

## ***Transitions to Adulthood***

**Summary of the Consultation Session - February 22, 2006**

**Hosted by the Children's Aid Society of Hamilton**

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Several recent reports, a national report by the Laidlaw Foundation called *Youth Leaving Care -- How Do They Fare?*<sup>1</sup>, and the local report *Needs Assessment and Recommendations for Street Involved Youth in Hamilton*<sup>2</sup>, have found that youth coming out of the child welfare system do not perform as well as their peers across a variety of outcomes. In particular, the transition into adulthood from the child welfare system has been identified as a very difficult one.

There are currently two major initiatives to improve youth's experience and outcomes in this transition period. One initiative is happening at the provincial level and is led by the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS). The other initiative is local, and being led by the Children's Aid Society (CAS) of Hamilton. This second initiative is focused on developing informed practice procedures at the local level that guide the Society in supporting youth leaving care and transitioning into adulthood. The CAS has established a Working Group (made up of CAS staff, board members, and youth) to develop this policy.

To begin this process, on February 22, 2006 the Children's Aid Society invited National Film Board filmmaker Andrée Cazabon to preview her latest documentary: *Wards of the Crown*. This documentary follows the journey of four youth who have lived in the child welfare system, with foster parents, group homes, and on the streets. Andrée has long been active in raising awareness about the grim conditions facing vulnerable youth. Her earlier films, *Letters to a Street Child*, and *No Quick Fix*, both address life on the street. Her new film, however, focuses on the difficulties children who are in the care of the CAS face when trying to meet their emotional and material needs.

Following the film, approximately 120 people (representing over 30 agencies) broke into small discussion groups, facilitated by the SPRC and CAS. The purpose of these discussions was to identify ways that the transition out of care and into adulthood could be made more successfully.

This report is based on the input from these discussion groups, and is provided for the Working Group who will be developing the Youth Leaving Care policy. The report briefly reviews the methods used for collecting the information, as well as analyzing the findings. The results section identifies each question and the key themes that were found. The conclusion draws attention to several of the key findings of the discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> Laidlaw Foundation (2005). Prepared for the Modernizing Income Security for Working Age Adults.

<sup>2</sup> Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton (2005).

## 2.0 METHODS

The information presented in the following report was based on input from ten discussion groups of approximately 10-12 people each at the February 22<sup>nd</sup> community forum. The attendees were made up of both Children's Aid Society staff (approximately 60 people), and community agencies or volunteers (between 40-50 people representing 33 different agencies). There was no formal registration process at the event, so exact numbers are not available.

The discussion groups were preceded by showing the film, *Ward of the Crown*, and a debriefing session by Andrée Cazabon, the filmmaker. Participants had a short break and were assigned to discussion groups to ensure a balance between CAS staff and community agencies at each table.

Each table had a facilitator who was responsible for moving the group through three discussion questions. The questions were:

- 1) What would the ideal world look like to ensure the optimum experience for youth who are leaving the care of the CAS?
- 2) How can the CAS and the surrounding community develop a network of supports that youth can access when they leave care?
- 3) What preventative measures can CAS and the community become involved in *prior* to youth leaving care that might lead to better outcomes?

Each group had approximately 15 minutes to discuss each question. Responses were noted on flipchart or notepad paper by the facilitator and then transcribed for analysis.

Each participant was also asked to complete a written survey at the conclusion of the small group activity. Sixty-five (65) surveys were returned. The questions on the survey were:

- 4) Are there other factors or issues that need to be considered by the Working Group in the development of a Youth Leaving Care policy that were not addressed in your group or the discussion today?
- 5) What should the community standards be for all youth leaving care? (include comments on educational supports, community supports, physical/mental health care, housing, length of CAS involvement, financial support, etc).
- 6) What should the Working Group be looking at to evaluate the success of this policy? How will we as a community know if this is working?
- 7) In your opinion, who are the key stakeholders that need to be a part of a Youth Leaving Care policy?

These questions were developed by the SPRC in consultation with the Children's Aid Society. Responses from these surveys were compiled to identify common themes and analysis.

It should be noted that participants were asked to focus on *local*/policy development issues, rather than provincial policies. Policies such as the age of transition and level of the ECM benefit rates were acknowledged as crucial issues, but beyond the control of the local CAS.

