

CONNECTING COMMUNITY

TO SURREY YOUTH
AGING OUT OF CARE



[Read Report](#)

BUILDING COMMUNITY:

*A Report on Project Activities for the Connecting
Community to Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care Project*



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COMPASS CONNECTIONS & PLENTY OF THREADS:

A Report on the Prototype Programs



Part of the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition's Connecting
Community to Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care Project

[Read Report](#)

YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT:

*A Report on Project Activities for the
Connecting Community to Surrey
Youth Aging Out of Care Project*



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CONNECTING COMMUNITY

TO SURREY YOUTH
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We acknowledge that this work takes place on the unceded, ancestral and traditional territories of the Semiahmoo, Katzie, Kwikwetlem, Kwantlen, Qayqayt and Tsawwassen First Nations. We recognize the ongoing colonization of Indigenous peoples, which is evident in the disproportionate number of Indigenous children and youth in the care system. We commit to approaching this work in the spirit of reconciliation; aiming to decolonize our practice and amplify the voices of Indigenous youth whenever possible.

AN INITIATIVE OF



WITH THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT OF

vancouver
foundation



Surrey Youth
Assistance Fund

Ocean Park
Foundation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth in and from care matter.

Of the approximately 700 youth in BC who leave government care on their 19th birthday each year, anywhere from 50 to 70 youth “aging out” every year call Surrey their home. In 2016, the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition (SPRC) identified youth who had “aged out” of the government care system as a key demographic to support, noting the increased risk of poverty for these young people. We set out on a mission to “wrap the community around youth”, and radically rethink the ways youth are supported by the broader community as they transition from the care of Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) into independence when they turn 19.

We brought together stakeholders, decision-makers, adults and youth with lived experience, and community members to hear from youth and what they need to feel connected to the community as they make the leap into independent living. Our vision was that:

- Surrey youth in and from care will be better supported in their transition into adulthood.
- Youth participants will develop and refine their leadership skills, with the tools and knowledge to more effectively advocate for policy and systems change.
- Individuals and organizations not currently engaged with young people will be actively engaged in providing support to Surrey youth with care experience through financial contributions, in-kind support, or volunteer roles.

Our vision was supported by an approach rooted in shared core values amongst those involved:

- Centre the Youth Voice
- Know the Facts
- Raise the Profile
- Change the System

Over three years, we completed a significant amount of work under three broad categories: research, building community, and youth leadership development. Bringing together our findings, we developed and launched two prototype projects, Compass Connections and Plenty of Threads. These prototypes provided innovative ways for youth to create new, supportive connections with diverse community members.

Most importantly, we created a Youth Advisory Committee made up of Surrey youth with care experience to support the project activities. This group of diverse young people provided crucial direction and expertise on the process, the actions, and the intended outcomes. Their voices were central to the project, and paramount to the project's success.

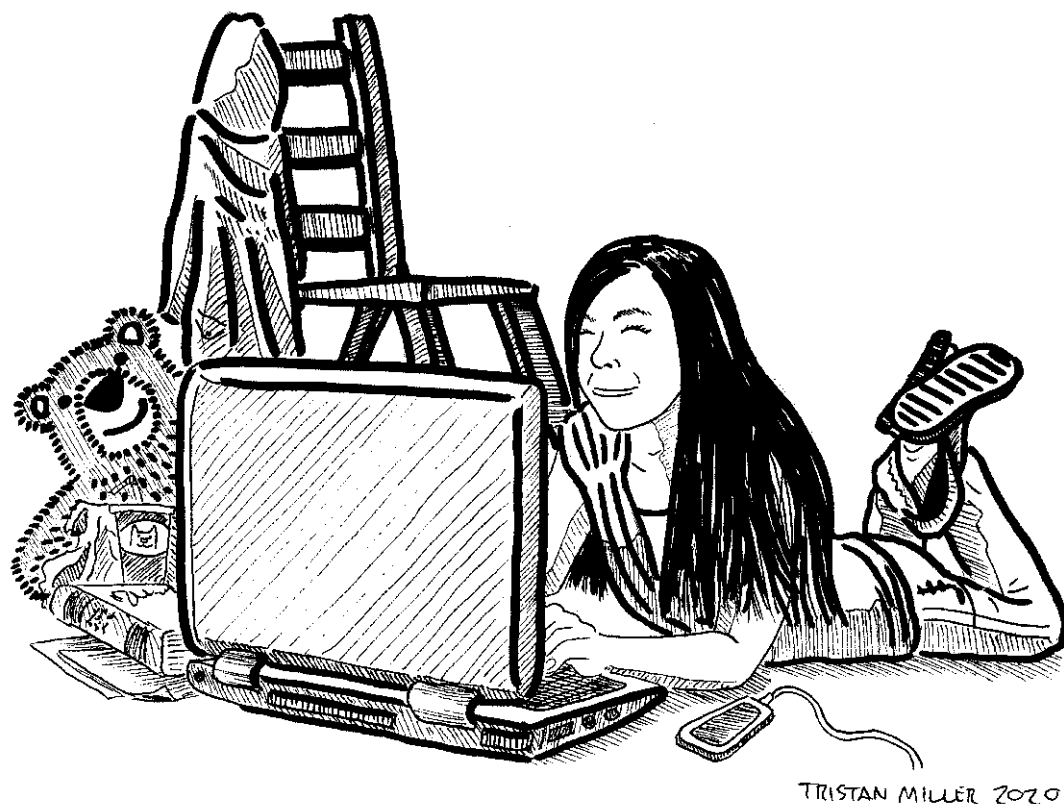
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THE CONTEXT



TRISTAN MILLER 2020



Approximately 700 youth in BC leave government care every year on their 19th birthday, and around 5,000 young BC adults (aged 19-24) have previously been in government care. While increasing numbers of young people in BC are living with their parents until well into their twenties, young people coming out of the care system are forced into independence at 19; cut off from familiar services and supports before they may be ready.

Surrey has the largest youth population in BC. But prior to 2016, there wasn't a lot of information specifically about youth with care experience in Surrey. Looking to take action on this issue, the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition commissioned a report by the McCreary Centre Society in 2016 entitled "Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care" to paint a clear local picture of this issue. Their research showcased some important facts: including that amongst Surrey's young people, anywhere from 50 to 70 turn 19 and 'age out' of government care every single year.

The research showed us that most British Columbian parents expect to support their children up to age 28, and most of them do. While just about all of their peers receive

some financial or other assistance from their families between the ages of 19 to 28, only a tiny fraction of former youth in care in Greater Vancouver had received any housing or financial support from their family since turning 19. Unfortunately, the pattern across BC is true for Surrey youth with care experience - local youth who age out of care are more likely than their peers to become homeless, have poor educational, employment and health outcomes, and claim income assistance benefits.

The research showed that the majority of BC adults believe that 19 year olds do not have the necessary skills and resources to live independently, and need the support of their families through their twenties. A 2013 Vancouver Foundation poll showed that only a quarter of BC adults were aware that government support ends when young people in care reach their 19th birthday. The Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition was concerned about the increased risk of poverty youth transitioning out of care face, and set out to explore how the community could play a role in supporting these incredible young people to thrive.

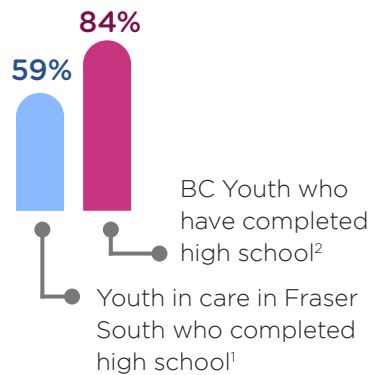
#THEFACTS

Indigenous children and youth are consistently over-represented in the child welfare system across Canada.

In the 2016 census, 650 children were in government care in Surrey. Of them, 305 were Aboriginal; just under half the total amount of children in care.

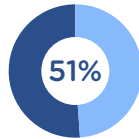
EDUCATION

Youth in Care are more likely than their peers to face challenges in their education.¹



54

The number of youth in the South Fraser region (Surrey, Langley, and Delta) who aged out of government care in 2015-2016.¹



In 2014, over half the homeless youth in Surrey had care experience³



The percentage of BC parents who continue to provide some level of support for their children until age 28.⁴



Only **9%** of youth with care experience in Greater Vancouver between 19-26 received housing support from their family after aging out.⁵

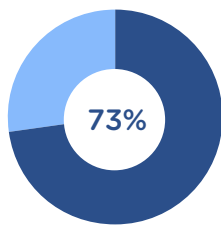


28% More than a quarter of local homeless youth with care experience had worked in a legal job in the past month.³

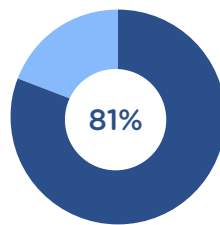


Nearly a quarter of Fraser South youth with care experience had an emotional or mental health condition.⁶

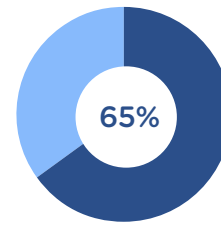
AND DESPITE ALL THIS...



FELT GOOD ABOUT THEMSELVES



FELT AS COMPETENT AS OTHERS



FELT THEY WERE GOOD AT SOMETHING

The majority of youth in Fraser South currently in care envisioned only positive circumstances in their future, most commonly having a job or career, being in school, or having a family of their own.⁶

¹Ministry of Children and Family Development (2016). [Youth in care in the Fraser South region]. Unpublished raw data.

²Rutman, D., & Hubberstey, C. (2016). Is anybody there? Informal supports accessed and sought by youth from foster care. Child Youth Serv Rev; 63:21-27.

³McCreary Centre Society. 2014 Homeless and Street-Involved Youth Survey.

⁴Vancouver Foundation (2014). Fostering Change—Perceptions on the challenges facing British Columbia youth transitioning out of government care.

⁵Morton, B.M. (2016). The power of community: How foster parents, teachers, and community members support academic achievement for foster youth. J Res Child Educ, 30(1):99-112.

⁶McCreary Centre Society. 2008 and 2013 BC Adolescent Health Surveys.

#WORDSMATTER

The term “Aged Out” is the most common way people refer to youth who have reached the age of 19 and are no longer eligible for government care such as a foster home, group home, or a Youth Agreement.

But some youth with lived care experience don’t like being referred to as “Aged Out”. It’s a label that doesn’t inspire positive or empowering ideas about young people. Youth in Surrey have proposed phrases like “journeying into adulthood”, “aging into the community”, or “transitioning into independence”, that better reflect that important transition point that happens at 19 when their government care support ends. We respect and value youth perspectives, and have tried to use respectful and affirming language throughout this

report when referencing this important milestone. We also feel a need to sometimes continue to refer to youth as “aging out of government care”, as it is still the most widespread and shared term used between organizations, government, and throughout the community at-large.

The delicate balance between working outside of a system and working within a system to influence change is central to this work. We commit to doing our best to meet immediate needs of those most impacted, while understanding at times we have to “talk the talk” of the current systems, in order to create a lasting culture shift long-term. It is a tough balance, and one we are constantly revisiting; in our actions, beliefs, and language.



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#THELINGO

Attack of the acronyms! Here is a helpful guide to decipher some of the language used in this report, and generally regarding children and youth in the government care system.

Age Out: In B.C. youth “age out” of foster care when they reach 19. At this time, MCFD is no longer the legal guardian of the youth and the youth is considered an adult.

Agreements with Young Adults (AYA): A Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) program that provides financial support to cover living expenses to former youth in care who, at the time of their 19th birthday, were in a Continuing Custody Order (CCO) or a Youth Agreement (YAG), and who were attending a post-secondary educational, vocational, or life skills program. The eligible age for AYA is 19-27.

Child in Care (CIC): A child who is in the custody, care or guardianship of a Director at MCFD.

Continuing Custody Order (CCO): A court order placing a child in the continuing custody of a director, granted when the court is satisfied that the child cannot return to the family.

Director: A person designated by the Minister.

Foster care: A living arrangement for a child who cannot live safely with their family of origin.

Foster parent/Caregiver: An adult who acts as a parent for a child in place of the child’s biological parents, but without legally adopting the child. These adults are screened and trained by the government and receive payment for their services.

Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD): The BC Ministry responsible for providing child protection and child welfare duties, to ensure the safety and well-being of children, including guardianship of children and youth in care, and for supporting youth on YAG, AYA, and independent living.

Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction (MSDPR): BC government ministry responsible for social services such as employment programs, income assistance and disability assistance.

Temporary Care Order (TCO): An order placing a child for a specific period of time in the custody of a Director or another person, with the intent for the child to return home. An order placing a child for a specific period of time in the custody of a Director or another person, with the intent for the child to return home.

Youth: In MCFD, a person who is at least 16 years of age and under 19 years of age. Other government definitions of youth include individuals between 15-24, or 16-28. In this project, youth usually refers to young people between the ages of 19-24.

Youth in government care (YIC): Refers to a young person under the age of 19 who is on a Youth Agreement (YAG), lives in a group home, foster home, or receives support from the BC government or a delegated Aboriginal agency.

Youth with care experience/from care: A young person who has ever been in government care.

Youth previously in care/from care: A young person who is not in care currently but has been previously.

Youth Agreements (YAG): A legal agreement between MCFD and a youth, most typically between the ages 16 to 18, who is unable to live at home or with another family or adult. Youth live independently with financial support.

#THESCENE

There is a lot of important work happening around the region, to increase awareness of the challenges youth face on their journey to adulthood. We are thankful to be engaging in this work, alongside others who have set the stage and turned the spotlight on young people from care.

FOSTERING CHANGE

Vancouver Foundation launched Fostering Change in 2013 with the goal of addressing homelessness by providing opportunities and support for youth transitioning out of foster care. The work is driven by a team of advocates with experience in the care system, and supported by allies. In Spring 2018, the Fostering Change campaign moved to First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, and continues to advocate for policy change that supports young people from care.

FIRST CALL: BC CHILD AND YOUTH ADVOCACY COALITION

First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition is a non-partisan coalition of over 108 provincial and regional organizations who have united their voices to put children and youth first in BC through public education, community mobilization, and public policy advocacy.

FEDERATION OF BC YOUTH IN CARE NETWORKS (FBCYICAN, OR THE FED)

The Fed is a youth-driven, provincial non-profit organization dedicated to improving the lives of young people in and from care in BC between the ages of 14 and 24, to ensure they reach their full potential. Their programs create a safe space for youth to come together, build connections, identify challenges, and feel at home. Throughout the year the Fed hosts youth retreats, provides bursaries for education and skills development, supports youth with training and leadership opportunities, and distributes resources and information to young people and their allies across the province.

AGEDOUT.COM

AgedOut.com is for young adults who were in government care in BC. It's an up-to-date warehouse of information on resources and services available to young adults and a learning tool to help people feel empowered as they leave care. AgedOut.com was developed by the Adoptive Families Association of BC in partnership with the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

THE PROJECT

Given what the statistics say about the increased risk of poverty for young people with care experience, it was a natural fit for the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition (SPRC) to lead a project focused on supporting youth aging out of the care system. The intent of this work was to “wrap the community around youth”, and radically rethink the ways youth are supported by the broader community as they transition from the care of MCFD into independence. And so, in 2016 with the support of funding from the Vancouver Foundation, “Connecting Community to Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care” launched into its first phase. With continued support from the Vancouver Foundation in 2017, and additional funding from Coast Capital Savings, Envision Financial, the Ocean Park Foundation, the YEES (now SYAF) fund, and others, we hit the ground running with an ambitious vision to change outcomes for youth in and from care.



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THE INTENT

The project goals represent short and long-term outcomes focused on increasing community support and improving outcomes for youth transitioning out of government care.

- Surrey youth in and from care will be better supported in their transition into adulthood.
- Youth participants will develop and refine their leadership skills, with the tools and knowledge to more effectively advocate for policy and systems change.
- Individuals and organizations not currently engaged with young people will be actively engaged in providing support to Surrey youth with care experience through financial contributions, in-kind support, or volunteer roles.



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THE APPROACH

With the intent to wrap the community around youth aging out of care in mind, the SPRC and Planning Committee created a project plan based on these commitments:

CENTRE THE YOUTH VOICE:

Youth are experts in their own lives, and know what they need to succeed. Youth with care experience will be empowered to prioritize and promote tools and techniques that will effectively support youth aging out of the care system in Surrey. Through the creation of a Youth Advisory Committee, youth with lived experience will be continuously engaged in an authentic way, with their voices central in all project activities.

KNOW THE FACTS:

We want to understand the issue. We will do the groundwork to ensure our work is rooted in evidence-based research; finding synergies between the specific needs and priorities of Surrey youth, promising practices in other communities, and brand new ideas that will work for Surrey.

CHANGE THE SYSTEM:

Identifying key priorities for young people, we will bring together the necessary individuals and organizations to strategize solutions to address the root causes of the issue. We will remember that traditional service provision doesn't go far enough, and begin to shift community behaviours; advocating for solutions that meet the needs of young people from care and end the cycle of youth poverty. We will think outside the box to engage "unusual suspects" in the community - those people not currently connected or providing services to youth in/ from care - in becoming actively engaged in supporting youth through their transition out of care; rethinking what it means to "age out".

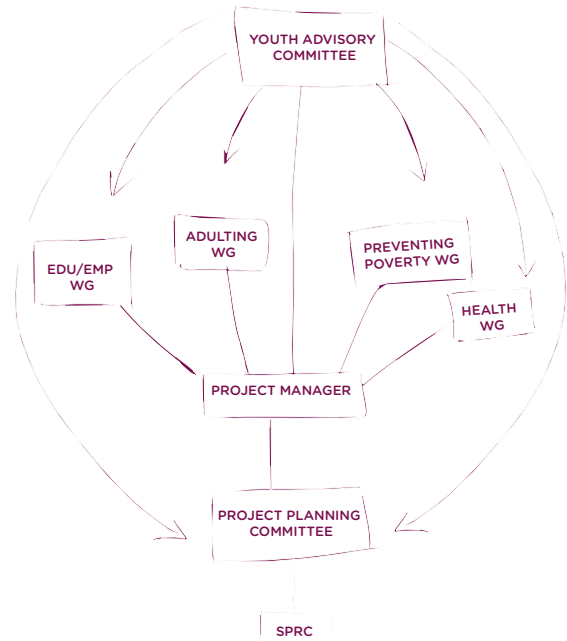
RAISE THE PROFILE:

We will raise awareness of this issue by hosting community events; to highlight the additional risk of poverty youth face, showcase the resilience and strength of these incredible young people, and to provide community members an opportunity to explore ways they might offer support to youth in Surrey.



THE PEOPLE

The SPRC understands that systems-change requires cross-sectoral collaboration and borrowed many aspects of a Collective Impact model of stakeholder collaboration to provide a foundation for the work. Working with SPRC member organizations, and bringing other community and agency representatives along, the SPRC worked diligently to uphold shared values of collaboration in order to maximize the project's reach and community impact.



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Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition (SPRC)

Formed in 2012, the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition (SPRC) aims to tackle poverty in Surrey. Its diverse membership reflects the breadth and diversity of the impact of poverty; with representatives from government, business, health services, community service agencies, and members of impacted or highly vulnerable populations coming together to exchange resources, to collaborate, to plan, and take action.

The SPRC uses its collective voice to mobilize and inspire government, the private sector, the not-for-profit sector, and the entire community to take actions to reduce poverty in the community. The SPRC engages in broad poverty reduction planning, while also undertaking targeted projects that raise awareness and understanding of the effects of poverty, that build the capacity in the community to reduce poverty, and that directly benefit those community members living with low incomes.



[It's been] a privilege to get to tap back into this work, and all of the great work and people that are involved in this kind of work. I have a better understanding of how much harder things have gotten for youth, and appreciating their stories. The young people will stick with me. And the staff who have such passionate advocacy. I have been pushed to do some deeper thinking around some issues, and become a better ally. To better support people who are vulnerable in so many diverse ways.

- Planning Committee Member



Project Planning Committee

The Planning Committee is composed of representatives from SPRC member organizations, Youth Advisory Committee members, and the Project Manager. This group provided support and direction on project timelines and activities, and acted as a liaison to the SPRC.

Working Groups

Following a series of community workshops and a youth retreat, multiple working groups were formed to mobilize on the key priorities and ideas generated by youth. Membership in the working groups varied; each included some representatives from SPRC member organizations, with the inclusion of additional community members, the Project Manager, and members of the Youth Advisory Committee. Originally focusing on six key priority areas, the groups later consolidated into four active planning tables: Preventing Poverty, Employment & Education, Creating Community & Adulting, and Health.

YAC

Central to the project was the creation of a Youth Advisory Committee (YAC), composed of local youth with care experience. Youth aged 15-24 were invited to meet regularly with a focus on providing insight and expertise to the Planning Committee and Working Groups on all project activities, developing leadership skills, creating connections with their peers, and advocating on important issues affecting young people with care experience. The YAC chose the name VIBE for their committee, which stands for: raising our Voices, Improving services, Be noticed, and Evolve.



THE WORK

We approached this work under three broad categories: research, building community, and youth leadership development. While some of the project activities had more immediate impact than others, each was taken in the spirit of moving towards systems change by wrapping the community around youth as they transition out of government care. The Planning Committee, project staff, and YAC tackled much of the work of building community and youth leadership development, while the working groups took on specific needs identified through the research and by young people at the retreats.



PROJECT ACTIVITIES



RESEARCH

- Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care Report
- Youth in Care Fact Sheet
- Housing Resource Sheet
- Youth Mentorship Program Models
- Youth Housing Models
- Youth Housing Survey



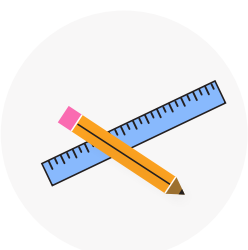
BUILDING COMMUNITY

- Stakeholder Workshops
- Holiday Dinners
- BC Children & Youth in Care Week Awards and Community BBQ
- 19th Birthday Installation and Event
- Youth Story Harvest



YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

- Youth Advisory Committee
- Advocacy
- Youth Retreats



PROTOTYPE PROJECTS

- Compass Connections
- Plenty of Threads

THE WORKING GROUPS

The research and conversations from the early stages of this project gave us a clear picture of what youth need as they make the transition from care into the community. Overwhelmingly, the consensus was that youth need:

- Supportive relationships with adults and peers
- A system navigator
- Access to safe, affordable housing
- Access to employment and job training
- Support to graduate and access post-secondary opportunities

The YAC hosted its first youth retreat in 2018, creating an opportunity for youth with care experience to prioritize some of these broad needs for Surrey youth, and a chance to dive deeper into determining how we could translate some of those needs into actions. At the retreat, youth highlighted the additional need to access sanitary and household care products, addictions support, free extended health benefits, more affordable housing options, increased start-up money, and support “adulthood”. These priorities acted as the foundation for four distinct working groups who began tackling direct needs.

CREATING COMMUNITY & ADULTING

The Creating Community & Adulthood working group focused on how to connect community members to young people as they transition out of government care, and vice versa. Youth identified that they lacked supportive relationships with adults in the community once they turned 19, and that they would have felt more supported in the transition with unpaid adults they could rely on for advice and support. Extensive research around possible models of mentorship programs was undertaken to develop and launch the Compass Connections prototype project that connected youth participants to adult volunteers on an ad-hoc, informal basis to meet their specific and timely needs.

