



PRE-READ

2023 International Transitions from Child Protection Symposium

Introduction

We're very excited to have you join us for the **2023 International Transitions from Child Protection Symposium on October 12-13 2023**. We have put together this pre-read package to help you prepare for the Symposium by sharing some information about the current state of policy, practice and research in transitions from child protection.

This package was informed by a literature scan on transitions from the child protection system as well as key informant interviews with government representatives, practitioners and researchers.

The challenge and the opportunity

Every year, thousands of young people in care across Canada reach legislated age cut-offs that mean they are no longer eligible for supports and services available through the child protection system. These youth experience markedly different social and economic outcomes than other young people – from higher rates of homelessness and housing insecurity, to lower levels of educational attainment, to poorer physical and mental health outcomes.¹

While these challenges are daunting, in our current moment there is reason for optimism. Jurisdictions across Canada (and internationally) have adopted new policies and programs to support transitioning youth. Community partners continue to find innovative ways to connect with vulnerable youth and provide wraparound supports and services. Researchers are contributing to a growing evidence base on the experiences of youth leaving care and the interventions that effectively serve them.

The symposium will build on this momentum, bringing together the change leaders across Canada who are championing this issue to spread knowledge about what's working, spark the co-creation of new solutions, and build lasting and sustainable partnerships.

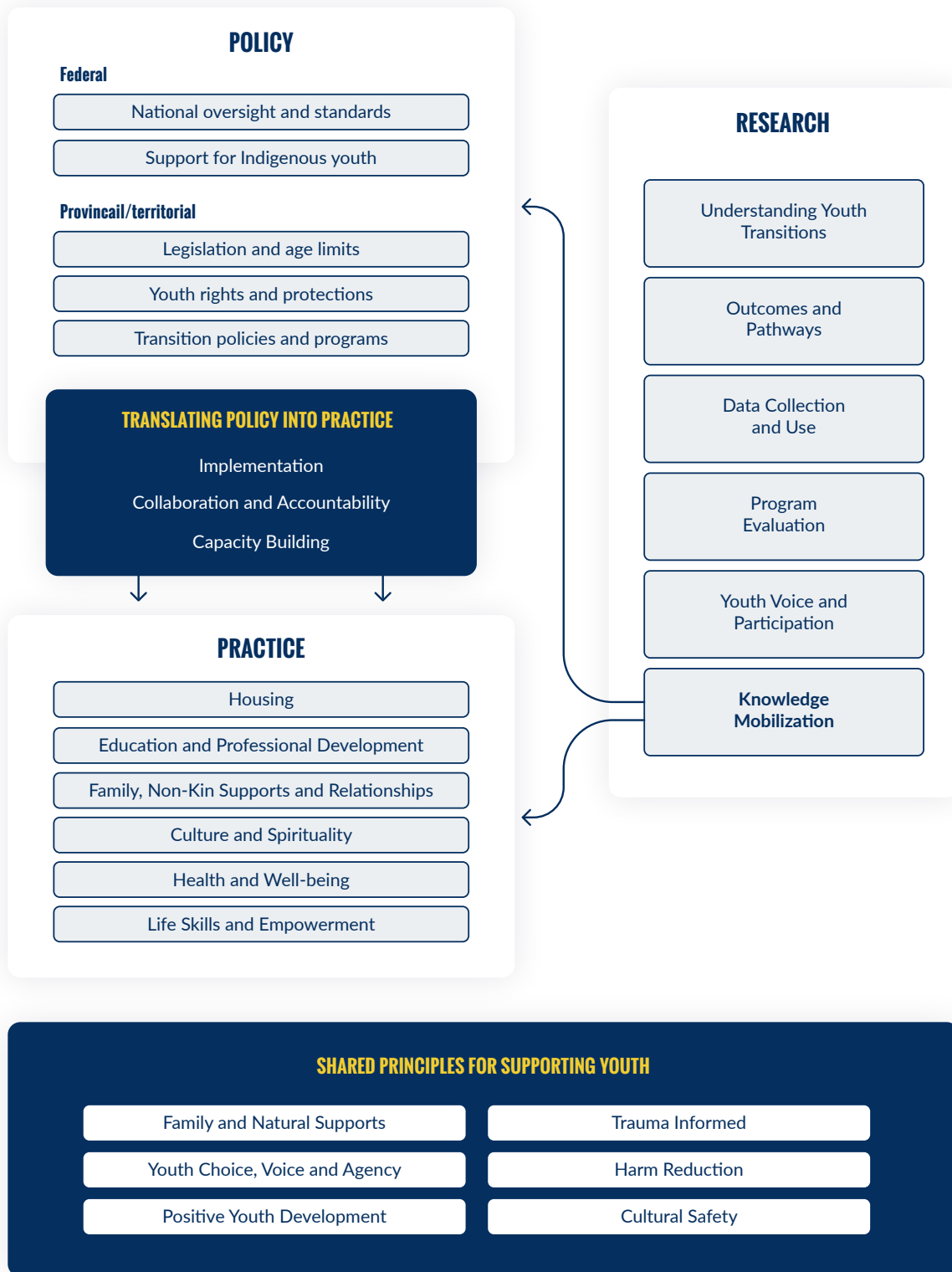
1. For useful overviews of Canadian and international research on the outcomes of youth transitioning out of care, see Kovarikova, J. (2017) [Exploring Youth Outcomes After Aging-Out of Care](#). Toronto: Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth; Youth.Gov (n.d.) [Young Adults Formerly in Foster Care: Challenges and Solutions](#); Sansone, G., Fallon, B., Miller, S., Birken, C., Denburg, A., Jenkins, J., Levine, J., Mishna, F., Sokolowski, M. and Stewart, S. (2020). [Children Aging Out of Care](#). Toronto: Fraser Mustard Institute of Human Development, University of Toronto.

