across the sector and the need for specific youth engagement guidelines when working with young people who have experienced care.

When it comes to media and public speaking storytelling, a number of youth described positive experiences where they accessed training, support to craft strategic messages that honour what feels ready to share and what's still too raw or may have negative consequences if shared, and had lots of follow-up support. However, many more youth described feeling exploited for their stories

and that the toll it takes isn't worth it or necessary to mobilize allies—they'd prefer and think it effective to speak to collective experiences or share stories in creative ways that don't identify them. Some also shared that they felt their ideas aren't valued and that they do not receive the kind of compensation that other speakers and workers do who contribute to child welfare.

Many described feeling tokenized, that their sphere of influence and decision-making power is not explained up front with disappointing results and that they are not supported financially to cover true costs of time away from work, transportation, child care, accessibility and food. Some also do not feel that those staff who engage them fully “get” the youth in care experience and the unique barriers and stigma they experience; fully understand family and class privilege, among others; use transparent engagement processes; offer enough follow through and updates; and do not provide sufficient emotional, resource and financial support to do well and be happy in their roles and in their lives outside of those roles.

Further, we heard from most about how doing advocacy work in an area where you have lived experience is uniquely exhausting and traumatizing because it draws upon your own triggers and traumas, and pushes you to further identify with that aspect of your life experience more often. This leads young people to feel like a “rent-a-foster-kid” and, though many feel they want and ought to give back to improve child welfare for other young people (and that part of that is providing peer support), they find that without sufficient financial and emotional and life skills support, they burn out and struggle in their lives. They lose out on their leadership roles and we lose valuable, skilled advocates.

Young people also reported finding it frustrating that they have positive experiences with one agency or opportunity and negative experiences with another, creating confusion, frustration and competition among youth involved in different agencies. Many were quite pleased and appreciate the efforts many agencies and individuals across the sector are making to engage young people with lived experience, but are frustrated that the work they contribute rarely seems to make any real change and do not often have any real influence and power.

In short, we heard over and over that young change-makers do not feel like their lived experience is valued as much as it ought to be and that there are few real pathways to decision making in child welfare for them. Because of their experience as a population young people typically affected by a unique combination of childhood and ongoing trauma, instability, having a system as a family, lack of permanent loving relationships and poverty, young people identify that their needs when engaged in child welfare work are unique and warrant specific supports.

Agency staff also expressed frustration with not knowing if they are doing it right and/or witnessing practices across the sector that they feel are exploitative, unsafe or unsustainable.

We heard that existing youth engagement guidelines and best practices are not always used and lack insight and best-practices to working with those from care and any accommodations and supports they may need as a result of several compounding barriers and difficult circumstances. Further, young people and staff alike expressed frustration about who is typically engaged and who is not. Young people in Northern communities and Indigenous young people in particular, in addition to other populations (young men, new Canadians, young people with special needs, youth experiencing homelessness, etc.) are often not engaged. Many engagement processes make some effort to reach these young people but encounter financial and time barriers; these barriers need to be addressed with sufficient resources, relationship building and time.

We only know if youth engagement is successful when young people report that they feel engaged and young people in and from care report mixed experiences.

**Solution:** Youth in and from care engagement guidelines, training curricula and certification created with young change-makers with an emphasis and adequate resources invested to include young people in Northern communities, Indigenous youth and other typically underrepresented groups in the guideline development. People with lived care experience deliver the training (or allies hired by youth), and the guidelines and training would be available to any organization that seeks to involve young people with care experience for their expertise. Those who sign a commitment to implementing the guidelines, undergo the training and take the steps needed to engage their young people according to the guidelines would receive a certification which could help attract funders, partners and young people to their work. Each year engaged youth would complete an evaluation process; annual re-certification would require a specific average ranking. This would help ensure the guidelines don't sit unused on a shelf.

**Objective:** Young people are involved in child welfare leadership and change in a way that they feel meaningfully, ethically and sustainably engaged, accommodated and supported. Young people are supported in a way that they can avoid burnout and graduate to more significant leadership roles if that is their interest. Agencies have guidelines to feel comfortable in their engagement work and can demonstrate their ongoing commitment.

