



**Ministry of Human Services' Response to the
Office of the Child and Youth Advocate
Youth Aging Out Of Care Special Report:
"Where Do We Go From Here?"**

October 2013

Table of Contents

Recommendation #1	2
Recommendation #2.....	3
Recommendation #3.....	4
Recommendation #4.....	5
Recommendation #5.....	6
Conclusion.....	7

Preamble

The Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (OCYA) plays a key role in the identification of systemic issues pertaining to vulnerable children and youth. In April 2013, the OCYA released its Youth Aging Out Of Care Special Report: “Where Do We Go From Here?” The report presents the OCYA’s perspective on the challenges faced by youth in care who are turning 18. The report suggests that Government focus on some key areas to improve the experiences of these youth and offers some suggestions for strategies and services. We are pleased that the OCYA has continued to raise awareness about the importance of appropriate planning and supports for Alberta’s youth receiving services. We also agree that special acknowledgement of community-based partners is important; as such, they need to continue to be part of the solution. We recognize that our strength comes from partnering with both the youth themselves and communities in order to create positive outcomes.

Many youth in care who are preparing for independence have complex circumstances and vulnerabilities. They also may not have the natural supports that other youth would have in terms of family and community. For these youth, the Government of Alberta is acting in the role of a parent and therefore has an increased responsibility to ensure they are able to successfully transition to adulthood.

The report makes five recommendations for Human Services about the delivery of services for youth who are leaving Government care. The ministry acknowledges the intent of the Advocate’s recommendations. The report suggests that previous responses from government to address issues for youth in care have not been effective. A review of the Advocate’s previous recommendations suggests that the ministry has, in fact, made progress and followed through on many recommendations; however, we do recognize that new tools, guidelines and policies, while important, are only part of the solution to improving outcomes for youth transitioning to adulthood.

In that spirit, in preparing our response to this report, the ministry undertook an exercise of inquiry and engaging partners in discussion including:

- Participation in the symposium hosted by the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate regarding the Youth Aging Out of Care Special Report;
- Completion of a scan of the promising practices and service delivery approaches currently used by our regional service delivery partners;
- Seeking input and guidance from the Council for Quality Assurance;
- Engagement with internal ministry partners;
- Review of existing policies against issues identified in the report; and
- Review of previous actions taken by the ministry in response to previous recommendations related to youth.

What we found was that there is a significant amount of work going on in this area and a great deal of emerging knowledge. Consequently, we see many opportunities to build on what is working right now.

As the Ministry of Human Services now encompasses many programs, including those in the employment, homelessness and disability areas, we need to leverage the benefits of a larger, more comprehensive ministry for the youth in care population in particular, given the ministry's role as guardian/parent. This also provides an opportunity to create more of a 'life-span' approach to how services and supports are provided for vulnerable Albertans overall.

Ministry Responses to the Recommendations in the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate Report Youth Aging Out Of Care Special Report “Where Do We Go From Here?”

OCYA Recommendation #1

Ensure young people leaving care have affordable, safe, and stable housing options and the financial resources to support themselves independently.

- Revise policy and practice to provide the support required by young people

Ministry Response: Accept

The Ministry recognizes that the need for affordable, safe, and stable housing is a basic need. The reality is that housing options for many of Alberta's vulnerable populations are limited due to Alberta's increasing population and the economy's impact on vacancies. This is a global issue that needs to be addressed in Alberta among various levels of government. The ministry will continue to work towards identifying housing options across the province and will raise awareness about the affordable, safe, and stable housing resources that are available.

The ministry has partnered with many agencies across the province to provide wraparound services in many forms of living arrangements. This type of service delivery has been used successfully, ensuring that youth have a support team to assist them in gaining and maintaining appropriate residency and developing skills for independence.

The Government of Alberta is in the process of developing a Plan to End Youth Homelessness. The proposed plan will:

- establish a shared vision, provincial priorities and policy directions amongst all ministries;
- facilitate collaboration among individuals, families and communities to prevent youth homelessness through education and awareness;
- support the provision of co-ordinated and integrated supports and services at the community level;
- provide the legislative and policy framework to address youth homelessness;
- support opportunities to share knowledge between policy makers, academics and service providers; and
- support promising practices and innovative research and programming.

Current policy allows for flexibility for caseworkers to offer a range of options for living arrangements to support youth in transition in a manner that fits with their specific situation and in the communities in which they wish to reside and which are best able to meet their needs. These options can include, but are not limited to: independent living, room and board with former foster parents and support in reunification with biological family. Rates for room and board/rent are based on community standards rather than being provincially established, in order to ensure that cost does not become the barrier to the right living arrangement.