Framework

The issue of transitions from child protection is complex and multifaceted. To help us work towards a shared understanding of this issue, and to provide structure to the symposium agenda and discussions, we have developed a draft **Transitions from Child Protection Framework (see Figure 1)**. The framework provides a way of mapping the different system components (and the interconnections between them) that influence young peoples' trajectories as they transition from child welfare.

The framework rests on three pillars: **policy, practice and research**. Underpinning these pillars is a draft set of **shared principles for supporting youth**. These principles provide a "north star" for developing policy, practice and research that is attuned to the needs of youth transitioning from child protection. In the following sections, we provide an overview of each component of the framework including the current state, promising practices and potential paths forward.

Figure 1: Transitions from Child Protection Framework



Policy

Governments have the mandate to pass legislation, fund and deliver programs, and partner with communities to support youth as they transition from the child protection system.

Federal policy & legislation

► NATIONAL OVERSIGHT AND STANDARDS

Canada is unique among many comparator countries in that the federal government does not play a direct role in child welfare legislation and funding (with the exception of federally funded services for First Nations children living on reserves). This has resulted in a “patchwork” system of supports for youth in transition across Canada.

Experts and advocates have proposed that the federal government play a more active role in ensuring that youth in transition across Canada receive the support they need – regardless of the province or territory they reside in. The federal government’s Reaching Home strategy has already outlined a commitment to reducing inflows into homelessness, which, given the well-documented link between child welfare involvement and homelessness, provides a basis for federal action in this space.

Specific proposals for federal action identified through the literature scan² and interviews include:

- Establish national standards for supporting youth in transition
- Play a leadership role in convening, sharing, and showcasing best practices in youth transitions
- Develop a consistent transition-planning approach to be used across Canada
- Create a unified national research strategy, data tracking and data sharing systems for youth in transition

2. Doucet, M. & Mann-Feder, V. (2021) [Supporting Equitable Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care in Canada: Policy Brief](#). Child Welfare League of Canada; Nichols, N., Schwan, K., Gaetz, S., Redman, M., French, D., Kidd, S., O’Grady, B. (2017). [Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness in Canada: A Proposal for Action](#). Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press; Doucet, M. and National Council of Youth in Care Advocates (2020). [A Long Road Paved with Solutions: ‘Aging out’ of care reports in Canada](#); Shewchuk, S., Gaetz, S. & French, D. (2020). [Transition Supports to Prevent Homelessness for Youth Leaving Out-of-Home](#). Care Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (Hub Solutions).

Box 1 provides examples of national government involvement in youth transitions in comparable federal jurisdictions (Australia and the US) that could provide useful lessons and guidance for Canada.

Box 1: Federal government involvement in youth transitions from child welfare

▶ Australia

Similar to Canada, in Australia state governments have jurisdiction over child welfare systems. However the federal government plays an active role in supporting youth transitions through the provision of financial assistance for care leavers. In 2011, the federal government also developed national standards for youth transitioning out of care, requiring state programs and guidelines to be consistent with these national standards.³

▶ United States

In the US, child protection is largely a state responsibility, but the federal government has passed legislation that includes provisions related to youth transitioning out of care. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 expanded independent living and education vouchers and set requirements for states to work on transition plans for youth at risk who are aging out of care. More recently, the Family First Prevention Services Act in 2018 established a new program to provide added funding to states to support youth transitioning out of care up to the age of 23.⁴

▶ SUPPORT FOR INDIGENOUS YOUTH

The Canadian government plays a direct role in funding child welfare services for First Nations children living on reserves through the First Nations Child and Family Services Program (whereas all other child welfare agencies are funded provincially or

3. Sansone, et al. (2020). [Children Aging Out of Care](#); Government of Australia (2020) [National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020](#).

4. Sansone et al. (2020) [Children Aging Out of Care](#).

territorially).⁵ The program provides funding to First Nations child and family services agencies which are established, managed, and controlled by First Nations and delegated by provincial authorities to provide prevention and protection services.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government committed to extending supports for First Nations youth who were “aging out” of the child protection system, and in 2022 Indigenous Services Canada introduced new post-majority support services as part of a larger reform of the First Nations Child and Family Services program. Authorized service providers can submit claims for funding to support the delivery of a wide range of services to support youth aging out of care (or who have left care) up to age 25, including financial supports, access to education, housing, and health and wellness services.⁶

More broadly, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls’ Calls for Justice have highlighted the distinct obligation and responsibilities of the federal government to address the inequities that Indigenous children and youth have faced in and out of the child welfare system. Indigenous children are highly overrepresented in child welfare systems and experience poorer outcomes across multiple social, economic and wellness domains.⁷

With its *Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families*, the federal government recognized the inherent jurisdiction of Indigenous peoples with regards to child and family services. Recognizing this as well as the fact that Canada has a distinct obligation to ensure Indigenous youth are supported as they leave the child welfare system, advocates have called for the federal government to collaborate with provincial and territorial governments to ensure consistency in funding and approaches, adopt national standards that prioritize the delivery of culturally literate and holistic supports for Indigenous youth, and extend Jordan’s Principle (which aims to ensure that First Nations children can access public services ordinarily available to other Canadian children with no service denials, delays or disruptions related to their First Nations status) past the age of 18.⁸

5. In the Yukon funding for child welfare services is provided by the federal government with services delivered by the territorial government.