**Eligibility:** Any organization or individual (including those outside child welfare) that seeks to or currently engages, young people in and from care

**Planning process:**

1. Identify and map out which similar resources currently exist, and how they could be built upon, including compiling the voluminous, relevant data from this project.
2. Discuss how to frame it to make funders sympathetic to this cause.
3. Determine who will host and lead project.
4. Identify which funders and partners would be most sympathetic and have the capacity to support this project.
5. Determine how to partner with young change-makers in guideline development.
6. Identify how to promote and roll out once complete.

“ STAFF WHO ENGAGE YOUTH NEED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ON HOW TO SUPPORT THEIR YOUNG LEADERS—ON ETHICAL STORYTELLING, ANTI-OPPRESSION TRAINING, POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT, TRAUMA-INFORMED CASE MANAGEMENT, FAMILY PRIVILEGE—WITH PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE TO DO THE TRAINING. ”

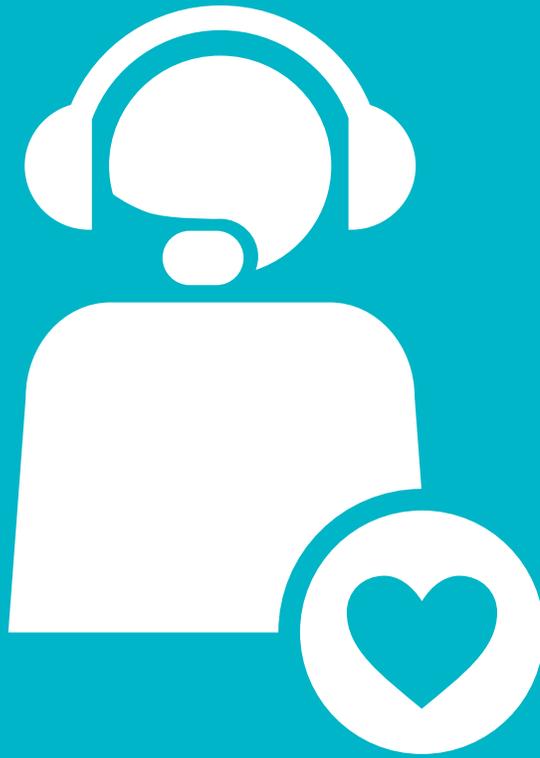
“ YOUTH ENGAGEMENT MUST BE A WIN-WIN RELATIONSHIP. IT'S A PARTNERSHIP. WE NEED THEM AS MUCH AS THEY NEED US OR MORE—THIS CREATES A NATURALLY SUPPORTIVE, MORE AUTHENTIC ENVIRONMENT. ”

“ EVERYWHERE WE GO WE HAVE TO EXPLAIN OURSELVES, SO REMEMBER THAT WHEN YOU ASK US TO SHARE OUR STORY FOR YOUR ORGANIZATIONS BENEFIT. IT MAKES IT DIFFICULT TO MOVE ON FROM THE 'FOSTER KID' IDENTITY. ”

“ SEEKING EQUITY IS COMPLEX...HOW DO WE DECIDE WHAT'S A SPECIAL ACCOMODATION AND WHAT'S 'NORMAL' HR PRACTICE? WE BRING CLASS, RACIAL, CULTURAL, HETERONORMATIVE AND GENERATIONAL BIAS INTO THIS. WE ALL NEED ACCOMMODATION. ”

“ DON'T FIX US, FIX THE SYSTEM. ”

“ WE NEED BETTER SUPPORTS IN PLACE SO THEY CAN THRIVE IN THEIR LEADERSHIP ROLES AND IN THEIR LIVES OUTSIDE OF THOSE ROLES FOR THOSE ROLES TO BE SUSTAINABLE. ”



## 5. 24/7 YOUNG CHILD WELFARE CHANGE-MAKER SUPPORT LINE + CHAT WITH PERMANENCY AND MENTORSHIP SUPPORT

### **Potential Program Titles: Resilience Line, featuring the My People Program**

**The Need:** Because of the early trauma, neglect, and instability young people from care typically experience growing-up, and the difficulty most workers have to find the time to properly develop and support permanency planning, we heard from young change-makers in and from care that they often do not have any stable healthy adult relationships. When asked what made the difference for young people from care who have thrived in their child-welfare roles and in their lives, overwhelmingly young people and allies who support them report having that “one supportive adult.” When young people have that one adult who loves them unconditionally and can provide a healthy supportive relationship, they typically have much better outcomes when it comes to accomplishing their goals, having healthy relationships with others, self-sufficiency and giving back to the community.