As identified in the report, one region has committed to enter into Support and Financial Assistance (SFA) agreements with all youth who indicate they want support transitioning out of care. This is a conscious move away from a compliance-based casework relationship to a principled one that recognizes the challenges all youth face when entering adulthood and our responsibility as a parent to ensure youth have the safety net of a continued relationship should they choose.

Actions:

1. We will collect data and evaluate the outcomes of the new approach to offering SFAs to all youth who are exiting care. The learnings will be used to inform possible broader implementation of this approach.
2. The ministry will work to prevent youth in care or formerly in care from becoming homeless, ensure youth receive the appropriate supports before they become entrenched in homelessness and support youth using a wrap-around client centred approach.
3. We will work with stakeholders and partners to ensure youth benefit from the broadest interpretation of services and supports that may be available to them. This includes supports under the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* as well as through other Government of Alberta programs.
4. We will work to develop tools to assist with “natural family” approaches. This would include where a foster family is prepared to continue to support a youth in their home after the youth turns 18, particularly while he or she is still in school. This would allow the young person to be supported through the transition to independence in the same way a natural family would ordinarily provide support to their child.

OCYA Recommendation # 2

Dedicate and train caseworkers to meet the unique needs of young people leaving care.

- Identify caseworkers to serve this population, including dedicated time available for young people to access them.
- Provide training to staff on the needs of this population and how to engage them.

Ministry Response: Accept

Human Services offers a variety of training to equip caseworkers to serve children and youth in need, including extensive delegation training for caseworkers. The ministry recognizes there are unique and complex challenges for many youth in care who are preparing to transition to adulthood that require a certain type of support. Where the populations of youth in care and youth transitioning out of care are higher, regions have developed specialized units such as the High Risk Youth Unit and High Fidelity Wrap Around services. Caseworkers in these types of units gain a great deal of experience and are trained specifically to serve this population. This level of specialization is not always possible in rural regions where the youth caseloads are not large. Capacity building does not happen only through training; it also occurs through connecting with other professionals and continuing to be aware of and learning about emerging themes and practices. The ministry recognizes we need to do a better job of sharing the intent and outcomes of new service delivery approaches. We will develop a co-ordinated process for sharing information and resources.

We also recognize the significance of youth workers and support workers in our partnering agencies who are valued members of the youth's skilled service teams. We know their expertise and dedication to meeting the unique needs of each youth increases positive outcomes.

Actions: The ministry will take the following actions:

1. We will work with our regional service delivery partners to share in training and information sessions related to youth transitioning to adulthood.
2. We will continue to be responsive to changing trends for youth through the innovative work in relationship building we are seeing with programs like High Risk Youth Units and High Fidelity Wrap Around services being offered in areas with a high density of youth.
3. We will develop a central repository for information and resources and a community of practice for worksites and caseworkers across the province who are working with youth in both rural and urban centres to share their expertise and learn from one another.

OCYA Recommendation #3

Increase the awareness of caseworkers, caregivers, and service providers about resources for young people leaving care and support young people to access them.

- Create greater awareness among caseworkers, caregivers, and agency staff about resources and programs that support transitioning to independence.
- Build processes for a seamless transition from 'in care' to adult services that are appropriate to their needs.

Ministry Response: Accept

Many innovative and systemic changes have been implemented to support the successful transition of youth receiving services to adulthood. A few of these include:

- Advancing Futures Bursary program, which provides essential support related to funding for post-secondary education of youth who are leaving or who have left care.
- High Risk Youth Units and caseworkers who specialize in working with hard-to-serve youth and youth transitioning to adulthood.
- Wrap-around service delivery approaches that include ministry staff, community agency staff and youth working together to support a seamless transition to adult services.
- Supported Independent Living programs accessed by youth to assist in the development of living skills, including daily living, budgeting, housing searches, among others.
- The Family Support for Children with Disabilities (FSCD) program has developed a specific integrated approach to transition planning to co-ordinate access to the programs and services supporting youth with disabilities to reach their full potential. The Ministry of Human Services now includes Persons with Developmental Disabilities (PDD) and Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) allowing for increased opportunities to develop smoother and more effective transition processes for youth who will be accessing these programs and supports.
- A Youth Transitions project, in partnership with the Alberta Foster Parent Association (AFPA) and the Alberta Association of Services for Children and Families (AASCF), to develop a tool box of resources for youth, caregivers and staff to better prepare and support youth in transition.
- Partnerships with Employment and Financial Supports and Alberta Works to support the development of youth employment skills and programs leading to increased opportunities for youth. Some of these initiatives include connecting youth directly to career counsellors, jointly providing education and job readiness skills and working to develop education and job search tip sheets specific to vulnerable youth.

