

For Immediate Release
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YOUTH PRESENT REPORT WITH RECOMMENDATIONS
TO IMPROVE WELL BEING OF YOUTH IN CARE
Emotional Support and Raising the Age of Eligibility Top Recommendations

TORONTO — Youth in care presented recommendations to representatives from the Ontario Government, foster parents, professionals and practitioners from Children's Aid Societies and Children's Mental Health Ontario yesterday at the closing of the 2008 Joint Conference: Shoulder to Shoulder Strengthening Partnerships for Positive Outcomes.

The Youth Policy Advisory and Advocacy Group, representing approximately 160 youth at the conference, gave detailed recommendations on how to better prepare and support youth in care for success in life. Their recommendations were developed during the conference over three days and built on over two years of advocacy by this group and other youth in care from across the province.

The youth began their presentation by acknowledging the successes and achievements over the past two years, especially in the areas of educational and financial supports. However, they said that much more work is needed to ensure that youth have the emotional support they need to help them succeed.

Young people representing Crown wards and former Crown wards in the care of Ontario's Children's Aid Societies noted "no other relationship begins with an expiry date" and recommended additional emotional supports and continued service to youth until 25 years of age. Under existing child welfare policy, youth in care are not eligible for service, protection, emotional or financial support beyond the age of 21.

As most youth in care rely on their local Children's Aid Society as their parent, many expressed their concerns that they would lose the support of their caseworkers, who are for many the only family they have known. They also acknowledge youth workers face considerable workloads and deal with many cases at a time.

Youth made recommendations in the areas of emotional support, increase in the age of eligibility for service from 21 to 25 years, educational support and financial assistance. Their recommendations include:

Emotional Support

- Youth need to have at least one reliable adult that they can call – and reach – when needed. They asked the audience "Who are YOU going to call?" in a crisis, with good news, when you are broke, or faced with tragedy. Most of them have no one aside from their worker.
- Reduce the number of youth per worker to maximum of 15 so that workers can spend more time with older youth
- Ensure access to mental health care services – ease the transition between youth and adult systems
- Encourage and nurture positive relationships that will last beyond CAS care

- Help establish a support network in which all youth feel secure and confident. Costs associated to this network should be fully covered
- Provide accessible and welcoming youth spaces at agencies where they can feel belonging and connectedness

Raise the age of eligibility to 25

- Change the age of protection from 16 to 18 years
- Extend the ability of agencies to provide monthly allowances from 21 to 25 years of age
- Extend the age of eligibility for children's mental health from 18 to 25 years – youth are just starting to deal with their issues at this time

Other recommendations in the areas of finance and educational supports include:

- Extend full health and dental benefits until the age of 25
- Ensure safe, appropriate and affordable housing for all youth. Youth in care should not live in shelters
- Provide help with financial planning and investments to live within their allowances and earnings
- Ensure that youth programming is in the core budget of every Children's Aid Society, and is not the first service to cut when budgets are limited
- Help youth find employers and develop future employment opportunities
- Seek out corporations to collaborate to offer scholarships and student aid programs
- Make educational assessments for these youth a top priority

"The youth have sent a message that their relationship with their parent should continue and not end abruptly on their 21st birthday," said Jeanette Lewis, Executive Director of the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies. "They are right when they say no other relationship begins with an expiry date."

As reported by StatsCan, most young people are either staying or returning home to live with their parents until they are 27 years old, at the age that Ontario's Crown wards are expected to leave care to face life on their own.

Last year, more than 29,000 children in Ontario received services and supports from Ontario's Children's Aid Societies, an increase of 24% since 2000/2001. More than 5,000 youth aged 16-21 were in the care of Children's Aid Societies last year.

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