Young people who did not have that “one supportive adult” they can reach out to during crisis, during positive times, and to plan and check in a round their goals, did often identify other people

who care about them who provide support, but these are often partners, friends and biological family members who may or may not be able to provide consistent, healthy, permanent support. This means an overwhelming number of young people report they do not have anyone they can call when in crisis, particularly when struggling with mental health, including PTSD and suicidal ideation.

Further, child welfare leaders from care who are volunteering their time and expertise related to their experiences told us they are routinely over exposed to others' trauma and reminded of their own traumas in carrying out their work, including public speaking, providing peer support and advocating for systemic change. When young people have no one to talk to, they spoke often about turning to unhealthy coping mechanisms, unhealthy relationships and self-harm. They pointed out that, while in care, they were not taught healthy coping strategies. While some identified that their dark emotional periods and crisis eventually improve, in the moment—in desperation—they told us that they and many of their peers feel so overwhelmed that they resort to unhealthy coping strategies like substance use, self-harm, sex that doesn't feel healthy, overspending, over-working and over-committing, emotional eating, blocking out the world and, devastatingly, suicide.

While these subjects are difficult, many young people spoke to the need to be able to talk openly about the pain, self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide present in the youth in and from care community. Over and over we heard that, if we don't "get real" and work harder to let the light into these dark subjects and create a culture where we can speak openly about struggle and how we all (from care or not) need help, many worry that we'll continue to lose those dealing with their pain in isolation.

Finally, we heard from many young people and their allies that existing lines aren't often used by youth in and from care because those answering don't "get" their experiences, they get a new person every time, and they don't think it's for them (i.e. they're not "kids" or they're not in a "real" enough crisis, or "leaders" aren't supposed to need help).

### **Solution:**

1. Part 1: A Resilience Line staffed by people with lived experience and allies who "get it" who are well trained in case management and crisis intervention and attachment and trauma-informed counselling practices. Hiring would be in partnership with youth in and from care. The support line would be accessible by phone, text, online chat, 24/7 365 days per year, available to young change-makers and anyone else from care. They would be well-versed in Ontario's resources for young people in and from care and help direct them to supports in their community. With a small staff, this would help young people establish connection and trust and provide more meaningful support.
2. Part 2: A My People Program. Resilience Line staff would also run a program where young people are supported to nourish and build their support network, continuing any permanency planning, Family Group Conferences, Family Finding and mentorship planning and connecting that were started during their time in care. Staff would support the young person to identify their healthy supports, what kind of support each person best provides (e.g. career mentoring, emotional support, practical life skills, having fun); and where there are gaps in their support network, youth would be supported to reconnect with potential supports and/or connect with a trained community ally through existing mentorship programs. Where those aren't yet available, the Community Ally component would be a mentorship-like matching program where older adults from care and those who are keen to be allies to those in care are trained as mentors and matches are supported to build and develop long term relationships. The young person would check in





with staff on their My People Permanency Plan and stay connected to their people through a private virtual network just for the young person like Facebook but with strict privacy settings. This would keep all of their people in one place and accessible using only the internet. Youth would also be supported to explore other forms of permanency, like adoption (both legal and ceremonial), no matter how old they are.

**Objective:** Young people are supported during times of crisis and to reconnect to existing, caring adults, and build new connections with healthy adult supports that provide unconditional love and permanency.

**Eligibility:** Change-makers and other young people with lived child welfare experience.

**Planning process:**

1. Mapping where available support lines and mentorship programs for young people from care currently exist and determining where partnerships and expansions could be made.
2. Determining Eligibility—would anyone be turned away? What if they're not from care or not a "change-maker" from care?
3. Draft a proposal and ask eligible young people about potential barriers and challenges.
4. Identify which funders and partners would be most sympathetic and have the capacity to support this cause.
5. Determine who to approach to host and/or fund and/or partner with, and/or if there are any programs to expand.
6. Discuss how to frame it to make funders/hosts sympathetic to a cause where crisis lines already exist for those who need it.
7. Determine how to develop and promote the program; include young people in design and hiring.

