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## **B.C. YOUTH AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE**

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The resolution B.C. Youth Aging out of Foster Care, proposed by The University Women’s Club of Vancouver (UWCV), was adopted at the Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW) BC Council AGM on April 23, 2016 and is now policy.

The Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW) BC Council urge the Government of British Columbia to support young people who have aged out of foster care at age 19 with their living expenses (including housing, food, education and health care) through a stipend or living supplement until they turn 25.

The CFUW BC Council urges the Government of British Columbia to develop and implement a comprehensive and integrated plan based on community standards of care to ensure every young person aging out of care has the opportunities and supports needed to thrive as adults.

The CFUW BC Council urges the Government of British Columbia to develop and review existing policies and procedures in collaboration with foster youth and community organizations that will help youth transition successfully from foster care to adulthood

The CFUW BC Council urges the Government of British Columbia in collaboration with community members to work to reduce stigma and foster permanence and community for youth aging out of care

### **RELATED POLICIES:**

None strictly related to Foster Care.

Closely related to BC Council Child Poverty Reduction Initiative 2012 -2014

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## **BACKGROUND**

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All young people in British Columbia should have access to the resources, opportunities, and consistent caring relationships they need to thrive in adulthood. There is an urgent need for systemic, community, and government level reforms that will reduce inequality during the transition to adulthood for young people aging out of government care in B.C.

This resolution calls for the extension of supports for youth aging out until the age of 25, the creation of a comprehensive and caring plan to ease transitions, a review of existing policies, and community based initiatives to reduce stigma and foster permanency.

## **Situation For Youth Aging Out of Care in B.C.**

The situation for young people today is different than it was for previous generations. Classic markers of transitioning to adulthood - marriage, household formation, finishing school, starting careers - have been delayed by a decade for young people across B.C. (Representative for Children and Youth in B.C. (RCYBC), 2014). People in B.C. believe that things are getting tougher for young people today, and recognise that family is a key support to ensuring success (Vancouver Foundation, 2016).

In this context of widespread difficulty, young people aging out of foster care face unique challenges. Each year 700 young people age out of foster care, often ending up with difficult outcomes (Vancouver Foundation, 2016). These young people face the high costs of transitioning to adulthood at a time of dire poverty where they are often struggling to meet their most basic needs. They face the double challenge of having fewer informal supports in their lives, while having a greater need for that very safety net (RCYBC 2014).

There have been many calls for reform on this issue from local and provincial watchdogs. Here in B.C., flags have been raised by the Representative for Children and Youth of B.C., the Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks (FBCYICN), Aunt Leah's Place, First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition and more. Outside of B.C., advocates have raised this issue in Alberta (2013), Manitoba (2006), Ontario (2012) and Washington State (2010), just to name a few.

The Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) have made an effort in recent years to improve the situation for these young people. This includes initiatives such as the Agreement with Young Adult, which allows young people to receive limited support for up to 24 months while attending school, until they turn 25 (Ontario, 2013). Recently they developed a B.C. "Useful Tips" booklet, which lays out the many supports young people need, and suggests they seek out adults who will sign "permanency pacts" to provide this (MCFD, 2013). A recent government review of policy and procedure in this area acknowledges further need for reform, while suggesting that a "culture of blame" created by external advocates is the main barrier to improvements (Plecas, 2015).

## **Barriers and Opportunities for Successful Transitions**

Certain elements are protective and encourage a successful transition. In B.C., parents provide exceptional care for their own kids who are 19-28, and recognise that long term relationships with dependable adults are key to success in the transition to self-sufficiency (Vancouver Foundation, 2016).

To succeed, young people need support with their career path, accessing education, finding suitable housing, building life skills, developing supportive relationships, growing identity, getting health care, and seeking legal information. Adults play a key role by guiding and encouraging along the way (Manitoba, 2006).

On a personal level, youth in care are often ambivalent about their transition out of care and into adulthood. They may feel positive around the increase in autonomy and the reduced surveillance, while feeling negative around the reality of living with financial hardship and losing the people once part of their daily life (Rutman et al, 2007). To make the transition more fluid, young people would like to have more access to resources, connections, and voice (Ontario, 2013). While turning 19 can be very scary for these young people, it would be less so if they had access to permanency. This includes physical and legal permanency, but most importantly, relational permanency - long term dependable relationships (FBCYICN, 2010).

