Did we Miss the Boat?

The Need for a Paradigm Shift in Policy and Service Provision for Youth and Young Parents

Transitioning from the Youth Services System in the Canadian Province of

Newfoundland and Labrador

Cheryl Coleman

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University of North Dakota

Abstract

The purpose of this report is to identify changes needed in provincial policy and current gaps in service within the Youth Services Program, the overarching governmental program for youth of Newfoundland and Labrador who are unable to live with their families of origin and/or are without sufficient familial supports. A trauma informed lens is utilized and best and promising practices are reviewed including recent Canadian research reflecting progress made in supporting youth in other provincial provinces and abroad. Specific changes needed in existing policy and practice are identified through examining the areas of eligibility for service, education and employment needs, the need for collaboration within systems of care, the importance of housing stability, long term supportive relationships, and wraparound models of support.

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Introduction

The causes of youth homelessness in Canada and throughout many areas of the world are wide ranging and have become increasingly complex. Research indicates that this growing concern often involves issues related to childhood trauma, mental health, and addiction, poverty, disrupted education, lack of adequate adult connection and support, and a lack of safe and affordable housing. In the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador the number of homeless youth has increased significantly in recent years. According to recent research conducted by Choices for Youth, a not for profit organization that provides support, shelter and employment to youth between the ages of sixteen to twenty nine, young people currently make up almost one third of the homeless population in St. John's, the province's capital city.

In response to the ever growing youth homelessness concern, the NL provincial government has been progressive over the past twenty years in creating legislation, policies, and programs for youth between the ages of sixteen to eighteen where none previously existed. Unfortunately, some of the ***existing policies and legislation are not aligned with the needs of the present youth population and several gaps in service exist leaving many youth with substantial needs unmet.***

Under the present provincial youth services policy, children may be eligible to become independent and responsible for their own guardianship at the age of sixteen and most often, must exit from the youth services program upon their eighteenth birthday. This occurs regardless of developmental stage, cognitive ability or whether or not they are pregnant and/or parenting. According to a pilot study conducted by the National Homelessness Initiative in

December of 2002, "the inflexibility of the care system (in Canada) to serve the needs of youth who have aged out or voluntarily exited care either prematurely or upon reaching the age of majority is often cited as a factor in poor outcomes…" (Serge, L. et al., 2002)   When young people being exited from youth services supports are also parents to infants or small children, the outcomes of unmet support needs also heavily impact the children of these youth, resulting in a subsequent generation of children also at risk for adverse experiences and a negative life trajectory.

Regardless of geographical location children and youth generally have the same basic needs. According to Stephen Gaetz (2014), a Canadian leader in best and promising practice research for youth homelessness, these needs include a safe place to live, access to income and education, supports for health and wellbeing and opportunities for meaningful engagement. Young people who have grown up in the foster care system and later transfer to youth services will also need to be provided the opportunity to learn how they have been impacted by their own adversity and childhood experiences. During this developmentally delicate stage young parents must also receive nurturing support in learning to attune to the emotional and physical needs of their children.

While current youth services legislation provides opportunities for young people to receive housing and education, the majority of young people who are in receipt of income support from youth services have had significant negative developmental impacts due to very high levels of early childhood adversity. Unfortunately, this "…toxic stress from childhood trauma can damage a child's developing brain…" (Stevens, 2016) When development is impacted in this manner, capacity for emotional regulation, focus, and executive functioning is

significantly diminished for the individual who has experienced the trauma. While it is possible to heal these negative impacts on the individual's brain, this can occur only when environmental conditions are conducive to healing.

Significant research exists that outlines promising and best practices in providing vulnerable youth with resources they need to ease pain and suffering and improve the potential for more positive life trajectories. Utilization of the evidence based and practice knowledge outlined in this paper, coupled with careful application of important resources by the province of Newfoundland and Labrador may well eliminate existing gaps and address the outstanding needs of youth in this province.

This paper outlines the components essential for addressing the service gaps for youth in NL as well as the requirements for policy change necessary to provide young parents and youth in general with the support they require as they transition from systemic support into adulthood and explores the negative impacts on life trajectories when this support is not provided. This paper also examines care systems and global best practices utilizing a trauma informed lens, and concludes with a community based, social work perspective on the need for systemic collaboration and a paradigm shift in addressing the needs of youth in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Literature Review

In recent years researchers in Canada and abroad have increasingly focused on the specific needs of youth leaving systems of care and best practices in addressing these needs. Judging from the literature available, Newfoundland and Labrador is not the only province in

Canada to identify the need to make improvements to systems of care to better meet the needs of children and youth. *This literature review discusses recent research regarding the current and changing needs of youth and explains findings that support the need for eligibility criteria expansion for youth serving programs. It also explores the unique challenges young parents experience when transitioning from systems of care, and outlines why long term supportive adult relationships and affordable, stable housing options are critical to wellness. Further, this section reflects the importance of providing educational and employment opportunities for youth and discusses related concerns for youth connected to systemic care. It explains the role of trauma histories to early brain development and life trajectories, and goes on to demonstrate the importance of including youth in policy development and decision making. Finally, this this literature review outlines the need for a collaborative approach in providing service to young people and establishes reasons why wraparound models of support are best for helping young people transition from systems of care.*

Systems of Care in Canada

Consistency exists in studies conducted over the past several years regarding high rates of negative life trajectories for youth who have become emancipated from the child protection system in Canada. This has been confirmed in a 2006 report by McEwan-Morris for the Manitoba Children's Advocate's office on youth leaving the Manitoba child welfare system, research conducted by Canadian Social policy expert, Anne Tweedle (2007), a report and comprehensive literature review on the needs of transitioning youth by Jennifer Fallis, program specialist with Manitoba's General Child and Family Services Authority, and collaborative research conducted by A Way Home, the National Coalition to End Youth Homelessness in

Canada (2014). All of these studies indicated that youth are at significantly higher risk for becoming homeless, for experiencing mental illness and addiction, criminal justice involvement, dropping out of school, and living in poverty. Fallis' research, in particular, also indicates that the individuals who "age out" of foster/youth care systems have considerably worse life trajectories when compared with their peers who have the advantage of residing with their families.

While the intended purpose of foster care is to provide temporary care to children and youth who are not able to live with their parent(s), many children and youth in Canada remain in provincial government foster or youth care systems until they must exit into independence whether or not they are developmentally or emotionally equipped to do so. Although some provinces, under exceptional circumstances, may consider the possibility of extending supportive services to youth up to the age of 21, according to the Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal, the vast majority of this population are no longer eligible for government child/youth services after the age of 18.

Marni Brownell, a senior research scientist with the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy and associate professor in the Department of Community Health Sciences at University of Manitoba has partnered with Neeta McMurtry, a freelance writer who specializes in making academic and scientific writing accessible to broader audiences. According to Brownell and McMurtry (2015), Canada does not keep reliable national statistics on children and youth in care. This is likely due to the fact that "in Canada, child welfare services are provincially and territorially funded and legislated, with the exception of federally funded services to First Nations peoples living on reserves." (Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal, 2016)

Due to the absence of a nationally regulated system, Provincial policy makers make funding decisions based on respective provincial statistical outcomes. (Brownell and McMurtry, 2015) These statistics, however, can be misleading and present a more positive depiction of services than is reality. For example, if policies change via additional exclusionary criteria to youth, statistical outcomes may reflect lower numbers or a decline of children/youth in care, however, the wellbeing (and numbers) of the population who did not meet the minimum criteria for service is not reflected.

The abundance of available research outlining the rates and likelihood of negative outcomes for individuals involved with systems of care in Canada is both concerning and alarming. This evidence also indicates that this issue must be further explored and carefully addressed at both the provincial and federal levels of governments within Canada.

The Changing Needs of Emerging Adults: Extending the Age of Eligibility

The existing provincial policies for age limitation and eligibility criteria for the youth services program in NL are not meeting many of the current needs of young people in the province. As will be explained in further detail later in this paper, the majority of young people must transition from the youth services program upon their eighteenth birthday or shortly thereafter. The literature reviewed in this section explains why it is critical to extend the age of eligibility for services for young people to better meet their support and developmental needs and also outlines how and why the needs of young people have evolved over recent generations.