EDUCATION & EMPLOYMENT

The Education & Employment working group tackled connecting youth to diverse mentors for career and educational development. Including representatives from local skills development and training programs, post-secondary institutions, and community organizations, this group developed and launched the Plenty of Threads prototype project; creating a “human library” of supportive adults for youth to connect with.

PREVENTING POVERTY

Recognizing the impact the housing crisis has on youth as they transition into independent living, housing quickly became the focus of the Preventing Poverty working group. Bringing together service providers from youth-serving agencies, along with other key stakeholders, this working group completed research on housing models and funding structures, advocated for rent supplements for youth, and supported the development of a housing resource list for young people.

HEALTH

The members of this working group shared goals around health, including addictions support, the need for extended health benefits at no cost, and sanitary and household products. Given the broad scope of mental health and addictions, the intended focus for this project was to address the lack of access to sanitary products youth identified as a priority (including household cleaning products, baby supplies, and menstrual and hygiene products) and find ways for youth to access these products in a more cost-efficient way. Although this was a priority identified by youth, we decided to focus on other areas during this project phase, but do hope to address issues related to health in future project activities in a more cost-efficient way.

RESEARCH

YOUTH AGING OUT OF CARE IN SURREY

With a commitment to ensuring our work was evidence-based, an important first step was to complete in-depth research to inform our project activities. The McCreary Centre Society assisted in compiling existing research on youth transitioning out of care; connecting the broad research to the local experience in Surrey. They produced an important report entitled “Report on Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care”, detailing the specific needs and experiences of youth transitioning out of care in Surrey. We also produced a fact sheet that highlights many of the key statistics and needs for this demographic. The Fact Sheet has been circulated and referenced widely throughout the community, and the research completed informed our approach, process, and activities.

Reflecting the priorities outlined by the youth through the initial research, and at the youth retreat, we engaged in additional research on housing and mentorship models.

HOUSING

Members of the Preventing Poverty working group collaborated to perform research on youth housing models, to support the development of a youth housing proposal. They studied a number of different housing models supported by non-profit organizations, and assessed their viability in Surrey. Complementing the general research on existing youth housing models, we also developed a youth housing survey, which was completed by 41 Surrey youth with care experience. The objective of the survey was to get a sense of preferences youth have for their living arrangements to inform potential housing developments in the future. The emerging themes and results of that survey will be circulated to youth-serving agencies interested in developing housing that works for young people.

Another important focus of the Preventing Poverty working group was bringing service providers together to share information and resources. Members of the working group compiled a Surrey-based Housing Resource Sheet, detailing housing options for youth in Surrey. This list will be updated regularly and circulated to youth-serving agencies.

#UNUSUAL SUSPECTS

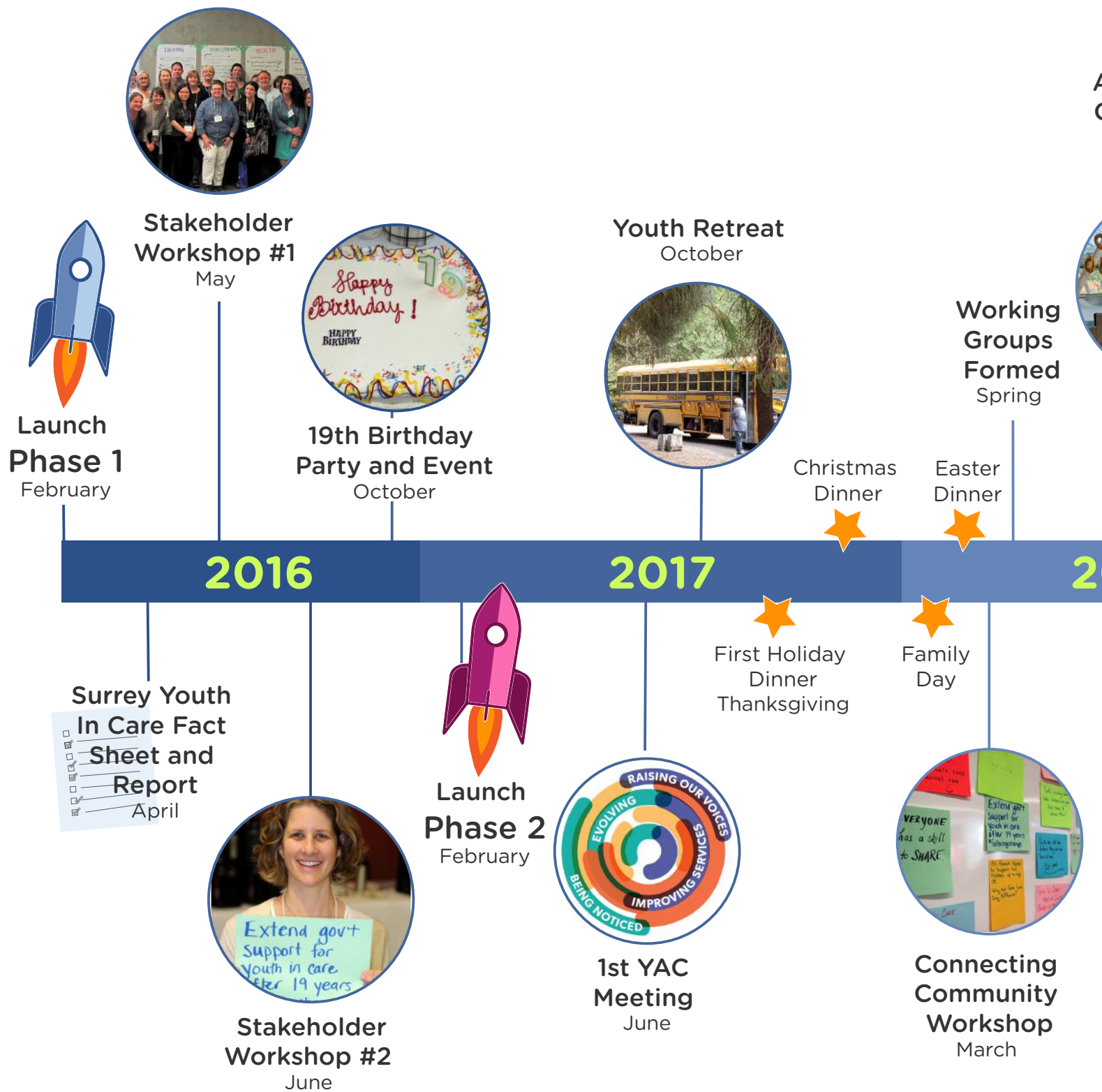
When it comes to youth services, we are often tossing catnip to the cats. Singing to the choir. Lecturing to the faculty. You know.

We know who the “usual suspects” are: the folks supporting youth on the ground through their paid work, those working in the child welfare system, and of course the magical-unicorn-giant-hearted-community-members who seem to be able to tackle every social justice issue present in the community with grace and conviction. We wanted to extend our reach and include people who weren’t already connected to youth, youth services, or the child protection system: the unusual suspects. The people who maybe didn’t realize they have something to offer young people, or who weren’t even aware that government care ends at 19. We wanted to open the - cats, choir, faculty - er, the circle, up and invite everyone in to be a part of creating a strong and supportive safety net for young people in our community.

MENTORSHIP

We heard loud and clear that youth want to develop healthy, supportive relationships with unpaid adults in the community as they transition out of care. We performed extensive research on various youth mentorship models; and our findings supported what we were hearing from the youth. Youth want youth-directed, informal opportunities to connect with adults, without needing a formal commitment, and without time constraints like traditional support programs. Indeed, the research reflected that the longest lasting and most impactful mentorship relationships begin informally, and develop organically. This important research served as the foundation for our two prototype projects: Plenty of Threads and Compass Connections.

THE TIMELINE



PHASE 1

BC Youth
Awards and
Community
BBQ
June



Youth Retreat
October



Groundwork
for Prototypes
February

Volunteer
Training
June

BC Youth
Awards and
Community
BBQ
June

Prototypes
Wrap
Celebration
September

Youth
Story
Harvest
February

Final
Report
March

Christmas
Dinner

Family
Day

Easter
Dinner

Christmas
Dinner

2018

2019

2020

Thanksgiving

Housing
Model
Research
February

GOT
YAC
May

YAC
Recruitment

Prototypes
in Action
Summer

Youth
Housing
Resource
Sheet
September

Thanksgiving
Dinner

Youth
Housing
Survey
October

YAC Retreat
February



PHASE 2

BUILDING COMMUNITY

One of our goals was to continue raising awareness about the challenges youth face as they transition out of government care, and into independent living in the community. At various points in the project, we brought together community stakeholders, adults with previous care experience, and community members who haven't traditionally been working in the youth services field to discuss the issue, get involved with supporting young people, and to celebrate the incredible and resilient youth in and from care we are so fortunate to have living in Surrey.

#DONORSPOTLIGHT

The Surrey Youth Assistance Fund (SYAF, formerly YEES, or the Youth Employment and Education Fund) was started by a generous anonymous donor in Surrey, originally with a focus on eliminating youths' barriers to employment and education opportunities. Following one of our community workshops, the donor was inspired to shift the SYAF's funding mandate to focus on ending the cycle of poverty and supporting vulnerable youth on their journey to adulthood and independence, including youth transitioning out of care.

The breadth of ways the SYAF offers support to young people is inspiring. Whether providing emergency funds to keep youth from homelessness, funds to purchase a computer for schooling, or to pay for driving lessons, the list of ways the SYAF directly supports youth is endless. The SYAF supports a number of groups at Christmas, including ours, providing generous donations for youth and young families in poverty, and youth in the safe house and homeless shelter in Surrey. The SYAF is a saving grace in our community, filling in so many funding gaps and helping youth to thrive.

WORKSHOPS

Our initial workshop provided an opportunity to bring over 40 diverse stakeholders together from a broad range of the wider Surrey community to deepen the understanding of the challenges youth face as they transition out of care. Participants working in the youth-services field gained valuable insight into how to positively engage youth in their own practice, and shared the learnings amongst their own teams and agencies. For participants coming from sectors outside of child and youth care, the workshops presented an opportunity for awareness-building of this important demographic, and a space to develop ideas on how the Surrey community can support its youth in and from care.

A second community-wide workshop focused on action-planning, bringing together representatives from local and provincial government, health, social work, youth-serving organizations, Indigenous partner organizations, education practitioners, individual community members, alumni from care, and youth. The workshop included a panel of alumni - adults who had successfully transitioned out of care - describing their experiences, successes, and challenges. Participants identified a number of "unusual suspects" who may have an interest in connecting with youth, brainstormed additional ways to engage more "unusual suspects", and were invited to reflect on their role in creating more opportunities for youth as they transition out of care. Many of the "unusual suspects" the participants identified at this workshop supported various project activities over the following years.

In March 2018, we held a third community event, bringing together key stakeholders to support action on the priorities identified at the youth retreat. The YAC shared their findings, and we formed working groups that brought on many "unusual suspects" to help move the project plan forward.

19TH BIRTHDAY PARTY

The 19th Birthday Party art installation displayed at Surrey City Hall provided an opportunity for anyone in the community to learn more about what happens to youth in care when they turn 19. The exhibit, created by Fostering Change, is a compelling representation of the challenges faced by youth aging out of the care system, and effective in increasing public awareness and compassion for these young people. It certainly had a lasting impact on those who came through the City Hall atrium, many of whom were moved to action. While the installation was in City Hall, we also hosted a community event, inviting key stakeholders and community members to attend and learn more about youth with care experience. Alumni from care and prominent individuals from the care community, or connected to supporting young people, spoke with passion about the need to support youth through this crucial transition.

BC CHILD AND YOUTH IN CARE WEEK AWARDS AND COMMUNITY BBQ

BC Child and Youth in Care Week (BCCYICW) is a time for everyone to stand in support and celebration of the incredible, courageous, and resilient young people in government care. Partnering with local youth-serving agencies, we held two annual BCCYICW celebrations in Surrey; hosting community-wide BBQs and honouring youth in and from care with individual awards of recognition. Nominated by their peers and staff from youth-serving agencies, we handed out over 50 awards each year, recognizing their personal, academic, or community achievements. Guests were moved to hear about the incredible impact these young people have in their communities, and to have the space to celebrate their unique and important contributions.



HOLIDAY DINNERS

The community holiday dinners are an example of responsive youth engagement. Early in the project, YAC Members expressed the immediate need to provide space for youth who have transitioned out of government care to have a place to go on holidays. Holidays can be a challenging time for young people living independently, who may not be connected to a biological or foster family, and/or who have a lot of emotion surface around these holidays.

On December 25th 2017, we held our first holiday dinner event. We invited youth and their loved ones to attend, with 25 people attending. The City of Surrey staff led a donations drive to fill stockings for youth with treats, personal items, and gift cards. We were able to secure grants to ensure each young person received a gift. Most importantly, we came together to cook and share a traditional meal, and to celebrate the season together with the youth and their chosen families. We were happy to continue this new tradition in 2018 and 2019.

What we quickly learned is that the need for holiday events extended beyond Christmas. We held gatherings on Family Day, Easter, Mother's Day, and Thanksgiving in 2018 and 2019. Many community members volunteered their time, assisted us in securing additional donations, and joined us to cook food and to celebrate; making these dinners an important opportunity for young people and community members to build relationships and support one another through informal gatherings.

”

The holiday dinners are so family-oriented. It was so nice to actually celebrate the holidays because I grew up never being able to.

- Youth Attendee

“

YOUTH STORY HARVEST

Near the end of the project, members of our Youth Advisory Committee hosted a “story harvest”; an event where they shared their personal experiences of growth and leadership throughout the project to community members. Community members were invited to reflect on those experiences through a specific lens; identifying examples of resilience, hope, empowerment, and connection woven throughout the youths’ individual and collective stories. It was a powerful way to celebrate the work of our Youth Advisory Committee, and to relay the impact this project has had on their personal and professional lives.



TRISTAN MILLER 2020

YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Our commitment to supporting youth throughout the project was two-fold: we wanted to amplify the voices of youth in and from care by ensuring the project activities were designed, implemented and evaluated with direct input from youth with care experience, and ensure that there was “nothing about them, without them”. We also wanted to support leadership development of youth, and provide them with opportunities to access skill development opportunities, new experiences, and to build connections with the community-at-large..

#YOUTHSPOTLIGHT

In his own words, Cody Jacques wears a lot of hats. Cody came to YAC with care experience, and a mission to change the system for his peers. Throughout his time with YAC, Cody has made the transition from a youth participant to a valuable project team member, sitting on almost all of the Working Groups, the Planning Committee, facilitating the YAC meetings and ensuring other YAC members had the support they needed to attend. Cody recently graduated from Douglas College with a Diploma in Child and Youth Care, and will be graduating with a Bachelor's Degree in Child and Youth Care June 2020. Cody, we could not be more proud of you, and credit much of the project's success to your commitment and drive.

YOUTH ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The YAC is both part of the organizational and decision-making structure of this project, and a case study in itself as the first Surrey youth advisory committee focused on the needs of youth in government care.

Youth aged 15-24 were invited to meet regularly with a focus on providing insight and expertise to the Planning Committee and working groups on all project activities, developing leadership skills, creating connections with their peers, and advocating on important issues affecting young people with care experience. YAC Members were actively involved in planning and facilitating the youth retreats, holiday dinners, and engaging in advocacy in the region. The success of our YAC inspired the creation of several additional YACs throughout Surrey during the course of this project; providing opportunities for youth outside of the care system to engage in the issues and services that impact them.

The majority of the original YAC members remained regularly engaged over the course of three years, which is exceptional in terms of youth engagement. One member who relocated to Prince George continued to attend meetings remotely, via online platforms. YAC members have credited the success of the YAC to the authentic approach to engagement, where the youth felt empowered to steer the project through their decisions about the project priorities and activities.

”

The YAC saw me for the individual I am, and saw me for who I was.

- YAC Member

“

YOUTH RETREATS

The YAC planned and facilitated 3 youth retreats; 2 that were open to any youth in or from care, and 1 for the YAC members.

The name of the first retreat in 2018 was “Changing Our Story, Changing Our Future”, and 17 youth attended. At that initial retreat, we gained valuable insight from the youth around the challenges young people face as they transition out of the care system, with a specific focus on Surrey. These youth were integral in identifying the top priorities that became the foundations for the working groups and all project activities.

The second retreat, “VIBES reYACt 2k19”, had 18 participants, with a focus on sharing the work the YAC had done throughout the project, and to provide a true camp experience for youth. Most of the participants had never camped before, and had high barriers to participation. The itinerary included youth-led activities and workshops, and time for nature walks, archery, ropes courses, and games. The retreats also provided a unique opportunity for youth to connect with their peers outside of their regular routines, creating positive memories and lasting connections.

Our final retreat, held in 2020, was an opportunity for the YAC members to reflect on their experience as part of the YAC, and to celebrate the incredible work they have accomplished.

”

If you give us the chance to speak, and sit there and listen, then you will get to know what we need. This YAC gave me the strength to advocate for myself, tell me what’s right or wrong. And speak up in the system.

- Alex, YAC Member

“

ADVOCACY

An important part of the project was a commitment to amplifying the voices of youth in and from care. Through participation with the YAC, youth gained valuable leadership skills around advocacy and public speaking. The YAC participated in a number of events where they were able to speak out about policies that directly impact them. Whether participating in all-candidate’s meetings during elections, attending policy meetings with groups like Fostering Change, travelling to provincial conferences to speak directly to decision-makers, hosting a podcast about youth in care, or providing feedback to organizations and groups asking for input or advice, the YAC gained the confidence and skills needed to affect change in the community.



TRISTAN MILLER 2020

PROTOTYPE PROJECTS

While having one supportive adult in their lives is important for youth leaving care, we found there is evidence to suggest that efforts to build dense and varied networks for youth is even more important for long-term personal success. Specifically, our findings support the development of natural and informal mentorship relationships, programs that build social networks rather than individual relationships, and programs that combine skills development and other types of instrumental support with the opportunity for natural mentorship relationships to arise. But when we looked around, we didn't see this model anywhere in Surrey. Or the province. Or Canada!

"Prototypes" are by definition an early model to test a process or concept. Our prototype projects were an opportunity to try something completely new and innovative by combining our research with our focus on building community and supporting youth leadership development.

Spear-headed by the Creating Community & Adulting and the Education & Employment working groups, we launched two short-term programs to test their viability and impact: Compass Connections and Plenty of Threads. Both of the prototypes demonstrated many early successes, and we can't wait to test both the Compass Connections and Plenty of Thread programs as proper pilot projects in the near future.

#ADULTING

Based on zero credible sources, here is our best guess on how to define this term:

adult:ing

/ə'dəltiNG, 'a,dəltiNG/

- The practice of behaving in a way characteristic of a responsible adult, especially the accomplishment of mundane but necessary tasks;
- the act of being adult-ish; and
- calling out for someone to bring another roll of toilet paper and realizing no one is coming.

COMPASS CONNECTIONS

When asked how the community could support youth after they had 'aged out' of government care, the youth voice was consistent and clear: they needed a network of supportive adults in the community they could call on as-needed for help "adulting". Examples of support they might need could be assistance with finances, landlords, cooking, exercise, or anything you might traditionally call a parent or close family member for throughout your 20s (and beyond, let's get #real.)

We recruited 7 volunteers we named Community Navigators; trusted adults that were available to support youth on an ad-hoc basis, when youth had a specific need. Between July and August 2019, 4 youth between the ages of 19 -27 tested the Compass Connections prototype program, reaching out to the Community Navigators for a variety of support including help finding pet veterinary care, advice on dealing with a landlord, and even learning to swim.

In the short prototype phase, both the youth participants and adult volunteers were positively impacted by their interactions and developing relationships. Whether during a one-time ask, or through ongoing conversations, youth reported that they felt supported and cared for. All 7 adult volunteers said they would volunteer again and enjoyed being able to offer informal support to multiple diverse young people.

”

There is a lot of power in asking for something and not having to give with it. Some people would say that's a part of love, or care, but I mean, since I was 14 or 15 I haven't felt that, so it's been a long time

- Youth Participant, Compass Connections

“

PLENTY OF THREADS

The name Plenty of Threads comes from the idea that we need 'plenty of threads' to weave a tight social fabric; especially for our young people from care living independently in the community. The working group's objective was to connect youth from care with people in the community who could act as resources, sources of information and connections for youth to build their professional and social networks in support of employment and education opportunities. The program built off the idea of a "human library" concept which originated in New York as an effort to challenge stereotypes and prejudices through dialogue. Through Plenty of Threads, we provided youth with a catalogue of interesting people (ie. the "books"), that they can "check-out" (meet for coffee); providing an opportunity to learn from the education and career experience of individuals they may not have otherwise met.

Over the two-month prototype phase, 5 youth met with many of the 14 human books available, discussing education and employment opportunities from a wide variety of fields including social services, law, and costume design. The feedback was extremely positive from both the youth participants and the adult volunteers, with many youth leaving feeling inspired and motivated that they are on the right track.

”

I would recommend this program to other adults to volunteer. There is a lot of value to connect and support with the next wave of youth that would/could be entering the labor force in whichever area they choose. It is about providing guidance to reassure that they can contribute and have something to offer.

- Human Book, Plenty of Threads

“

#HUMANBOOK

human

/ˈ(h)yō omən/

Relating to or characteristic of people or human beings.

book

/bō ok/

- A written or printed work consisting of pages glued or sewn together along one side...