In the absence of traditional supports, many young people fall back on internal strengths gained during life experiences, including basic advocacy and people skills, resourcefulness, the ability to learn from mistakes, and their work ethic. Frequently they identify finding a supportive community with real, meaningful, long term connections as key to success (Rutman et al, 2007). This aligns with findings around the importance of social capital as a protective factor for these young people. This social capital can be built up through birth and chosen families, through schools and communities, and through peers (McCreary, 2015).

While the strength and resiliency of these young people is remarkable, they nonetheless face many potential barriers to success. In the years after aging out, they often must face a barrage of major life events on their own, such as moving, pregnancy and childbirth, finding and fitting into a new job, graduating high school, and starting a post-secondary program (Rutman et al, 2007). They must navigate a system and society built with the assumption that informal supports are available to all, or they end up on social assistance where “the belief is that lower-than-average living conditions are an incentive for people to move to employment”. Existing funds for young people aging out have harsh conditions and which do not allow for ‘boomerang kids’ who must return home a few times before making it on their own (RCYBC, 2014).

For young people aging out, they must take on this transition while still trying to deal with the compound effects of pre-care, in-care, and post-care trauma. Suddenly at 19 they lose the people who had been their primary supports, and are left on their own, without the tools to form new relationships to replace those lost.

At this time they are still coping with feelings of anger, sadness and despondency from earlier years, and have an increased risk of suicidality (Manitoba, 2006). Facing exclusion and isolation due to frequent moves, living with no adults around, as well as coping with poverty, victimization, physical health and disabilities, and mental health, these young people are further marginalised by feelings of stress and despair, self harm and suicidality, and avoiding services due to bad experiences in the past (McCreary, 2015). They face disproportionate challenges in the areas of education, employment, finances, welfare dependency, criminal involvement, homelessness, mental health challenges, and early pregnancy (Ontario, 2013).

## **Opportunities for Systemic, Community, and Government Reform**

Ideally, systemic change could remove the causes of children and youth coming into care and could reduce the challenges faced in the transition to adulthood. We can recognise that the environment is difficult for all young people today, and stop holding young people aging out of care to a higher standard than their peers (RCYBC, 2014). We can realise that the story of foster care cannot be told without also speaking about poverty, disability, and First Nations (Fostering Truth, 2013) - areas in which CFUW has already developed some advocacy policies. Systemic change, preventing young people coming into care and creating a supportive and equal playing field for all young people, is the ideal long term solution.

Holistically, here and now, the community can rise up to engage, include, and encourage these young people, remembering that 'it takes a village to raise a [young person]'. A supportive environment can be fostered for adults who have a role in these young peoples life, including family members, community groups, teachers, and prosocial peers (McCreary, 2015). Adult community members can play a key role by building long term relationships with these young people, and encouraging exploration, providing mentorship and guidance, fostering emerging skills, as well as providing protection from injustice (Manitoba, 2007). Without healthy and loving communities, attempting to make change in this area will be "like lobbing water balloons at shadows" (Fostering Truth, 2013).

Pragmatically, the government can live up to the community standard of parenting in B.C. by extending supports for young people until the age of 25. By extending supports to young people aging out of foster care, governments across the world can reduce the long term costs of difficult transitions, including incarceration, welfare, criminal involvement, mental health, and early pregnancy (Ontario, 2013). The benefits of improving systemic, community, and government support for young people aging out exceeds the costs, with approximately \$1.11 gained for every dollar spent (Vancouver Foundation, 2016).

## **Path to a Better Future for Young People Aging Out**

This is the time to make change happen. Young people across B.C. have been working together with community organisations for decades, first to increase the visibility of youth in care and awareness of their human rights, then to increase their voice and participation in decisions that affect them, and finally now to improve their transition out of care. The B.C. provincial election in May 2017 will be a key opportunity for change, and our activities will line up with advocacy campaigns across the province. May and June of this year, 2016, will be a key kick-off time, with media attention for B.C. Child and Youth in Care Week and an upcoming Fostering Change Public Awareness Campaign.

There will be a focus on 3 things: increased financial supports to age 25, meaningful relationships to caring adults and last, but not least, an opportunity to connect and contribute to their community. With 71% of people in B.C. supporting the extension of some sort of government support for young people aging out until they turn 25, the public will is there, and all that is needed is the political will to back it up.

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