In a 2007 final report based on a three year longitudinal study through the University of Victoria's (school of social work), Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw, and Brown, partnered with BC

Ministry of Children and Family Development, the Greater Victoria Child and Youth Advocacy Society, and the National Youth in Care Network, to research outcomes of youth whom had been in care in the province of British Columbia. This research revealed a contrast between the needs of youth in previous generations and youth in more recent times. According to this study, it is common for recent generations of young people to experience less stable and more fragile transitions into adulthood. These findings were later echoed in research by Avery and Freundlich (2009), and Irene Yen, et al (2009). These findings are significant considering the researcher's levels of expertise. Rosemary Avery, the Chairperson of the Department of Policy Analysis at Cornell University has spent her professional career focused on child welfare policy and the experiences of teenagers and children in child welfare systems and Irene Yen is an associate professor at the school of medicine at the University of California whose work involves epidemiology, children and youth, and policy advocacy.

According to Rutman at al., and Canadian Census data, since the 1970's, it has been increasingly common for young people in Canada to remain or return to the parental home well into their 20's. This development has been confirmed by Canadian census data reports that indicate that 57% of youth in Canada (aged 20-24) were living with family in 2001. This shift in social patterns in Canada has been largely due to a fluctuating economy and an increased cost and requirement of education and training to obtain gainful employment.

Due to this evolutionary shift, it is no surprise that many Canadian youth find it necessary to take a longer period of time to make the transition into independent adulthood. This current societal situation has proven to be extremely unfortunate, however, for Canadian youth whose "Parent" has been their respective provincial government. For these young

people, the same familial safety net does not exist and hardships are compounded by traumatic experiences and premature removal of necessary government supportive services.

Unfortunately, within the current departmental policy in Newfoundland and Labrador, supportive services are withdrawn from young people at the age of 18 with consideration to extend these services to the age of 19 provided the young person continually attends an educational or rehabilitative program. This policy currently does not have room for consideration of extending services regardless of a young person's developmental stage, obvious need for support, personal immediate hardship, or extenuating circumstances such as pregnancy or ongoing trauma.

According to Rutman et al., a significant portion of Canadian young people have services discontinued while in need of emotional support and practical assistance with locating housing, appropriate educational programs, employment, and establishing personal relationships, and support networks. It is unfortunate that youth who have governmental supports removed at an early age "are expected and under pressure to do more, sooner, and with fewer internal and external resources than their peers." (Rutman et al, 2007) When youth leave governmental systems without having their emotional and practical support needs addressed, research also indicates that they are at greater risk for homelessness, sex exploitation, victimization, involvement with the justice system, and later involvement with child welfare systems.

This problem is not unique to Canadian youth. In the UK, United States, and Australia, those who leave Child/Youth systems are at greater risk for experiencing mental and physical health problems, addictions, not completing high school, struggles with poverty, homelessness, and underemployment, and becoming a parent at a young age. In addition, young people

leaving Child/Youth systems in Canada and some other countries also lack practical skills such as food shopping, budgeting finances, decision making, self-advocacy, personal stability, and support. (Tweedle, 2007, Rutman et al, 2007, Courtney, et al 2005).   While it is very important that youth receive training to learn these practical skills, this is effective only when emotional and physical safety is addressed and supported.

Mark Courtney, professor at the University of Chicago has led numerous studies on the adult functioning of former foster children and experimental evaluation of independent living services for foster youth. His research, with his colleagues Osgood and Foster (2010), reflects that it is best practice to extend services to youth until they reach their mid-twenties. *This research is also explicit in communicating that these services need to exist for young people without condition*. (Osgood, Foster, and Courtney, 2010) The 2012 Canadian literature review conducted by Fallis also supports this practice and has found a positive correlation between extended time in independent living preparation and positive outcomes for young people. These findings from expert sources are important and need to be recognized by all government systems that serve youth and children.

Although there seems to be consensus in the literature regarding the need for extension of programs and services for young people into their twenties, the Ontario Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth (2012), unequivocally states that extending services "may not be enough to significantly change outcomes for this vulnerable group…" and additionally recommends wraparound supports that address young people's underlying issues as a critical component for effectively supporting youth to attain positive life trajectories.

Unique Challenges for Young Parents Transitioning from Child/Youth Systems

Because young parents are a unique subgroup of young people who depend on the Youth Services program in NL for services and support, it is startling that no separate policy exists for this population. Omission of specific policy for this subgroup has created a situation whereby the specific needs of pregnant and parenting youth are not addressed within this program. *This segment discusses findings that reflect negative outcomes for young parents with histories of foster care and the critical need for youth to have close adult attachment. It also highlights the heightened risk of social isolation for this subgroup and explores the support needs of young mothers.*

While pregnancy and parenting at any age presents its challenges, this experience for teenaged parents can be particularly overwhelming. Jennifer Manlove, Sociologist at Duke University and co-director of teen pregnancy research at Child Trends, (a USA based, and nonprofit research organization focused exclusively on improving the lives of children, youth, and families) reports numerous negative outcomes for this young population of parents. For young people who are pregnant and have children while they are in foster care or transitioning from child and youth care systems, Manlove et al. (2011) also reports that this group is further disadvantaged due to limited access to emotional and financial supports. Further to this, because young women are most likely to become the custodial parent of children, early childbearing can also make it difficult for them to avoid living in poverty.

Osgood, Foster and Courtney (2010) also references that higher rates of parenthood is a distinctive feature in the vulnerable population of youth transitioning from care. These findings are also in alignment with *The Health and Well-being of Children in Care* study in BC

that was recounted by the Ontario Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children & Youth (2012). According to this report, "…*at age 19, a young woman in care was more than four times more likely to have been pregnant than a woman not in care*". This is concerning for young women who are currently in the system or transitioning from systems of care, however, the larger issue lies with future generations who are at significant risk of later becoming involved with these same systems of care.

While it is the general assumption that teen pregnancy is not intentional and is something to be avoided, according to research conducted by Dworsky and Courtney (2010), between 22 and 35 percent of young women aged 17-19 who took part in their study, either "definitely" or "probably wanted" to become pregnant.   The literature indicates that a lack of a positive and close attachment to a caring adult in a caregiving role is a significant factor for young women who become pregnant and who engage in early sexual intercourse. (Dworsky, Courtney (2010).

Given the fact that human beings in general require a positive social support network for mental health and wellness and the Public Health Agency of Canada recognizes this as one of the most important determinants of health, it is not surprising that young women transitioning from government systems of care look to fill the void of human connection and belonging through the form of parenthood when they find themselves isolated, without family, and without the continuous support of a caring adult. Due to the high rate of early adverse experiences for young women who have been in care and who have children early in life, more often than not, this leads to the perpetuation of a cycle of child protection system involvement.

According to Manlove et al, studies also indicate strong evidence of an intergenerational pattern of abuse and neglect that is relative to this involvement.

Regardless of this correlation, the majority of young parents in this situation are nervous about their ability to parent and "…want to have relationships with people and organizations that will guide them with their parenting. They do not want history to be repeated; they want to be good parents." (Alberta Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2013)

This significant need for connection and belonging is a common theme found throughout the literature regarding the needs of youth transitioning out of child and youth systems of care. (Rutman, et al (2007), Dworsky and Courtney (2010), Alberta Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (2013). For young parents who must transition from these systems, these findings highlight the need for consistent and positive support for young women who also have the responsibility of parenting a child.

Young women who have transitioned or are transitioning from care and who are also parenting are naturally at risk for social isolation due to the already limited supports in their lives. This is often compounded by an unaffordability for transportation and barriers to childcare. Given this limited ability for connection, it is not surprising that a Canadian study by Rutman et al. found that the majority of youth (with a history of foster care) reported mental health issues. Interestingly, research findings by Dworsky and Courtney (2010) also led to the hypothesis that providing youth with a consistent and close relationship with a caring adult and allowing them to remain supported by systems of care beyond the age of 18 also has "a protective effect on the risk of teenage pregnancy." This statistic is important for governments to consider; if fewer children are born to youth exiting foster care, not only will this significantly

decrease future government spending but it will also address the vast outstanding need for

consistent and unconditional adult support in the lives of many young people.