**“ IT'S TIME TO HEAL OUR SECTOR'S HEALERS. ”**



## 6. PROVINCIAL YOUTH IN/FROM CARE RESOURCE WEBSITE

**The Need:** Young people consulted overwhelmingly expressed frustration that they do not know about the resources and support services available to them, from scholarships and bursaries, to funding for basic needs, health and wellbeing resources, programs and activities, events or housing support. Those who knew about some resources felt strongly that many of their peers did not, and that they are overwhelming and confusing to keep track of and navigate. Further, many reported being unfamiliar with resources available in their community or new communities they move to or communities where peers they're supporting live. So much of resource-hunting happens when the professionals that young people turn to are not available and the young people end up providing support to peers to help them navigate the system. Young people want to be able to access an easy to navigate, youth friendly and up-to-date website and a hard copy document that explains all of the resources available to youth in and from care in any community in the province, including those not specific to youth in and from care, like housing and mental health supports or recreational and cultural activities. Young people also reported that existing websites are either too specific to one community or are difficult to navigate, understand and are not up to date.

Further, many workers expressed a desire to stay in the loop and up to date on all resources and that they find it difficult to do so.

Agency leaders consistently expressed frustration that there are many great resources in the province that are underutilized.

**Solution:** Easy to use, youth friendly and accessible website with a unique URL, not buried within an existing site. It outlines all supports and resources and services available to youth in and from care wherever they are in the province, including information about housing, counselling, emergency supports, cultural activities, health and well being, housing, school and bursary information, events, etc. They also requested a hard copy booklet updated annually available to those who do not have regular internet access. The website would be updated regularly, with the option for agencies and workers to post services and resources and for someone to maintain, update and answer questions from youth and help them navigate the website. Website should be clear, simple, easy to use, warm, non-judgmental, accessible to those with special needs and culturally inclusive. Young people should be involved in developing the site to make sure it's user-friendly and contains adequate information. If possible to code, a key function would be a form section to enter your needs, location and other eligibility factors and the site would generate all available funds and resources specific to that need and that young person. Agedout.com would be an ideal template, so this could be an expansion of that website to Ontario.

**Objective:** Young people and their supports can know about and access all existing resources so that they can get the support they need, use the services that exist and support their peers in any community.

**Eligibility:** Anyone, but marketed to and written for youth in and from care ages 14-30

**Planning process:**

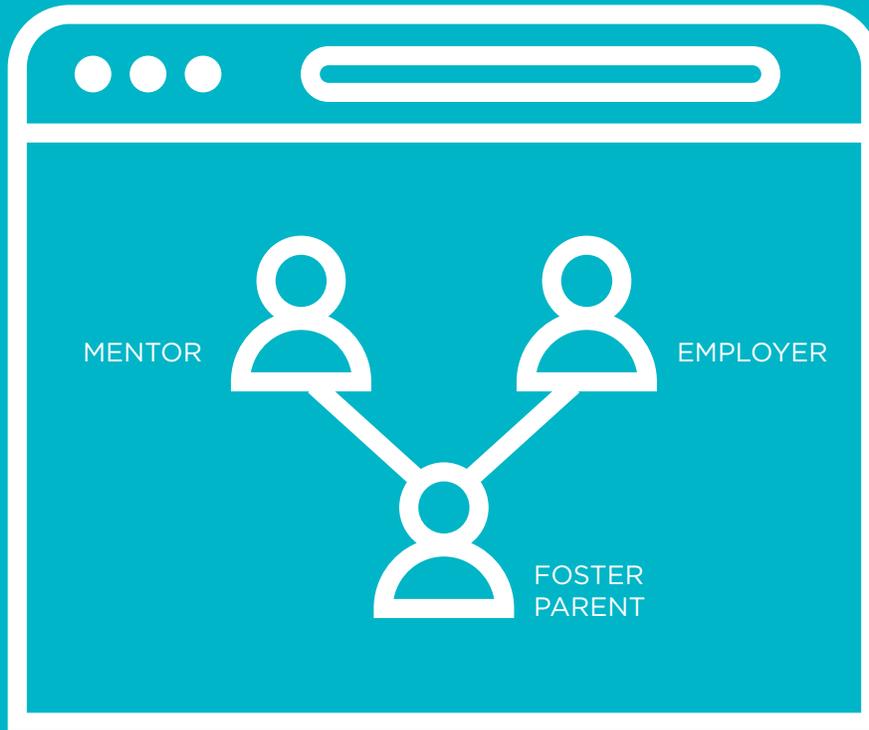
1. Identify and map out which similar websites currently exist (i.e AgedOut.com, OACAS' site, YouthRap, etc.).
2. Draft a proposal and ask eligible young people about their goals for the website—needs are different in Ontario
3. Determine who to host and fund—an expansion of existing site or partner to use an existing template?
4. Discuss how to frame it to make funders/hosts sympathetic to this cause
5. Prepare proposal and approach potential funders/hosts
6. Determine how to let young change-makers know this website exists. Success here (i.e. high usership) will require a significant youth-engagement and promotion plan with in-person launches, advertising and social media presence.