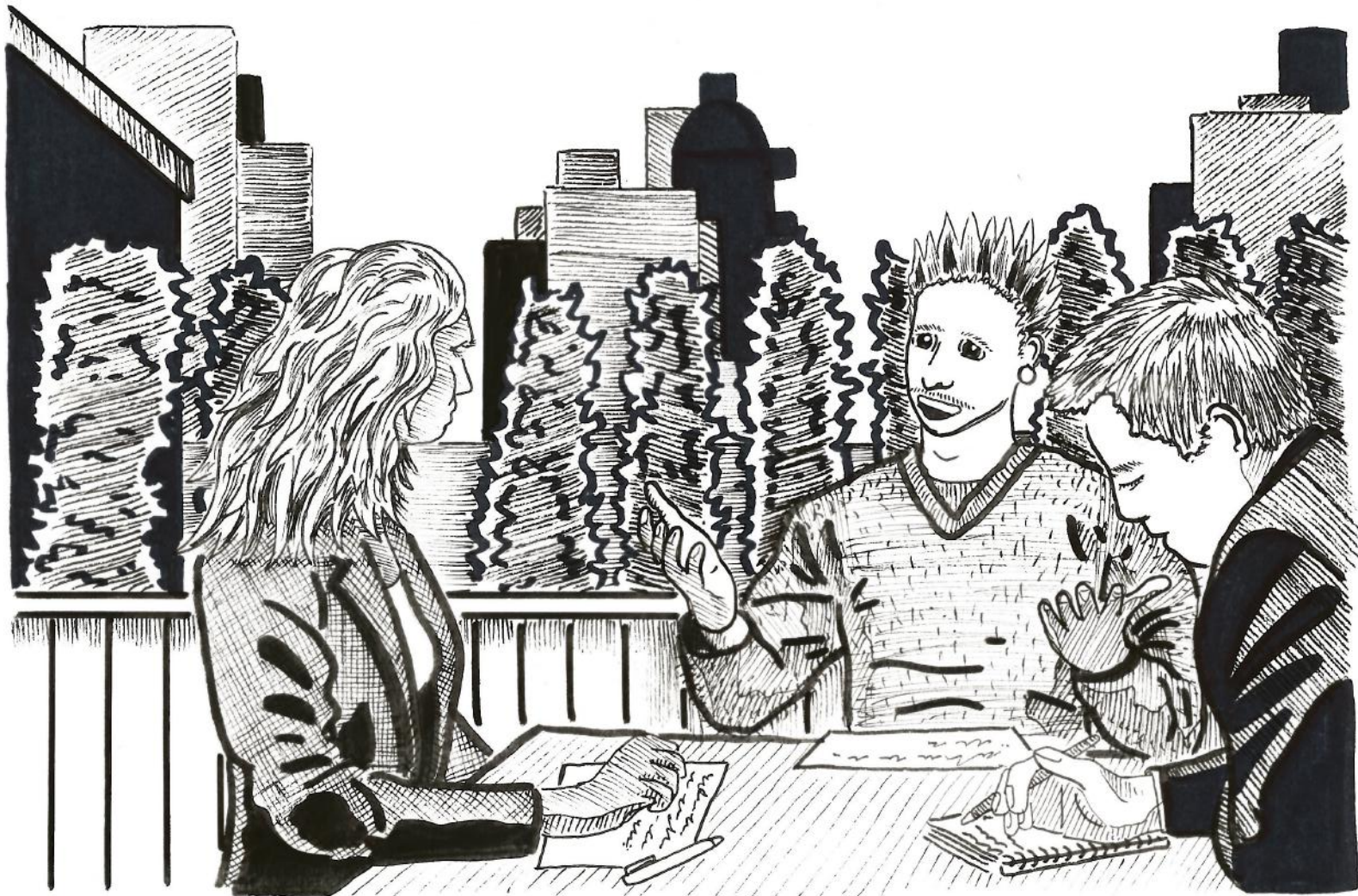
Okay this isn't working. A human book, in the context of a "human library", is a volunteer with a particular knowledge set or personal experience that is willing to share their experiences with others. Someone can "take out" a human book, and learn a bit about whatever the book wants to share. Anyone can become a human book. We all have something valuable to share with others.



TRISTAN MILLER 2020

THE LESSONS

Over the course of three years, we did a lot of learning and a lot of growing. Here are some of our high-level takeaways from the overall project.



TRISTAN MILLER 2020

01 SYSTEMS CHANGE WORK IS HARD.

And long. And hard. The work requires authentic collaboration between people with lived experience, community members, service providers, and decision-makers. We recognized early on that we could only tackle a piece of the systems-change, and that some of our goals were too ambitious. We refocused our energy on finding the next step to affect change. We know the actions we took that supported immediate impact are part of the shift of broader systems-change, and so while we didn't end youth poverty, for example, we took many valuable steps in that direction.

02 BACKBONE SUPPORT IS CRUCIAL.

We know it is extremely challenging to find the financial and personal resources to have consistent backbone support for working and planning groups in a collective impact project structure. Working off the “side of a desk” just isn't sustainable or effective. We also know that a collective impact structure is the most effective for addressing broad community needs. When we reflect on this project, it's pretty clear that the working groups that had dedicated administrative resources had the most consistent membership and the most impactful outcomes. Finding sufficient resources and committed people and organizations who are willing to provide ongoing organizational support is key to the overall success.

03 NEVER DOUBT THE POWER OF COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS.

This project was initially supported by a strong community advocate for youth justice who was a leader with decision-making power. This community champion had a clear vision, made connections, and used their personal and professional network to support the work. While a community champion is an invaluable resource, it is equally important to structure the work so it is sustainable, regardless of who is able to be involved. Achieving success in long-term systems change work requires community champions - plural. A shared and consistent vision, and a commitment to collaborate amongst all stakeholders, will ensure that even when you lose your community champion, or encounter any bumps in the road, the work will maintain momentum and can be carried on with success.

04 YOUTH-LED MEANS BEING RESPONSIVE.

Part of what made this project so impactful was our ability to be responsive to emerging needs, and to prioritize what the youth wanted. This was supported by our funders' flexibility, and the intention of everyone involved to do this work in a good way. Over the three years, we added new project activities, dropped some, and refocused when we needed to. Hey, we even took a year longer than we anticipated to make sure we got it right. If you want to center the voice of young people, you have to walk the talk and shape the project around their needs.

05 YOUTH WANT TO BE CONNECTED TO UNPAID ADULTS.

It's safe to say that youth who have been through the care system are resilient, resourceful and self-sufficient. But just because they can do it alone, doesn't mean they want to. We have heard loud and clear that youth want to be connected to unpaid adults in the community; adults that aren't tied to the time constraint of a service program, and that they can build an organic relationship with over time, and on their terms. Our two prototype projects were so successful because they connected youth to supportive, healthy adults in meaningful ways; and it turns out that adults in the community want to be connected to these youth just as much.

06 YOUTH NEED SUPPORT TO SHOW UP.

It was really challenging to connect with youth who had already transitioned out of government care and were living independently in the community. Because most youth over 19 aren't connected to services, we had to think creatively about how to engage them and ultimately a lot of our success came down to word-of-mouth. Once engaged, many of the youth participants faced a lot of barriers to participating - whether in YAC, the holiday dinners, retreats, or the prototype projects. Many of the youth participants required a lot of additional staff support to show up, which further supports the need to wrap the community around these young people to make sure they can continue to show up in every aspect of their lives.

07 THE YOUTH ARE IN SURREY. THE FUNDING AND CAPACITY IS NOT.

One of the most valuable findings from our project was a better understanding of how many Surrey youth transition out of care into the community, and what their specific needs and challenges are. Surrey has the highest population of young people, and anecdotally we know that youth who transition out of care in other nearby cities often end up in Surrey, searching for affordable housing solutions. The number of youth who transition out of care in Surrey also doesn't include youth on YAGs, so we know the estimate of 50 - 70 youth aging out annually is low. And yet, we see other cities with far more resources, funding, and practical support for this demographic. While we feel we helped put a spotlight on this issue in Surrey, we know there is still a lot of work to be done.

”

I think this project also allowed for the opportunity to bring different agencies together to work towards a shared purpose and built connections among organizations. Overall, I think the project raised awareness about youth in/ from care in Surrey and the incredible strength/assets they bring to the community, but also the need for more holistic community support and systemic change to enable them to thrive.

- Working Group Member

“

THE HORIZON

It's always hard to know exactly what the next cycle of a project will look like, but here are some of the key pieces we believe are important in whatever we take on next. More specific recommendations for future project activities are included in the project activity reports.



TRISTAN MILLER 2020



NARROW THE FOCUS.

Have you heard that quote by Desmond Tutu about eating an elephant? One bite at a time? That's what we plan to do, but without the elephant, of course. While we have a vision to end poverty and improve the outcomes for youth in and from care, we know it's going to take a lot of time, work, and resources to get there. We are committed to thinking strategically about what small steps we can take to effectively impact systems-change, and who needs to be at the table to make it happen.



CONTINUE RADICAL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT.

The voices of youth with lived experience are central to this work. We will continue to push ourselves to think radically and creatively about what authentic youth engagement looks like, and how we can support them in a good way. This means meeting when youth are able to, meeting in places that feel safe for young people, removing barriers to attending meetings and events, compensating them fairly for their expertise, ensuring the work is reflexive, and sometimes... eating a giant piece of humble pie when we get it wrong.



DIVE DEEPER.

Our prototype projects, Compass Connections and Plenty of Threads, were huge successes. But to really understand both the challenges and long-term impact of these programs, we need to launch a longer pilot phase that includes more youth and more adult volunteers. This approach to informal mentorship isn't being done elsewhere, and we want to figure out how to do it. This is what the youth have asked for, this is what they need, and this is what the research shows to have the strongest impact on participants - so let's put it to the test and figure out a way to make this work for young people.



CHECK-IN EARLY AND OFTEN.

It is really challenging to evaluate the impact of project activities, beyond the personal experience. A rigorous evaluation plan that includes multiple strategies to measure progress and success will assist in project planning, and allow for possible course correction along the way.



FIND AND KEEP THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS.

We will continue to go beyond our circles, to connect with people who never imagined themselves involved in this field. We discovered that so many community members want to be involved in supporting these young people; our job is to find ways for them to do so! Moving forward, we want to have ongoing, consistent engagement with the “unusual suspects”, to ensure that they remain connected to project activities, and more importantly: the youth.



BUILD BRIDGES.

We will continue working collaboratively at every level necessary to work towards systems-change. Nurturing the relationships we have built through this project, we will look for synergies with other local agencies and organizations. Importantly, now that we have helped put this issue on the map in Surrey, we can connect with the other groups organizing regionally and provincially, to ensure that our message is clear and consistent, adding to the unified call for change.

THE WRAP

We accomplished a lot over three years together. Our successes span from immediate impact on the ground, to important work behind the scenes, bringing new people in, building partnerships, and gaining a better understanding of the challenges and barriers Surrey youth experience as they transition out of care.

The consistency and commitment of the youth and adults involved over three years is a testament to both the need, the sense of urgency, and the desire to make lasting change for youth. Our work has built on the efforts of others, and will be an important foundation for work in Surrey to come.

Youth who have experience in the care system have been through enough. Let's continue to work together to ensure their next chapter into adulthood is one that includes healthy relationships, a strong sense of community, self-empowerment, access to resources and opportunities, and endless hope for a bright future ahead.

”

Everyone keeps saying “oh the YAC is coming to an end.” I don't think of it that way. I think there's a lot more work to be done, and there's no doubt in my mind that we will find something, because this is just... it can't end now. I feel like we are picking up, we are on a roll, and there's no way you can just stop something in its prime.

- Edward, YAC Member

“

#ITTAKESAVILLAGE

This project was not possible without the financial and in-kind contributions from so many organizations and individuals. This list is not exhaustive, but we would like to thank the following groups for their generous funding, donations, and in-kind support to ensure that we could shift our focus from dollars to action.

Funders

Vancouver Foundation
Coast Capital Savings
Envision Financial + First West Foundation
City of Surrey
Vancity Credit Union
Mitsubishi Surrey
The Cmolik Foundation
Surrey Youth Assistance Fund (formerly YEES)
Simon Fraser University
Kwantlen Polytechnic University
Van Tel/Safeway CU Legacy Fund
Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks
Gordon Food Services
Vancity Community Foundation
More individual community members than we can count!

Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition Member Organizations

City of Surrey
SFU Surrey
Ministry of Children and Family Development
Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction
Immigrant Services Society of BC, representing the
Local Immigration Partnership
Surrey School District
Surrey Libraries
Fraser Health Authority
Surrey Board of Trade
Vancity Credit Union
Pacific Community Resources Society
SOURCES
Fraser Region Aboriginal Friendship Centre
Options Community Services
Surrey Homeless and Housing Task Force
ACORN
Surrey Homeless and Housing Society

Planning Committee

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Heather Lynch, Options Community Services
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Cody Jacques, Options Community Services
Erin Harvey, Pacific Community Resources Society
Natasha Singh, Fraser Region Aboriginal
Friendship Centre
Chelsey Grier, Fraser Region Aboriginal Friendship
Centre
Margaret Mubanda, Community Member

Working Group Leads

Averill Hanson, Ministry of Children and Family
Development
Rachel Nelson, SFU Surrey

YAC

For confidentiality reasons we can't list the names
of all our YAC members, but know they are
spectacularly awesome and we couldn't have done
this work without them!

Project Team

Tanika Dodds
Sam Pothier
Tasha Henderson
Darcie Bennett
Cody Jacques
Alice Sundberg
Mary Hart
McCreary Centre Society

Art

Tristan Miller, Art
Zoë Greig, Graphic Design



TRISTAN MILLER 2020

INCREIBLE



COURAGE.



INCREDIBLY

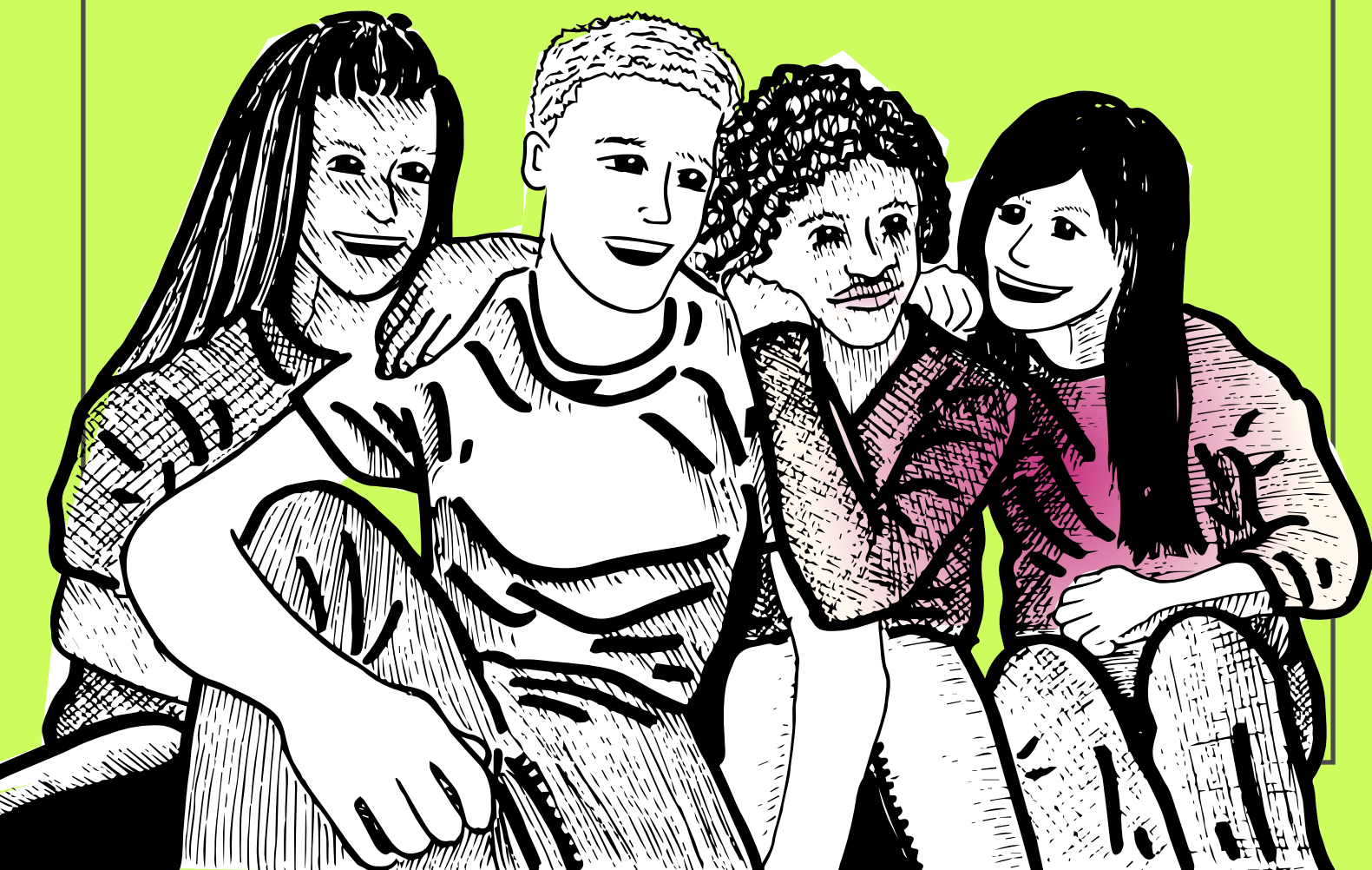


PROUD
OF MYSELF



BUILDING COMMUNITY:

*A Report on Project Activities for the Connecting
Community to Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care Project*



We acknowledge that this work takes place on the unceded, ancestral and traditional territories of the Semiahmoo, Katzie, Kwikwetlem, Kwantlen, Qayqayt and Tsawwassen First Nations. We recognize the ongoing colonization of Indigenous peoples, which is evident in the disproportionate number of Indigenous children and youth in the care system. We commit to approaching this work in the spirit of reconciliation; aiming to decolonize our practice and amplify the voices of Indigenous youth whenever possible.

AN INITIATIVE OF



WITH THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT OF

vancouver
foundation



Surrey Youth
Assistance Fund

Ocean Park
Foundation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth in and from care matter.

Of the approximately 700 youth in BC who leave government care on their 19th birthday each year, anywhere from 50 to 70 youth “aging out” every year call Surrey their home. In 2016, the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition identified youth who had “aged out” of the government care system as a key demographic to support, noting the increased risk of poverty for these young people. They set out on a mission to “wrap the community around youth”, and radically rethink the ways youth are supported by the broader community as they transition from the care of MCFD into independence when they turn 19.

Over three years, we focused our work in three areas: research, building community, and youth leadership development. In our final year of the project we launched two prototype projects that brought together findings and work from those three areas.

This report describes our community building activities, and the key learnings and take-aways for our future work together. Community building activities aimed to raise awareness, increase community support for young people and celebrate the incredible and resilient youth in and from care living in Surrey. Our focus on building community resulted in many direct-impact project activities, including:

- 3 Community and Stakeholder Workshops
- 1 Art Installation and Community Event
- 2 Youth Awards Ceremonies and Community BBQs
- 9 Holiday Dinners
- 1 Final Showcase Community Event

Project activities were supported by the collaboration of diverse community members and key stakeholders through an overall Project Planning Committee and a number of distinct Working Groups. Most importantly, we created a Youth Advisory Committee made up of Surrey youth with care experience to support the project activities. This group of diverse young people provided crucial direction and expertise on the process, the actions, and the intended outcomes. Their voices were central to the project, and paramount to the project’s success.

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THE CONTEXT

Approximately 700 youth in BC leave government care every year on their 19th birthday, and around 5,000 young BC adults (aged 19-24) have previously been in government care. While increasing numbers of young people in BC are living with their parents until well into their twenties, young people coming out of the care system are forced into independence at 19; cut off from familiar services and supports before they may be ready.

Surrey has the largest youth population in BC; in 2016, roughly a quarter of the City's population was under 19 years old. But prior to 2016, there wasn't a lot of information specifically about youth with care experience in Surrey. Looking to take action on this issue, the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition commissioned a report by the McCreary Centre Society in 2016 entitled "Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care" to paint a clear local picture of this issue. Their research showcased some important facts: including that amongst Surrey's young people, anywhere from 50 to 70 turn 19 and 'age out' of government care every single year.

The research showed us that most British Columbian parents expect to support their children up to age 28, and most of them do. While just about all of their peers receive some financial or other assistance from their families between the ages of 19 to 28, only a tiny fraction of former youth in care in Greater Vancouver had received any housing or financial support from their family since turning 19. Unfortunately, the pattern across BC is true for Surrey youth with care experience - the research done by the McCreary Centre Society found that local youth who age out of care are more likely than their peers to become homeless, have poor educational, employment and health outcomes, and claim income assistance benefits.

Additionally, the research showed that the majority of BC adults believe that 19 year olds do not have the necessary skills and resources to live independently, and need the support of their families through their twenties. A 2013 Vancouver Foundation poll showed that only a quarter of BC adults were aware that government support ends when young people in care reach their 19th birthday. Initiatives like Fostering Change, and the work of the Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks and First Call have been extremely successful at raising public awareness of this important issue, and so the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition set out to see how to bring individuals, organizations, and local government together to more effectively support young people transitioning out of care in Surrey.



This report focuses on the project activities related to building community, and our efforts to raise awareness of this important issue.

THE PROJECT



RESEARCH

- Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care Report
- Youth in Care Fact Sheet
- Housing Resource Sheet
- Youth Mentorship Program Models
- Youth Housing Models
- Youth Housing Survey



BUILDING COMMUNITY

- Stakeholder Workshops
- Holiday Dinners
- BC Children & Youth in Care Week Awards and Community BBQ
- 19th Birthday Installation and Event
- Youth Story Harvest



YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

- Youth Advisory Committee
- Advocacy
- Youth Retreats



PROTOTYPE PROJECTS

- Compass Connections
- Plenty of Threads

Given what the statistics say about the increased risk of poverty for young people with care experience, it was a natural fit for the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition (SPRC) to lead a project focused on supporting youth aging out of the care system. The intent of this work was to “wrap the community around youth”, and radically rethink the ways youth are supported by the broader community as they transition from the care of MCFD into independence. And so, in 2016, with the support of funding from the Vancouver Foundation, “Connecting Community to Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care” launched into its first phase. With continued support from the Vancouver Foundation in 2017, and additional funding from Coast Capital Savings, Envision Financial, the Ocean Park Foundation, the Youth Employment and Education Fund (now the Surrey Youth Assistance Fund) and others, we hit the ground running with an ambitious vision to change outcomes for youth in and from care.

We brought together stakeholders, decision-makers, adults and youth with lived experience, and community members to hear from youth and what they need to feel connected to the community as they make the leap into independent living. Our vision was that:

- Surrey youth in and from care will be better supported in their transition into adulthood.
- Youth participants will develop and refine their leadership skills, with the tools and knowledge to more effectively advocate for policy and systems change.
- Individuals and organizations not currently engaged with young people will be actively engaged in providing support to Surrey youth with care experience through financial contributions, in-kind support, or volunteer roles.

Our vision was supported by an approach rooted in shared core values amongst those involved:

- Centre the Youth Voice
- Know the Facts
- Raise the Profile
- Change the System

Over three years, we focused our work in three areas: research, building community, and youth leadership development. At the end of the project we launched two prototype projects that brought together findings and work from those three areas. Project activities were supported by the collaboration of diverse community members and key stakeholders through an overall Project Planning Committee, a number of distinct Working Groups, and the Youth Advisory Committee.

THE WORK

One of our goals was to continue raising awareness about the challenges youth face as they transition out of government care, and into independent living in the community. At various points in the project, we brought together community stakeholders, adults with previous care experience, youth, and community members who haven't traditionally been working in the youth services field. Our goal was to discuss the issue, increase the community support for young people, and to celebrate the incredible and resilient youth in and from care we are so fortunate to have living in Surrey.

We took a number of initiatives to work on community involvement and awareness-building on this issue. Each had a target audience, an intended outcome, and purpose that aligned with the following project goals:

- Surrey youth in and from care will be better supported in their transition into adulthood.
- Individuals and organizations not currently engaged with young people will be actively engaged in providing support to Surrey youth with care experience through financial contributions, in-kind support, or volunteer roles.

Specifically, we wanted the project activities to be opportunities to:

- Deepen participants' awareness of issues facing youth in and from government care in Surrey;
- Nurture a more empathic understanding of youth in and from government care;
- Gain an understanding of how to more effectively support youth from care in their transition to adulthood; and
- Create a platform to engage youth and adults from the care community in a meaningful way.

To evaluate the impact and success of each project activity, we engaged in a wide variety of evaluation activities. Using valuable feedback from event participants, the Youth Advisory Committee, the Planning Committee, and relevant stakeholders, we were able to draw out key reflections and recommendations for related project activities. These findings and suggestions are summarized and highlighted in each of the following sections.

STAKEHOLDER WORKSHOPS

Over the course of the project, we held three community-wide workshops with the intent to generate discussion and action to support youth in and from care.