In addition to the importance of providing young parents and their children extended

services and connections with supportive adult relationships, systematic evidence from the past

30 years indicates that "…teaching parents specific strategies to support their children's

development can be effective." (Kaiser & Hancock, 2003). Further empirical data outlined by

Ann Kaiser, Professor of Education and Human Development, Vanderbilt University and Terry

Hancock, professor of clinical practice and research director at Texas State University, also

identifies that teaching young parents effective interaction strategies to utilize with their

children can lead to an improvement in child developmental outcomes and a decrease in

behavior problems*. In keeping with a trauma informed approach, this research has also found

that mandating participation in learning parenting skills is unsuccessful*. Instead, it is important

for young parents to choose participation. *Further to this, goodness of fit and approach of the

individuals teaching these skills is of utmost importance. Educators and support people must

also be skilled and open to feedback from parent participants because when parents feel valued

as co-participants in the training process, success is much more probable.*

Kaiser and Hancock's research also reveals that within the process of helping young

parents learn parenting skills, it is critical to provide a safe and supportive environment for

young parents, omit negative feedback, provide praise for strengths, and work to remove

barriers that might be associated with childcare and transportation. As with any youth

population, when a positive relationship has been established, young people tend to be more

open to assistance. For this reason, it is best for young parents to learn parenting skills with a person whom they have a relationship and with whom they feel safe.

This view is also supported by the Massey Center, a Toronto based residential program for young mothers. According to an evaluation of the Massey Center programs, the constant presence of primary workers offers residents "many opportunities for informal interactions and lessons on parenting and independent living skills." (Gauri, R. et al., 2012)

A research report evaluation on teenage parent supported housing---commissioned by the UK government and conducted by the Center for Housing Policy, University of York…, included seven projects with upward of one thousand young parents. The first key lesson for policy and practice emerging from this evaluation indicated that "supported accommodation with on-site staff was considered a valuable housing option for 16/17 year olds, teenage parents with high support needs, and/or those with weak support networks." For other young parents with less complex needs, this report strongly recommended independent tenancy located near support networks. (Quilagars, et. Al. 2011)

In addition to these recommendations, other key lessons for policy and practice referenced the importance of flexible service delivery, the need to be realistic about readiness for education and employment, and the need to provide quality frontline support staff. It was noted that it is beneficial if these support staff are willing and able to accompany young parents to appointments or groups and assist them with navigating services until they are able to do so independently. This report also expressed that the stakeholders involved felt that provision of these types of housing support programs were "effective in the prevention of, and early response to, child protection issues."

The findings referenced above were also echoed in a report by the London based Tavistock institute of Human Relations, a renowned, not for profit organization concerned with group behavior. *This report specified that "no single model of (housing) provision meets all needs" but instead, diversity of provision is needed*. In this report, Corlyon and Stock (2011) also state that housing schemes for 6-10 young mothers is viewed as ideal, with support being best provided through a "key working system with structured support and action plans in an atmosphere that is respectful, empowering, and offers confidentiality."

When governments and communities recognize and begin to address the outstanding needs of young parents in a manner that honors the individual needs of each young parent, this creates a positive trickledown effect for the children of these young people and for future generations.

The Key Role of Long Term Supportive Relationships

Research consistently and explicitly indicates that one of the most important and necessary protective factors for all children and youth is the presence of at least one committed and caring adult for whom the young person feels connected to and supported by in an enduring capacity. For many young people whom have experienced in-care systems this is often, a critically important and missing resource. Unfortunately, this is also reality for many youth of Newfoundland and Labrador.

According to a 2014 literature review by LeeAnne Dewar and Deborah Goodman of the Child Welfare Institute, Children's Aid Society of Toronto, above all else, having a committed and caring adult has been deemed as the most important resource in a young person's life. This review reports that "youth are at risk if they don't develop and maintain long term

supportive relationships with adults." They also found that "improved success is fostered by at least one permanent connection with a committed adult who is able to provide a stable, safe and unconditional commitment" (Dewar, Goodman (2014). *A previous Canadian literature review by Fallis (2012) reports on studies conducted with young people with previous involvement in systems of care. Not surprisingly, this research demonstrated that resilient children with a history of involvement with protective systems are those who have some type of caring and supportive non parental adult(s) in their lives.*

Although the role of a competent and supportive social worker is very important, unionized government structures in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador make the probability of consistency in social work caseloads very difficult. In addition, significant documentation requirements and high caseloads limit workers ability to effectively support youth and their needs. For these reasons, it is critical for government to support alternative and/or supplemental services for young people to fill this essential missing role in their lives. At present, there is very limited evaluation information regarding how to implement a model of support for an adult population. (Dewar & Goodman, 2014), Research conducted by the General Child and Family Service Authority in Manitoba, however, reported that one of the strongest recommendations by staff and youth participants transitioning from care systems is the need for a mentorship program of some kind. (Fallis, 2012) This concept is further supported through policy recommendation by Avery and Freundlich (2009) that "no youth leave foster care without the support of one or more permanently committed adult."

Various types of successful Mentorship programs have been implemented in California, British Columbia, Alberta and the UK with a variance between the use of trained volunteers and staff. Evaluations of these programs have shown positive results and evaluation of the UK program indicated that "the longer the mentoring relationship lasted, the greater the likelihood of positive outcomes." (Fallis 2012) These findings are also consistent with outcomes from St. John's (NL) based supportive housing programs for youth as well as Ohio based supportive mentorship programs operated by Lighthouse Youth Services.

The supportive housing programs operated by Lighthouse Youth Services, an organization nationally recognized for innovative services to homeless youth, provides supervised apartment living for youth aging out of care. This program has been effective because it utilizes different models of housing with varying levels of adult support determined by the varying support needs of youth. Services range from providing the support of an onsite manager in an apartment block to scattered site housing with an assigned support staff for each individual young person. Low caseloads for support staff are identified as important in order to provide youth with adequate connection and support. Evaluation for this program (over a 6 year period) indicated impressive education, employment and eventual independent housing rates for youth who had accessed the program.

Casey Family Programs in the USA, also recognizes and promotes the importance of providing youth with ongoing mentorship and supports into the early twenties and after exiting systems of care. This organization provides strategic consulting to child welfare systems and community partners in fifty USA states and cites supportive relationships and community connections as one of its seven core components. *In an evaluation of Casey programs, it was*

determined that no single program component was deemed equivalent in importance as a

caring adult who provided support through the transitional period. (www.Casey.org)

As identified throughout this section, the research indicates time and again the clear

and undeniable need for provision of consistent supportive adults to children and youth

accessing systems of care. It is the responsibility of the NL provincial government to ensure

that this important resource is provided to all children and youth accessing supports through

child protection and the youth services program.

> *"Adolescence is increasingly recognized as the second major 'window' of opportunity and risk in development, next only in significance to early childhood development. It is a period of biological, cognitive and social change of such magnitude and rapidity that it is no surprise to find that it is associated with the onset or exacerbation of a number of health-related problems including depression, eating disorders, substance abuse and dependence, risky sexual behaviour, antisocial and delinquent activity and school dropout."*
> *(Canadian attachment experts – Marlene Moretti & Maya Peled, 2004)*

Housing and Housing Stability

Research repeatedly and consistently indicates that independent living is not a feasible

option for youth leaving systems of care because they "lack the social scaffolding of stable

family and community networks." (Avery and Freundlich, 2009) These findings are consistent

with the needs of the majority of youth accessing the Youth Services program in NL.

According to youth homelessness research conducted by Community Development

Halton (Ontario, Canada) and Transitions for Youth (2007),

a review of the literature reveals that there are few publications that provide

information regarding best practices for addressing housing and homelessness issues,

especially for the subpopulation group of youth. However, there is research on broader

programs and services directed at youth, as well as research on homelessness that

provide a foundation for identifying elements in addressing the needs of homeless and

at-risk youth.

The critical components of this research for housing programs for youth included safety,

accessibility, affordability, security, and privacy. Further to this, support and application of a

harm reduction philosophy was also noted as an important for working with and providing

housing to youth.

Although, publications regarding housing for youth are not plentiful, the publications

and research that currently exists consistently and repeatedly align with some basic elements

that are referenced and supported by the Homeless Hub Canadian research library. Based on

significant research within the population of youth who are homeless and/or at risk of

homelessness, the Homeless Hub reports and strongly endorses a multi-faceted approach of

providing a range of housing options to meet the different and individual needs of young

people who are transitioning to adulthood. These include assisting youth to reconnect with

family when this is an appropriate option, permanent or long term supportive housing options

for those who require it, and 2 different types of transitional housing. (Gaetz, 2014) The first

type of transitional housing Gaetz and the Homeless Hub recommends is congregate housing

for youth who prefer to spend the majority of their time with peers. The second is, scattered

site housing that provides a higher level of independence combined with some level of support.