Actions: The ministry commits to the following actions:

1. We will develop a central repository for information about what is available for youth in care to ensure caseworkers, caregivers and agency staff are aware of existing resources.
2. We will continue to build capacity in agencies and caregivers to support the youth they work with. This includes the completion of the Youth Transitions project with the AFPA and AASCF as well as the implementation of the FSCD transition initiative.
3. We will strengthen Human Services' response to youth transitioning out of care by adopting promising approaches and expanding work already underway.

OCYA Recommendation #4

Ensure young people leaving care have supportive adult relationships.

- Work with young people and caregivers so young people develop the relationships and relationship skills they require for independence.
- Wherever possible, ensure that young people are able to effectively address their interests regarding family relationships.

Ministry Response: Accept

The Ministry of Human Services recognizes the importance of, and encourages the development of, healthy adult relationships as a key component in the successful transition from a youth in care to a healthy adult. There are no more significant relationships to a child or youth than those with their family of origin. Efforts to encourage and foster healthy, supportive adult relationships have to be an ongoing and intentional focus for caseworkers from the beginning of their involvement with a child and their family. We know youth in care often express the desire and intention to reconnect with their biological families as they enter adulthood. Approaches such as the Outcomes-based Service Delivery initiative emphasize relationship-based practice through increased family searches and engagement with immediate and extended family. The expanded use of Family Group Conferences has led to increased success in maintaining and developing relationships and commitments between the youth and their immediate and extended family. Overall, the ministry has been placing an increased emphasis on avoiding the disruption of connections to biological parents and, when it has to happen, supporting the youth in reconnecting and/or resolving the status of those relationships.

Actions: The ministry commits to the following actions:

1. We will support our regional service delivery partners in the adoption of tools and approaches that are intended to preserve families from the beginning of Child Intervention involvement – including strengths-based approaches such as Signs of Safety, which involves family members in identifying danger/harm as well as strengths and supports with the goal of preserving family connections.
2. We will continue to promote the use of Family Group Conferencing as a tool for family preservation and family reunification/connection.

OCYA Recommendation #5

Support young people leaving care with access to counseling and/or mental health services and those that require it are transitioned to the adult system.

- Provide counseling to young people who require it to address the trauma surrounding coming into care and related issues.
- Work with Alberta Health Services to provide services that meet the mental health needs of young people.

Ministry Response: Accept

The mental health and emotional well-being of youth in care is a priority for the Ministry of Human Services. As with any youth, the transition to adulthood often brings increased anxiety. Through a Support and Financial Assistance Agreement, the ministry is able to continue to pay for counselling services and required medication up to the age of 22. We understand the formal transition required from children's health and mental health services to the adult system does not always happen in a seamless way.

Actions:

1. Strengthen policy to reflect the need to formally transition health and mental health services from the child system to the adult system as part of transition planning.
2. Continue as an active partner in the Addiction and Mental Health Strategy to support foster parents, families, and caregivers in working with youth who have mental health issues. This includes supporting the transition from youth to adult services.

Conclusion

Each youth in care is unique and will require a tailored approach to a successful transition to adulthood. Transition planning for youth in care is a legislated requirement beginning at age 16. The Transition to Independence Plan is intended to be a tool that documents the common goals of the youth and the service team members who are involved in the youth's life. The youth is to be an active participant in the development and the execution of the plan. The plan also serves as a guide to foster and develop the youth's independence. A plan on paper, however, is only as good as the relationships of the people involved and the availability of resources to follow through.

There are several initiatives, service delivery approaches and practices being adopted that show great promise in improving how youth in care are served in general, including successful transitions to adulthood. Human Services will leverage these activities through improved co-ordination and attention to this particular population by creating a cross-ministry team to monitor and support implementation of leading practice and service delivery approaches, identify barriers to seamless service delivery and create solutions that will lead to better outcomes.

Human Services is committed to continuous improvement and ongoing evaluation of services and supports for the children, youth and families we serve. As part of our ongoing improvement activities, we regularly review and update our policy to meet the changing needs and emerging knowledge of those we serve. The ministry needs to ensure the voice of youth is built into ongoing policy, practice and service delivery improvements. To this end, the ministry is currently reviewing options for the development of a regular youth survey to provide an ongoing assessment of how services are meeting their needs.

Another step in Human Services' transformation, as we continue to move towards delivering integrated services that are relevant, effective, and meet the needs of Albertans and our communities, is the creation of the Family and Community Engagement Councils. These councils will focus on relationship building and direct engagement with communities, our Aboriginal partners and other stakeholders such as school boards, health advisory councils and municipalities to identify issues and co-create solutions.

The creation of the councils will result in the dissolution of the Child and Family Services Authority (CFSA) boards, which have made tremendous contributions to Albertans over the years. The relationships the boards have built will lay the groundwork for the new councils.

By working at the community level, the proposed councils will help us determine how well our policies and programs are meeting their intended outcomes and how we can better work together to address social challenges.