6. Sansone et al. (2020) [Children Aging Out of Care.](#); Government of Canada (2022). [Post-majority support services for First Nations youth and young adults.](#)

7. Nichols et al. (2017) [Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness in Canada: A Proposal for Action.](#)

8. Doucet, M. & Mann-Feder, V. (2021) [Supporting Equitable Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care in Canada: Policy Brief](#); Nichols et al. (2017) [Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness in Canada: A Proposal for Action](#); Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (2022) [AMC Statement on CHRT Order and its Impact on Jordan’s Principle for First Nations in Manitoba](#)

Provincial/territorial policy and legislation

► LEGISLATION AND AGE LIMITS

Provinces and territories in Canada have legislated age limits at which youth are no longer eligible for child protective services, ranging from 16 to 19 years across jurisdictions. While most provinces and territories offer some form of ongoing support for youth after they reach this age limit, these extended supports are not legislated and generally require youth to apply and meet defined eligibility standards.⁹

The COVID-19 pandemic led most provinces and territories to put temporary moratoriums on “aging out” of the child welfare system, recognizing that the pandemic would exacerbate the challenges facing youth leaving care. Post-pandemic, some provinces and territories have taken additional measures to extend support options to youth who have reached the age cut-off for leaving care. For example:

- **British Columbia** – Increased age limits for accessing transition supports from 24 to 27, and increased the age that youth can stay in their care placement from 18 to 21. BC has also shared that in 2024, the government will pursue legislative changes to expand eligibility for transition supports.
- **Ontario** – Increased age limits for accessing continued support from 21 to 23

Raising the age cut-offs for support to youth leaving care is an important step that is consistent with research on the experiences and outcomes of youth leaving care. At the same time, some advocates and experts have argued that simply extending age cut-offs is not sufficient for effectively supporting youth, and that cut-offs should be replaced entirely by a readiness-based system that bases timelines on youths’ readiness to transition into adulthood.¹⁰

► YOUTH RIGHTS AND PROTECTIONS

Jurisdictions are increasingly recognizing the importance of ensuring that youth transitioning out of child protection have adequate legal rights and protections that are appropriate for their developmental stage. Currently, all provinces and territories in Canada have independent officers of the legislature (whether a children’s Advocate, Representative, or Ombudsman) that have the mandate to promote children’s rights.

9. Shewchuk et al. (2020) [Transition Supports to Prevent Homelessness for Youth Leaving Out-of-Home Care](#); Hyslop, K. (2023). [How BC Can Better Support Youth Aging out of Foster Care](#). The Tye

10. Doucet, M. and National Council of Youth in Care Advocates (2020) [A Long Road Paved with Solutions: ‘Aging out’ of care reports in Canada](#); Sansone et al. (2020) [Children Aging Out of Care](#)

Advocates have argued that in addition to ensuring youth have information on how to reach these representatives if needed, jurisdictions should consider appointing a specialized youth advocate that they can reach independently to advocate on their behalf, as well as ensuring youth have access to housing advocates and legal representation.¹¹

► **POLICY FOR TRANSITION SUPPORTS**

Increasingly, Canadian jurisdictions are introducing new policies and programs specifically designed to support youth leaving care in their transition to adulthood. Often, this involves the continuation of supports that youth received while in care, with adaptations or additions to help them prepare for their transition out of the system.¹² This trend is consistent with what is happening internationally, with more and more jurisdictions introducing new policies focused specifically on supporting care leavers. Some international jurisdictions – particularly in Europe – have gone beyond simply making these supports available, to mandating or guaranteeing a minimum level of support for those leaving care, without requiring youth to apply and meet eligibility criteria in order to receive supports. In addition, some jurisdictions have begun to deliver supports for youth transitioning from care through youth services systems, rather than continuing to support them through the child protection system.

Examples of policies and programs focused on transition supports from Canada and other countries are provided in Appendix A. These policies and programs highlight the increasing attention to the need for comprehensive and individualized supports for youth as they transition out of the child welfare system, including:

- **Guaranteed comprehensive financial supports** that ensure youth are above the poverty line and are supported with bank accounts, access to emergency funds and other supports¹³
- **Consistent approach to assessment and transition planning** that ensures youth strengths, risks and needs are thoroughly assessed and youth have a solid transition plan that reflects their voice and choices¹⁴

11. Doucet, M. & National Council of Youth in Care Advocates. (2021). [Equitable Standards for Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care](#). Child Welfare League of Canada

12. Sansone et al. (2020) [Children Aging Out of Care](#)

13. Doucet, M. & Mann-Feder, V. (2021) [Supporting Equitable Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care in Canada](#). Child Welfare League of Canada; Bowie, A., Hamid, J. & Murphy, C. (2021). [Aging Out Without a Safety Net: Addressing the Economic Insecurity of Young Women+ Aging out of the Canadian Child Welfare System](#).

14. Nichols et al. (2017) [Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness in Canada: A Proposal for Action](#); Shewchuk et al. (2021) [Transition Supports to Prevent Homelessness for Youth Leaving Out-of-Home Care](#)

- ▶ **Dedicated transition workers to work with youth** to plan their transition, recognizing that social workers who have been involved in removing children from their families are not best positioned to help them build the connections and supports they need in their transition¹⁵

Translating policy to practice

Once governments have developed new policies or changed existing ones to better support youth transitioning out of care, the hard work of implementing these policies begins.