Providing a variety of housing options with differing levels of support better fits the housing requirements for a youth population due to vast variations in young people's respective needs and developmental stages.

These types of housing options are consistent with some aspects of the housing first approach that has been identified as best practice for an adult population with complex service needs. The Housing First approach prioritizes a quick response to providing permanent housing to people experiencing homelessness while also prioritizing client choice in both housing selection and in support and service participation. (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2016)

Casey Holtschneider (2016), Assistant Professor at Northeastern Illinois University and author of youth homelessness literature, identifies and reiterates Gaetz' (2013) emphasis on the difference between utilizing a housing first philosophy with a youth population as opposed to applying Housing First as a specific program model that is limited to providing only self-contained apartments to individuals. Holtschneider (2016) also references empirical data that indicates "…young people deeply value the Transitional Living Program model and moving away from the emotional, practical and developmental supports they provide would be a mistake." Holtschneider's research clearly affirms that young people view the transitional model of congregate living with available support from staff and peers as a critical stepping stone toward long term stability. Young people in this study expressed this as a need due to the self-proclaimed requirement of additional time and preparation for independent living. Further to this, youth identified that "equally important was the opportunity to do so surrounded by

others who can identify with their circumstances and provide a range of supports intended to assist with their transition to stability and wellness". (Holtschneider, 2016)

Social impact research conducted by Sloane, Radday, Stanzler, (2012) also recommended family reconciliation and transitional housing with supportive services (and extensive outreach) as the most promising housing options for young people. While "experts agree on the overall structure of these two approaches," Sloane, Radday, and Stanzler identify that "the specifics of best practices for each approach are still evolving." Their findings, however, also support Gaetz and Holtschneider's recommended housing models for youth. *This is reflected in their assertions that "well-designed programs have several transitional housing options, with varying levels of supervision and independence, to accommodate youth at varying levels of self-sufficiency."*

It is simply not enough for youth leaving systems of care in Newfoundland and Labrador to be held responsible to find their own accommodations within the community. Even those who manage to secure substandard housing in bedsitting rooms or in shared apartments with strangers do not receive adequate support from an adult resource. Providing youth with a range of adequate and affordable housing options and connecting these options with regular adult supports, is a key component for successfully supporting the youth of Newfoundland and Labrador. This change in service delivery would provide the provincial government with a solid foundation to effectively support and care for young people in this province.

Education and Employment

Within the current provincial system, many educational and employment barriers exist for young people connected to the youth services program and for those who have formerly accessed the program. Part of the problem in metro NL is that by the time youth in the system are transferred to the youth services program at the age of sixteen or seventeen, they have already dropped out of school. While it is evident that prevention efforts are required before young people reach this point in their lives, once this situation presents, the focus for these particular individuals must be conducive to their current reality.

The 2014 Canadian literature review on best practices by the Children's Aid Society of Toronto, it was determined that lack of education and lack of training opportunities also negatively impact the transition process for youth. Part of this concern is that transitioning youth face learning challenges and are not provided with adequate educational opportunities. From this research conducted by Kirk and Day (2011), and Jones and Gragg (2012), Dewar and Goodman (2014) references considerable inequality in both educational and training opportunities for this youth population.

While it is clear that youth leaving systems of care require additional opportunities that fit their respective needs, protective factors can also increase the probability of obtaining education and employment. One of the protective factors regarding attainment of education and subsequent employment has been reported by Fallis (2012). This literature review indicates that that youth who remained in care until the age of twenty one demonstrate better outcomes in pursuing post-secondary education and as a result, become more employable which later reduces the need for reliance on government income support.

While the youth services program is progressive in that it provides youth financial support to attend post-secondary programming, most individuals are eligible for this financial support (tuition payment) only up until the age of nineteen when they must exit the program. Presently, the only exception occurs if a young person was in care upon their sixteenth birthday, and is *currently* participating in a program: Youth meeting these conditions are permitted to retain YSP supports until they turn twenty one. On the other hand, young people who were not in care at the time they turned sixteen, are also not eligible to receive any financial coverage for post-secondary education. Unfortunately, the vast majority of youth services participants are not able to make use of this opportunity for paid post-secondary education. The reason for this lies in the missing components that are not offered within this, so called, opportunity.

Due to trauma related brain development impediments, the majority of youth within this system require real adult support into their early twenties and an opportunity to develop healthy adaptive coping strategies before or in tandem with focusing on education and employment goals. If support needs and emotional safety are not first provided to young people, they are unlikely to develop the capacity necessary to utilize educational and employment opportunities because of challenges focusing beyond immediate survival.

According to the Homeless Hub, a Canadian web-based research library and resource centre that is supported by the Canadian Homelessness Research Network, numerous training and employment programs exist for unemployed youth and some of these even specialize in serving at-risk or homeless youth. The Homeless Hub indicates that "traditional employment

programs and methods may not work for marginalized youth"…and instead, they recommend

the creation of programming that supports and responds to the needs of this population

through addressing systemic issues and removing barriers that affect participation in a

program.

The Homeless Hub provides the following suggestions/considerations for improving the

probability of successful employment and improving rates of obtaining high school equivalency

for marginalized youth. These are based on promising practices found in their Youth

Employment Toolkit that takes an Employment First approach grounded in providing youth with

necessary supports to prevent breakdown in job placements.

- *Connect employment training with housing stability. Youth should be supported to find or maintain housing, either independently, with the same agency or through a community partner. However, there should be no risk of eviction if the youth fails to complete the training program.*

- *Provide start-up costs including transportation, work clothing and necessary supplies/equipment.*

- *Support the youth to obtain necessary identification.*

- *Provide life skills training to assist the youth with development of practical skills that will serve them after the program is complete. In particular, obtaining a bank account and developing a budget, creating a resume, interview skills etc. are key for a youth employment program.*

- *Offer intensive case management supports to assist the youth in dealing with issues that arise. This includes allowing time off (with pay) to attend to urgent matters such as court dates, counselling appointments etc.*

- *Figure out a plan to address issues of lateness and attendance. These present particular challenges for street-involved youth who may not have the same ability to adhere to a structured routine as housed youth.*

- *Build in access to education – especially a GED – if possible. This will help improve outcomes after the program for the young person. Support a young person's goals for future educational attainment. This could include discussing*

educational programs, assisting with applications and applying for scholarships.

- *Create opportunities for job shadowing/mentorship so that youth can see what a program looks like in a real world application.*

- *Consider a weekly or bi-weekly pay schedule rather than monthly. This serves two functions:*

  - *Youth do not have to wait as long between pay cheques, especially for those items that are deemed essential for work.*

  - *Money is spread out over the month rather than arriving in one large sum (this does make budgeting for rent important however).*

  http://homelesshub.ca/toolkit/subchapter/employment-programs-youth

The common thread found throughout the Homeless Hub toolkit is a concentration on providing adequate support to youth in their employment efforts while also providing them with wraparound supports that acknowledges current and individual reality. This acceptance of working with youth where they are, as opposed to where they 'ought' to be, is critically important for individual progress.

To offset the challenges and barriers faced by youth leaving systems of care, "coordinated efforts and partnerships related to educational planning and service delivery is considered an element of best practice in ensuring better educational outcomes for youth." (Fallis, 2012) In the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, collaboration and development of a working relationship between the government departments of Advanced Education and Skills, Children, Seniors, and Social Development and the Department of Education is an important first step needed to remove barriers for young people and necessary in creating a system that effectively supports the province's most vulnerable youth.

Why Trauma Histories Matter: The Pervasive Impact of Early Adversity

The primary reason for the youth services program in NL not aligning with the needs of young people is that current youth services policies are not trauma informed.   This section discusses the prevalence of trauma in children and youth from systems of care and explains how early traumatic experiences impact the developing brains and subsequent life trajectories of these individuals. It also highlights the critical need for trauma informed policy and practice within child and youth serving systems of care.