Our initial workshop brought together over 40 diverse stakeholders together from a broad range of the wider Surrey community. Our goal was to deepen the understanding of the challenges youth face as they transition out of care. Importantly, the workshop featured a panel of alumni - adults who had successfully transitioned out of care - who shared their experiences, successes, and the challenges they faced as young people in the care system.

Participants working in the youth-services field gained valuable insight into how to positively engage youth in their own practice through a review of wise practices from other regions or countries. Participants also engaged in creating information sheets by identifying programs and resources for youth. For participants coming from sectors outside of child and youth care, the workshops presented an opportunity for awareness-building of this important demographic, and a space to develop ideas on how the Surrey community can support its youth in and from care.

A second community-wide workshop focused on action-planning; bringing together representatives from local and provincial government, health, social work, youth-serving organizations, Indigenous partner organizations, education practitioners, individual community members, alumni from care, and youth.

In small groups, participants brainstormed ideas and engaged in discussion. Some key systems change themes arose including the need to extend the age of government support, and a desire to see safe, supportive, and accessible housing options after exiting the care system.

Workshop participants were invited to reflect on their role in creating more opportunities for youth as they transition out of care with a special focus on education, skills-training and employment, housing, physical and mental health, and connection to others.

Participants also identified a number of “unusual suspects” who may have an interest in connecting with youth and brainstormed additional ways to engage more community members. Many of the “unusual suspects” the participants identified at this workshop supported various project activities over the following years.

In March 2018, after the next phase of the project launched, we held a third community event, bringing together over 50 key stakeholders to support action on the priorities identified by young people at the first youth retreat. The Youth Advisory Committee shared their findings, and we formed working groups focused on key priorities that brought on many additional “unusual suspects” to help move the project plan forward.

The workshops had the outcome of inspiring local philanthropists to fund project activities, and to make funding available for work connected to supporting youth with care experience.

THE LESSONS

1. LIVED EXPERIENCE MUST COME FIRST.

Our workshops were successful because of the inclusion of alumni from care. It was powerful to hear the experiences, challenges, and success stories of adults who transitioned from government care into community. While some of the logistics of transitioning out of care have changed in the years since some alumni turned 19, many of the struggles remain the same. It is essential to honour lived experience, and the insights and recommendations provided by care alumni provided a strong foundation for our future work to build on.

2. EMOTION CAN DRIVE ACTION.

Cue the tears, consensual hugs, and high-fives. We received a lot of positive feedback that the workshops were filled with emotion. Emotion often compels people to make change and it is important to honour the emotion that may come up when discussing children and youth in care. To do so means ensuring facilitators understand how to effectively and respectfully hold space for participant reactions, and then channel that emotion into empowering participants to take action.

3. PEOPLE WANT TO HELP.

One of the key takeaways from our workshops is that the youth-serving community, as well as the community-at-large, want to be involved. They really do. The desire to support youth as they transition into community is far-reaching, and many people either aren't aware of tangible ways they can support this demographic, or there simply aren't any. We realized quickly that we had to find ways to keep community members engaged and create opportunities for them to continually be involved in the project.

4. SOMETIMES IT'S OKAY TO PREACH TO THE CHOIR.

A lot of the workshop attendees work in the youth-serving field, human services, or already had a previous understanding of the specific challenges for youth transitioning out of the care system. And that's okay! Go on and preach to the converted, sing from the same song sheet, kick the can down the road... or something. It remains important to bring together professionals in the field; to share experiences, to strengthen relationships, and to build new connections. Despite already being members of "the choir", our workshop attendees expressed leaving feeling reenergized in their commitment to continue to find ways to support young people with care experience.

THE HORIZON

1. BALANCE THE FOCUS.

We can all agree: there is a lot of work to be done, and there are many different perspectives on where to start. We were sometimes challenged to find ways to get front-line service providers and community members to consider the broader systemic shifts needed to effect long-term change when there are so many fires to put out. We anticipated this possible roadblock, and our facilitators had a deep understanding of how to tangibly make the connection between individual action and systemic change. In the end, we feel like we struck the right chord in recognizing and validating the need for quick-wins, while also inspiring action connected to systems change. Maintaining this delicate balance between seeking short-term successes and long-term progression will be crucial for the development of new workshop focus areas in future project phases.

2. CIRCLE BACK.

It's generally considered good practice to follow-up with all attendees of events to encourage ongoing commitment, to provide additional opportunities for collaboration, and to build relationships. When you include people with lived experience as speakers, panelists, and guests, it is not only good practice, but imperative to connect with those individuals later to provide updates on how their input was used, project achievements, and projected outcomes. We were successful in reconnecting with most workshop participants and guests when opportunities arose for their continued involvement, and to share status updates on the project overall. People with lived experience deserve to know how their voices are being used, and so moving forward it is important to ensure there continues to be a high-level commitment to circle back to ensure they remain in the loop.

3. BE READY.

Throughout the project, it became clear that the presence of backbone support to collaborative project activities was key to success. Before engaging community members in brainstorming activities, ensure the required resources to provide administrative and practical support to cross-sector teams are readily available. If you're going to motivate and excite people to take action, the foundation to make it work must already be laid.

4. MAINTAIN ENGAGEMENT.

Of course we want every single person in Surrey to support youth as they transition out of government care. With a small staffing budget, we struggled at times to find the necessary resources to support the diversity of people wanting to be engaged in project activities. Much like the aforementioned recommendation to "be ready" for action, moving forward it will be important to ensure the project has an appropriate volunteer management plan in place and adequate staff resources before reaching out to the broader community. Capitalizing on people's excitement and energy following an event like a workshop is paramount in generating momentum, but ensuring there is a plan and the resources to keep them engaged is equally as important in maintaining it.

“

WE WILL NEVER LEAVE
SUCH IMPORTANT WORK
GATHERING DUST ON THE
SHELF. WE WILL MAKE
SURE THAT YOUR VOICE
WILL BE HEARD IN SOME
OF THE WORK THAT WE
DO IN THE FUTURE.

”

- Vera LeFranc, *Former Chair of
Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition*

19TH BIRTHDAY PARTY

The 19th Birthday Party multimedia exhibition, created by Fostering Change, is a compelling representation of the challenges faced by youth aging out of the care system when they turn 19. We displayed the installation for the general public for four days in the Surrey City Hall atrium; providing an opportunity for anyone in the community to learn more about the transition from care to community as a young person. The exhibit has proven effectiveness in increasing public awareness and compassion for youth in care, and we are confident the display at City Hall moved many community members to action.

During the exhibition, we held a reception that featured alumni with care experience speaking about their experiences, and key stakeholders in the field discussing what is, and can, be done to better support youth. The event was open to the community, with a goal of engaging as many Surrey organizations and agencies as possible. Approximately 75 people attended, exceeding our expectations.



TRISTAN MILLER 2020

THE LESSONS

1. HOT SPOTS INCREASE ENGAGEMENT.

This exhibition was another powerful reminder to host events and activities where community members already gather. Hundreds of people access City Hall daily, and displaying the installation in the atrium allowed people to stop and engage with the piece as part of their previously scheduled day. It is generally a good engagement practice to go where people already are; effectively reaching many people you wouldn't normally reach, and allowing people to engage on their own terms. Hosting the installation in City Hall gave us a dynamic opportunity to spark a conversation about youth in the care system with a brand new audience.

2. MESSAGING MATTERS.

Perhaps it's a call to action, a financial ask, or just important pieces of information about the priorities for youth in and from care. It is important to leave the audience with a handful of key takeaway messages, especially at events that feature multiple speakers. Whatever it is, ensure that all speakers have some consensus of the message you're hoping will resonate with the audience and lead them to action. While we had the same message - that youth transitioning out of care need more support - we could have been more clear about our call to action at the community-level, with additional opportunities for involvement.

3. LIVED EXPERIENCE MUST COME FIRST.

It bears repeating that it is essential to amplify the voices of those with lived experience. Ensure that every public event includes and centres youth or alumni with care experience, and that representation is intersectional to include girls and women, Indigenous youth, newcomers, youth from the queer community, youth with disabilities, and others who might continue to be under-represented in policy or the public eye.

THE HORIZON

1. CONSIDER ACCESSIBILITY.

The collective decision to host the 19th Birthday Party installation and event at Surrey City Hall was strategic and successful in the context of our target audience. It's worth noting that over the course of the project, however, many youth expressed that they did not feel comfortable at City Hall, or in more formal event spaces. Engaging youth in the planning process will help to ensure that each event is designed in a way that meets the needs of the intended audience, while simultaneously prioritizing youth involvement. This event made sense to be at City Hall, while others made sense to be held elsewhere. Ultimately, ensuring events are accessible and welcome for everyone is paramount.

2. SPREAD THE WORD.

Go live on Facebook, post a tweet, snap that chat, or dance it out on Tik Tok. Reach out to media outlets, and connect events to larger social media movements or campaigns, to increase the reach of each event experience. We didn't plug into social media for this event, and missed some opportunities to amplify our work via online campaigns underway. Community-wide events are the perfect opportunity to invite local and regional media outlets to shine a spotlight on your work. And be sure to never underestimate the power of youth in getting the word out online.

3. INVITE FUNDERS.

Most funders love to be invited to events! They appreciate seeing where their dollars are going, and seeing the community rally around a cause their organization supports. And let's be real: it's like a giant, warm and fuzzy pat on the back for them and who doesn't love that?! We were strategic and intentional about inviting current and potential funders to this event and others, and saw those efforts pay off in new direct grants to support our project activities. Personally inviting funders to events will help build your relationship; you know, just in case you ever need funding again.

BC CHILD AND YOUTH IN CARE WEEK AWARDS AND COMMUNITY BBQ

Proclaimed by the Province of British Columbia in 2011, BC Child and Youth in Care Week (BCCYICW) is a time for everyone to stand in support and celebration of the incredible, courageous, and resilient young people in government care. We wanted to support a community-wide event for BCCYICW, and the Youth Advisory Council were quick to suggest hosting an awards ceremony to honour youth in and from care with individual awards of recognition.

Working in partnership with the local youth-serving agencies Options Community Services, FRAFCA, and PCRS, the Youth Advisory

Committee hosted two annual BCCYICW celebrations in Surrey. Both events featured a community-wide BBQ and awards ceremony for youth.

Nominated by their peers and staff from youth-serving agencies, we handed out over 50 awards each year to young people, recognizing their personal, academic, or community achievements. Guests were moved to hear about the incredible impact these young people have in their communities, and the youth community was thrilled to have a space to celebrate their unique and important contributions.





#ROUND OF APPLAUSE

There was not a dry eye in the house, when reviewing the award nomination forms. Here are some of the excerpts written about Surrey youth:

- He is so kind, caring, and determined.
- She never gave up.
- She has a beautiful heart.
- He has become very independent and has successfully overcome many challenges experienced and has remained optimistic and excited for the future.
- She sets her sights on something and she exceeds that goal.
- He is making sure that he is heard.
- He does not give up on himself, or his goals.
- She is living independently with success.
- He provides mentorship to other youth.
- She is a great advocate for herself.
- She is reliable, responsible, and does what she needs to survive.
- Her insight and open mind is a warm welcome to those around her.
- His resilience and openness make him an incredible young man.
- She has been reaching for the stars since she was in care.
- She cares so deeply for people, and pushes them because she knows they deserve greatness.
- She actively seeks out how to make change and does it with every ounce of her soul.
- He exemplifies hard work and dedication by volunteering and being a positive influence in the community.
- She is leading a healthy lifestyle and preparing to be a great mom.
- She shows up, helps out, and supports the community.

“

IT WAS MY FIRST TIME
BEING ACKNOWLEDGED,
I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO
REACT. IT SHOWED ME
THAT EVERYTHING I HAVE
DONE OR ACCOMPLISHED
HAS BEEN NOTICED AND
THAT I'M WORTH MORE
THAN MY PAST.

”

- Award Recipient

THE LESSONS

1. YOUTH IN CARE ARE OFTEN INVISIBLE.

Youth in and from care are doing incredible unpaid and paid work in the community all the time. We likely know many of these young people, but may not know they have care experience. Yet, through discussion with the YAC, we realized there are not a lot of ways to publicly recognize youth for not only for their contributions, but for what they have overcome. The majority of youth who received awards at this event said it was the first time they had been recognized for anything. These young people deserve to be heard, seen, and celebrated for all of the greatness they bring to our community.

2. YOUTH ARE HARD TO FIND.

While we had a large number of nominations, all of the nominations received were connected to social service providers, or youth-serving organizations. It was challenging to get the word out to the greater community to solicit nominations for youth or alumni that are no longer connected to social services. We know there are incredible young people from the care system who deserve to be recognized for their contributions, but it will take some creativity to find them, as (see #1) they are often invisible.

3. YOUTH WANT TO LEAD.

Our Youth Advisory Committee members made it clear: they wanted to be in charge! Youth wanted to have an active role in planning, executing, and hosting the event for their peers. But like any group, their desire and ability to participate is on a spectrum and leadership can take many forms. Wherever possible, have project staff take a supportive role to provide administrative and logistical support and allow youth to be the true stars of the show.

“

[They] saw me for the individual I am.

- Youth Advisory
Committee Member

”

THE HORIZON

1. SHARE THE SPOTLIGHT.

Everybody wins! One of the most important aspects of the awards ceremony was that youth could be nominated for anything. Whether it be their personal accomplishments or contributions to the community, every single youth nominated each year received an award. Let's continue to spread the love and make sure every nominated youth is recognized. Some may think that lessens the award's impact, but we like to think that these youth deserve to be showered with love and appreciation, and that every contribution - big or small - is worth celebrating.

2. ELIMINATE BARRIERS.

It can be hard just to show up. Only half of the award recipients attended the awards ceremony, for a variety of reasons. There are many additional ways we could have, and can eliminate barriers for youth to attend an event like this moving forward. The Youth Advisory Committee said it would ease some anxiety by providing award recipients with an agenda, the event format, and a script of their acknowledgement in advance. Other ideas they brainstormed included offering transportation options, or developing a buddy system so that youth don't have to arrive alone. Finally, the Youth Advisory Committee suggested creating day-of roles that youth could take on and receive an honorarium for; helping them feel like they have a purpose and aren't awkwardly standing idle. Let's continue to design events that work for youth, especially the incredible young people nominated for awards.

3. CONNECT THE DOTS.

While it is important to ensure that awards can be given out for any personal growth, achievements, or community contributions, the awards ceremony also provides a great opportunity to specifically showcase youth who have been connected to a structured volunteer program. In our evaluation of the event, it was suggested that we consider partnering with community organizations to create specific programs youth can be involved in and recognized for. There are local and regional examples of youth leadership programs that build these types of opportunities into their program structure. The feedback has been that knowingly working towards receiving an award can foster a great sense of achievement and pride for young people. Additionally, the Youth Advisory Committee suggested using the awards as an opportunity to further connect youth to the community by potentially awarding a youth with an internship opportunity at a local organization, or winning a lunch meeting with a local leader. Finding additional ways to connect the awards with deeper community engagement will help move the awards ceremony from immediate impact closer to the direction of systems change.

HOLIDAY DINNERS

Early in the project, members of the Youth Advisory Committee expressed the need to support youth who have transitioned out of government care to have a place to go on holidays. Holidays can be an especially challenging time for young people living independently, who may not be connected to a biological or foster family, and/or who have a lot of emotions surrounding these holidays.

On December 25th 2017, we held our first holiday dinner event. We invited youth and their loved ones to attend a Christmas dinner graciously hosted by a Surrey City Councillor in their home. 25 people - including youth, allies, alumni, and staff - attended this uplifting and fun event. City of Surrey staff led a donations drive to fill stockings for youth with treats, personal items, and gift cards and we were able to secure

a grant to ensure each young person received a gift. Most importantly, we came together to cook and share a traditional meal, and to celebrate the season together with the youth and their chosen families. We were delighted to continue this new tradition in 2018 and 2019.

The holiday dinners are an example of responsive youth engagement. We quickly learned that the need for holiday events extended beyond Christmas. In 2018 and 2019 we held gatherings on Family Day, Easter, Mother's Day, and Thanksgiving. Many community members volunteered their time, assisted us in securing additional donations, and joined us to cook food and to celebrate; making these dinners an important opportunity for young people and community members to build relationships and support one another through informal gatherings.



TRISTAN MILLER 2020

“

THE HOLIDAY DINNERS
ARE SO FAMILY-ORIENTED.
IT WAS SO NICE TO
ACTUALLY CELEBRATE
THE HOLIDAYS BECAUSE
I GREW UP NEVER BEING
ABLE TO.

”

- Youth Attendee

THE LESSONS

1. HOLIDAYS ARE HARD.

No one wants to be alone on Christmas. Or Easter. Or Thanksgiving. And especially not on Family Day. We quickly learned that youth in and from care often live independently in the community and do not have a place to go on holidays, as most service organizations are closed on the actual day of the holiday. For youth with care experience, holidays can be especially hard; bringing up many mixed emotions about family. It is important to have a space for youth to gather with their peers, loved ones, chosen families, and supportive adults on the actual holiday day, when they might otherwise be alone.

2. YOUTH NEED STAFF SUPPORT.

Holidays can be hard for anyone. To ensure that all youth and volunteers could safely attend a holiday dinner, we mindfully built a staffing team that was available to support all youth in attendance. With the additional emotion that the holidays bring, it is essential that all aspects of the plan are considered through a trauma-informed lens: from gift-giving to meal-sharing to crisis support. A clear risk management plan, and the right people, will help ensure a smooth and successful holiday celebration; keeping the event open, accessible, and safe for all. Which, when we think about it, is the best gift we can give.

THE HORIZON

1. DIVERSIFY VOLUNTEER ROLES.

Holidays can be both the easiest and the most challenging time to recruit community volunteers for. We consistently found that on the one hand, people feel generous and want to help, but the reality is that many people are busy with their own families and holiday traditions. The holiday dinners created an inviting entry point to bring in additional “unusual suspects” and so it was important to engage community members as volunteers whenever possible, providing a diversity of tasks that fit their availability and skills. Whether it’s organizing a gift drive at their workplace, cooking and dropping off food, cold-calling businesses for donations, putting up posters around the city, or showing up to help at the event, there should be a role available for anyone who wants to be involved.

2. OPEN INVITATIONS.

All youth in and from care deserve to have the option of celebrating the holidays with a warm meal and good company. While some youth expressed they preferred having the holiday events at a community member’s home, that format undoubtedly limits the amount of people who can attend. After two years of hosting Christmas dinner at someone’s home, in 2019 we decided to test run hosting the event at the Newton Youth Hub, to see whether it remained as festive and welcoming. We had a great turnout, new volunteers, familiar faces, and nothing but positive feedback. Moving forward, continue to host the holiday events in spaces where youth feel comfortable, but that can also accommodate anyone who wants to attend, as well as any youth who may decide to drop-in unexpectedly on the day-of. Let holidays be a place where everyone is welcome.

YOUTH STORY HARVEST

Near the end of the project, members of our Youth Advisory Committee hosted a “story harvest”; an event where they shared their personal experiences of growth and leadership throughout the project with an audience of community members. Guests were invited to reflect on those experiences through a specific lens; identifying examples of resilience, hope, empowerment, and connection woven throughout the youths’ individual and collective stories. It was a powerful way to celebrate the work of our Youth Advisory Committee, and to relay the impact this project has had on their personal and professional lives.

“

These [events] make it feel like being a youth from care isn’t an obstacle, it’s a benefit.”

- Youth Participant, Plenty of Threads

”



THE LESSONS

1. STORY-TELLING IS POWERFUL.

We chose an event format that centred the youth voice in a unique and intimate way. Focusing on stories, rather than project activities or achievements, was a powerful way to build deeper connections and empathy. The nature of this format created an event that felt personal and authentic for everyone in attendance. Youth became storytellers, sharing their experiences and emotions, and community members were invited to actively listen and engage in stories, allowing them a rare glimpse into the youths' world in a safe and accessible way.

2. YOUTH WANT TO FOCUS ON THE PRESENT, NOT THE PAST.

What the Youth Advisory Committee members made clear to us is that they wanted to share their experiences with their involvement in the project, and not their personal histories. To ensure they felt safe and supported, we had a familiar face from the Planning Committee at each table, facilitating the discussion to ensure that it stayed focused on the project. It is important to honour and empower youth in their "present", enable the community to see them as more than just their "past", and to provide them with the space to be who they want to be - outside of their history.

THE HORIZON

1. SHOWCASE YOUTH.

Let's shine the light on young people. Moving forward, it will be important to continue to find ways to highlight the time, energy, and work youth put into supporting project activities. The Story Harvest was just one way of centering the youth voice and celebrating their many successes. Finding opportunities to put youth in the spotlight is crucial to both empower young people to be actively engaged, and to shift the broader conceptions of the role young people play in the community.

2. EXPAND THE REACH.

Clang the bells, ring the alarms, shout it from the rooftops! While we had a great turnout for the Story Harvest, the majority of guests were people already connected to the project, or youth-serving agencies, already. Looking ahead, it is important to strategize on how to bring in as many community members as you can to these feel-good, celebratory events to continue to expand the reach of this project's work and build an even wider community net to wrap around these young people.

“

We are amazed whenever people can share such deep, personal stories. We kind of live in a society where we seem to just pass right by each other. You know, working for the government I know that so much pain has been caused, and the fact that people are still open and willing and happy to talk and to welcome us in - it's so amazing.

- Story Harvest Attendee

”

THE BIG PICTURE

When we look at the ways we took on building community throughout the project, there are some key takeaways as we prepare to move this work forward in 2020.

01 FIND THE RIGHT BALANCE.

Many of our project activities responded to an immediate need highlighted by youth and the community (eg. holiday dinners). While those events are an important part of community building, they aren't necessarily the most efficient ways to move forward some of our goals of systemic change. Partnering with local community-serving organizations with a mandate to offer direct services to young people can help ensure that these events happen, but with less financial and staffing resources needed from the project. Our job is to find the right balance between recognizing the need for smaller-scale community gatherings, while ensuring that our resources remain primarily focused on systems change. Additionally, building relationships with decision-makers and systems stakeholders is crucial both to help identify the levers or openings for change, and so that we have vocal champions advocating in the systems they work within. We spent three years building meaningful partnerships with a variety of people and organizations, and in our next phase we will build on those partnerships and seek additional champions at every level.

02 FINDERS, KEEPERS.

Over the three years of this project, we saw just how many people want to support youth from the care system. Overwhelmingly, this is an issue that generates empathy, compassion, and support. Finding community members and those we called “unusual suspects” was easier than we imagined. Keeping them engaged and involved, however, was more challenging. As we move forward into the next phase of building community project activities, it is important to strategize on how to best capitalize on the strengths and resources of local businesses, organizations, and individual community members; engaging them in ways that support our project goals. Whether it is working with a car-sharing program to provide discounts for youth or inviting local businesses to sponsor holiday dinners, we need to ensure the project has the appropriate resources dedicated to keeping interested groups and people actively involved. We can find them, let's make sure to keep them, too.

03 LEAN IN FOR THE WIN-WIN.

We know there are many people and groups working on supporting youth as they transition out of care. Between advocacy for policy change, and the development of frontline programming, there are many regional activities underway that we can tap into; supporting their work and easing our load. Hosting an event for the provincial BC Child and Youth in Care Week, and featuring Fostering Change's 19th Birthday Installation are two great examples of connecting our work to other successful initiatives around the province. Sharing the load helps move all of our work forward.