▶ IMPLEMENTATION

There is often a gap between policies as they are written down and their implementation in front-line service delivery. This can result in youth having different service experiences even within a given province and territory, including varying levels of awareness about the supports they are entitled to.¹⁶ Experts have also argued that current application processes and eligibility requirements for ongoing supports can create barriers by reinforcing stigmas and requiring youth to ask for help from the same systems that have not always served them effectively.¹⁷

Interviewees shared some potential strategies for ensuring more consistent and effective implementation of services and supports including systematic change management efforts that engage front-line service delivery staff and community partners at all stages of policy development and implementation, streamlined application procedures, and the provision of clear policy guidance and easily accessible information about available services and supports.

▶ COLLABORATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Government and community both have critical roles to play in supporting youth in transition, and neither will be able to solve the challenges that youth are facing working alone. Many experts and advocates have argued that greater collaboration and integration between sectors is needed to leverage the strengths of each sector, eliminate service gaps, and ensure both government and community are accountable to the needs of youth (rather than system mandates).

15. York U article; Nichols et al. (2017) [Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness in Canada: A Proposal for Action](#)

16. Shewchuk et al. (2021) [Transition Supports to Prevent Homelessness for Youth Leaving Out-of-Home Care](#)

17. Osgoode, D.W., Foster, M.E. and Courtney, M.E. (2010). [Vulnerable Populations and the Transition to Adulthood](#). CYC-Online 136.

Interviewees suggested many potential strategies for ensuring greater cross-sector collaboration and accountability in transitions from child protection, including:

- ▶ Harmonized case management and information-sharing agreements between the child welfare system and community partners working with vulnerable youth
- ▶ More consultation with community partners to ensure that new government programs build on the strengths and expertise of community partners who are already working with vulnerable youth and do not replicate or reproduce their efforts
- ▶ More flexible approaches to funding services that minimize barriers to access and empower service providers to work with young people in a youth-centered way
- ▶ Adopting common accountability standards that prioritize youth needs and ensure that all organizations working with youth share responsibility for connecting youth to the right services and supports.¹⁸ Dr. Melanie Doucet and the National Council of Youth in Care Advocates have already developed a common set of standards and an evaluation model focused on ensuring equitable transitions for youth transitioning out of care (see Box 2 for more information).

Box 2: Equitable Standards for Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care

The [Equitable Standards for Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care](#) were developed by Dr. Melanie Doucet and the National Council of Youth in Care Advocates through a collaborative, grassroots effort focused on understanding what youth in care need as they transition to adulthood. The standards incorporate knowledge and input from youth with lived experience across Canada. They are designed to be used by provincial, territorial and federal governments and child protection agencies to align the types and levels of support they provide with what youth need as they exit the child protection system, ensuring these youth have the same opportunities as their peers who have not interacted with the child protection system.

Dr. Doucet and the National Council of Youth in Care Advocates have also developed an accompanying [Equitable Standards Evaluation Model](#) designed to help governments and agencies assess their fidelity to the Equitable Standards and develop action plans to address gaps.

18. Doucet, M. (2022) [Equitable Standards for Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care Evaluation Model](#). Child Welfare League of Canada.

▶ **CAPACITY BUILDING**

A key component of successful implementation is ensuring that the systems that will be delivering programs and services have the capacity to do so effectively. This includes providing adequate resourcing to hire, train, and continually develop a workforce that can effectively serve youth as they transition out of care. For example, governments are beginning to provide training to dedicated transition workers that focuses on youth development, youth-centered service delivery, and relationship building. Community service agencies working with this population also need adequate funding and support to ensure that they have the right capacities to work with vulnerable youth. In interviews, service providers shared several examples of areas where they would like to continue to build capacity reflective practice, clinical debriefings, knowledge about the history of colonialism and its ongoing legacy in the child welfare system, and training and change management focused on supporting youth to connect or re-connect with family members and other caring adults.

Practice

Youth transitioning out of the child protection system may require support with a diverse range of social, health, financial and other needs.

Housing

Given the strong and well-documented links between child welfare involvement and housing instability and homelessness, it is critical to ensure youth transitioning out of child protection system are connected to safe, secure, and stable housing.

Experts have suggested that in addition to providing direct financial assistance for housing and support navigating the housing options, youth should continue to have options to live with and visit foster parents. They should also have access to subsidized housing options, transitional homes and other types of living arrangements that meet them where they are at and ensure their housing situation is stable and secure.¹⁹ Interviewees noted that supporting non-profits to acquire dedicated affordable housing stock for youth in transition is another potential tool for helping youth access sustainable housing.

A promising approach to supporting transitioning youth with their housing needs is to adapt the Housing First for Youth (H4FY) approach specifically for youth leaving care.²⁰ The Free 2 B demonstration project, co-led by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and WoodGreen Community Services, tested this model in Toronto. The project was supporting youth transitioning from the child welfare system with rental supplements, housing navigation assistance, and support developing the essential skills needed to be successful in the housing market. The project also emphasized small case-loads and intensive time investment with each youth to build strong relationships with staff.²¹

19. Doucet, M. & National Council of Youth in Care Advocates. (2021). [Equitable Standards for Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care](#)

20. Gaetz, S., Walter, H. and Story, C. (2021). THIS is Housing First for Youth. [Part 1 – Program Model Guide](#). Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press; Gaetz, S., Walter, H. & Borato, M. (2021). THIS is Housing First for Youth. [Part 2 – Operations Manual](#). Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

21. Remand and Wexler (2019) [Free 2 Be in Action! How Housing First for Youth is Supporting Youth Transitioning from Care in Toronto](#) Homeless Hub, Canadian Observatory on Homelessness.