Systems must address the immediate and physical and practical needs of young people who avail themselves of these services. While the NL government is working to meet the needs of its respective target population, a critical piece of this work remains missing. Inherent in the province's surrogate parent role, is the fiduciary responsibility to address the emotional and developmental needs of young people before exiting youth from their system of care. Before this can become possible, however, steps must be taken to determine the scope of these needs.   To do this, individuals providing service and those involved in policy development must become informed and gain an understanding of the reasons for, what often seems to be, extreme and self-sabotaging behavior on the part of young people within the system.

Numerous studies reflect significant evidence that young people who have lived in care have commonly experienced substantial trauma. (Rutman et al., 2007, Poole, N. Greaves, (ed) 2012) This fact has also been substantiated by the United States Congressional subcommittee on improving foster care as they report that "the proportion of foster care youth with Post-

Traumatic Stress Disorder (is) double that of U.S. war veterans". (CEO William C. Bell, US

Congressional subcommittee on improving foster care).

Trauma is of particular concern when adverse experiences occur early in childhood

when the brain is in early stages of growth and development. According to trauma experts,

Poole and Greaves (ed.)(2012), children who live in environments where they feel unsafe,

neglected, or abused must learn and grow "…despite the pervasive experience of threat.

Children are able to do this by adapting to the ongoing state of fear they are experiencing but

they do so at a great cost to their development." The experiences of abuse, neglect or other

traumatic experiences during childhood often results in an "impact on the regulation of

biological stress symptoms that lead to alterations in brain maturation and resultant long term

maladaptive outcomes." (Poole and Greaves (ed) 2012)   Without adequate support and

opportunity for healing, these maladaptive outcomes endure as children move into

adolescence and adulthood.

These neurological impacts also means significantly increased risk for attachment and

relationship problems later in life, behavioral problems, suicidality, self-harm, substance abuse,

and addiction, and mental health problems that include severe depression, anxiety, personality

disorders, and physical health concerns. (Poole, N. Greaves, ed., 2012, www.acestoohigh.com,

Avery and Freundlich 2009, Klinic Health Center, 2013). These important research findings have

been substantiated by the original (1998) ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) study by Dr.

Vince Feletti (Kaiser-Permanente) in the United States. This pivotal study utilized an initial

sample of more than 17,000 individuals and identified the direct connection between adverse

childhood experiences and the increase in serious physical and mental health problems. (Poole, N. Greaves, ed. 2012)

In addition to Feletti's research on Adverse Childhood Experiences (1995-1997), brain research has revealed that the areas of the brain responsible for reason and impulse control do not become fully developed until the mid-twenties which is why the majority of young people depend on the emotional area of the brain for decision making. This becomes compounded by other chemical and physical changes and helps shed light on why many young people have difficulty with impulse control, navigating relationships, and future planning. This also explains why young people, particularly those in care who have experienced trauma, often struggle and require additional supports in their transition to adulthood. (Altschuler, Stangler, Berkley, and Burton (2009) as cited by the Alberta office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2013)

It is clear that youth who have had involvement with foster care systems and/or who have had early adversity are at a significant disadvantage when compared with their peers who have not had the same level of adversity because their developing brains have been significantly and negatively impacted by their experiences. While brain research indicates that an average adolescent may make poor decisions based on emotion instead of reason, youth who have experienced significant hardship often possess a much lower threshold for impulse control and emotional regulation. In addition to these brain altering impacts, the Center for Addiction and Mental Health (2012) indicates that children and youth who have experienced early adversity are also at higher risk to develop cognitive impairments, attention deficits, and somatic disorders.

Often times, maladaptive coping strategies are responsible for young people's limited capacity to progress in their lives. At the same time, systems respond to the limited, immediate needs of young people by providing referrals to services that seem to meet immediate needs only. (ie: homeless shelters for those evicted, anger management groups for youth who seem incapable of controlling negative emotions, referrals to adult income support programs if the young person is not regulated enough to stay in school past the age of eighteen).

Despite the positive intent of both referring workers and policy makers within this system, unfortunately most often, these attempts at helping young people do not address the core problems of perennial emotional suffering experienced by young people and the lack of trained individuals available to help youth learn effective coping and distress tolerance skills. As a result, the help provided only infrequently leads to meaningful and long lasting change in a young person's life.

Bender et al (2015) specifies the importance of addressing trauma through "creating community level interventions and policy change to prevent trauma. (Their) findings suggest that trauma informed services should be standard across youth serving organizations (and) are particularly relevant for youth with foster care histories." Interestingly, this has also been recently reflected by the Center for Mental Health and Addictions (CAMH) in Ontario, Canada. Their publication of "Becoming Trauma Informed" indicates an evolutionary shift in responding to homelessness through trauma informed practice. This literature also identifies that "explicit recognition has emerged that trauma effects people who are homeless, and that their trauma related issues should be considered in designing services to better meet their needs." (Poole, N. Greaves, L (ed) 2012)

Although it is not explicitly stated in much of the literature, it is easy to hypothesize why the single most reported best practice and protective factor for youth is a healthy and long term relationship with a supportive and available adult. Providing this resource to young people with in-care histories assists with development of healthy attachment patterns that are important to brain development and have likely not been experienced by many youth in care during childhood. In addition, this type of relationship has potential to provide a much needed sense of belonging that can offset loneliness and some mental health concerns. When this type of trusting and supportive relationship exists for young people and they are provided the opportunity to learn strategies to cope with how they have been impacted by their respective trauma histories, this can provide some real hope for healing, and positive, meaningful changes in life trajectories.

Implementation of trauma informed training education for employees at all departmental levels would help government employees recognize and understand young people's maladaptive coping behaviors such as substance abuse, physical and verbal aggression, and avoidance of responsibility. It would also help the department of CSSD to appreciate the underlying problems in current policy and service delivery, provide a clearer picture regarding specific changes needed within the existing system, and help decision makers appreciate that maladaptive behaviors often surface in traumatized young people as a result of the adolescent brain becoming wired differently due to exposure to real or perceived threatening environments.

Further to these important reasons for trauma informed education, it is also important for decision makers and those delivering services to understand that childhood traumatic

experiences does not have to end with negative life trajectories for young people involved with government systems of care. Because neuroplasticity exists within the human brain, it is possible for young people with extensive trauma histories to learn to cope effectively if adequately supported and provided with trauma informed care. (Avery, Freundlich 2009)

Although early traumatic experience is very well researched and referenced as having strong and significant positive correlation with poor life trajectories, it is often a missing component within some of the existing literature on the needs of youth who are exiting systems of care. In the area of addressing emotional need, what is identified most often, is the need for mental health services, addictions services, and additional supports and services. *While these components of service are necessary and of extreme importance to a young person's wellbeing, they are often not effective because systems are focused on addressing immediate concerns without paying enough attention to emotional safety as it connects with underlying developmental and trauma related concerns.*

"If you want to improve outcomes on the front lines of our child welfare system, those in leadership positions must have the experience and expertise to ensure that strategies and vision can be translated into action". *William Bell - Congressional subcommittee on improving foster care (US).*

Inclusion of Youth in Policy and Decision Making

In all matters, effective policy making occurs in collaboration and consultation with the individuals for whom the policy is intended to serve. Fortunately, the provincial NL government recognizes this important element in creating upcoming policy change for the youth services program and has recently sought input from current and former consumers of its services.

According to Rutman, D., Hubberstey, C., & Feduniw, A. (2007), Gauri, R. et al. (2012), Ontario Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth (2012), the Alberta Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (2013), and Gaetz (2014), an important element in effectively supporting young people includes meaningfully including young people in decision making in their own lives and in policy development that will impact their lives and the services they receive. Research has indicated that engaging young people (and young parents) in developing their own goals for changes in their lives "promotes more constructive interactions with a high degree of support and a minimal amount of conflict." (cited by Gauri, et. Al (2012) in Rhodes et al, 1992) Rutman, D., Hubberstey, C., & Feduniw, A. (2007).   Human Services Alberta (2014) also highlights the importance of utilizing the promising practice of giving youth the opportunity to have a voice with regard to identifying priorities and development of public policy for services that impact their lives.

As stated previously, the provincial government of Newfoundland and Labrador under the Department of Children, Seniors, and Social Development, has made efforts to reach out to former and current participants of the Youth Services Program for the purpose of utilizing information provided by this population to help inform upcoming revision of youth services policy and legislation. For this, due credit must be given to the current department for their

willingness to reach out to young people and for recognizing the need for policy and legislative change to the current system.