The information gained through the discussion groups and surveys were compiled and analyzed for common themes. For each question, the key themes were identified (in most cases approximately

ten different themes). The frequency each theme was mentioned by the discussion groups was tabulated. The results are reported in the following pages. The number in parentheses is the number of times that a theme was mentioned for a particular question.

## 3.0 RESULTS

This section identifies the discussion question that was asked, with the number of times a theme was mentioned in parentheses. In some cases, examples from the discussion are included for clarity.

### 1) What would the ideal world look like to ensure the optimum experience for youth who are leaving the care of the CAS?

- **(22) Long term relationships are identified, supported, and maintained (either mentor, significant person, biological family, extended family, siblings)**

Examples:

- "the need to identify at the beginning someone who will never leave, it's very rare this happens with a worker"
- "to allow and support a relationship between the child and someone who is meaningful to them"
- "every kid leaving care should be hooked up with someone"

- **(16) Sense of being loved/emotional well-being (includes unconditional support - even when failing, and overcoming professional boundaries)**

Examples:

- "Always come back for support"
- "Kids have ability to make mistakes and have someone there [to take them back]"
- "kids need to be hugged, touched, and nurtured"

- **(15) Change is minimized. Includes changes in placements, caseworkers, and looks at reducing caseloads so workers can emphasize relationship.**

Examples:

- "it can be very time consuming to spend time nurturing relationships and is seen as 'extra' to mandatory requirements" (speaking re: the need to reduce caseloads)
- "Their life be stable enough that when they leave 'not much changes' - can come home on weekends, etc."

- **(12) More flexibility in how services and education are delivered to meet individual needs.**

Example:

- "an education system that will meet their needs, flexible, alternate options"

- **(10) System and policy change. Includes adequate financial supports, housing, increased age.**

Examples:

- "better financial support - nice place to live, go to school"
- "shouldn't be forced to leave at certain ages"

- **(9) Increased community investment and leadership.**  
Example:
  - Includes wraparound like service delivery (note: ACCP mentioned 2x as a possible coordination agency).
- **(8) Material needs met.**  
Example:
  - Includes stable housing/home, furniture needs, other basic needs met.

2) **How can the CAS and the surrounding community develop a network of supports that youth can access when they leave care?**

- **9/10 groups had discussions of a *wrap-around model*.** Groups talked about mentors, peers, and important networks, Youth after care network, all helping to navigate services.  
Examples:
  - "Wraparound base of key players in people's lives - teachers, friends, workers"
  - "Community based support program for independence, not CAS but in communication with them"
  - "Need an intense response like wraparound for each youth"
- **8/10 groups had in-depth discussions of a *centralized information source, resource guide to community services, one-stop shop separate from CAS, but linked*.** Also suggested mandatory orientations to such services for youth leaving care.  
Examples:
  - "Each individual is provided with a manual of community services and taught how to access them".
  - "System of centralized resources for kids to access when out of care (too fragmented currently)"

Other items mentioned were:

- **(8) policy and system change** (raise age to 21, increase financial support through ECM)
- **(7) Create and develop mentor programs.**
- **(6) increase communication between agencies (including Board of Education)**
- **(4) ask youth and implement suggestions**

3) What preventative measures can CAS and the community become involved in prior to youth leaving care that might lead to better outcomes?

- **(23) Creativity and flexibility - in agencies, in placements, in relationships to help meet youth's needs** (includes innovative programming like respite care program in Toronto).

Examples:

- "Get agencies to assume more risk to work creatively and well with youth"
- "Toronto setting up a respite program for youth"
- "When you start to formalize the process, people back out, feel pressured"
- "Should be a base level of ability by workers to recognize mental health and substance abuse issues and provide 'harm reduction' as often youth are not ready to receive 'counselling' and they've found coping tools that are maladaptive, but effective."

- **(16) Prevent placement breakdown and emphasize relationships**

- Note: includes not moving kids when they are doing well

Example:

- "early training for CPW's that incorporates philosophies early on about the importance of connections for the children throughout their experiences and transitions"

- **(11) System change/Political Advocacy - Increase in age**

- **(9) Broader community involvement in planning**

Note: includes earlier connections with mental health supports, wraparound model.