Education and professional development

Youth involved in the child protection system generally have lower levels of educational attainment, higher rates of unemployment & underemployment, lower earnings, higher rates of poverty and are more likely to rely on social assistance.²² Several studies have indicated that the majority of youth in foster care don't graduate from high school.²³

Many jurisdictions provide direct financial assistance for education to youth transitioning out of care, and other organizations also provide financial and other types of support.²⁴ Post-secondary institutions are offering their own tuition bursary/waiver programs and some offer additional support services and workshops to help youth formerly in care succeed in their educational journey.²⁵

Experts and advocates have highlighted additional ideas to ensure youth transitioning out of care have the comprehensive education and professional development support they need, including:²⁶

- ▶ Coordination with public education systems to facilitate stronger student engagement and help ensure that youth are on a path to high school completion
- ▶ Full support pursuing post-secondary pathways as well as alternative professional development and training opportunities
- ▶ Specialized supports including tutoring, career counselling, job search and career navigation

22. Sansone et al. (2020) [Children Aging Out of Care](#)

23. Rutman, D. , Hubberstey, C., Hume, S. (2014) [Avoiding the Precipice: An Evaluation of Aunt Leah's Link Program in Supporting Youth from Foster Care](#). Victoria: University of Victoria

24. Children's Aid Foundations of Canada (n.d.) [Access financial support for your education journey](#); Ontario Education Championship Team (n.d.) [About Us](#)

25. Agrba, L. (2021) [Levelling the post-secondary playing field for former youth in care](#). Maclean's.

26. Homeless Hub (2014) [Transitions from Child Protection](#). Canadian Observatory on Homelessness; Doucet, M. & Mann-Feder, V. (2021) Supporting Equitable Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care in Canada

Family, non-kin supports and relationships

Many youth who transition out of the child protection system face unique challenges in establishing or maintaining the positive family and social supports that every young person needs to ensure their success and stability. Young people have shared the loneliness and trauma they experience when they transition out of the care system without permanent, safe, healthy connections that can provide the advice, comfort and emotional support they need to navigate their next steps.²⁷ Increasingly some practitioners are focused on working with youth to establish and/or re-establish healthy and stable connections that provide a foundation for their transition to adulthood. In interviews, practitioners noted that focusing on family and relationships is also a way for the child protection workers to maximize their impact by ensuring that the youth they work with are connected with the permanent, ongoing supports they need to succeed— supports that an individual worker would be unable to provide to these youth on an ongoing basis.

There are several promising examples of organizations and initiatives that are helping youth establish stable and health connections with family and other caring adults. Making the Shift, which is co-led by A Way Home Canada and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, have developed and are working to embed the Family and Natural Supports (FNS) Framework in all of their efforts to prevent youth homelessness. This includes a demonstration project that focuses specifically on helping youth connect to family members and other supportive adults in safe and constructive ways.²⁸ StepStones for Youth is a non-profit organization in Toronto that works with youth in and transitioning out of care to identify, build and nurture networks of support that youth can depend on long after they have transitioned out of care.²⁹ In the US, the Family Finding approach is a public health project focused on building and maintaining the family support network of youth who have been placed outside of their home and community.³⁰

27. Bowie et al. (2021). [Aging Out Without a Safety Net: Addressing the Economic Insecurity of Young Women+ Aging out of the Canadian Child Welfare System.](#)

28. Borato, M., Gaetz, S. & McMillan, L. (2020). [Family and Natural Supports: A Framework to Enhance Young People's Network of Support.](#) Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

29. StepStones for Youth. (2019). [Building Connections.](#)

30. Family Finding (n.d.) [About Family Finding](#)

Culture and spirituality

Helping youth connect to their culture and spirituality is important for supporting their well-being and healthy development. Historically, cultural needs have generally not been a priority for service providers working with youth in and from care. Experts and advocates have called on service providers to help youth connect to their nation/community of origin, ensure they have access to their family history, and provide links to cultural programs and services. Indigenous youth should have opportunities for land-based healing, and all youth should have opportunities to connect to their native language and community of origin and receive support navigating their identities.³¹

There are some promising instances of service providers working with youth in transition to help them connect to their culture and spirituality. For example, Threshold Housing Society, an organization in Victoria focused on preventing youth homelessness, has added a dedicated Indigenous Wellness Advocate to their staff that works to connect Indigenous youth with experience in the foster care system with their cultural origins through links to urban Indigenous communities and Indigenous Knowledge Keepers.³² Interviewees from the community sector also shared some of the approaches they are using to integrate a cultural lens to their programming, including putting in place an Elder Council and inviting Indigenous Circle Keepers to connect with the Indigenous youth they are working with.