*“ FOR YEARS I’VE COME TO THESE MEETINGS AND WE SAY THE SAME THING. WHY IS THERE NOT A CENTRAL WEBSITE FOR ALL YOUTH IN CARE? ”*

*“ YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL THE NEED TO MAINTAIN A PERSONA ONCE THEIR SEEN AS A ‘SUCCESS.’ IT THEN BECOMES DIFFICULT TO ASK FOR HELP, ESPECIALLY FROM THOSE WHO ARE SUPPORTING YOU TO BE A LEADER. ”*

*“ I WAS LUCKY, WITH WORKERS, WITH LOVING PEOPLE—BUT WE SHOULDN’T HAVE TO BE LUCKY TO GET SUPPORT. ”*



## 7. MOBILIZING ALLIES WEBSITE + CAMPAIGN

### Potential Program Titles: **Be the Village; Building the Village**

**The Need:** Overwhelmingly, we heard that the people that youth in care learn to count on are professionals who are only available during certain hours and only for a short time in their life. Upon aging out, many youth find they are only able to turn to friends, partners, and some familial relations, if those are available at all. When youth have those relationships, they often report that they are valuable and important but cannot provide all supports they need, especially when it comes to life skills, school and career planning, and financial management; that these relationships do not always provide the stability or resources that they seek, including a place to go during tough financial times, periods of mental health crisis, and during holidays.

With growing community awareness about the challenges young people involved in child welfare face, there is a greater appetite from the community at large to improve the lives of children and youth in and from care but few channels to do so. Youth, agencies and adults alike consistently spoke to the idea that it takes a village to raise a child and that there is no such thing as “other people’s children.” Further, the community at large knows it is wiser to invest early in young people than to support them through expensive government services later on. Finally, many youth report frustration with the adversarial “blame game” culture around child welfare and would prefer adult allies who care about them to work together to support them instead of as “frenemies” who tear each other apart. We heard that government systems are better able to make appropriate changes when the whole community is pushing for them.

**Solution:** A website, campaign and database that engages the public in youth in care issues, explains their unique barriers and challenges, and offers avenues for adult allies to play a support role as the village to youth in and from care in roles that work for them. Suggested topics and/or webpages on the website include:

- a. Youth in Care Issues Awareness page (video/information/stats)
- b. “Foster Kid” Stigma section (video/information/stats)—could be combined with the Issues page as it is one of many issues facing youth in and from care, but may also be worth its own
- c. “We all have a role”—ways to support youth in and from care:

**i. Educate Yourself and Others**

**ii. Youth In Care Movement Champion** (raise awareness and mobilize community)

**iii. Donate** (link to child welfare Foundations and charities)

**iv. Volunteer** (links to child welfare agencies where allies can volunteer)

**v. Mentor**

1. Professional/Career (links to expanded Element Financial Youth Capital Program or develop a database and training, potentially modelled after the Element Financial Youth Capital Program something similar)
2. Relational (connected to My People Program—described in Solution #6: Resilience Line, but could be hosted anywhere—helping youth plan their ongoing permanency, including reaching out/re-connecting with known healthy, caring adults and matching to trained Community Allies, emphasis on peer and adults with care experience)

**vi. Foster** (links to information on how to become a foster parent and foster parent organizations)

**vii. Adopt**—emphasis on adopting older young people and sibling groups (links to information on how to become a foster parent and foster parent organizations)

**viii. Pro-bono Professionals Network** for youth in and from care (create database and training), including financial services (taxes, planning, etc.), legal services, life-coaching, etc.

**ix. Landlord Network** for those interested in providing low-rent housing to youth in and from care (create database and training to build relationships with their youth tenants, especially where their unit is in their home), modelled after the Friendly Landlord Network in BC

**x. Employer Network** for those interested in hiring youth in and from care (create database and training, could connect to Element Financial Youth Capital program)

**Objective:** Young people are supported by the entire community and have more opportunities to build relationships and access resources to pursue their goals and thrive in their lives. The community is empowered with the information they need to support young people in and from care. It takes the pressure off of the system alone to be a family that it cannot be to our children and youth.