THE WRAP

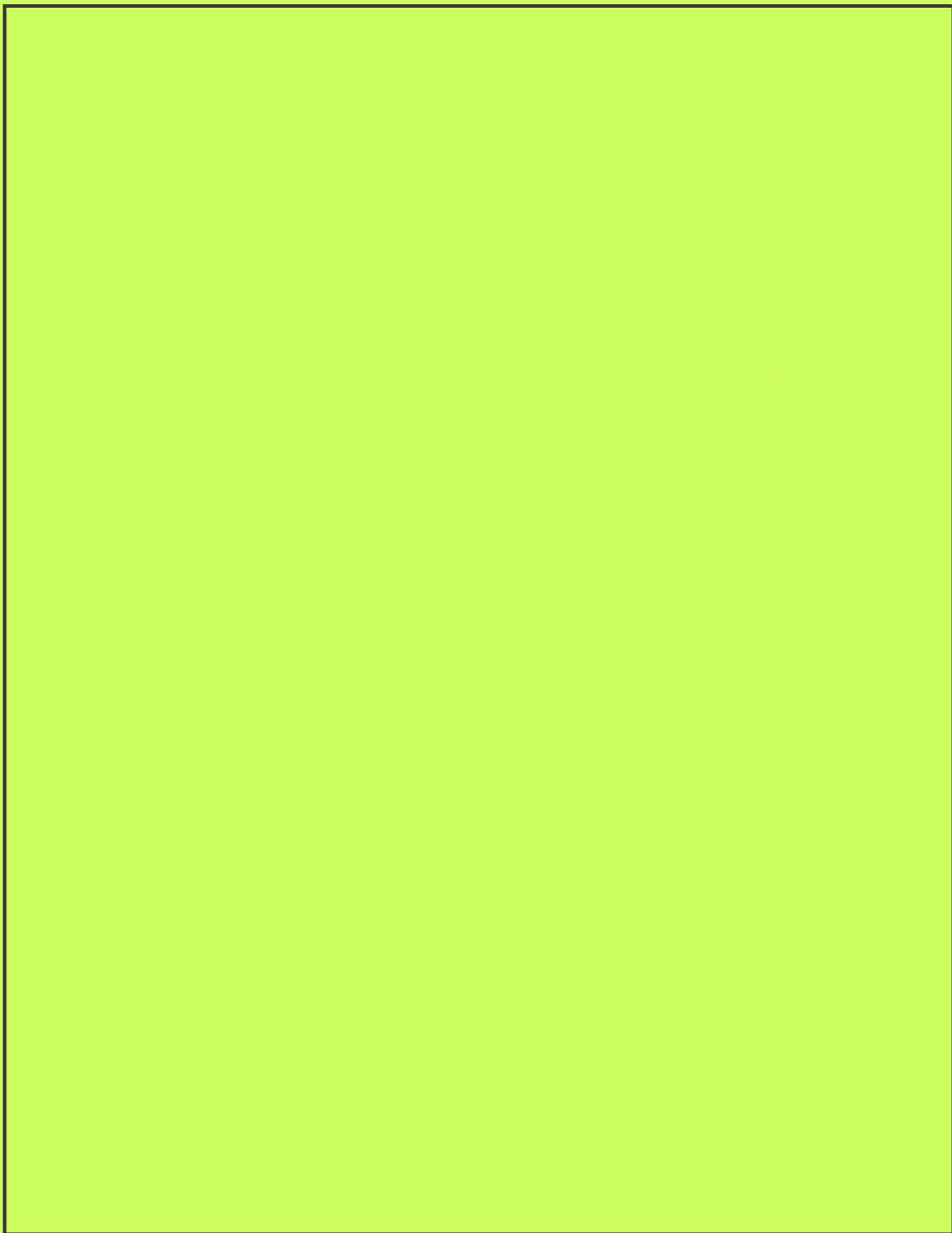


We accomplished a lot over three years together. Our successes span from immediate impact on the ground, to important work behind the scenes, bringing new people in, building partnerships, and gaining a better understanding of the challenges and barriers Surrey youth experience as they transition out of care.

The consistency and commitment of the youth and adults involved over three years is a testament to both the need, the sense of urgency, and the desire to make lasting change for youth. Our work has built on the efforts of others, and will be an important foundation for work in Surrey to come.

Building community is a long term commitment. You simply cannot “build community” overnight. We are confident that our efforts to raise awareness, to pull new people in, and to continue relationship-building amongst current stakeholders will have a butterfly effect of gradually moving the dial over time. By and large the community wants to be involved in supporting our young people; we just need to find a way to do so.

Youth who have experience in the care system have been through enough. Let’s continue to work together to ensure their next chapter into adulthood is one that includes healthy relationships, a strong sense of community, self-empowerment, access to resources and opportunities, and endless hope for a bright future ahead.



COMPASS CONNECTIONS & PLENTY OF THREADS:

A Report on the Prototype Programs



Part of the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition's Connecting
Community to Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care Project

We acknowledge that this work takes place on the unceded, ancestral and traditional territories of the Semiahmoo, Katzie, Kwikwetlem, Kwantlen, Qayqayt and Tsawwassen First Nations. We recognize the ongoing colonization of Indigenous peoples, which is evident in the disproportionate number of Indigenous children and youth in the care system. We commit to approaching this work in the spirit of reconciliation; aiming to decolonize our practice and amplify the voices of Indigenous youth whenever possible.

AN INITIATIVE OF



WITH THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT OF

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Surrey Youth
Assistance Fund

Ocean Park
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth in and from care matter.

Of the approximately 700 youth in BC who leave government care on their 19th birthday each year, anywhere from 50 to 70 youth “aging out” every year call Surrey their home. In 2016, the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition identified youth who had “aged out” of the government care system as a key demographic to support, noting the increased risk of poverty for these young people. They set out on a mission to “wrap the community around youth”, and radically rethink the ways youth are supported by the broader community as they transition from the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development into independence when they turn 19.

Over three years, we focused our work in three areas: research, building community, and youth leadership development. In our final year of the project we launched two prototype programs that brought together findings and work from those three areas. Project activities were supported by the collaboration of diverse community members and key stakeholders through an overall Project Planning Committee, and a number of distinct Working Groups. Most importantly, we created a Youth Advisory Committee made up of Surrey youth with care experience to support the project activities. This group of diverse young people provided crucial direction and expertise on the process, the actions, and the intended outcomes. Their voices were central to the project, and paramount to the project’s success.

Throughout our discussions with youth, alumni from care, and allied stakeholders in our community workshops, events, and youth activities, two key issues emerged: the immediate and ongoing need for meaningful community connection and social capital. Digging deeper in our conversations, there were two primary focus areas related to connection and social capital where we believed we could have the most impact - adult connections and education and employment.

In our final year, our work in researching ways to support a deeper and wider community connection to youth resulted in the development of two distinct prototypes: Compass Connections and Plenty of Threads. We implemented the prototypes in order to test the models, learn from the implementation, and assess whether or not we should proceed with a full pilot.

Our research and youth engagement both show support for the creation of programs where interactions between youth and adult volunteers are informal, youth-directed, and based on need. This report summarizes that research, the outcomes of our implementation phase, and our recommendations for future programming.

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THE CONTEXT

Approximately 700 youth in BC leave government care every year on their 19th birthday, and around 5,000 young BC adults (aged 19-24) have previously been in government care. While increasing numbers of young people in BC are living with their parents until well into their twenties, young people coming out of the care system are forced into independence at 19; cut off from familiar services and supports before they may be ready.

Surrey has the largest youth population in BC; in 2016, roughly a quarter of the City's population was under 19 years old. But prior to 2016, there wasn't a lot of information specifically about youth with care experience in Surrey. Looking to take action on this issue, the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition commissioned a report by the McCreary Centre Society in 2016 entitled "Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care" to paint a clear local picture of this issue. Their research showcased some important facts: including that amongst Surrey's young people, anywhere from 50 to 70 turn 19 and 'age out' of government care every single year.

The research showed us that most British Columbian parents expect to support their children up to age 28, and most of them do. While just about all of their peers receive some financial or other assistance from their families between the ages of 19 to 28, only a tiny fraction of former youth in care in Greater Vancouver had received any housing or financial support from their family since turning 19. Unfortunately, the pattern across BC is true for Surrey youth with care experience - local youth who age out of care are more likely than their peers to become homeless, have poor educational, employment and health outcomes, and claim income assistance benefits.

The research also showed that the majority of BC adults believe that 19 year olds do not have the necessary skills and resources to live independently, and need the support of their families through their twenties. A 2013 Vancouver Foundation poll showed that only a quarter of BC adults were aware that government support ends when young people in care reach their 19th birthday. Initiatives like Fostering Change, and the work of the Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks and First Call have been extremely successful at raising public awareness of this important issue, and so the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition set out to see how to bring individuals, organizations, and local government together to more effectively support young people transitioning out of care in Surrey.



This report focuses on the development of our prototype programs, the implementation of the prototype phase, key learnings, and recommendations for these programs moving forward.

THE PROJECT



RESEARCH

- Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care Report
- Youth in Care Fact Sheet
- Housing Resource Sheet
- Youth Mentorship Program Models
- Youth Housing Models
- Youth Housing Survey



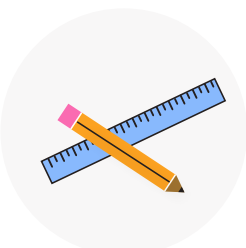
BUILDING COMMUNITY

- Stakeholder Workshops
- Holiday Dinners
- BC Children & Youth in Care Week Awards and Community BBQ
- 19th Birthday Installation and Event
- Youth Story Harvest



YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

- Youth Advisory Committee
- Advocacy
- Youth Retreats



PROTOTYPE PROJECTS

- Compass Connections
- Plenty of Threads

Given what the statistics say about the increased risk of poverty for young people with care experience, it was a natural fit for the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition (SPRC) to lead a project focused on supporting youth aging out of the care system. The intent of this work was to “wrap the community around youth”, and radically rethink the ways youth are supported by the broader community as they transition from the care of MCFD into independence. And so, in 2016, with the support of funding from the Vancouver Foundation, “Connecting Community to Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care” launched into its first phase. With continued support from the Vancouver Foundation in 2017, and additional funding from Coast Capital Savings, Envision Financial, the Ocean Park Foundation, the Youth Employment and Education Fund (now the Surrey Youth Assistance Fund) and others, we hit the ground running with an ambitious vision to change outcomes for youth in and from care.

We brought together stakeholders, decision-makers, adults and youth with lived experience, and community members to hear from youth and what they need to feel connected to the community as they make the leap into independent living. Our vision was that:

- Surrey youth in and from care will be better supported in their transition into adulthood.
- Youth participants will develop and refine their leadership skills, with the tools and knowledge to more effectively advocate for policy and systems change.
- Individuals and organizations not currently engaged with young people will be actively engaged in providing support to Surrey youth with care experience through financial contributions, in-kind support, or volunteer roles.

Our vision was supported by an approach rooted in shared core values amongst those involved:

- Centre the Youth Voice
- Know the Facts
- Raise the Profile
- Change the System

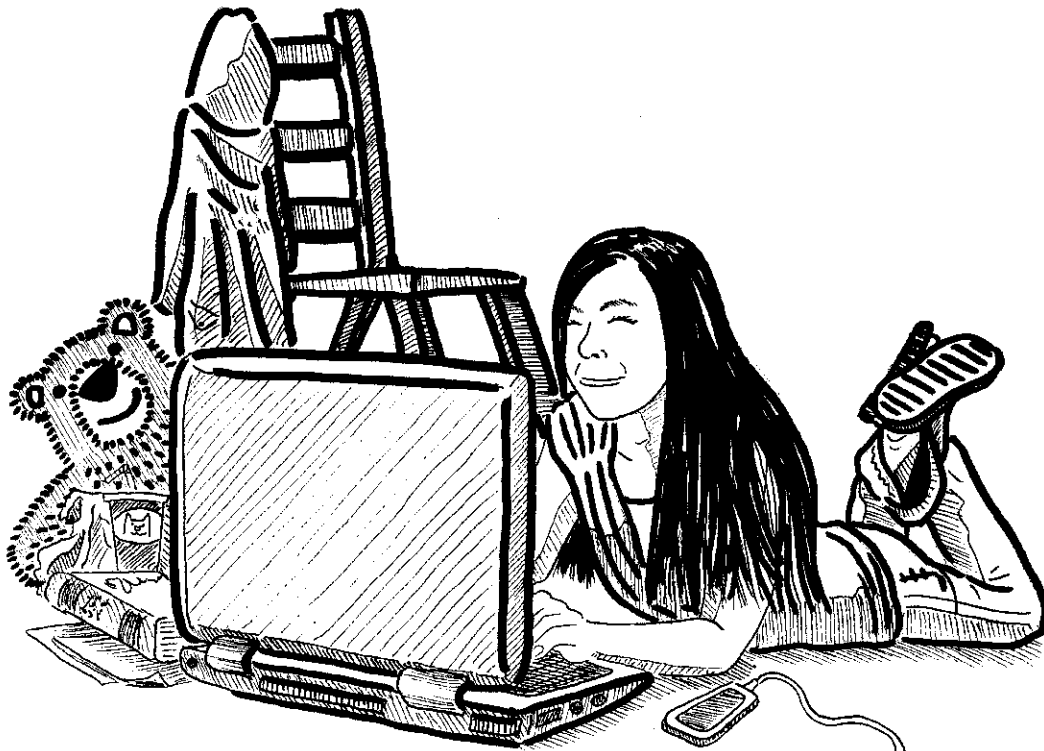
Over three years, we focused our work in three areas: research, building community, and youth leadership development. At the end of the project we launched two prototype projects that brought together findings and work from those three areas. Project activities were supported by the collaboration of diverse community members and key stakeholders through an overall Project Planning Committee, a number of distinct Working Groups, and the Youth Advisory Committee.

THE CASE

When they turn 19, youth in the care system lose access to the majority of professionals who have been available to support them. As well as no longer benefiting from these professionals' knowledge and skills, there is also an abrupt ending to relationships that have been developed over time. Since many of these youth may have recently left school, they are also likely to lose the relationships they have developed with staff, and, potentially, friends and their families.

As identified by organizations like the Vancouver Foundation, isolation and a sense of belonging are two major contributors to overall health and well-being. We heard many times from care alumni that after more than a decade after transitioning out of the care system and into the community, that emotional and sensitive transition time still created distress in their adult lives. Throughout our discussions with youth, alumni from care, and allied stakeholders in our community workshops, events, and youth activities, two key issues emerged: the immediate and ongoing need for meaningful community connection and social capital.

Digging deeper in our conversations, there were two primary focus areas related to connection and social capital where we believed we could have the most impact - adult connections and education and employment.



ADULT CONNECTIONS

Over the course of our community workshops and engagement with people who had care experience, alumni shared what helped them in their transition to independent living. They spoke of particular individuals, including social workers, parents of friends, and adults in the community who had provided, and still provide, vital support and connection for them; contributing as an important factor in their future success.



Mentors - trusted adults - can contribute to the lives of youth from care in many ways. Peer and adult support was highlighted as a key contributing factor to the success of many former youth in care. This could look like assistance in navigating various systems such as housing or health care, or practical assistance like cooking meals, or providing a safe place to visit. Beyond the tangible support, having a healthy relationship with an adult who could offer emotional support by listening, to offer general advice, and to celebrate their successes was just as important. The knowledge that there were unpaid adults rooting for you was continuously mentioned as a top priority for young people who may not have any connections to biological family members after they age out of government care.

“

You don't have a mom or a dad, and can't call someone and just say 'I'm freaking out.' It was pretty big to just ask someone and get some direction. It was also really nice to have follow-up, and it was lovely reassurance that I can do this.

- Youth Participant, Compass Connections

”

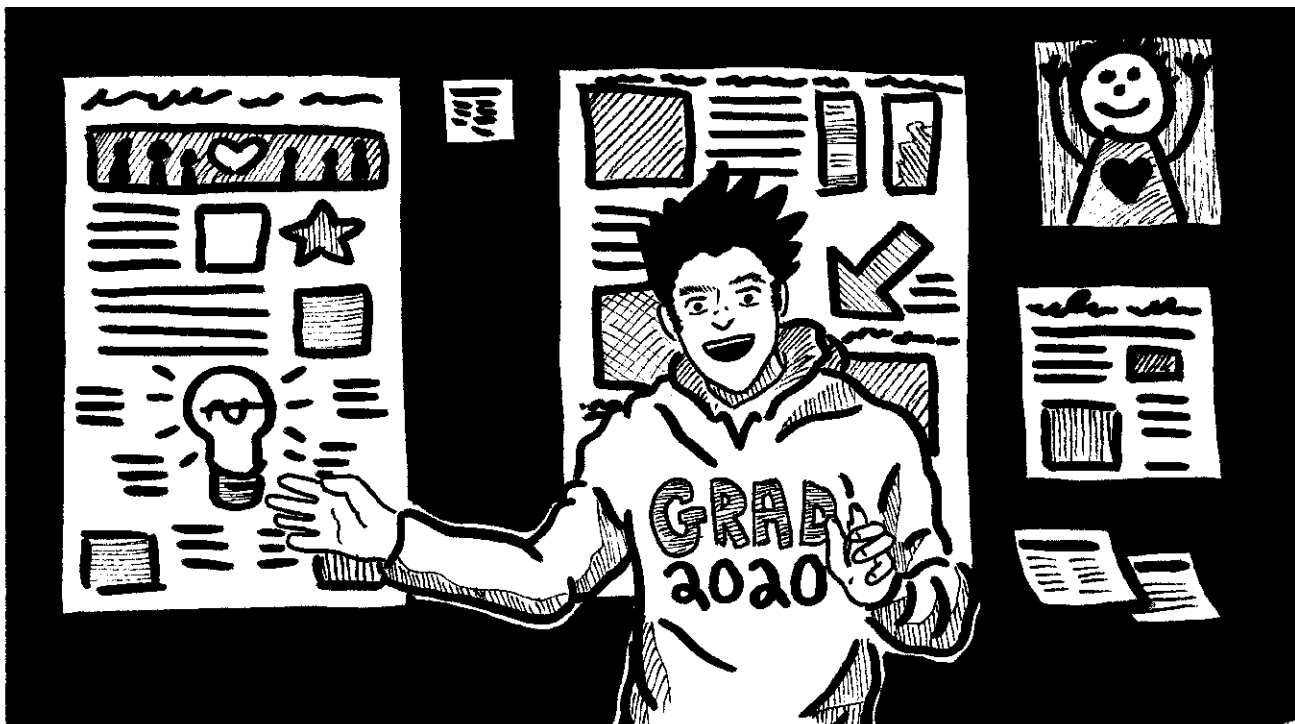
EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

As our research with the McCreary Centre Society showed, youth in care in the region are less likely to graduate high school than BC youth (59% compared to 84% of BC youth); less likely to feel cared for by school staff; and are more likely to feel that they have additional barriers to feeling connected in school. However, for these young people in care, those who felt that teachers cared for them were more likely to have positive mental health and to see themselves having a positive future.

We also found that youth who have been in care are less likely than others to attend post-secondary education. Although there have been increases in government financial assistance for post-secondary education in recent years, our conversations with youth and alumni from care highlighted many of the systemic barriers youth face. We heard that practical difficulties range from navigating an unfamiliar system and paperwork alone, or being unable to afford to volunteer or take on unpaid internships during their studies due to lack of funds.

The research report noted that Surrey youth who had been in care identified that local employers were often reluctant to give young people a chance and felt that if hired, they had to hide their care experience. Those who had found employment reported that they had received support to do so. The need for more support to access job training, work experience, employment and education opportunities are frequently cited by youth from care and service providers. Ultimately, we heard a consistent message that many youth just don't know where to start, or who to turn to with questions about education and employment.

Furthermore, our conversations with youth and alumni revealed that when youth have limited adult connections, they often lack role models in diverse fields which can limit their view on what is possible. It is important that youth are connected to adults in a range of education and employment roles, so that they can imagine themselves learning or working in a diversity of opportunities.



THE ASK

Working with our Youth Advisory Committee, we heard loud and clear that most youth are not interested in forced, high-stakes, rigid schedules, ongoing relationships with adults in the community. Youth 19 and older want opportunities for needs-based connections with adults on an ad hoc basis, and on their terms. They want to be able to reach out to an adult for some practical or emotional support, without feeling like they have to be in consistent communication with that person. Members of our Youth Advisory Committee expressed a desire to be able to learn something about the adult volunteers before meeting with them, and to be able to reach out virtually to someone first, before having to meet in-person.

They asked us to create something that reflects their needs. So we set out to see what the research said, and what was already available in the region.



LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on mentorship for adult youth leaving foster care generally is limited, and the literature looking at programs that employ something other than the one-to-one match model is even more limited. While we had these constraints in researching potential mentorship models, there is clear evidence to support the Youth Advisory Committee's vision for this program. There is strong evidence in the literature to suggest that when a young person's basic needs are not taken care of, traditional mentorship models are simply not effective.

Specifically, there is evidence in support of:

1. Natural and informal mentorship for youth leaving foster care;
2. Programs that build social networks rather than individual relationships; and
3. Programs that combine skills development and other types of instrumental support with the opportunity for natural mentorship relationships to arise.



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NATURAL AND INFORMAL MENTORSHIP

“Informal mentoring” is a natural element in many relationships both in the workplace and other settings. Informal mentoring occurs in a relationship between two people where one gains insight, knowledge, wisdom, friendship, and support from the other. Either person may initiate the mentoring relationship, the mentor to help the other, the protégé to gain wisdom from a trusted person - it is friendship first, learning and career second and third.¹

A “natural mentor” is one that the youth himself or herself identifies (as compared to being matched in a program to a stranger). The relationships arise naturally and can include teachers, extended family members, neighbors, coaches, and religious leaders.² Natural mentoring has been recognized as a promising approach for youth approaching their departure from the care system and the transition to adulthood because these relationships form gradually. That means they are less pressured and trust can develop over time.³ The end result is relationships that have been found to last longer and evolve over time.

These findings suggest that a program that builds the pool of diverse, supportive adults that youth come into contact with, and that offers the possibility for natural and informal mentoring relationships to arise could be particularly valuable for youth transitioning out of government care in Surrey.

BUILDING SOCIAL NETWORKS

There is evidence to suggest that while having one supportive adult in their lives is important for youth leaving care, efforts to build dense and varied networks for youth exiting government care is even more important for long term success. Supporting Youth in the Transition from Foster Care: Formal and Informal Connections looked at data collected from 96 former foster youth related to the support they received during their transitions from care in order to answer three questions:

- What types of supportive relationships did the sample report?
- What are the characteristics of the supportive relationships?
- What is the relationship of social support to outcomes?⁴

The researchers looked at three types of networks - biological family, peers, foster care. Youth with three strong networks were found to be significantly less likely to experience depression and anxiety. “Network disruption was found to be associated with psychological distress and this relationship was mediated by the strength of the restructured relationship.... Having only one strong network did not result in significant improvement over having no strong domains. Rather multiple strong social networkers were needed to have an ameliorating effect on psychological stress.”⁵ The authors conclude that: “While much attention has been given to the importance of one consistent adult relationship to youth development, the authors would suggest more attention to tapping the potential of multiple individuals and social networks... Social support is needed by everyone, but particularly by vulnerable populations at times of transition. The information provided by the group of youth in this study underscores the many different types of relationships that can be perceived as helpful.”⁶

These findings support the Youth Advisory Committee’s position, and our anecdotal findings, that a program that builds new networks will be particularly valuable for youth leaving care in Surrey.