Collaboration: Wrap Around Models of Support

As referenced earlier, when wrap around models of support are utilized and treatment is client centered, youth are better able to have their individual needs met in a way that supports the entire person. As services currently exist, individual issues are separated and often, ineffectively treated as standalone problems. To further compound this problem, different NL government departments have conflicting mandates that are not conducive to wrap around and collaborative models of support for young people. Because respective departmental mandates are frequently conflicted, this creates disjointed and unhelpful service delivery and gaps in supports and services for individuals.

Promising practices specify that meaningful collaboration between governmental departments, in partnership with community based agencies, are better able to address gaps in service by treating and supporting individuals rather than addressing specific issues aligned with individual agency and departmental mandates. Providing youth with a continuum of accessible supports through utilizing a highly coordinated "system of care' approach between service providers also reduces barriers for accessing services." (Gaetz, 2014) Research conducted in Waterloo, Ontario, also reflects this approach to service delivery and specifically recommends linking education, income and housing supports as an efficient and effective way to meet the needs of youth.

 (Vilaysinh, V., Wagler-Mantle, B., Robinson, J. (2010).

This intergovernmental and community partnership approach that supports physical,

mental and emotional health has been identified as a best practice approach in delivering

services to both children and youth with a *history of systemic care*. According to research

conducted by Vandenberg and Grealish in 1996, this wraparound model of support has been

successfully utilized to focus on addressing individual needs and promotion of positive

outcomes both nationally and internationally for more than 20 years.

We must develop and demand strong cross-systems partnerships. Child welfare systems cannot do this work alone. The system must work in tandem — with local communities, law enforcement, education, community-based organizations, philanthropic organizations and others — to build comprehensive programs that improve the lives of children in foster care
(William C. Bell- Congressional subcommittee on improving foster care (USA).

The Current Situation for Youth in Newfoundland and Labrador: Youth Services Programming and Policy Challenges

Throughout the past sixteen years, the provincial government has made several changes to legislation, policy, and programming for young people in Newfoundland and Labrador. This segment outlines the history of these changes, maps the current Youth Services program structure, addresses gaps in services and supports, and explains fundamental concerns with current policies impacting youth and young mothers in NL. Information referenced in this section was retrieved from the current Youth Services Policy and Procedures manual (updated July 2016), the NL government website, and was verified during the September 2016 Youth

Services review - community consultation hosted by the Department of Children, Seniors, and Social Development in St. John's, NL on September 27, 2016.

In 2000, the provincial government legislated the *Child Youth and Family Services* Act in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. This act was the first of its kind in NL and was designed to assist youth during the transition to adulthood and to address a gap in provincial legislation. Previous legislation only referenced children under the age of sixteen and to adults eighteen and older. The new CYFS act was specifically designed for young people aged sixteen and seventeen for whom provincial legislation did not previously exist.

The passing of the CYFS act resulted in development of policy for youth who were not in foster care or not with their families at the age of sixteen. This new act and the resulting policy dictated that services would be delivered to youth at the age of sixteen to allow them to live independently and become responsible for their own care. The CYFS Act required all youth accessing foster care or the Youth Services Program to sign a youth services agreement at the age of sixteen.

In 2009, the provincial government department of CYFS partnered with a not-for-profit agency, Choices for Youth, and provided funding to this organization for operation of the 'Moving Forward' program, a new, metro based program designed for"…young people who exhibit high-risk behaviors, have complex mental health needs, and who have exhausted all other services within the system. (The purpose of this program was to) …intervene with mental health crisis response and prevention, prevent youth from entering the justice system, and relieve demands put on emergency room interventions". (www.choicesforyouth.ca). While this

program, has been effective in meeting its mandate, space in this program is limited and only individuals who have extreme complexities are eligible for this service. Unfortunately, many youth who need immediate service and daily supports are still not able to access the program due to limited provincial resources.

In 2011, the CYFS act was replaced by the Children and Youth Care and Protection act. Some services remained unchanged and the Moving Forward program continued to be funded by the provincial department. The new legislation, however, did lead to some policy and program changes that permitted youth to remain in foster care until the age of *eighteen i*f they chose to do so. For youth who accessed the Youth Services program but were not in care at the age of *sixteen*, they were offered a conditional, one year extension of service (up to the age of *nineteen*) but only if attending school.

The above mentioned Youth Services Program (YSP) has been in existence since 2000 and is the provincial government based program responsible for providing services and financial support to young people covered by the CYCP act and, formerly, by the CYFS act. This program currently exists within the provincial government Department of Children, Seniors, and Social Development. It is a voluntarily program, and is available for youth who are exiting the foster care system or those who are no longer in the care of a parent.

The current Youth Services program provides services to youth age *sixteen and seventeen* who are determined to be in need of protective intervention according to the CYCP act. Once a young person reaches the age of *eighteen*, however, services become conditional and are based on a young person's participation in an educational or rehabilitative program.

For individuals who were not in foster care at the age of *sixteen, they are eligible for program services up to the age of nineteen only if attending a high school or equivalency program. Those who were in care at the age of sixteen may be eligible for services until they turn twenty one, under the strict condition that they are attending an educational or rehabilitative program. Very rarely does the YSP support a young person to the age of twenty one because the expectations placed on youth have proven to be unrealistic for the vast majority of those accessing this program.* Also, rigid application of this policy dictates that social workers within this system must exit the vast majority of youth from this program on their *eighteenth* birthday or shortly thereafter. Unfortunately, this removal of services based on lack of participation in a program occurs regardless of the youth's level of need for supports and services, or the individual's capacity to participate in an external program.

This policy is also contradictory to significant evidence specifying that continued support, into the mid-twenties, is a necessity for more recent generations of young people. As outlined in the trauma section of this report, this extended support is substantially more critical for youth who have experienced early adversity. Unfortunately, the inflexibility of this policy is central to the retraction of supports and services from youth who are not ready for the transition to independence. The aforementioned rigid criteria are applied regardless of the developmental capacity of young people to live independently, their status of homelessness, whether or not they may be pregnant and/or parenting, regardless of significant mental health, and addictions concerns, social isolation, autism, an FASD diagnosis, whether or not they have been in care for the duration of their lives, or any other complexities and/or hardships. Youth accessing the Youth Services program are simply not developmentally ready for independence

during the teen years. This NL governmental policy of withdrawing essential service from young people by placing unreasonable conditions on them is both unethical and not responsive to the needs of NL young people accessing this system.

Further to this significant concern, up until recent years, *youth who exited the youth services program on their eighteenth birthday due to failing to attend an educational program, had a six month window in which to return to the YSP if they become enrolled in an educational program. Unfortunately, this option was removed with the introduction of the CYCP act and youth are no longer eligible to return to youth services for support if they fulfill this expectation.* The reason for this change is not clear.

Young women who are pregnant and/or parenting are a subgroup of the aforementioned at-risk youth population whose needs are also not recognized within the current Youth Services Policy as being unique. Throughout Canada, any parent is entitled to up to one year of parental leave/continuance of financial benefits upon the birth of a child. Young women supported by the Youth Services Program, however, are not given this same privilege as they are expected to begin or remain in an educational or rehabilitative program if they wish to continue receiving supports and financial resources from the Youth Services Program. When these pregnant or parenting young women turn *eighteen*, if they are not ready to participate in a regular program due to early childhood attachment needs, parenting responsibilities, and/or their own personal struggles, these important factors are not considered by the Youth Services Program. At this point, these young women and their babies are transferred from the YSP to the adult income support program which does not offer case management or other supports and services. There is currently no exception to this policy despite the fact that it contradicts

the overarching Canadian value placed on attachment and parental bonding that is understood as critical during early childhood development.

Judging from concerns discussed above, it is evident that developmental capacity of youth has not been considered in present Youth Services policy. This is also apparent in the lack of developmental assessments employed by the YSP. By nature of the population, the majority of young people within this system have experienced early adversity and have not had the benefit of long term supportive adult connection and a safe, stable environment during childhood and teen years. *It is this safe environment and healthy adult connection that is needed to foster healthy brain development and increase capacity in young people so they may focus on personal development and attend an educational or rehabilitative program at this stage in their lives.* Implementation of assessments measuring young people's developmental levels and acuity would provide an effective avenue to assess need for service, capacity, developmental abilities, and would uncover the fact that rigid policy expectations are unrealistic, unjust and punitive to NL's most vulnerable youth. Utilization of an appropriate assessment tool would also provide government with important data and insight into the needs of the target population and would help the system better match service delivery with individual need.