**Eligibility:** Anyone

## Planning process:

1. Mapping where similar websites exist, including out of province/country, that could be built upon.
2. Determine if this is an Ontario site or a national site.
3. Determine whom to approach to host/fund/partner.
4. Discuss how to frame it so that potential hosts/funders/partners are sympathetic to the cause.
5. Hosting a target-audience focus group to develop approach and key messages.
6. Develop a proposal or put out a RFP.
7. Determine how to partner with young people in and from care and adult allies to develop the site and promotion plan; input from young people on tone and language is key, controlling how they're represented.

*“ WE ARE JUST LIKE ALL KIDS - WE JUST DON'T HAVE THE SAME RESOURCES. ”*



# INTERVIEW:

## **Lorena Bishop (née, Pilgrim): Looking back on child welfare leadership as a young person from care**



Now in her mid-thirties, Lorena has been a pillar of the youth in care movement in cities across Canada since her early youth. Having worked for a variety of organizations in many roles—from volunteer to senior staff leadership—she shares with us many powerful insights as both someone who engages young people in and from care and experienced youth engagement as a young person from care.

### **What do you think great youth engagement looks like?**

To me it's an opportunity for a young person to explore, discover, build on their strengths, passions, interests, ideas. There has to be a partnership between the organization and the young person. It's not about saying "oh, we need this to happen; we need to get a young person to do it." It's about connecting young

people with opportunities that you may have in the work you're doing and finding meaningful ways to connect young people to work in the organization.

### **What about engaging young people in and from care?**

Young people in care may require additional support and [we need to be] mindful of the realities they may have in terms of their everyday life. They have their own barriers and realities that may impact their ability to participate in the organization's work. So be mindful, but also help them to eliminate or reduce those barriers, and provide them with the support and training they need to do the work. Don't just make assumptions that a young person knows something straight forward that we take for granted—it may not be straight forward to them if they haven't had the exposure. Also, check in about any additional challenges and barriers they may have related to their being care like FASD....We need to find creative and supportive ways to support them to do the work.

### **Why does youth engagement require support? Shouldn't it just be about including young people in the work? Is support needed only for those from care?**

No. All young people need support, but the level of support that people need [to participate in work] varies depending on their experiences and circumstances—for example, if they're from care. You have an obligation, just like you do with any employee; get to know their strengths, areas of development, get to know how to support them in their work. If you aren't doing that with your employees, you're not being a great manager. So why wouldn't we do the same thing with young people? Any young person... Young people from care require additional support because of their experiences in their day-to-day life—perhaps with old or ongoing trauma and other barriers. From one meeting to the next, a young person may have changed homes, may be on a new medication. Sometimes these needs don't show up the way we think they're going to. This requires spending

time to check in and get to know that young person. Just like when any employee runs into an obstacle that gets in the way of their work, you would support them to work around the things in their life that allow them to do the work. Why wouldn't we do that for youth who likely have less resources?

### **Why are we obligated to provide support? Shouldn't we just find youth in a better place, for their sake and for the work?**

It's unethical to ask young people to be engaged in the work you're doing, and not give something back. It's not acceptable.... Say an employee is an alcoholic, and they come to work with booze breath, it's not acceptable, but we have an obligation to connect them with resources and provide that support so they can heal, before you get to the place where you let them go.

With young people, the level and extent of support may be different for some, but it's still the same thing. Let them know it's okay that they're at where they're at, but if it starts to impact the work, then we need to have conversations to see if they're willing to pause and connect with resources to contain the behaviour in such a way that it doesn't bleed and impact into the work. If they can do that, then we keep them in the role.

With young people there may be more chances and allowances and support, but they still need to do their role. If we start to spend too much time managing the behaviour that we can't do the work, maybe it's about them taking a break or finding them a different role. If they don't follow through with the support and resources, then you may need to let them go or find a less [involved] role. If the impact on the group of youth engaged or the organization is too great, then reassess. But you still need to create the time and space to provide the support, like with a weekly check-in, just like with regular staff. Check in around their role and tasks and work dynamics, but also if anything's going on outside their role in their lives.

With whomever we work with, we need to build a connection with the person. If they're in a good place, that's great. And when they're not, you learn about it sooner and can help troubleshoot and mitigate. Even if you don't care about them, it's a sustainability thing. It costs a lot of money to fire and hire and retrain new volunteers.