- **(8) Start planning for leaving care earlier.**

Responses ranged from immediately when coming into care to age 6 to six months before leaving care.

- **(7) Activities/programs to increase kids self esteem** (volunteering, meaningful activities)

Example:

- "Something to help youth build confidence, it goes back to relationships, so that they feel good about their decisions".

4) Are there other factors that need to be considered by the Working Group in the development of a Youth Leaving Care policy that were not addressed in your group or the discussion today?

- **(17) Systemic change/political advocacy.** Increasing age was most common. Includes changing "rigid" involvement rules, and increased funding.

Examples:

- "The political level for all systems is at the heart of this".
- "When you turned 18 did your parents cut off contact with you? Did you lose the financial and emotional support of your family when you started

post secondary education? We need to look at this - kids still need support into their mid-20's. "

- "Financial support - to ensure the youth has sufficient funding support without needing to be on welfare (they've left one system CAS, they shouldn't have to move to entire other system: welfare)"

- **(16) Valuing continuity of relationships/establishing a mentor/permanency planning**

Examples:

- "Kids should not have to get a new worker because they move to a new department - the kid needs to move with the worker - and this is too easily dismissed as impossible to accomplish"
- "Having the youth paired with a 'life coach' that can help them access supports - minimum 1 year prior to 18<sup>th</sup> birthday".
- "We need to look for more permanent homes - institutions do not equal homes - we need creative ideas to make children belong"

- **(14) Getting the perspective of youth in care and recently out of care.**

Examples:

- "Any policy that is developed has to include participation by youth in care".

- **(12) Priority access to community support services.** Includes orientation to available services, but also priority access to these services.

Example:

- "Waiting lists at agencies - they need to be reduced or eliminated or priority given to our youth leaving care".

- **(6) Make transition a phase, rather than a distinct point, and support people over time.**

- **(6) Address unique needs of youth**

- includes addictions, mental health, developmentally delayed/ borderline

**5) What should the community standards be for all youth leaving care? (include comments on educational supports, community supports, physical/mental health care, housing, length of CAS involvement, financial support, etc.)**

- **(21) Youth should leave care when they meet criteria or are "ready" - not when they reach a certain age.**

Example:

- "When youth is mature enough whether that is 16 or 25 - need to be supported until then".

- **(18) Policy change required.**

Examples:

- "Less restrictions on ECM, particularly school and work".

- "CAS should allow children to continue contact and support past the age of 16/18"
  - "Youth should be able to come back if independence is not working out".
- **(13) Flexibility around rules and easy access to community services.**  
Examples:
    - "Youth leaving care should have universally accessible services at the time they need them. Education/vocation training should be available to build a career path. Services should be flexible and not age determined".
    - "Youth need academic programs which are not 'cookie cutters' rather creative plans"
- **(12) Have a mentor or significant relationship in place**  
Examples:
    - "Connection with family member, friend, mentor, church or religious group and a sense of belonging to their cultural group/heritage".
- **(9) Have a wraparound framework in place**  
Example:
    - "A concept such as the 'wraparound' program would be ideal for all youth leaving care whereby persons from each of the above groups are connected with the youth and available to be accessed as support".
- **(7) Full funding for university or apprentice/professional training**
- **(6) Standards should be the same as we have for everyone else in community.**  
Examples:
    - "All children/youth leaving care should be afforded the same opportunities/connections/flexibility/opportunity to make mistakes that our own children have".
    - "Consistent with the ideals of ONLAC, we should be striving to ensure kids raised in care have same standard of living as their peers in the community".

**6) What should the Working Group be looking at to evaluate the success of this policy?  
How will we as a community know if this is working?**

- **(31) Longitudinal information.** -following youth who have been in care over time at specific intervals and looking at successes/failures in particular areas.  
Examples:
  - "Process to be developed by which we could keep in touch with youth leaving care for several years".
  - "Establish markers such as: do the youth have ongoing significant, supportive relationships, places to go on holidays, do the youth have adequate stable housing, do the youth have meaningful involvement in the

community - e.g. job, school, volunteering - look to the recovery model to establish the indicators of success".