Although Youth Services currently utilizes an assessment tool, this Youth Screening and Assessment Tool (YSAT), is implemented primarily as an eligibility assessment that helps the social worker determine the need for protective intervention under the CYCP act and assesses eligibility for financial resources.   It is not designed to help social workers determine the support needs of young people or a young person's capacity for independent living.

The eligibility concerns and assessment gaps discussed thus far are, unfortunately, are further compounded by financial and housing policies applied to young people accessing the YSP. To date, youth accessing the YSP program are provided a grocery allowance that has not increased since the initial CYFS act was implemented in 2000. Despite the fact that the cost of living has significantly increased over the past sixteen years, youth are provided a food allowance of only 200 dollars per month. YSP financial polices also dictate that young people who are able to work may only keep possession of their earnings up to 200 dollars per month. Any income over this amount is deducted from the young person's meagre YSP monthly income allowance.

Further to this, policy 5.5 states that "youth are responsible for securing their own accommodations." Although social workers may assist a youth to find appropriate housing, they are not responsible for this task and/or for approving the suitability of accommodations for youth. Up until 2011, the Youth Services program employed a social worker responsible for seeking housing options for youth and liaising with local landlords in the metro area. Unfortunately, this role was discontinued in 2011 due to the provincial government's shifting of the CYFS program from the regional health authority to a different government department. This new department of Child, Youth, and Family Services (since renamed the Department of Children, Seniors, and Social Development) directed its employees to focus primarily on its core mandate, the protection of children and youth. While helpful for intervening with families and children, this shift inhibited service delivery for youth with unique and significant needs and sufficient supports were not provided to young people.

Two years after shifting its focus to concentrate on its core mandate, in 2013 the provincial department made further programming changes in an attempt to streamline services for youth province wide. These changes in mainstream service delivery resulted in a discontinuation of YSP funding for the Choices for Youth based Supportive Housing Program implemented in 2000. This program existed only in metro NL, provided case management services, and assisted youth to secure and maintain housing in the community.

While the legislation that enables youth to live independently from the age of sixteen still exists, the St. John's based supportive housing program was discontinued and the new 'Supporting Youth with Transitions Program' was created province wide.

The purpose of this reorganization was to create new services for youth in rural NL and to provide a province wide life skills based program. In metro NL,, the department again partnered with Choices for Youth (CFY) to administer this new life skills program. In rural NL, this program was delivered directly by the dept. of CSSD by five life skills coordinators. While learning life skills is an important resource that many youth in the system are missing, many continue to struggle with other more urgent needs such as mental health, addictions, and developmental capacities that are not conducive to living independently and maintaining their housing. Lack of affordability for adequate housing for youth and living in substandard housing conditions (in the metro area) creates another barrier for assisting young people to learn home based life skills.

Further to this, conversations with 'Supporting Youth in Transitions' staff have brought to light significant challenges with utilizing the current tool (CASEY) mandated by the Youth

Services program for life skills assessments. It seems, the staff in metro NL are not alone in

expressing challenges that this particular tool presents. The Massey Center, a children's mental

health center for pregnant and parenting adolescents in Toronto, Ontario, has also utilized the

CASEY life skills assessment tool. Both staff and program participants of this center have also

reported challenges with using the CASEY tool for assessing life skills, so it seems that

expressions of concern with this particular tool is not limited to workers in Newfoundland and

Labrador. (Gauri, R. et al. (2012)

Unfortunately, housing for young people in Newfoundland and Labrador also remains

an ongoing concern. Despite the developmental need of youth requiring consistent and

ongoing support and guidance from a committed, invested adult, these resources are not

available to young people. Instead, individuals between the ages of sixteen and seventeen are

responsible to secure their own housing, even though policy prevents most from renting self-

contained apartments. Consequently, these young people are left with the option of having to

rent single rooms in houses with individuals they do not know and, often, are not comfortable

living with. Unfortunately, these board and lodging homes and bedsitting houses are not

regulated by the provincial residential tenancies act and youth have very little or no recourse if

landlords choose to ignore maintenance or other issues that arise. Further, these 'bedsitting

houses' are located mainly in metro NL and are most often substandard housing options for

youth. In these situations, youth have no control over who may live in these houses and often

times, physical safety and emotional wellness is further compromised by adults and others

residing in these places.

While the previous description of youth housing focuses mainly on the metro area of NL, youth in rural Newfoundland and Labrador in need of housing and supports are at an even greater disadvantage. Because the province of NL is comprised of 4 distinct regions and housing and support services for youth with complex needs are virtually non-existent in rural areas, youth from rural areas are often sent to St. Johns metro area for service.   This displacement of vulnerable teenagers to an unfamiliar urban environment places them at additional risk because they are further isolated and must often, initially stay in homeless shelters in close proximity to others who have significant complex needs and are street entrenched. This environment becomes detrimental to many young people because they are often lonely, desperate for connection, and looking for a place to belong. The fact that they become connected to those partaking in seriously harmful activities becomes secondary to feeling connected to 'something.'

According to the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador's Strategic Plan for 2014 – 2017, the purpose of a young person entering into a Youth Services Agreement is to provide them with support that "…focuses on the areas…that are known to improve quality of life, including financial support, housing stability, relationships, life skills, identity development, education and emotional well-being." This government plan also states an understanding that "… life-long connections to family and community are crucial to future health and wellbeing."

In an effort to prevent youth displacement from the family home, the department overseeing the Youth Services Program had recently developed a strategic plan for 2014-2017 that included a preventative effort of "supportive services (that) address issues which could affect the safety, health and well-being of the youth in an effort to keep families together." The

intention of this preventative effort was to assist young people at risk of leaving the family home, however, this service is not promoted and is very rarely utilized under the current Youth Services Program.

While the Youth Services Program goals focuses on key concerns and significant efforts have been made by the provincial government to implement programs that address these outstanding needs, gaps persist due to failure to consider brain research relative to the developmental needs of youth with histories of adverse experiences, which explains why many young people's life trajectories remain bleak after leaving this system of care.

The problems within the current system are not unique to Newfoundland and Labrador. In fact, they are common within many other governments and organizations. As with other agencies, the core issue for the current youth services program seems to stem from its attempts at attending to "…surface manifestations of problems faced by youth, rather than addressing their root causes." McKenzie-Mohr and Coates (2012). Inherent in this systemic problem is the reality that individual difficulties are viewed as private issues, the identification of the structural causes are neither examined nor changed, and services for individuals remain disjointed. (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005, as cited by McKenzie-Mohr and Coates (2012).

However, with the ongoing legislative and policy review for youth being served in Newfoundland and Labrador, there is hope for positive change. This can only occur, however, if flexibility in policy exists, and if the Department of Children, Seniors, and Social Development prioritizes and is responsive to all major areas of best and promising practices regarding supporting youth within its system.

One Social Worker's Perspective

Throughout my twenty years working with youth who have complex service needs I have learned that, almost without exception, individuals at all levels who work within systems and community based organizations want to help young people and want to make informed decisions that benefit the youth of this province. Unfortunately, this often doesn't translate into youth receiving the services they require due to well-intentioned but inflexible policies that leave social workers feeling powerless in advocating for their young clients to receive valid and desperately needed services or resources.

It is difficult to escape the irony of this situation because at a time when the NL provincial economic reality is bleak, the province's attempt at reducing expenditures through significantly limiting resources to these highly vulnerable individuals soon results in much higher costs that resurface in other governmental departments. *These cost savings* inevitably result in exponential spending through young people's use of emergency services, justice system involvement, and long-term dependence on governmental income supports. A very recent example of this occurred when a young woman in the youth services program required medication that cost approximately $100 per month for which she was deemed ineligible for financial coverage. As a result, this young woman suffered to such an extreme degree that she presented repeatedly at local emergency departments to get some temporary, immediate relief. Her continuous discomfort impacted both her employment and her education because she missed shifts at her part time job and she began missing classes at school. One emergency visit alone cost more than the price of her medication for each month. The disruption to her

education and missed time at work also places her at increased risk for mental health concerns

and potential for negative impacts on her life trajectory.