### **Should we avoid engaging young people who aren't in a really strong place?**

Good god, no! But it's about opportunity and capacity—don't engage someone who doesn't have the interest and capacity in the role, and you have to match them to the right role. Are you gonna ask someone who is struggling with addiction to lead an event? Probably not, but maybe you could get them to help decorate or take video footage at the event. Find the connection with the work and where the young person is at and their passion, interests and strengths. If they can't be in a leadership role, find another role for them to participate and engage.

### **What were some of the practices that made you feel engaged respectfully and sustainably?**

I could just tell when someone has taken the time to be present with you and connect with you. That for me was when I felt engaged. That's when I felt like what I was doing was worthwhile, that I was respected as a person, that my work was valued. It's almost like a spiritual thing. Helping you to see that you're valued and that you matter. That you have something to contribute.

## **Storytelling is a critical part of educating the public and mobilizing them to take action and push for greater supports for any cause, including improving the lives of youth in and from care. How do we ask and support the young people who want to share their stories?**

It is okay for young people to share stories, and sometimes they're ready to do that. It's about the impact it's going to have, so you need to be a person to support them to identify when they're overly raw, or if they're overly detached—neither of those are healthy experiences. Detached is an issue because if you're detached, you're not okay yet with that experience, it's shoved down or unprocessed. You haven't actually processed that experience. You're not owning your story. It is not empowering to not own your story. If you're not in a place where you've owned your story (either stepping outside of it because it's too painful to be disassociated or it's too raw), and you haven't dealt with it, then that's not healthy. So support them to share the pieces of their stories they've owned—processed. Help them figure out which pieces of their story they're empowered by and craft strategic messages with them on those.

### **Is getting involved that way paternalistic?**

The irony that young people never get asked their opinion growing up and then all of a sudden we care what they have to say when we need them is interesting! You can find ways to be able to support people to share things and the details that aren't raw. Perhaps find spaces for them to share in safer places as a first step. You can literally go through the draft of what they want to say to identify the pieces that are healed and those that are still raw. When we see someone on a Ted talk share a hard experience, do you think that speaker hasn't first told their partner, their best friends, their counselor, their colleagues before they're sharing that in public? The public shouldn't be the first to hear. You can visibly see when their body language changes around the pieces that are raw. We all have details about our lives we've processed more than theirs. If there's a piece that makes them anxious, you can say "okay maybe we don't share this piece now; we can take that out if you want." You have to provide young people with an opportunity to make real choices. It's not about whether they share their story, it's about how. That's where we have the responsibility to support them. Ask them how do they want to feel after? What pieces do they want to share? Given that conversation and given the choice, they're probably not going to want to share certain pieces of their story.

You also have a responsibility to the people in the audience and the triggers to the audience to. My opinion is that it's not healthy for that young person to share raw or detached unprocessed stories. There's still ways for young people to share impactful stories without it being raw. Without the audience going "oh god. Whoa." Go with the challenging and inspiring stuff, you can still share hard things that hit you in the gut, but it should inspire change without feeling fear. We need to find that line between where it mobilizes people to take action and where it's so raw and difficult that they shut down or get worried about that particular person.

# APPENDIX:

## Most Commonly Proposed Solution Ideas

As ranked by survey and summit participants:

1. Student Dept Repayment
  2. Child Welfare Change-Maker Retreats, featuring:
    - a. Leadership Training
    - b. Life Skills Training
    - c. Youth in care networking/relationship building
    - d. Fun and Relationship Building
      - i. Moderated, supportive online community
  3. Participation and Healing Fund, featuring:
    - a. Safety Net Fund
    - b. Liveable Income/Sustainable Income Top-Up Fund
    - c. Accessibility Fund
    - d. Professional Development and Certification Fund
    - e. Health and Wellness Benefits
    - f. Loved Ones Travel Fund
    - g. Recreation, Cultural and Community Connection Fund
  4. Youth-in-and-from-Care Engagement Practice Guidelines + Certification Training
  5. Support Line + Chat, featuring permanency and mentorship connections
  6. Resource Website for Ontario youth in and from care
  7. Allies website, featuring:
    - a. Awareness page (youth in and from care issues, including stigma)
    - b. “We All Have A Role,” featuring:
      - i. Educate Yourself and Others
      - ii. Youth in Care Movement Champion
      - iii. Donate
      - iv. Volunteer
  - v. Mentor (career and relational)
  - vi. Foster
  - vii. Adopt
  - viii. Pro-bono Professionals Network
  - ix. Friendly Landlord Network
  - x. Friendly Employer network
8. An Independent Ontario Youth in Care Network (this is already in planning phases, so not included here)
  9. Facility for youth in and from care, like a university, with holistic training for youth to build their goals and resume for plans after their advocacy. This is a pre-existing idea, as presented during [Jane Kovarikova's five14 Talk: Succeeding Survival. Click here to watch.](#)
  10. Training for Practitioners on how to best support youth they serve (e.g. counselors, doctors, teachers, etc.)
  11. CAS to open files of former youth in care as adults and offer support
  12. Advocate in Residence program: grants specifically for advocates to advise agencies or try projects of their own, requiring lived experience
  13. Provincial Magazine for youth in and from care