Health and well-being

Youth leaving care tend to have poor physical and mental health outcomes and difficulties accessing health care.³³ Many jurisdictions offer health benefits to youth leaving care, including benefits specifically targeted to mental health services like therapy and counselling. However, access to services is uneven across Canada. Experts have called on governments to ensure that all young people have aging out of care have access to long-term, accessible and affordable mental health services, provided by professionals trained in trauma-informed care and youth development.³⁴

31. Doucet, M., & Mann-Feder, V. (2021) [Supporting Equitable Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care in Canada](#)

32. Threshold Housing Society (2023). [Ready or Not'23: Culture, Spirituality and Wellbeing](#)

33. Sansone et al. (2020) [Children Aging Out of Care](#)

34. Bowie, et al. (2021). [Aging Out Without a Safety Net: Addressing the Economic Insecurity of Young Women+ Aging out of the Canadian Child Welfare System](#)

Life skills and empowerment

Many youth transitioning out of the child protection system have not received the same level of support as other youth when it comes to developing practical life skills and the knowledge needed to navigate their transition to adulthood. In the US, independent living programs have placed a strong emphasis on the development of practical self-sufficiency skills (like cooking, cleaning, writing a resume, and developing a budget). These programs have found mixed evidence of effectiveness, with some experts arguing that they need to be complemented by more relationship-oriented services and a greater focus on developing social and emotional skills.³⁵

Recognizing the limitations of traditional independent living programs, some service providers have worked to develop life skills programs that go beyond practical skills and focus on the multiple skills and attributes that will set them on a path to success. One promising example is the My Life program in California, which provides 9-12 months of relationship support, self-regulation skills coaching, experiential activities, and peer connections to youth leaving care.³⁶

Box 3: Addressing multiple dimensions of need

There is emerging evidence that the most effective way to address the support needs of youth transitioning out of care is through holistic programs that address multiple dimensions of need simultaneously, rather than targeting specific areas (e.g. employment, housing assistance). A review of international best practices for youth leaving care concluded that programs and policies that address the interconnectedness of youth needs are most likely to be successful.³⁷ In interviews, practitioners discussed the importance of understanding the full range of youth needs and collaborating with other systems and service providers to connect them with the right services at the right time.

35. Doucet et al. (2018). [Relationships Matter for Youth 'Aging Out' of Care](#). Montreal: McGill University.

36. Powers, L. E., Geenen, S., Powers, J., Pommier-Satya, S., Turner, A., Dalton, L. D., Drummond, D., Swank, P., & other members of The Research Consortium to Increase the Success of Youth in Foster Care. (2012). "My Life: Effects of a longitudinal, randomized study of self-determination enhancement on the transition outcomes of youth in foster care and special education." *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(11), 2179–2187.

37. Reid, C. (2007). The transition from state care to adulthood: international examples of best practices. *New Directions for Youth Development* (113): 33-49; Sansone et al. (2020) [Children Aging Out of Care](#)

Research

Research and evaluation are critical to designing and refining policies and practices to effectively support youth as they transition from child protection.

Understanding transitions to adulthood

Policies and practices focused on transitions from child protection need to be informed by an evidence-based understanding of how youth transition to adulthood. Interviewees noted that research on child welfare has historically been disconnected from research in developmental psychology about transitions to adulthood. This research has demonstrated that adolescent brains continue to develop and build important cognitive abilities and emotional regulation skills into their mid-to-late twenties. During this period, young people require both ongoing support and opportunities for agency, choice, and leadership to ensure their healthy development.³⁸

It's also important to consider transitions in the context of sociological trends. In countries like Canada, most youth live with and/or rely on their family for support for much longer periods than they did in the past. In 2021, 35.1% of young adults in Canada aged 20 to 34 lived with at least one of their parents.³⁹ The financial, emotional, and social benefits that come from this ongoing support are not available to most youth leaving care who are expected to become self-sufficient much earlier.

Outcomes and pathways of youth leaving care

Much current research in the area of youth transitions from care has focused on documenting the outcomes of youth leaving care, relative to the outcomes of the broader youth population. This research – both Canadian and international – has made it clear youth leaving care experience dramatically poorer social, economic and health outcomes than the youth population overall.

This research is important for making the case that more needs to be done to support youth transitioning from child protection. However, increasingly researchers and other experts are calling for more research on the diverse and nuanced pathways of

38. Poirer et al. (2020). "Ensuring young people flourish: Applying the Science of Adolescent Development through the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative." Child Welfare League of America

39. Statistics Canada (2022) [Plateau in the share of young adults living with their parents from 2016 to 2021](#)

youth over time as they leave care, including those who achieve positive outcomes. Interviewees noted that the focus on the negative outcomes of those leaving care has contributed to the stigma that these youth already experience. They noted that we need more research on questions like:

- ▶ What are the risk factors, and protective factors, associated with specific youth outcomes?
- ▶ How do experiences *during* care influence post-care pathways and outcomes?
- ▶ What assets are most important to help youth acquire to support their transition?
- ▶ What transition supports exist, how are they delivered, and how are they experienced by youth?
- ▶ How do the experiences and outcomes of youth transitioning from care vary (by age, gender, race and ethnicity, etc.) and how can supports be designed to address this variation?

There are some important examples of research in Canada that are starting to build our knowledge base about the different pathways and outcomes of youth leaving care, and how interactions with different policies and systems affect those trajectories:

- ▶ *Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey*, conducted by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness in partnership with A Way Home Canada, demonstrated the clear links between involvement in the child welfare system and youth homelessness.⁴⁰ A recent article using data from the 2019 wave of *Without a Home* explores the life circumstances and outcomes of youth who have accessed homelessness services and also have a history of involvement with child protection, identifying key risk factors and experiences with transition support.⁴¹
- ▶ *The Study on the Future of Placed Youth in Quebec* combined interviews with a representative sample of youth (about 1,000) over a 3-year period, with analysis of administrative data, to understand the pathways and outcomes of youth leaving care. The study demonstrated the clear links between child welfare involvement and homelessness (nearly half of youths in the study experienced housing instability and 20% experienced at least one episode of homelessness).⁴²

40. Nichols, N., Schwan, K., Gaetz, S., Redman, M., French, D., Kidd, S., O'Grady, B. (2017). [Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness in Canada: A Proposal for Action](#)

41. Bonakdar, A., Gaetz, S., Banchani, E., Schan, K., Kidd, S.A., O'Grady, B. (2023). "Child protection services and youth experiencing homelessness: Findings of the 2019 national youth homelessness survey in Canada." *Children and Youth Services Review* 153 (2021) 107088.