INTEGRATING NATURAL MENTORSHIP

The authors of *Supporting Youth in the Transition from Foster Care: Formal and Informal Connections* identify the role that faith communities can play in providing networks that include mentorship and instrumental support and are not reliant on one single relationship noting that “[r]eligious settings in particular have a long history and capacity for outreach, service, and support... An advantage of an organizational approach to support is the existing infrastructure in place, receiving support, in whatever form, from an organization may have greater stability because it is not dependent on a specific individual who may move, become ill, or otherwise be unable to maintain a promised relationship.”⁷ This finding raises the possibility that secular organizations could become the hub in which such networks develop for youth transitioning from care in Surrey.

Existing programs for older youth with care experience, like those intended to teach independent living skills, have also been identified as offering an opportunity to invite important nonparental adults interested in connecting with older youth to youth from care through program activities. “This could take the form of incorporating natural mentoring into existing child welfare services as well as developing programs that provide opportunities for older foster youth to interact and naturally develop relationships with caring, nonparental adults.”⁸

In the context of youth leaving care in Surrey, this could take the form of facilitated learning activities and events that include adults with specific skills and interests and an openness to developing longer term relationships with youth.

1 http://www.journalofleadershiped.org/attachments/article/137/JOLE_4_1_Inzer_Crawford.pdf

2 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2167696812467780>

3 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2167696812467780>

4 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20565016>

5 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20565016> (126)

6 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20565016> (142)

7 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20565016> (139)

8 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2167696812467780>

THE LANDSCAPE

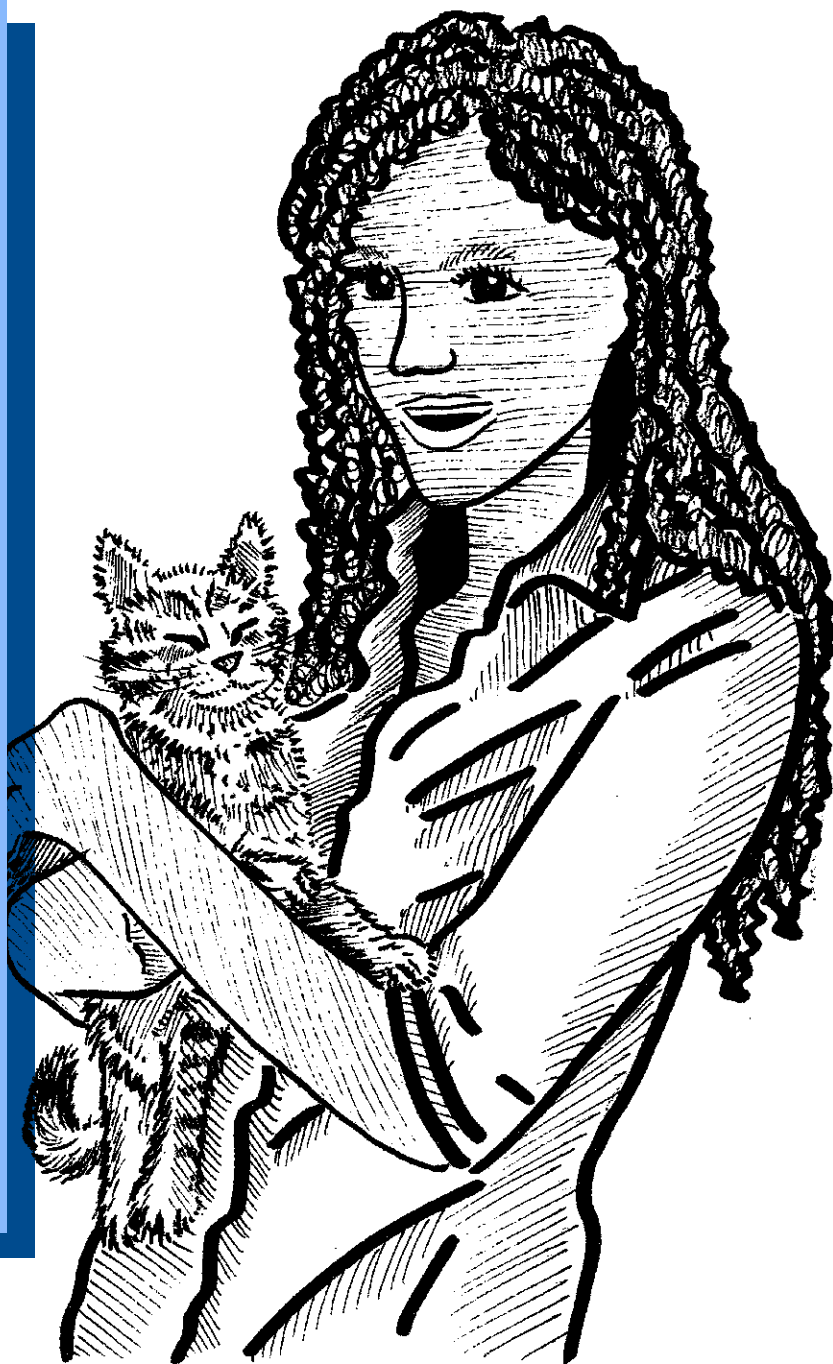
As we uncovered in the research, mentorship programs where youth have access to adults for advice and practical assistance, can be very beneficial in reducing social isolation and fostering feelings of belonging. With the acknowledgement of the need for more adult support for young people, we reached out to other youth-serving organizations to learn more about what was already happening regionally, and what the existing models of mentorship or support programs looked like in practice. We spoke to staff at four local and regional agencies to learn more about their programs. Here are some of our key takeaways:

- There are no organizations in the region currently doing anything like the Youth Advisory Committee is envisioning for youth.
- Service providers can see the value and need for a model that does not rely on paid relationships and that provides instrumental support on an as-needed, real-time basis.
- All of the service providers expressed concerns about liability and the need to maintain strict boundaries between mentors and youth.
- There is an overall reliance on paid mentors or on existing relationships with youth workers.
- Effective mentorship programs are time intensive and require staff support for extensive screening, logistics, matching and check-ins. Staff coordinators are very, very involved.
- Screening is extensive and can take up to two months to complete. Even with adult youth there are substantial liability concerns to address. These concerns are exacerbated if mentors and youth were meeting in non-public spaces like home visits or driving, for example.
- Volunteer/mentor attrition is high because they get frustrated if a youth misses an appointment etc.
- It is also very hard to recruit men and mentors to work with older youth.
- Volunteer-led workshops focused on life skills like cooking, housing or financial planning are very popular and a good way to create connection between youth and volunteers.
- There are a lot of transportation needs in Surrey that need to be met creatively.
- Organizations that provide practical support to newcomers or seniors may have examples of how to facilitate some of the practical support youth require, like transportation.

THEN WHAT?

Unfortunately, once youth age out, there isn't much in terms of ongoing, regular support for them. But, there are a few key places youth can turn to in Surrey, when they need a hand.

- Agedout.com is an online resource offering support and information for youth leaving care.
- Federation of BC Youth in Care offers financial and practical support.
- Fraser Region Aboriginal Friendship Centre Association (FRAFCA) supports youth post-19 through various programs.
- Pacific Community Resources Services has some service programs that extend post-19, such as an employment program, housing programs, and counselling.
- Options Community Services has a life skills program, employment program, a parenting program, and youth transition workers available for youth after they turn 19.
- SOS Children's Village offers a youth transitioning program.
- Métis Family Services has some programs that youth 19+ may be able to access.
- There may be more we don't know about... but we can say with confidence that it's simply not enough.



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THE MODEL

While having one supportive adult in their lives is important for youth leaving care, the evidence suggests that efforts to build dense and varied networks for youth is even more important for long-term personal success. Specifically, our findings support the development of natural and informal mentorship relationships, programs that build social networks rather than individual relationships, and programs that combine skills development and other types of instrumental support with the opportunity for natural mentorship relationships to arise.

The Youth Advisory Committee envisioned a model where they could access an online platform to see photos of the volunteers, learn more about their background and experience, and what the volunteers are interested in, or able to support with. There would be a process through which the youth could reach out to supportive adults on their terms, when needed, with no pressure to follow-up afterwards, or to connect any further. But when we looked around, we didn't see this model anywhere in Surrey. Or the province. Or Canada! And so, we set out to build it.

"Prototypes" are by definition an early model to test a process or concept. Our prototype programs were an opportunity to try something completely new and innovative by combining our research with our focus on building community and supporting youth leadership development. With many unknowns, we intentionally limited the scope and breadth of the prototype projects so that we could effectively test the model to assess its potential viability. We did this by:

1. Limiting the number of youth participants to youth we were already connected to, or whom we knew had additional support networks available to them.
2. Only permitting youth 19+ to participate, to eliminate additional liability concerns.
3. Recruiting adult volunteers from our professional and personal networks, whom we knew would be willing to be flexible and adapt as we tested the process.
4. Testing various forms and administrative processes through a free system, rather than invest in the development of a program-specific platform.
5. Building evaluation into each activity, and ensuring all participants understood the test nature of this prototype phase.
6. Having a condensed timeline of two months.

The prototype phase was an opportunity to test the models and answer some of the initial questions we had to assist us in assessing whether or not we should proceed to a full pilot phase for each of the prototypes. Some of these questions were:

- Does this model show some promise for the outcomes that we were hoping to achieve?
- What would need to change for it to meet the needs it was intended to meet? (Eg. the nature of the services offered, the relationships that were/were not formed, the design of the program, etc.)
- What is the cost/investment compared with a model that includes paid mentors?
- What are the intangibles, in terms of costs and benefits?
- Is this something current participants would want to continue to participate in?
- Is this something youth/young adult participants are likely to sign up for, beyond the pilot phases?
- Is this a volunteer program adults will likely sign up for?
- Is this a program adults would commit to?
- How long does the intake process take? What is the administrative investment in each adult volunteer?
- Were there any unanticipated safety, boundary or liability issues?
- What strategies are available to mitigate risks and liability?
- What training do adult volunteers require to be able to offer appropriate support to youth?
- What should an online platform, scheduling, and outreach look like?
- How many hours of ongoing monitoring and staff support is required per number of participants/volunteers?
- What unexpected issues are connected to this model?

Adult volunteers for the prototype programs were required to attend an orientation and training session focused on the specific needs of youth who have transitioned out of care, and some background information about setting boundaries, using a trauma-informed lens, and where to find additional resources. While the adult volunteers had relationships with project staff, volunteers were required to complete an intake form, be interviewed with project staff, complete multiple reference checks, and complete a police record check.

Youth participants were required to either attend a short training session to discuss the program and boundaries, or they received a package with this information to review on their own time. Both the youth participants and adult volunteers were invited to share a meal and meet each other at a launch party following the training sessions.

Evaluation was built into the prototype model, with project staff checking in with adult volunteers and youth participants regularly. Adult volunteers were invited to provide feedback about training and the intake process immediately following the program launch. At the end of the two month trial period, adult volunteers were invited to complete an online evaluation form and speak directly with project staff. Project staff connected with each of the youth participants, either via evaluation activities with the Youth Advisory Committee, or individually. All youth participants received an honorarium for their involvement. All program participants were invited to attend a program wrap event, where participants were encouraged to debrief and share about their experiences and celebrate their involvement.

THE PROTOTYPES

We focused on the two key areas identified in our early research, and through work connected to youth from care: adult connection and employment and education. Spear-headed by the Creating Community & Adulthood and the Education & Employment working groups, we launched two prototype programs to test their viability and impact: Compass Connections and Plenty of Threads. Both of the prototypes demonstrated many early successes, and we can't wait to test both the Compass Connections and Plenty of Thread programs as proper pilot projects in the near future.



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COMPASS CONNECTIONS

THE FOCUS

Youth When asked how the community could support youth after they had 'aged out' of government care, the youth voice was consistent and clear: they needed a network of supportive adults in the community they could call on as-needed for help "adulthood". Examples of support they might need could be assistance with finances, landlords, cooking, exercise, or anything you might traditionally call a parent or close family member for throughout your 20s (and beyond).

The prototype was an opportunity to test whether this program model supported youth to be more connected to supportive adults in the community, and importantly, whether the structure supported youth to be empowered to reach out when they need assistance. On a small scale with trusted participants, we wanted to assess the viability of the program, and whether it showed enough promise to warrant a full-scale pilot phase in the future.

A member of the Youth Advisory Committee came up with the name Compass Connections for the program, to symbolize that while youth who have transitioned out of care and into the community are resilient, smart, and self-sufficient, they sometimes just need a person to point them in the right direction.

“

I think of it like a 'Community Aunt or Uncle'.

- Youth Participant

”

THE PARTICIPANTS

We recruited 7 volunteers we named Community Navigators; trusted adults that were available to support youth on an ad-hoc basis, when youth had a specific need. Over July and August 2019, 4 youth between the ages of 19-27 tested the Compass Connections prototype program, reaching out to the Community Navigators for a variety of support including help finding pet veterinary care, advice on dealing with a landlord, and even learning to swim.

“

There is a lot of power in asking for something and not having to give with it. Some people would say that's a part of love, or care, but I mean, since I was 14 or 15 I haven't felt that, so it's been a long time.

- Youth Participant, Compass Connections

”

THE OUTCOMES

7 COMMUNITY NAVIGATORS

4 YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

Over the two months, youth participants reached out to the Community Navigators 8 times. All of the Community Navigators felt like they were able to respond to the request.

When asked whether they reached out for support from the project staff, no volunteers felt like they required any assistance in dealing with the youth requests, and that they were able to effectively respond.

8
POINTS OF CONTACT



with youth



volunteers felt they were able to respond to the request

2 YOUTH REACHED OUT TO COMMUNITY NAVIGATORS FOR:

- Veterinary care including how to find a veterinarian, options for payment plans or low-cost clinics
- Questions about filing taxes
- Support to learn a new skill
- How to deal with children who are selective eaters
- Advice on travelling
- Support to deal with landlords and housing issues

“
IF I WAS LIKE 19,
AND FRESH OUT
OF CARE, I WOULD
HAVE USED THIS LIKE
18,697,000 TIMES.

”

- Youth Participant

THE FEEDBACK

Our findings reflect the evaluation activities and debrief activities done throughout the prototype phase, and following its wrap. Overall, both the youth participants and adult volunteers were positively impacted by their interactions and developing relationships in the prototype phase. Whether during a one-time ask, or through ongoing conversations, youth reported that they felt supported and cared for. All 7 adult volunteers said they would volunteer again and enjoyed being able to offer informal support to multiple diverse young people. All 4 youth participants said they were interested in participating in a full pilot phase of this program.

Overall, the prototype phase demonstrated that this programming model shows strong potential in its ability to connect youth with community members; helping to meet the need youth express around needing youth-directed adult support once they transition out of government care.

“

I liked that it was a stranger. I have a hard enough time maintaining my own friendships. So if I had to add another person I had to be “on” for.. I’m tired. I don’t have time to reach out to everyone all the time. And I also see the value in developing relationships, but it’s also nice to not have to.

- Youth Participant

”

“

You don’t have a mom, or a dad, and can’t call someone and just say “I’m freaking out.” It was pretty big to just ask someone and get some direction. It was also really nice to have follow-up, and it was lovely reassurance that I can do this.

- Youth Participant

”

YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

All of the participants preferred having the option to connect with the Community Navigators via phone or email first, before having to phone or meet in-person. Overall, the youth participants found the way we listed volunteer interests and availability challenging to navigate, and in the end selected a Community Navigator to contact based on their image and short bio.

4 OUT OF 4

Youth Participants said they would be interested in participating in a longer pilot of this project.

4 OUT OF 4

Youth Participants said they would recommend the program to their peers.

4 OUT OF 4

Youth Participants felt their request was fulfilled by the Community Navigators.

4 OUT OF 4

Youth Participants felt the Community Navigators treated them with respect and compassion.

“

“It was helpful to target a problem, rather than just being in a relationship. The help was about a specific thing.”

- Youth Participant

”



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“

THERE IS SOMETHING INCREDIBLY POWERFUL ABOUT REACHING OUT TO SOMEONE WHO'S NOT BEING PAID TO BE IN YOUR LIFE AND NOT ONLY HAVING THEM HELP YOU WITH SOMETHING, BUT FOLLOW THROUGH WITHOUT JUDGMENT OR EXPECTATION. I, IN MY ARROGANCE AS A COPING MECHANISM, THOUGHT I'D NAILED THAT DOWN. "YOU CAN SOLVE ANYTHING THAT NEEDS SOLVING & IF YOU CAN'T, YOU CAN PAY SOMEONE FOR THINGS LIKE THAT," IS AN INNER STORY THAT I'M FINDING MORE OF MYSELF IN OF LATE. WHAT I THINK IS HUMOROUS IS THAT THAT'S THE TEXTBOOK DEFINITION OF A PARENT - NOT TO SAY THAT I'M CROSSING THAT LINE IN BLURRING VOLUNTEERS AS PARENTAL ROLES, BUT THAT A ROOT CAUSE OF THE DISCONNECTION STEMS FROM BEING 'PARENTLESS.

”

- Youth Participant

COMMUNITY NAVIGATORS

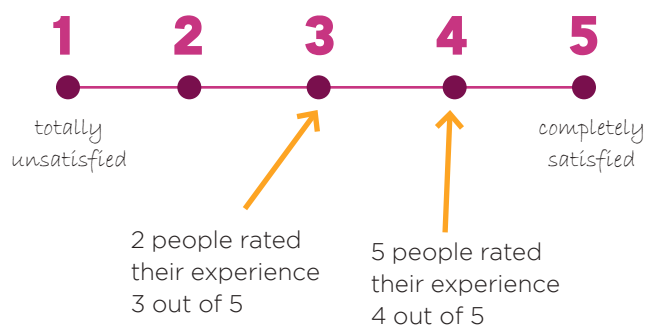


volunteers said they would participate in this program/ model again.



volunteers said they would recommend this program to other adults they know.

When asked to rate their experience with the program on a scale from 1-5, with 5 being “completely satisfied” and 1 being “totally unsatisfied”, the adult volunteers responded positively.



Elaborating on their rating through discussion and the written survey, the volunteers felt they couldn't fairly assess their experience with the program overall with such limited connections and interactions with the youth participants. Most volunteers said the connections they did make were positive, and felt that they would rate their experience higher if they had had more interactions.

Only one volunteer felt they were able to develop a “meaningful connection” with a youth participant; and this was because they met in-person regularly. Other volunteers felt they didn't have enough interaction to develop a deeper connection with any of the youth participants.

When asked whether the training prepared them for the program, the volunteers rated the training on a wide spectrum with 1 volunteer selecting 1 for “not at all”, and 2 volunteers selecting 5 for “completely”. Overall, the median rating was 4, and the average was 3.4.

Regarding accessibility to the google drive and related documents, volunteers rated the accessibility and ease of use at 4, with 5 being “very easily accessible”.

Here are the volunteer responses to what surprised them through the program:

- Learning what little support is offered once youth are considered adults.
- How long it took anyone to reach out. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but I didn't hear from anyone until the middle of August.
- Just how much I wanted to help however I could! I felt bad that I wasn't able to suggest a low-income alternative to the question I had.
- That I only received 1 message from a youth participant.
- The strength of the human spirit.



It's nice that someone thinks that you have something to share. Because you put yourself out there and you think, gosh, no one is going to want an old lady to talk to, so it felt nice to be contacted and it's nice to share something with someone.

- Community Navigator



PLENTY OF THREADS

THE FOCUS

One of the key messages we heard around connecting youth to the community was a need to find people in the community who could act as resources, sources of information, and connections for youth to build their professional and social networks in support of employment and education opportunities. Youth from care are often surrounded by adults in the human services, and may not have the ability to connect with people in diverse education and employment fields. They also often lack the networks many children living with their families have access to, connecting them with volunteer, internship, or paid work opportunities with friends or extended family members.

The prototype phase was an opportunity to test whether this program model shows promise in helping to meet the need youth expressed around connecting to adults when exploring employment and education opportunities. On a small scale, we wanted to determine whether this model was effective in connecting youth to adults outside of their circle, and whether it could act as a foundation for a full-scale pilot in the future.

The name Plenty of Threads comes from the idea that we need 'plenty of threads' to weave a tight social fabric; especially for our young people from care living independently in the community. The program built off the idea of a "human library" concept which originated in New York as an effort to challenge stereotypes and prejudices through dialogue. Through Plenty of Threads, youth received a catalogue of diverse people (ie. the "books"), that they can "check-out" (ie. meet for coffee); providing an opportunity to learn from the education and career experience of individuals they may not have otherwise met.

THE PARTICIPANTS

We recruited 14 volunteers to act as Human Books during the 2-month prototype phase; colleagues and friends of the Education & Employment Working Group. 5 youth aged 19-24 actively participated over July and August 2019, reaching out to many of the 14 human books available. Through their meetings, youth discussed education and employment opportunities from a wide variety of fields including social services, law, and costume design.

“

I don't know what I'm going to do with my degree. I would love to be able to talk to someone.

- Youth Participant

”

“

It also reminded me why I started doing what I am doing. Bringing all of those things back to the roots. As an adult participant, being able to sit and have that exploration of self. That was really powerful, in a way that also serves the adult.

- Human Book

”

THE OUTCOMES

14 HUMAN BOOKS

5 YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

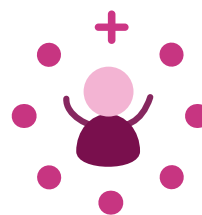
Over the two months, youth participants reached out to the Human Books at least 7 times, with more meet-ups still in the planning phase when the program wrapped.

Many adult volunteers were not contacted, and some were contacted multiple times by different youth. When asked whether they reached out for support from the project staff, no volunteers felt like they required any assistance in dealing with the youth requests, and that they were able to effectively respond. One volunteer reported being contacted after they had moved to Toronto, and so were unable to meet with the youth in-person.

2 YOUTH REACHED OUT TO HUMAN BOOKS IN THE FOLLOWING FIELDS:

- Human Services
- Law
- Costume Design and Film
- The Employment & Education Working Group found it very easy to recruit adult volunteers to act as Human Books, with significant interest from a variety of fields.

at least **7**
POINTS OF CONTACT
with youth



“

... meeting someone who is doing the same career path you want to do. That was pretty cool. Especially if you come from care and your parents didn't do anything like that, if you know what I mean? You don't really have the same connections as other kids. Other kids who want to be lawyers, their parents are lawyers. Or their parents are bankers so they become bankers, or their parents know someone who is a banker.

- Youth Participant

”

THE FEEDBACK

Our findings reflect the evaluation activities and debrief activities done throughout the prototype phase, and following its wrap.

Overall, the feedback was extremely positive from both the youth participants and the adult volunteers through the prototype phase. Through individual meetings over coffee, youth reported feeling inspired and motivated that they are on the right track. Of the 7 volunteers who responded to our follow-up survey, all responded that they would be willing to participate in a full pilot phase of the program, and that they would recommend the program as a volunteer opportunity to their colleagues. All 5 youth participants said they were interested in participating in a full pilot phase.