“ WE NEED TO STOP THINKING THE YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ‘MAKE IT’, WHO ARE LEADERS, DON’T NEED ANYTHING AND THE ONES WHO AREN’T LEADERS ARE BAD AND NOT ABLE TO BE LEADERS—WE NEED TO LOOK AT HOW WE VALUE SUCCESS AND SUPPORT EVERYONE’S GREATNESS. ”

“ [THERE IS] NOT ENOUGH ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS WHICH THE YOUTH CHOOSE...WE NEED TO HAVE OPEN CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE STRUGGLES OF YOUTH ADVOCATES AND TALK MORE OPENLY ABOUT ADDICTION AND SUICIDE. ”

“ STOP MAKING POSTER CHILDREN. ”

“ I’M SICK AND TIRED AND FRUSTRATED...I’VE SAT ON COMMITTEES AND GOT INVOLVED AND I’M LEFT WITH THE SAME QUESTION. ARE THESE PEOPLE OF TALKING OR ACTION? I SEE BAND-AIDS. WE HAVE YOUNG PEOPLE DYING...I ALMOST DIED. ”

“ REMEMBER, ADULTS WHO ARE BEING CONSULTED OR PARTNERED WITH OR WHO SIT ON THESE ADVISORY GROUPS ARE PRESENT ON WORK TIME—THEY ARE BEING PAID. THE YOUTH ARE NOT. WE NEED TO MAKE SURE WE COMPENSATE THEM APPROPRIATELY SO THE ROLES ARE SUSTAINABLE. ”

“ KNOWING THERE ARE THOSE IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN THE SECTOR WHO CARE—WHO LOSE SLEEP OVER HOW WE’RE DOING. IF IT WERE UP TO THEM THEY’D SIGN A BILL FOR US TOMORROW. THAT MATTERS TO ME...AND THOSE ARE THE PEOPLE BEHIND THIS PROJECT. ”

“ STOP IMPLYING THAT THE ONLY WAY A YOUNG PERSON IN OR FROM CARE CAN RECEIVE ATTENTION IS TO BARE THEIR SOULS FOR ALL TO SEE. ”

“ WHEN WE SAY WE NEED SOMETHING WE ARE TOLD THAT IT ALREADY EXISTS BUT IT DOESN'T—NOT HOW WE NEED IT TO. ”

“ WE NEED LONG-TERM MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT TO ADDRESS ALL THE TRAUMAS INCLUDING BURDENS'—OF OTHER YOUNG PEOPLE'S STRUGGLES. ”

“ KEEPING YOUNG PEOPLE YOUNG IS NOT WORKING. WE NEED TO PREPARE THEM FOR THE 'REAL WORLD'. ”

“ THE AMOUNT OF HONORARIUM DOES NOT RECOGNIZE THE VALUE OF LIVED EXPERIENCE. A SPEAKER WOULD GET \$2000 FOR WHAT WE GET \$40 TO TALK ABOUT OUR STORY. ”

“ CHILD WELFARE ADVOCACY WAS A DISTRACTION FROM WORKING ON MY OWN STUFF. ”

“ I'M HEARING THE SAME STUFF THAT WE HAVE BEEN TALKING ABOUT FOREVER. BENEFITS [NOW IN PLACE] ARE GREAT BUT THERE IS NOTHING FOR THOSE OF US THAT ADVOCATED FOR THIS. ”

“ YOUNG PEOPLE NEED A GUARANTEED, REALLY SKILLED AND TRAINED COUNSELOR THEY CONNECT TO THAT FOLLOWS THEM IN CARE AND AFTER. ”

**WE  
HEARD  
YOU**



**THANK  
YOU**