As an individual who has learned the needs of young people through extensive youth

engagement and practice experience over many years, I have learned that flexibility within

policies and programs is essential for hope to exist in helping young people transition

successfully into adulthood.   Through co-development of a new supportive housing program in

2008, and subsequent coordination of this program that provides cost effective wrap around

supports for young people, I am also aware that single programs work best when they address

the individual needs of each young person. As a result, the RallyHaven Supportive Housing

Program has become a different program for every young person who has ever called it home.

Since needs are unique to each individual, so too, must be the approach in helping each

young person with respective immediate needs, healing from past traumas, and planning for a

hopeful future. This comprehensive yet basic approach is effective in addressing specific

individual needs while also addressing common concerns such as life skill development, goal

setting, and provision of a consistent, supportive adult who can help navigate systems or simply

listen to young people when loneliness, anxiety, or depression is too much to bear alone.

As much of the recent research indicates, young people with histories of involvement in

systems of care are often disconnected from their biological families and struggle with feeling

that they do not belong anywhere due to a profound lack of consistent connection. Over the

past 3 years, almost without exception, every young person who has been assessed for

participation in the RallyHaven program has either had a formal diagnosis of anxiety and/or

depression, and/or has reported struggling with extended periods of anxiety /depression.   The

majority have also had trouble with providing the name of a consistent supportive adult in their lives who they would be able to reach out to consistently for support.

While the development of the current RallyHaven Supportive Housing Program has transpired through an evolutionary process that has been based on the changing needs of youth, the original conception for this program arose out of a desperate shortage of affordable housing for young people in metro NL. At its initial inception, this program had provided housing to four young people and had been developed in partnership with the YSP, with support from the provincial housing authority. This occurred in 2008 at a time when the Youth Services program employed a Housing Social Worker to assist youth with attaining housing. Since that time, the housing worker position has been discontinued within the Youth Services Program and is no longer formally connected to the RallyHaven program. This program, however, continues to provide housing and supports to YSP current and former clients. Over the past eight years, it has also been financially supported through the Provincial Supported Living Program and has grown to accommodate housing for sixteen young people. Many other former residents remain connected as well.

As youth have become residents of the RallyHaven Program, it has been interesting and surprising to witness positive relationships that have occurred organically over time. While the majority of young people in the program had not had the benefit of solid connections to biological family, they would gradually develop trusting relationships with program staff. Surprisingly, many of them also developed close and long lasting relationships with each other as well that have frequently been maintained after leaving the program and transitioning to independent living. While RallyHaven's original purpose was to provide young people with a

place to live, inadvertently, it also provided a place where youth felt a strong sense of belonging.

As an indicator of this connectedness, many youth who have left the program have returned months and years later when in need of occasional support or during times when they wanted to share accomplishments or happy news such as the birth of a child, an engagement, or completion of an educational program. Upon leaving the program, many youth have expressed relief and comfort knowing that they have the option to return to visit with consistent adult supports if the need or desire arises.

In my experience I have noted many factors that are important in supporting youth to transition to adulthood, however, no one factor can take precedent over a kind and compassionate approach. Positive helping relationships are not possible unless young people feel understood, heard, respected, and valued. While staff who support young people are capable of learning other important skills, a kind approach is most important because it cannot be easily taught.

Other important factors for effectively supporting youth involves paying close and careful attention to housing youth with other young people who have similar lifestyles, offering the option to return for support when needed, and providing consistent staffing. It is also essential to provide youth with as much autonomy and choice as possible including assistance with development of personal life goals and areas of growth. This works best when the level of support that is individually needed is also consistently available. For some young people this means driving them to write an exam because otherwise, the young person may not go to school due extreme anxiety over riding the bus. Other times this means a wakeup call in the

morning to avoid being late for work or bringing a young woman her favorite blanket when she is in the hospital feeling suicidal, alone and scared. Sometimes this support looks like an early morning visit to a program house to convince a young man to get out of bed and be driven to his psychiatrist's appointment to get his schizophrenia medication refilled.   These supportive actions are, for most youth who live with family, carried out by a supportive parent. When parents are not able or available to support their children in this way, these needs do not disappear, but are often compounded.

Many other young people at this same stage in life, would have a parent to help them with these important things that occur in everyday life. Our young people who have been through the system of care have an even greater need for this kind of adult support. Although this work is not without difficulty and some young people will continue to struggle, this type of support is critical for numerous young people and has made a positive difference in the lives of many.

Although the RallyHaven program provides housing and supports to only a small portion of the population who need it, of the 28 youth (between the ages of 16 – 26) housed within this program over the past 3 years, 50% (14) completed pre-employment programs, 34% (10) became connected to counsellors for mental health/addictions , 43% (12) gained part time or full time employment, 18% (5) began post-secondary programs (two of whom have since graduated from trades programs), 29% (8) returned to high school/high school equivalency programs/ upgrading, and 39% (11) were connected to family doctors/other necessary medical connections.

Through the years I have been grateful for the opportunity to support young people and watch them learn to become more compassionate, to learn how to develop supportive networks with each other and to grow into strong competent individuals when their support needs are met.   Through collaborative efforts and application and adherence to best and promising practices for supporting youth, the upcoming NL legislative and policy review creates hope for positive change. As an experienced social worker who is invested in creating positive change in the lives of Newfoundland and Labrador youth, it is my hope that the current review will result in provincial legislative change that embraces flexibility and better meets the needs of young people.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been extracted from existing literature based on best and promising practices available to date for supporting young people transitioning to adulthood. Many of these recommendations are also consistent with practice based evidence on a local level with many Newfoundland and Labrador youth.

Policy Recommendations

1. Extending eligibility for youth to remain consistently supported up to the age of 24

2. Creation of separate (trauma informed) policy specific to young parents

3. Revise policy and practice to reflect developmental needs of youth and children within the provincial system and create flexibility in policies to address individual need at times of undue hardship

4. Extend opportunities for post-secondary tuition payment for youth up to the age of 24

5. Policy change to discontinue financial claw backs when youth begin working part time.

6. Provision of Trauma Informed Practice training for all individuals involved with Child and youth care systems so they may understand the needs and behaviors of young people. (including all levels of management, frontline staff, and those responsible for development of policy)

Programming and Practice Recommendations

7. Provision of supportive housing opportunities for young parents that exists in close proximity of parenting supports

8. Provide biological parents with PRIDE training and supports (that are currently offered exclusively to foster parents)

9. Implementation of developmental assessments for youth to provide more accurate information regarding individual needs (The Vineland Assessment tool is successfully utilized in Ireland for determining developmental levels in numerous individual areas)

10. Engage youth in leading individual support plans and Include young people in decision making

11. Additional supported, affordable, and variety of housing programming options to meet the needs of youth in NL.

12. Provide youth and children within the system with access to more immediate mental health counselling

Recommendations for Collaboration and Wraparound Supports

13. Partnership and collaboration between programs and agencies within the Department of CSSD (Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation and the Youth Services program) with community based agencies to develop a range of programming that

addresses permanency planning for young people for the purpose of providing them with necessary social scaffolding and consistent connection to stable, supportive adults. This includes fostering reunification with biological and /or foster families through counselling & mediation, and/or alternative (long term) supportive housing and/or other supportive programming.

14. Collaboration with community agencies and government departments to development Employment First programming for youth

15. Coordination and collaboration between government departments that provide services to the 16-24 population (Dept. of Advanced Education and Skills, Dept. of Children, Seniors, and Social Development, Dept. of Education, Dept of Justice) to streamline mandates and create services to provide wraparound supports to individuals as opposed to addressing issues as standalone problems.

Conclusion

The young people of Newfoundland and Labrador who must turn to the provincial government for supports and services are at a significant disadvantage in comparison with young people who have access to sufficient family supports. It is evident that a new provincial plan is needed to improve supports and services to youth in their transition to adulthood and to assist in improving the life trajectories of this population. This review has discussed major areas of importance that are necessary for providing effective services for young people involved with systems of care and who are transitioning to adulthood. While each of the specific areas addressed in this report are of significance, it is important that these are implemented together, in tandem, as fragmentary application of supports risk potential impacts to quality

and effectiveness of services. Meaningful interdepartmental and community agency

collaboration, together with application of evidence based practices outlined in this report will

close current service gaps and create an effective system of care to better address the needs of

youth in Newfoundland and Labrador.   Doing so will reduce long term governmental costs

through increased positive life trajectories for future generations of young people in

Newfoundland and Labrador.

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