Through the evaluation activities, it became clear that there is strong promise with this program model to fill a current need in helping youth connect to adults in their desired education or employment field.

YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

4 OUT OF 4 of the 4 youth participants we were able to reach after the program ended, all said they would be interested in participating in a longer pilot of this project.

4 OUT OF 4 of respondents said they would recommend the program to their peers.

2 of the youth participants reached out to multiple Human Books.

All of the participants preferred having the option to connect with the Human Books via phone or email first, before having to phone or meet in-person. They also appreciated receiving gift cards so that they could purchase a beverage for themselves and/or the adult volunteer when they met.

All of the youth participants reached out to Human Books that were in their desired field or connected to their current education program.



TRISTAN MILLER ZOZO

“

I DON'T THINK YOU UNDERSTAND HOW MUCH THIS MEANS A LOT TO ME. TO KNOW I'M GOING THE RIGHT WAY, WAS SUCH A BIG STRESS RELIEVER, AND I JUST FELT LIKE YES. IT WAS SO NICE. WHERE I CAME FROM, THE TEACHERS WERE LIKE "WELL YOU'RE A FOSTER KID, YOU'RE GOING TO SCREW UP ANYWAYS". THAT WAS THE ATTITUDE THEY HAD ALL THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL, SO IT FELT LIKE WHY EVEN TRY? NO ONE HELPS ME AFTER SCHOOL, SO WHAT'S THE POINT IN TRYING TO DO BETTER? I CAN'T PAY FOR A TUTOR. I WOULD JUST BE LIKE MY PARENTS AND NOT GRADUATE. WHAT'S THE POINT IN DOING SCHOOL, I'M JUST GOING TO FAIL ANYWAYS. SO TO HEAR VALIDATION FROM SOMEONE IN THAT TIER, IN MY EYES WITH THAT MUCH STATUS AND SUCCESS, TO HEAR THAT SHE THINKS I CAN DO IT. IT WAS JUST... AMAZING.

”

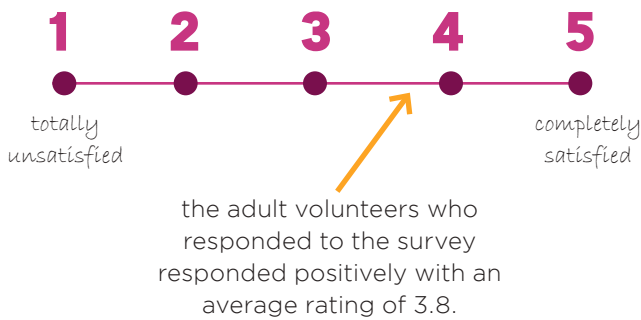
- Youth Participant

HUMAN BOOKS

7/14

Human Books responded to the online evaluation survey, and some were contacted to debrief individually after the prototype ended.

When asked to rate their experience with the program on a scale from 1-5, with 5 being “completely satisfied” and 1 being “totally unsatisfied.”



The 3 respondents who selected “3” were either not contacted by youth, and therefore felt they could not accurately rate their experience, or they had moved provinces and were unable to meet in-person with the youth. The 4 respondents who met with youth rated their experience either 4 or 5 out of 5.

During their meetings the Human Books reported they did one or more of the following:

- Shared information their career;
- Made a list of people the youth could contact for more information;
- Provided a framework for the industry and guidance on seeking employment; and/or
- Followed up after the meeting with additional information and resources.

2

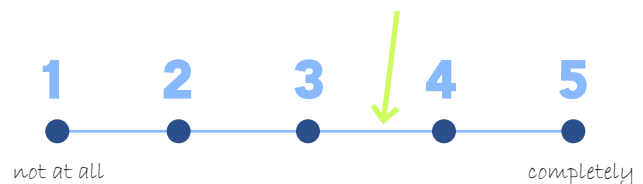
of the respondents felt they developed a meaningful connection with the youth participant,

2

while 2 reported that while they had a positive experience, they did not develop a connection.

When asked whether the training prepared them for the program, the volunteers rated the training on a wide spectrum with 1 volunteer selecting 1 for “not at all”, and 2 volunteers selecting 5 for “completely”.

Overall, the median rating and average rating was 3.5.



No respondents reported needing assistance from project staff to fulfill youth requests. One volunteer commented that she was surprised to connect with a youth in their early 20s, as her perception of “youth” was 13-18.

All 7 volunteers who responded to the online survey said they would be open to participating in a full pilot program.

THE PILOT PHASE

After running a prototype phase of these two programs, we are confident that a program that relies heavily on volunteers from the community is possible and would have some important benefits in terms of building relationships and fostering a sense of intergenerational community.

However, in order to be effective, both the Compass Connection and Plenty of Threads programs would need an organizational home, a dedicated staff person with an appropriate skill set and reasonable time horizon to develop. This is a very new service delivery model and a rushed, under-resourced, or improperly developed program would at best be ineffective and would, at worst, cause harm. Specific recommendations for a future pilot program are based on feedback from youth participants, the Youth Advisory Committee, adult volunteers, working group members, and our findings from the literature review and local research.



TRISTAN MILLER 2020

TIMEFRAME

The program needs to be ideally piloted for a minimum of two years to build a roster of volunteers, allow relationships to develop and to meaningfully evaluate how it is being used and how it is working. This would also allow time for participants to get set-up in advance of their 19th birthday.



I'm thinking about that bridge between turning 19 and the journey into adulthood. This could make the transition a little easier, a little lighter. The fear of turning 19 is so enormous, and that all the people I know will be gone and I'll have no one. So maybe we connect youth when they are 18, so they aren't as scared to transition.

- Adult Volunteer



OWNERSHIP

Compass Connections and Plenty of Threads need to be housed within an organization or service hub that young people are already accessing with the infrastructure required to provide:

- Supervision and support of staff
- Space for meetings and training
- An address and phone number as well as administrative and IT infrastructure
- Support with police record checks and insurance
- Institutional signatory on agreements with participants and volunteers
- Established risk management strategies
- Relationship with funders and other stakeholders

STAFFING

The program requires at least 0.5 to 1.0 FTE coordinator depending on the number of participants. This person should have strong youth advocacy, volunteer management, and administrative skills.

This person should have strong networks in Surrey, should be very knowledgeable about existing programs and resources so that they can direct participants to resources and supports not provided through the program.

This person should have the ability to work some evenings and weekends to provide support to volunteers and participants with full-time jobs as well as having office hours during the day to coordinate with other services and with youth workers and social workers if needed.

This person should be responsible for:

- Maintaining program infrastructure
- Making sure youth serving organizations, youth workers, and MCFD staff know about the program
- Recruiting volunteers on an ongoing basis, with a focus on both diversity of lived experience/identity and diversity of skills. Certain skills may be specifically recruited for.
- Ensuring they have up-to-date information about services and programs that already exist to make strong referrals and avoid duplication
- Doing intakes and screenings with youth and potential mentors, checking references, and police record checks
- Maintaining the database and other administrative work
- Developing a robust training program and hosting regular trainings and meet-ups
- Ongoing check-ins with volunteers and participants
- Evaluation, advocacy and fundraising
- Crisis management as required

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT AND ONBOARDING

Information about the program should be provided to a 19+ youth who has had a Continuing Care Order, Youth Agreement, or has/ currently has an Agreements with Young Adults. All of our youth participants in the prototype phase were between the ages of 19-24. While this reduces some of the liability for volunteers and the backbone organization, we know anecdotally that it will be challenging to recruit youth for these programs once they have already transitioned out of care. It is recommended to work with MCFD to see whether youth can be connected to these programs as part of their transition plan at age 18, so they have these resources available as soon as they turn 19.

Ideally, anyone in Surrey working with young people about to turn 19 or who have recently turned 19 would be aware of the program. The Compass Connections program would likely best serve the needs of youth 19-24 or 25, but the Plenty of Threads may be an important resource for youth 19-27 or 29.

The ideal participants should be youth who are quite independent, have some stability in their lives and are looking for some additional support and resources as well as to build more connections in the community.

Once a young person is connected with program staff and fills out an intake form, they could then speak to the coordinator about the specific support they are looking for whether either of the programs meets their needs. Youth participants would sign an agreement to respect the program code of conduct.

They would be invited to the next training/meet-up event and then be given access to the online portal for making connections.

VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT AND ONBOARDING

Volunteers would ideally have a connection to Surrey, a few hours a month to offer, and a skill they can share or task they would like to help with or be interested in sharing information about their education or professional background.

In order to take part in the program they would:

- Complete an initial intake questionnaire
- Go through an interview with the coordinator
- Go through a reference check
- Go through a vulnerable sector police record check
- Attend training and meet-up event
- Provide a bio, photo and other information for the online portal

The on-boarding process is rigorous and time consuming but necessary to ensure fit and most importantly, the safety of youth . Most agencies we spoke to said that the length and effort required to on-board has the unintended benefit of determining which volunteers are committed to the program. After the training, they would be given access to the appropriate part of the portal, provided with some referral resources, and be provided with a tracking document that includes crisis supports. Volunteers can change their availability and add or edit their interests at any time, though the coordinator should be kept appraised.

“

IN THE ORIENTATION, MAYBE INCLUDE SOME PARTS AROUND FEAR OF REJECTION, PEOPLE NEED TO KNOW AND UNDERSTAND THAT KIDS IN THIS PROGRAM HAVE BEEN KICKED BY PEOPLE THEY SHOULD HAVE BEEN ABLE TO TRUST. SO DON'T JOIN THIS PROGRAM IF YOU'RE NOT GOING TO FOLLOW-THROUGH. MAKE A LIST OF THINGS KIDS IN CARE HAVE TO DEAL WITH, SO REALLY HAMMER HOME THE COMMITMENT NEEDED. MAKE IT CLEAR THEY HAVE NO RIGHT TO LET THESE KIDS DOWN. DON'T VOLUNTEER THEN.

”

- Adult Volunteer

TRAINING DELIVERY

Because recruitment will be ongoing, rolling training sessions could happen every three to four months. The amount of time we allocated for training (two hours plus time for mingling and getting to know young people) in the prototype phase, was not nearly sufficient. An important question to consider is how to deliver a longer training session. Options for delivery could be a 6-8 hour session on a single weekend day, or multiple 2-hour sessions over three evenings.

Instead of combining training with a meet-up event for new participants and volunteers each time, training sessions could instead be followed by a workshop on an issue of interest, a speaker, a film screening, or some other special event

that allows for sharing of food and connection. Anyone in the program could participate to build ongoing connections and community and to learn from the events.

More than one volunteer expressed an interest in hearing actual stories from youth or adults about their lived experience transitioning out of the community. It will be important to balance that need with confidentiality and respect to those with lived experiences; ensuring no further trauma is done by retelling peoples' stories. While it is important to share the realities young people face, we also need to share information from a strengths-based perspective and to ensure we do not create an image of youth as victims.



TRISTAN MILLER 2020

PROGRAMMING

The two prototypes, Compass Connections and Plenty of Threads were imagined and initiated by youth. While they are different in their focus areas, it would make sense for both programs to be connected, and coordinated by the same organization. This would allow youth participants to be referred to whichever program would support their needs, and easily give the adult volunteers an ability to participate in both programs if they choose to.

Youth participants and our Youth Advisory Committee members recommended having an online portal that both youth participants and adult volunteers could access. There, youth could post a question publicly and receive a diversity of responses from the adults, or they could message privately with a volunteer of their choice. Connecting via an online portal would eliminate confidentiality concerns between youth and adults sharing their personal contact information. It would also allow the adult volunteers to login when they are available, rather than asking youth to wait to reach out to adults during specified times. Through the portal, youth and volunteers could see links to various resources that may assist youth with concerns that are beyond the scope of the programs. Youth expressed that they would like a mobile-friendly website for this platform, instead of an app, as some young people do not have cell phones. Ultimately, we see the value for youth and adults to connect in-person, and we saw this reflected in participant feedback. However, youth continually express more comfort reaching out virtually to begin with, and then possibly pursuing in-person connections based on a positive, or series of positive, experience(s).

The question of reimbursement for volunteers access money for young people (coffee cards/ transit) and of adult volunteers providing food and/or other items of monetary value will need to be considered in advance of the pilot phase. We did not provide for this in the prototype, although we made coffee cards available for meetings in the Plenty of Threads program. At the training there was a conversation about volunteers buying coffee or a meal, or providing supplies. The questions for exploration include:

- Whether that would be expected of navigators and whether that would be a barrier to some participants
- Equity among participants (if one participant receives something of value)
- How to maintain boundaries for each party if money or gifts are exchanged

COMPASS CONNECTIONS

This program would allow participants to connect directly with screened and trained Community Navigators who have volunteered to share specific skills or offer specific supports.

Skills and services could include:

1. Talking to young people about budgeting, taxes and other financial matters;
2. Teaching a craft, sharing a hobby or supporting a new fitness routine;
3. Offering advice on cleaning vehicle maintenance or home repair
4. Coaching on relationship or career issues;
5. Interview preparation or review of resumes and cover letters;
6. Providing support in looking for housing or dealing with a landlord;
7. Help with school-related questions or challenges;
8. Cultural, spiritual and/or identity-based support;
9. Help finding community resources and professional support; and
10. Transportation of furniture or other large objects.

Transportation remains an important question and this program could include something similar to the ride programs that exist for seniors if it was resourced to do so, or could look at taxi/ride-share voucher programs as a supplement to this program. Home visits for things like repairs are also an open question to be considered by an expanded program, as is the possibility of Community Navigators volunteering to be “emergency contacts” for a participant. The question of offering driving lessons has also been raised. These possible supports require additional risk management strategy as they are deemed higher-risk activities due to the nature of one-on-one contact in private settings.

PLENTY OF THREADS

This program would allow participants to connect with individuals in an education or employment field of interest.

Through the prototype we saw that the youth who participated were already enrolled in post-secondary education, or had a clear idea of their desired education or employment path. Given this, it will be important to explore deeper connections to post-secondary institutions to increase the ability to connect with youth who have already transitioned out of care.

Youth participants would benefit from receiving gift cards to use at their informational meetings. Through our evaluation activities, we also discussed opportunities to scaffold the risk associated with meeting someone by attending with a peer mentor, youth, or another third party.

“

I’m super shy. I’m nervous and intimidated. So it would be great to have youth in care as peer mentors, because there is that comfort already there.

- Youth Advisory
Committee Member

”

MONITORING & EVALUATION

We were able to answer some of our evaluation questions through the prototype phase, but many require a more robust pilot phase of the programs to fully answer. Regular evaluation of the program should happen at least twice a year during the scale-up/pilot phase, and undertaken by the coordinator. This should include separate evaluations for volunteers and participants, as well as some kind of check-in with referring workers/organization. The pilot should remain flexible enough that it is able to be responsive to feedback throughout the entire phase.

A part of the evaluation for this program should include identifying services that would more appropriately be provided by providing resources directly to youth or by funding paid positions. The Youth Advisory Committee and the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition could advocate for the provision of these services.

Through a pilot phase, the following questions should be addressed:

- Do the pilots achieve the intended outcomes? To what extent?
- What resources would be needed to scale this/ make it permanent?
- If that happens, where should it live? What should the skillset of the coordinator be?
- How should relationships that emerge be managed (or not)? If a mentorship or kin type relationship emerges should that be considered outside of the program?
- What would be required to make organizations comfortable referring participants to the program?
- What is the cost/investment compared to a model that includes paid mentors?
- How many hours of ongoing monitoring and staff support is required per number of participants/volunteers?
- Is this a program adult volunteers would commit to long-term?
- What would be required to add participants with more complex needs?
- What would be required to add more crisis line/ 24 hour-type support?
- What is the appropriate age range for participants?
- Were there any unanticipated safety, boundary or liability issues?
- What strategies are available to mitigate risks and liability?

THE WRAP

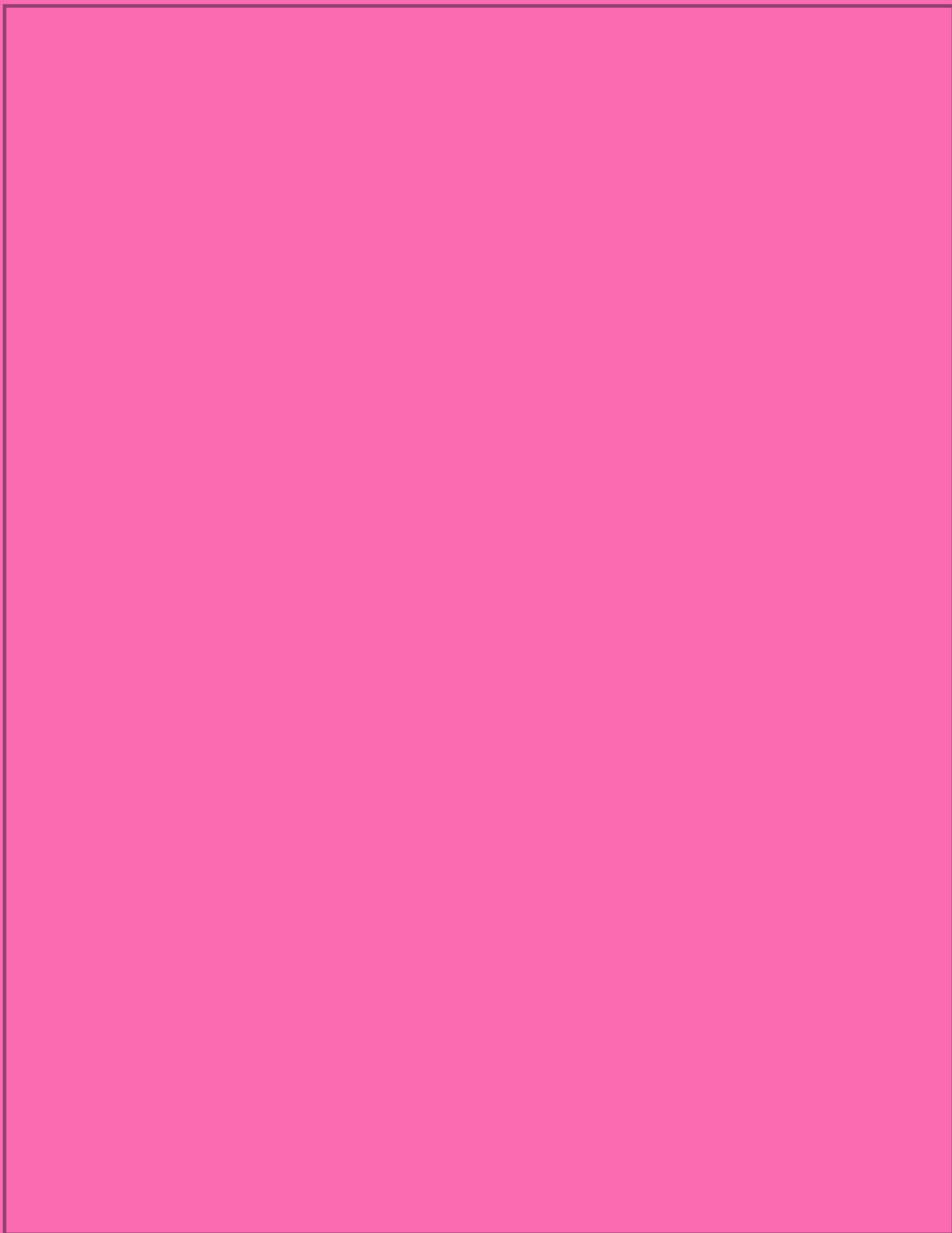
It is clear that Youth Advisory Committee members are not looking for forced relationships, high-stakes relationships, forced schedules or paid friendships and do not believe a model that included those elements would serve their peers. Ideally, they are looking for needs-based connections with adults on an ad hoc basis, from which relationships may grow.

Recognizing that this model is brand new, the 2-month prototype phase provided an opportunity to examine a number of questions we had about the logistics, the liability, and the possible outcomes of a program like this. Using a prototype approach, we tested the model with a small group of trusted youth and adult volunteers. We were able to answer many of the questions we had about this model, but most importantly, this one:

Do the programs provide opportunities for youth to reach out and be connected to a diverse group of community members, either to help with life skills, or employment and education fields? Does this model meet this currently unmet need of creating a stronger social fabric for youth who have transitioned out of care?

Yes. Yes, it does.

The youth participants of Compass Connections and Plenty of Threads unequivocally responded yes - this model meets a currently unmet need in the community for youth who have recently transitioned out of the government care system into independent living in Surrey. Our prototype phase gave us a lot of information, and also raised a number of new questions. We look forward to seeing how the findings from the prototype phase can influence and inform a full pilot phase of both programs, and identify what is required to ensure both programs have the positive impact we believe they are capable of achieving.



YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT:

*A Report on Project Activities for the
Connecting Community to Surrey
Youth Aging Out of Care Project*



We acknowledge that this work takes place on the unceded, ancestral and traditional territories of the Semiahmoo, Katzie, Kwikwetlem, Kwantlen, Qayqayt and Tsawwassen First Nations. We recognize the ongoing colonization of Indigenous peoples, which is evident in the disproportionate number of Indigenous children and youth in the care system. We commit to approaching this work in the spirit of reconciliation; aiming to decolonize our practice and amplify the voices of Indigenous youth whenever possible.

AN INITIATIVE OF



WITH THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT OF

vancouver
foundation



Surrey Youth
Assistance Fund

Ocean Park
Foundation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth in and from care matter. And they deserve to be heard.

Of the approximately 700 youth in BC who leave government care on their 19th birthday each year, anywhere from 50 to 70 youth “aging out” every year call Surrey their home. In 2016, the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition identified youth who had “aged out” of the government care system as a key demographic to support, noting the increased risk of poverty for these young people. They set out on a mission to “wrap the community around youth”, and radically rethink the ways youth are supported by the broader community as they transition from the care of MCFD into independence when they turn 19.

Over three years, we focused our work in three areas: research, building community, and youth leadership development. In our final year of the project we launched two prototype projects that brought together findings and work from those three areas.

The focus on youth leadership development was two-fold: we wanted to amplify the voices of youth in and from care by ensuring the project activities were designed, implemented and evaluated with direct input from youth with care experience. We also wanted to support the leadership development of youth, and provide them with opportunities to access skill development opportunities, new experiences, and to build connections with the community-at-large.

This report highlights the work we did on youth leadership development, and includes highlights on the distinct activities related to this area of focus:

- The development of a Youth Advisory Committee
- Supporting a range of advocacy opportunities for youth
- Hosting 3 Youth Retreats

Paramount to the project’s success was the creation of the Youth Advisory Committee; a group made up of diverse Surrey youth with care experience, with a mandate to advise on all activities related to the Connecting Community to Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care project. This group of outspoken young people provided crucial direction and expertise on the process, the actions, and the intended outcomes of the project-at-large. Project activities were further supported by the collaboration of diverse community members and key stakeholders through an overall Project Planning Committee and a number of distinct Working Groups

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THE CONTEXT

Approximately 700 youth in BC leave government care every year on their 19th birthday, and around 5,000 young BC adults (aged 19-24) have previously been in government care. While increasing numbers of young people in BC are living with their parents until well into their twenties, young people coming out of the care system are forced into independence at 19; cut off from familiar services and supports before they may be ready.