- **(20) Statistical measures.**
  - (9) identified a reduction of the number of youth in shelters specifically. Example "Look at the number of street youth and look at the number of youth in care that are moving on to post secondary education or the work force - if the number of street youth decreases and the number of productive youth increases - it's working".
  - Increased number in post secondary education
  - Decreased number of youth in corrections
  - Decreased number of youth in care
  - Decreased number of former CAS youth on welfare
- **(18) Qualitative information from youth about how policy is working**  
Example:
  - "Need to constantly be going back to the youth to ask for their input and recommendations".
  - "Let the youth determine what is or what is not working"
- **(8) Qualitative information from service providers in the community**  
Example:
  - "Talk to workers, clients, community partners and agencies".
- **(6) Assess implementation of policy (includes Report Card)**

7) In your opinion, who are the key stakeholders that need to be a part of a Youth Leaving Care policy?

- **(25) Youth**
- **(22) "family" / mentor / significant relationships**
- **(22) CAS**
- **(21) Community - not otherwise specified.** Most answers just stated "The whole community should be involved".
- **(19) Community support services - linked to the youth.**
  - There were multiple statements regarding the involvement of: mental health, corrections, police, CONTACT, ACCP, and COAST.
- **(14) Education system (Board of Education and colleges/universities)**
- **(11) CAS front line workers/crown ward supervisors**

- **(9) Funders or the Ministry**
- **(7) Medical or mental health services**
- **(4-6 each) Ontario Works, Foster Parents, Housing, Employment**

## 4.0 CONCLUSION

Youth leaving the care of the Children's Aid Society face many different challenges - at both the systemic and personal levels. This community forum and discussion session was intended to identify ways to improve outcomes for those youth by coming up with ideas where the Children's Aid Society of Hamilton and community agencies could work together.

While the results noted are noted in the previous section, there were several themes that occurred throughout the day that bear repeating.

- **Connections and Relationships**

What shows up most frequently in the discussions is the need for youth to be able to form meaningful connections and relationships that begin while in care, and extend to after they leave. These connections can be of a variety of types - siblings, important people, mentors, friends, etc., but should not be C.A.S. involved. Youth need an important person to be with them as they navigate the transition to life on their own.

- **Policy Change at the Provincial Level**

The discussion groups were deliberately focused on changes that could be made at the local level to improve outcomes for youth leaving care. All the discussion groups, however, spoke to the importance of provincial policy changes that would have a large impact on improving youth outcomes. The primary policy changes identified were raising the age of care to 18 or even 21, increasing ECM benefits, and creating flexibility in providing service after the youth has "left" care.

- **Wraparound Model**

The overwhelming majority of groups identified the wraparound model as a useful tool that should be explored. People talked about the benefits of a team working for the best interest of the child; a number of services; team-driven. The community could be mobilized around youth seeking independence, to set goals, meet goals, and give support. Ideally, these services would be provided in the same place - sort of like one-stop shopping.

- **Community Involvement**

People expressed that children in care are the community's responsibility. The entire community, not just C.A.S., is responsible for child welfare and protection. People felt that by involving a wider variety of agencies and networks, children will have access to more supports and better chances for success.

- **Youth Make Mistakes**

Many groups talked about the harsh consequences that youth had to face when they made mistakes. These consequences were viewed as much harsher than the ones we impose on our own children. People thought there should be something in place so that youth can be young, and make the mistakes that young people make, without cutting themselves off from the system. With this comes the need for youth to remain

connected to the system in some way after becoming independent - not just "You're 18, and on your own, so we cannot help you any longer". People wanted a way for kids to come back.

- **Starting To Plan for Independence at a Younger Age & Make the Transition a Phase.**

Planning for exit from the system is something that needs to be started much earlier. People discussed how it takes time to learn life skills, and beginning to plan for exit when the child is 15 is not early enough. We need to be properly preparing these kids to leave care, and to cope successfully with the demands of independence. A 16-yr. old child living in an intact family most likely does not have the skills to cope independently, so how can we expect a youth of the same age with even less support to do so? People pointed out the length of time it often takes for non-CAS youth to transition from home, and expressed that a similar "phase" approach to transition may be more effective.

- **The Need for Longitudinal Information to Determine Successes.**

Many people expressed the need for touching base on a periodic basis with youth who have left the care of CAS. This ongoing look at how youth are doing in different areas of their lives would allow the CAS and community to evaluate its practices and work toward the highest quality of life for youth in care.