42. Blanchet, A. & Goyette, M. (2022). *Leaving Care in Quebec: The EDJeP Longitudinal Study*. *Pedagogia Social*

- ▶ An ongoing research study in Nova Scotia funded through Making the Shift is following a large cohort of young people through the transition from child welfare services using a mixed methods approach (*Youth Transition from Child Welfare to Precarious Living Conditions: A Mixed Methods Longitudinal Study of Risk and Protective Factors in Nova Scotia*).
- ▶ Researchers have documented the structural inequities faced by Indigenous children and youth involved in the child protection system, including their over-representation in child welfare services and the inequitable provision of services to First Nations children.⁴³ The successful legal challenge brought forward by Dr. Cindy Blackstock to address service inequities for First Nations children ruled that the federal government will be required to compensate First Nations adults transitioning out of the child welfare system who have been harmed by an underfunded child welfare system.⁴⁴
- ▶ Researchers have collaborated with youth with lived experience of homelessness to explore how the complex institutional and bureaucratic processes and gaps in services associated with the care system and connected service systems create negative consequences for youth leaving care. This work has highlighted the importance of systems collaboration and coordination to ensure that youth are connected with the supports they need when they need them.⁴⁵

43. Blackstock, C. (2011). The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal on First Nations Child Welfare: Why if Canada Wins, Equality and Justice lose. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 33:1; Blackstock, C., Brown, I. and Bennett, M. (2007). Reconciliation: Rebuilding the Canadian Child Welfare System to Better Serve Aboriginal Children and Youth." In I. Brown, et al. (Eds.), *Putting a human face on child welfare: Voices from the Prairies*. Prairie Child Welfare Consortium

44. Delory, A. (2022). [Cindy Blackstock: Indigenous Children are Worth Fighting For](#). Dal News.

45. Nichols, N. (2013). Nobody "Signs Out of Care." Exploring Institutional Links Between Child Protection Services and Homelessness. In Gaetz, S., et al. (Eds.), *Youth Homelessness in Canada: Implications for Policy and Practice*. Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press; Nichols, N., Malenfant, J. and Youth Action Research Revolution (2023) *Youth as Truth-Tellers and Rights-Holders: Legal and Institutional Reforms to Enable Youth Housing Security*. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies* 14:1.

Data collection and use

An important enabling factor for conducting more research on youth transitioning out of care – especially longitudinal research that tracks the pathways and outcomes of the same youth over time – is the availability of more comprehensive and comparable data on this population. Canada currently has no federal data source tracking youth who have left the care system, and the collection and quality of data on youth “aging out” of the child welfare system is also uneven across provincial and territorial governments. As a result, we lack definitive answers to basic questions like how many youth age out of care each year, what their demographic characteristics are, and what supports they access.⁴⁶

Experts have argued that more needs to be done to use existing data collected through the child protection system along with other sources of administrative data to track youth pathways and outcomes. *The Strategy for Patient Oriented Research*, a large scale data project funded by the federal government, is already moving in this direction by supporting provincial and territorial efforts to connect and use different sources of administrative data within their jurisdictions to track long-term outcomes. The project is also supporting initial efforts to link data across jurisdictions to address research questions at a pan-Canadian level.

Program evaluation

Programs focused specifically on providing supports to youth leaving care have the potential to alter their pathways and outcomes, but there are gaps in the knowledge base about how well these programs are working. In interviews, practitioners shared that they are interested in evaluating the program and service innovations they are using to support youth to find out how effectively they are working, but often lack the resources to invest in these evaluations.

Existing evaluations of programs for youth transitioning out care have yielded mixed results. A recent systematic review of independent living programs and services for youth transitioning from care found that most programs had limited positive impacts.⁴⁷ This points to the need for rigorous evaluation of some of the more innovative policy and program approaches being adopted across Canada that are incorporating new types of supports and different ways of working with youth.

46. Bowie, A., Hamid, J. & Murphy, C. (2021). [Aging Out Without a Safety Net: Addressing the Economic Insecurity of Young Women+ Aging out of the Canadian Child Welfare System](#). Adoption Council of Canada.

47. Doucet, M., Greeson, J.K.P., Eldeeb, N. (2022) “Independent living programs and services for youth ‘aging out’ of care in Canada and the US: A systematic review” *Children and Youth Services Review* vol. 142

Some of the ongoing research and demonstration studies funded by Making the Shift are seeking to build our knowledge about effective programs and services for supporting transitioning youth:

- ▶ **Free2Be: Housing First for Youth Leaving Care** – This project is using a randomized control trial to determine the impact of an adapted Housing First for Youth model focused on youth leaving care.
- ▶ **Decolonizing Transitions from Care for Indigenous Youth** – This project is following the journeys of youth with experience in the care system as they participate in an Indigenous housing initiative, evaluating the program’s contribution to reducing homelessness with this target group.

Youth voice and participation

It is critical to ensure that research is grounded in the lived experience of youth transitioning from care, incorporating their experiences and perspectives at every step. Increasingly, researchers are finding ways to collaborate with youth to ensure that these youth feel ownership over research focused on their outcomes and experiences.