Surrey has the largest youth population in BC; in 2016, roughly a quarter of the City's population was under 19 years old. But prior to 2016, there wasn't a lot of information specifically about youth with care experience in Surrey. Looking to take action on this issue, the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition commissioned a report by the McCreary Centre Society in 2016 entitled "Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care" to paint a clear local picture of this issue. Their research showcased some important facts: including that amongst Surrey's young people, anywhere from 50 to 70 turn 19 and 'age out' of government care every single year.

The research showed us that most British Columbian parents expect to support their children up to age 28, and most of them do. While just about all of their peers receive some financial or other assistance from their families between the ages of 19 to 28, only a tiny fraction of former youth in care in Greater Vancouver had received any housing or financial support from their family since turning 19. Unfortunately, the pattern across BC is true for Surrey youth with care experience - the research done by the McCreary Centre Society found that local youth who age out of care are more likely than their peers to become homeless, have poor educational, employment and health outcomes, and claim income assistance benefits.

Additionally, the research showed that the majority of BC adults believe that 19 year-olds do not have the necessary skills and resources to live independently, and need the support of their families through their twenties. A 2013 Vancouver Foundation poll showed that only a quarter of BC adults were aware that government support ends when young people in care reach their 19th birthday. Initiatives like Fostering Change, and the work of the Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks and First Call have extremely successful at raising public awareness of this important issue, and so the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition set out to see how to bring individuals, organizations, and local government together to more effectively support young people transitioning out of care in Surrey.



This report focuses on the project activities related to youth leadership development, and our efforts to increase the skills of youth from care, and empower them to be changemakers in the community.

THE PROJECT



RESEARCH

- Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care Report
- Youth in Care Fact Sheet
- Housing Resource Sheet
- Youth Mentorship Program Models
- Youth Housing Models
- Youth Housing Survey



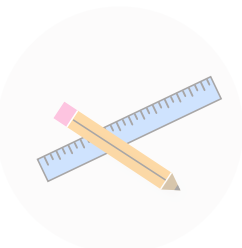
BUILDING COMMUNITY

- Stakeholder Workshops
- Holiday Dinners
- BC Children & Youth in Care Week Awards and Community BBQ
- 19th Birthday Installation and Event
- Youth Story Harvest



YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

- Youth Advisory Committee
- Advocacy
- Youth Retreats



PROTOTYPE PROJECTS

- Compass Connections
- Plenty of Threads

Given what the statistics say about the increased risk of poverty for young people with care experience, it was a natural fit for the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition (SPRC) to lead a project focused on supporting youth aging out of the care system. The intent of this work was to “wrap the community around youth”, and radically rethink the ways youth are supported by the broader community as they transition from the care of MCFD into independence. And so, in 2016, with the support of funding from the Vancouver Foundation, “Connecting Community to Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care” launched into its first phase. With continued support from the Vancouver Foundation in 2017, and additional funding from Coast Capital Savings, Envision Financial, the Ocean Park Foundation, the Youth Employment and Education Fund (now the Surrey Youth Assistance Fund) and others, we hit the ground running with an ambitious vision to change outcomes for youth in and from care.

We brought together stakeholders, decision-makers, adults and youth with lived experience, and community members to hear from youth and what they need to feel connected to the community as they make the leap into independent living. Our vision was that:

- Surrey youth in and from care will be better supported in their transition into adulthood.
- Youth participants will develop and refine their leadership skills, with the tools and knowledge to more effectively advocate for policy and systems change.
- Individuals and organizations not currently engaged with young people will be actively engaged in providing support to Surrey youth with care experience through financial contributions, in-kind support, or volunteer roles.

Our vision was supported by an approach rooted in shared core values amongst those involved:

- Centre the Youth Voice
- Know the Facts
- Raise the Profile
- Change the System

Over three years, we focused our work in three areas: research, building community, and youth leadership development. At the end of the project we launched two prototype projects that brought together findings and work from those three areas. Project activities were supported by the collaboration of diverse community members and key stakeholders through an overall Project Planning Committee, a number of distinct Working Groups, and the Youth Advisory Committee.

THE WORK



Our commitment to supporting youth throughout the project was two-fold: we wanted to amplify the voices of youth in and from care by ensuring the project activities were designed, implemented and evaluated with direct input from youth with care experience, to ensure that there was “nothing about them, without them”. We also wanted to support the leadership development of youth, and provide them with opportunities to access skill development opportunities, new experiences, and to build connections with the community-at-large.

The authentic inclusion of youth voices was a vital part of the overall project. Through the creation of a Youth Advisory Committee, supporting youth to engage in advocacy opportunities at the local and regional level, and hosting multiple youth retreats, we were able to actively work towards our overall project goal that:

- Youth participants will develop and refine their leadership skills, with the tools and knowledge to more effectively advocate for policy and systems change.

Engaging with young people across the City, we remained responsive and reactive in our project implementation; shifting our own actions to better support youth, and seeking out opportunities to improve our focus on the issues that mattered most to young people.

To evaluate the impact and success of each project activity, we engaged in a wide variety of evaluation activities. Using valuable feedback from event participants, the Youth Advisory Committee, the Planning Committee, and relevant stakeholders, we were able to draw out key reflections and recommendations for related project activities. These findings and suggestions are summarized and highlighted in each of the following sections.

YOUTH ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The Youth Advisory Committee (YAC) was both part of the organizational and decision-making structure of this project, and an important case study in itself as the first Youth Advisory Committee in Surrey focused on the needs of youth in government care.

Youth with care experience aged 15-24 were invited to meet regularly with a focus on providing insight and expertise to the Planning Committee and working groups on all project activities, developing leadership skills, creating connections with their peers, and advocating on important issues affecting young people with care experience. YAC Members were actively involved in planning and facilitating the youth retreats, holiday dinners, and engaging in advocacy in the region. The success of our YAC inspired the creation of several additional YACs throughout Surrey during the course of this project. While it is awesome that other YACs provided opportunities for youth outside of the care system to engage in the issues and services that impact them, most, if not all, of them remain 'advisory'. What made our YAC unique were the opportunities for members to roll up their sleeves and do the work. Advising, yes. But also planning, implementing, and facilitating project activities and events that changed the experience for youth transitioning out of care.

The YAC chose to name themselves VIBE, which stands for: raising our Voices, Improving services, Be noticed, and Evolve.

The majority of the original YAC members remained regularly engaged over the course of three years, which is exceptional in terms of youth engagement. One member who relocated to Prince George continued to attend meetings remotely, via online platforms. YAC members have credited the success of the YAC to the authentic approach to engagement, where the youth felt empowered to steer the project through their decisions about the project priorities and activities.

“

The YAC saw me for the individual I am, and saw me for who I was.

- YAC Member

”

#YOUTHSPOTLIGHT

EDWARD

Edward joined the YAC with a prompt from his youth worker. Edward is a self-described youth advocate, and the YAC was the perfect place for him to find and use his voice. He is proud of the impact project activities like the Youth Retreats had on Surrey youth. Edward is currently attending post-secondary education to become a Lawyer, and works with the SOS Children's Village.

STACEY

After experiencing the government care system, Stacey is determined to ensure no one else has the same experience she did. She joined YAC to deepen her understanding of how the system works and has been a continuous force, advocating for change in Surrey. Stacey is currently working towards a Degree in Child and Youth Care, to fulfill her dream of being a Youth Worker.

JOZAE

Jozae initially joined the YAC for the financial incentive. But she stayed because, in her words, it was badass work. Zae has been an important addition to the YAC since its inception, and she has grown into a leader on issues related to youth in care. Zae has a dream to be a famous painter and share her art with the world and to pursue a career in youth work. Or, she might find a way to do both and hopes to run an arts program at a local youth centre. The sky is the limit for Zae, and we all know she will fly.

ALEX

Alex is artistic, creative, and makes a statement with his performance art. They joined the YAC to gain leadership skills and to make a difference in the community. Acting as a Cabin Leader at the Youth Retreat was a personal accomplishment for Alex; and their hilarious performance as the talent show emcee will not be forgotten! Alex never stops advocating for youth in care, the LGBTQQI2S community, and Indigenous people.

“

I LEARNED HOW TO ADVOCATE FOR MYSELF. I TAUGHT OTHERS HOW TO ALWAYS SPEAK YOUR TRUTH AND ALWAYS KNOW YOUR WORTH. THESE ARE LESSONS THAT WILL STICK WITH ME FOREVER.

LEARNING ABOUT BOUNDARIES. I LOVE THAT I DIDN'T EVER THINK I COULD CARE ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE. I FELT THAT I COULD BE MYSELF AROUND ALL THE PEOPLE HERE. THIS IS A LIFESTYLE I NEVER THOUGHT I'D LIVE. LIKE I COULD DO ANYTHING I PUT MY HEART TO. THIS GROUP COULD SEE ME ON A REAL LEVEL. RELATIONSHIPS ARE REALLY HARD FOR US, AND THIS WAS THE FIRST GROUP I MET (YOUTH FROM CARE) WHERE I FELT LIKE I BELONGED. I SEE THIS AS A FAMILY. MY FAMILY. THIS WAS A VERY DIFFERENT LIFESTYLE THAN WHAT I HAD AND BEING A PART OF YAC TAUGHT ME HOW VALUABLE MY LIFE IS, HOW I WANT TO TREAT MYSELF, AND HOW I WANT TO TREAT OTHERS. AFTER THE FIRST COUPLE MONTHS OF THE PROJECT I STOPPED THE ILLEGAL STUFF I WAS DOING, AND I NEVER LOOKED BACK.

”

- Jozae, YAC Member

ADVOCACY

An important part of the project was a commitment to amplifying the voices of youth in and from care. Through participation on the YAC, youth gained valuable leadership skills around advocacy and public speaking.

The YAC participated in a number of events where they were able to speak out about policies that directly impact them. Members of the YAC were able to speak about the challenges and needs of youth transitioning out of care in many diverse ways. For example:

- Participating in all-candidate meetings during elections;
- Attending policy meetings with regional groups like Fostering Change;
- Attending provincial conferences to speak directly to decision-makers;
- Acting as guest speakers on a podcast about youth in care;
- Presenting to various City Committees, and the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition;
- Providing feedback to organizations and groups asking for input or advice; and
- Advocating for themselves in their personal and professional lives.

“

If you give us the chance to speak, and sit there and listen, then you will get to know what we need. This YAC gave me the strength to advocate for myself, tell me what's right or wrong. And speak up in the system.

- Alex, YAC Member

”

All of these experiences helped the YAC gain the confidence and skills needed to affect change in the community.



“

THE WHOLE TIME I FELT LIKE EVERYONE WHO WAS THERE HAD MY BACK. EVEN THOUGH THEY DIDN'T NECESSARILY KNOW WHAT I WAS GOING TO SAY, OR HOW LONG IT WOULD GO, OR HOW INTENSE IT WAS GOING TO BE... THAT WAS THE TIME FOR ME THAT FELT LIKE.. I CAN JUST KEEP GOING AND THEY WILL SUPPORT ME NO MATTER WHAT. MY WHOLE LIFE I'VE BEEN TOLD THAT I TALK A LOT, AND PEOPLE LOOK AT ME WEIRD SO I STOP TALKING. IT'S HARD WHEN YOU HEAR YOUR WHOLE LIFE TO STOP TALKING, BECAUSE THAT'S WHO I AM. I'M OFTEN SILENT [NOW]. THE EDWARD I VISUALIZE MYSELF AS, LIKE THE IDEAL EDWARD, THE EDWARD I WOULD BE IF I HADN'T GONE THROUGH THOSE EXPERIENCES WHERE I FELT LIKE I HAD TO ADHERE TO OTHER PEOPLE'S EXPECTATIONS AND VIEWS ABOUT ME - I WAS ABLE TO CHANNEL THAT INTO [THE TIME] I SPOKE TO THE [COMMUNITY GROUP] AND I WASN'T GOING TO STOP UNTIL I FELT LIKE THEY ACTUALLY UNDERSTOOD, AND I WASN'T GOING TO STOP UNTIL I SAID EVERYTHING I WANTED TO SAY, AND THAT I WAS ABLE TO ADDRESS WHAT NEEDED TO BE ADDRESSED. AND I FELT LIKE I WAS ABLE TO BE DONE AND SAY EXACTLY WHAT I WANTED TO SAY. IT WAS GREAT.

”

- Edward, *YAC Member*

YOUTH RETREATS

The YAC planned and facilitated three youth retreats; two that were open to any youth in or from care, and one for the YAC members. In preparation for the retreat, the YAC learned facilitation skills, event planning skills, and worked with project staff to plan the logistical details.

The name of the first retreat in 2017 was “Changing Our Story, Changing Our Future”, and 17 youth attended. At that initial retreat, we gained valuable insight from the youth around the challenges young people face as they transition out of the care system, with a specific

focus on Surrey. These youth were integral in identifying the top priorities that became the foundations for the working groups and all project activities.

The second retreat, “VIBES reYACt 2k19”, had 18 participants, with a focus on reporting back on the work the YAC had done throughout the project, and to provide a true camp experience for youth. Most of the participants had never camped before, and had high barriers to participation. The itinerary included youth-led activities and workshops, and time for nature walks, archery, ropes courses, and games. The retreats also provided a unique opportunity for youth to connect with their peers outside of their regular routines, creating positive memories and lasting connections.

Our final retreat, held in 2020, was an opportunity for the YAC members to reflect on their experience as part of the YAC, and to celebrate the incredible work they have accomplished.



TRISTAN MILLER 2020

Retreats are valuable because they bond youth in care together in a safe space. We got to be out in nature without our labels

- Retreat Participant

THE LESSONS

We had a lot of hits, and like any project, a few misses, along the way - always reflecting and learning how to do this work more effectively and equitably. We learned a lot about youth engagement, inclusion, and empowerment through the implementation of our project activities; highlighted through these reflections on key takeaways.

1. YOUTH KNOW WHAT THEY NEED.

Like all people, youth from care are experts in their own lives. And they should be acknowledged as such. Youth from the care system have important ideas on how to address the system and community gaps in support that impact them most. When we asked youth at the retreat, on the Youth Advisory Committee, and through our other activities what the priorities are for their community, they answered! It didn't take long for dozens of youth to come to a shared vision of what needs to change. What made our project successful was that we believed and valued what youth had to say, and we used their insight to shape all of our project activities. We found that youth almost always have the words, but they sometimes need a little nudge, or the space, to use their voice.

2. YOUTH NEED SUPPORT TO SHOW UP.

Whether it's to regular YAC meetings, to an event, or to a retreat, many youth require a lot of emotional and logistical support to participate. In the initial stages of this project, the Planning Committee under-estimated the amount of staff support it would require to ensure broad youth participation. Following feedback from the youth and staff, we committed to having a dedicated staff person available to support youth at each YAC meeting, and to ensure the retreats and events were adequately supported. We also made sure that there were staff with lived experience deeply involved at the staff-level, present at youth events, and that any additional staff approached the work through a trauma-informed lens. Youth need support to show up, and what that support looks like matters just as much.

3. LIVED EXPERIENCE DESERVES REMUNERATION.

Through the YAC, we asked youth to actively participate in planning and evaluating project activities. Their lived experience is indeed a credential, and should be remunerated as such. With limited funding, we sought specific grants to ensure that we could offer our YAC members an honorarium for each meeting. They also received an honorarium for their participation on working groups, in the Planning Committee, as participants in the prototype projects, and for their facilitation of events and retreats. Youth deserve fair compensation for their contribution and work to support project development and implementation. The YAC should not be expected to provide free labour, in any form. Period.

4. YOUTH NEED A SOFT LANDING.

Youth may know what they need, but they don't always have the skills to advocate for themselves or for systems-change. They may not even recognize what those skills are, until they jump in. Most young people haven't had the chance to present in front of decision-makers, or advocate for policy change to large groups. From the beginning, we built in workshops and training sessions to our YAC meetings, so that they were empowered to lead the way. We worked on facilitation, event planning, public speaking, and other key skills and supported them to be front and centre in the community. There were a lot of nerves, some missteps, but mostly incredible learning and growth. To be empowered along their own journey in advocacy and activism, youth need strong support to stand up, speak out, and fall right back down if they need to. Rinse and repeat.

5. RADICAL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT MEANS GETTING FLEXIBLE.

It isn't enough to invite youth into adult spaces. If we are authentic in our desire to radically change the way we support youth, it means shaking off our preconceptions of youth engagement and being willing to do things differently. The timing of meetings and events, the location, and the meeting structure all likely need to shift to ensure that youth are able to attend and be actively involved. We were able to support these principles in our YAC meetings, meeting more frequently based on feedback, and at times and places that worked for youth. We struggled more to accommodate youth into our working groups, where the service provider/stakeholder availability didn't always align with youth availability. While we never got it perfectly right, we found other concrete ways to honour youth engagement; for example, bringing every decision back to the YAC, and adapting the project structure and timeline as youth identified new needs and ideas. What radical youth engagement looks like is ultimately up to youth to decide; but usually always demonstrated by a commitment to putting the needs of youth ahead of our own.

6. CONSISTENT STAFFING MATTERS.

The majority of our YAC members had a consistent presence on the committee over three years. In technical terms for youth engagement: that's pretty much bananas. Throughout our debrief activities, many of the YAC members honed in on the consistent staff support and what that consistency meant to them. Often, they described their experience in the care system as one marked with a high turnover of supportive adults; either in paid or unpaid roles. The project's consistent staffing meant that youth could develop deeper relationships with project staff and allies, without fear that they would eventually move on. As it turns out, when the revolving door stops turning, youth don't feel the need to leave.

“

When it comes to YAC, we didn't have specific instructions, there was no manual on how to do our work, it was just pretty much [project consultants] coming in and saying “I'm here to bring the food and you guys decide whatever you want to do.” The freedom. That was given to us.

- Jozae. YAC Member

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THE HORIZON

Any future work will reflect the same commitment to authentic and radical youth engagement, and centering the voices of those with lived experience. We don't know exactly what our next steps will be, but these key recommendations will help shape our actions moving forward.

1. ELIMINATE THE HOOPS, WHILE RAISING THE BAR.

We need to minimize the barriers for youth to participate as much as we can. We need to address their specific needs to ensure they have adequate supports in place to be a part of all project activities, including the YAC. At the same time, we need to continue raising the bar for their involvement; they are creative, bright, and capable young people and should be expected to maintain professionalism and be accountable to fulfill their chosen duties. We brought youth struggling with mental health and addictions to the retreat, invited youth in crisis to the YAC meetings, and recognized some of the most high-needs youth at our awards ceremony. We also expected them to be on time, to be professional, and to be accountable for whatever they took on. Let's continue to eliminate any hoops youth have to jump through, while simultaneously demonstrating our respect for their abilities by maintaining high standards for involvement. We have seen that when you raise the bar for what you expect from young people, they can - and will - meet it every.single.time.

2. LET YOUTH TAKE THE WHEEL.

All of the project activities need to be youth-driven and youth-led. When they are, they tend to strike the right balance between "fun" and "work". And who says the two can't overlap, anyways? One of the most common reflections we received from youth engaged in our project activities was that they were appreciative there was always ample space to build personal connections; whether it was time to share personal updates, cook together and share a meal, or have planned downtime during a retreat. Reflecting on that feedback, we can see that the project activities are about much more than checking off a to-do list. They are also about inviting youth to show up as their authentic selves and building meaningful connections between peers, staff, and the broader community. Letting youth guide our processes will ensure that our meetings and our activities are safe and inviting places for all youth.

3. BRING THE YAC TO THE COMMUNITY, AND THE COMMUNITY TO THE YAC.

Some of our most inspiring and exciting moments were when the YAC was invited to advise community groups on the work they were doing. We also took the YAC on the road to speak to City Advisory Committees, elected officials, and at conferences with key decision-makers. We are hungry for more! Part of changing the way we do youth engagement with young people from care is providing an open invitation for community organizations and people to access the YAC and solicit feedback on their program or service, and how they might better serve youth in and from care. We can invite others in, but we must also continue to be proactive in finding ways for the YAC to be involved in raising awareness of this issue in the community-at-large. Watch out Surrey: the YAC is coming.

4. CONNECT THE DOTS.

There is power in numbers. There are already some amazing groups and initiatives like Fostering Change, AgedOut.com, and the Federation of BC Youth in Care focused on improving the outcomes for youth in care locally, regionally, and nationally, in addition to a number of other YACs across Surrey. This time around, we didn't have the resources necessary to expand our reach. One of our priorities moving forward will be to more actively tap into this wisdom and momentum and connect the Surrey YAC to the broader youth movement to create an even stronger unified voice amongst young people. We also want to ensure our YAC members have a range of opportunities to sharpen their skills and exercise their right to speak out on behalf of youth from care. Plus, Surrey youth are rock stars and we want to show them off. Obviously.

5. DECOLONIZE.

We know that in Surrey, and throughout BC, Indigenous youth are vastly overrepresented in the care system. While some of our YAC members identify as Indigenous, our work thus far in moving the dial toward decolonization has been minimal. Moving forward we want to build stronger connections to the urban Indigenous community in Surrey to ensure that we are doing this work in a way that reflects our desire to decolonize the process and practices of youth engagement, inclusion, and advocacy; while also ensuring we are effectively addressing the specific challenges for Indigenous youth exiting the care system.

6. FOCUS ON SYSTEMS CHANGE.

When it comes to youth development, It can be challenging to tease out what defines immediate impact, and what is systems-change. While we know that any immediate impact like the development of the YAC will inevitably change the way young people and the broader community interact with each other, a key focus needs to be on empowering youth to see themselves as important changemakers in the community. As the supportive adults in this work, we can identify and engage the champions in every sector and create the opportunities for youth engagement. Let's ensure that we arm youth with the tools they need in their toolbelt to understand how to access decision-makers, and where the levers are at every level of decision-making to impact change and improve outcomes for young people leaving care.

7. PLAN, DO, REVIEW.

We had some great debrief sessions with the YAC following our retreats, our presentations, and each event. But things were moving and shaking and we didn't always stop to catch our breath and really capture the impact of our youth leadership development activities. The YAC offered an opportunity for youth to hone their leadership skills, but it also shifted the system by engaging youth at every level of the development and implementation of the project. A more thorough and nuanced evaluation strategy will help us capture all the amazing ways the YAC brought about change, both individually and throughout the community.

THE WRAP

We accomplished a lot over three years together. Our successes span from immediate impact on the ground, to important work behind the scenes, bringing new people in, building partnerships, and gaining a better understanding of the challenges and barriers Surrey youth experience as they transition out of care.

The consistency and commitment of the youth and adults involved over three years is a testament to both the need, the sense of urgency, and the desire to make lasting change for youth. Our work has built on the efforts of others, and will be an important foundation for work in Surrey to come.

Youth leadership development can take many forms and we have only scratched the surface for what is possible in Surrey. We have learned a lot of valuable lessons throughout our three years working directly with hundreds of young people, and know that whatever this work looks like in the future, it must continue to be youth-driven, youth-led, and be open to radically changing the way we imagine youth engagement.

Youth who have experience in the care system have been through enough. Let's continue to work together to ensure their next chapter into adulthood is one that includes healthy relationships, a strong sense of community, self-empowerment, access to resources and opportunities, and endless hope for a bright future ahead.

“

Everyone keeps saying “oh the YAC is coming to an end.” I don't think of it that way. I think there's a lot more work to be done, and there's no doubt in my mind that we will find something, because this is just... it can't end now. I feel like we are picking up, we are on a roll, and there's no way you can just stop something in its prime.

- Edward, YAC Member

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