Interviewees noted that meaningful, authentic engagement with youth through the research process is challenging and that researchers need to be wary of including youth voice and input in a superficial way. Youth also need to be properly compensated and recognized for the expertise that they bring to research in this area. Including those with lived experience is important at all stages of the research process, beginning with the development of research agendas and questions. Those working with Indigenous youth also highlighted the importance of working with Elders and community members to guide engagement with youth and ensure that research reflects Indigenous ways of knowing.

Knowledge mobilization

For research to have an impact, there needs to be dedicated mechanisms to ensure that learnings are applied in policy and practice. Academic researchers, however, generally receive little training and assistance on how to mobilize their knowledge to influence changes in real-world programs and services. Interviewees shared some of the challenges that researchers face when they want to influence policy and practice but do not have the right skills or knowledge to do so. They also noted the difficulties in aligning the research process with the timelines of policymakers who are often looking for advice and recommendations to be generated quickly.

From the policymaker perspective, interviewees noted that they are very interested in incorporating research into their decision-making, but encounter difficulties when research is not shared in timely, succinct and relevant ways. Many researchers are working to overcome these challenges and find ways to enhance the uptake of their work to drive change for youth transitioning from the child welfare system. For example, all of the Making the Shift research and demonstration projects focused on youth leaving care include knowledge mobilization strategies focused on influencing policy and practice.

Shared principles for supporting youth

The foundation of any change effort is shared values and principles. These draft principles, informed by the literature scan and key informant interviews, are designed to lay a common foundation for policy, practice and research that meets the needs of youth transitioning from care.

Family and natural supports

Youth who have experiences in the child welfare system are more likely to have had disrupted early attachments, which may influence their ability in adolescence and adulthood to form quality intimate relationships. At the same time, family often continues to play an important role for these youth, and relationships with family and other significant people in their lives are a critical factor that influences their transition to adulthood. Helping youth to build a healthy, permanent support network and the skills they need to form quality relationships as they transition to adulthood is critical for ensuring youth can thrive.⁴⁸

Youth voice, choice and agency

Voice, choice and agency is a critical principle for any efforts to support vulnerable youth, including youth transitioning out of care. Young people need to be provided with fulsome information about the service and support options available to them, along with the opportunity to choose their preferred course of action. Services and supports that are truly youth-centered would also create space for youth to take on new responsibilities and try new things, knowing that they have a strong safety net underneath them.⁴⁹ Youth also need to be actively involved in the design and evaluation of youth transition support programs at both the government and community level, with support provided for national youth in care networks and advocacy efforts.⁵⁰

48. Ibid.

49. Gaetz et al. (2021) THIS is Housing First for Youth. [Part 1 – Program Model Guide.](#); Shewchuk, et al. (2020) [Transition Supports to Prevent Homelessness for Youth Leaving Out-of-Home Care](#)

50. Doucet, M. & Mann-Feder, V. (2021) [Supporting Equitable Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care in Canada](#)

Positive youth development

Supports for youth aging out of foster care should be informed by a positive youth development approach. Positive youth development (PYD) is a holistic approach to helping youth build their assets and skills that focuses on creating a supportive, developmentally appropriate service setting. PYD approaches emphasize positive relationships and often provide youth opportunities to give back to their community. Programs and services that use a PYD approach help youth identify their strengths and personal interests, build on natural supports, set goals, and enhance their problem solving skills.⁵¹ For youth transitioning out of care, applying a PYD lens means that youth are not rushed to assume the responsibilities of an adult before they are developmentally ready, and that they are not punished or stigmatized for making mistakes that are common for young people at their developmental stage.

Trauma-informed

Children and youth who interact with the child welfare system have a much higher likelihood of experiencing trauma, generally defined as a set of circumstances or experiences that are physically or emotionally harmful and have lasting adverse effects.⁵² This trauma can occur prior to entering the care system, during, or after they leave care – or any combination of the above. Given this, it is extremely important that services and supports for youth transitioning out of care are delivered through a trauma-informed lens. Service providers and researchers working with these youth need to be equipped to recognize, understand, acknowledge and respond to issues that are present in survivors of trauma, and reduce practices that may inadvertently re-traumatize young people.⁵³

Harm reduction

Some youth leaving care may experience risks associated with substance abuse and addictive behaviours. A key principle of the Housing First for Youth approach, including the adaptations of this model for youth leaving care, is a focus on reducing the harmful effects of these behaviours without requiring abstinence as a precondition of receiving

51. Dotterweich, J. (2021). [Positive Youth Development 101](#). ACT for Youth Center for Community Action, Cornell University.

52. Child Welfare Information Gateway (2020) [The Importance of a Trauma-Informed Child Welfare System: Issue Brief](#). Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families.

53. Gaetz et al. (2021) THIS is Housing First for Youth. [Part 1 – Program Model Guide.](#); O'Donnell, C. & D'Addato, A. (2020). [Creating New Pathways to Trauma-Informed Aftercare: Policy Recommendations](#). CarePath

services. This approach advocates for having honest conversations with youth about the harms of substance abuse and addiction as well as offering youth the option for “abstinence only” housing if it aligns with their needs and preferences.⁵⁴ More broadly, experts have noted that having unnecessary structures and rules within the youth transition system can make it more difficult for those who most need help to access services.⁵⁵ It is important that services meet youth where they are at and mitigate the likelihood that they will become disconnected from services and supports altogether.

Cultural safety

Services and supports offered to youth need to offer a sense of safety and inclusion that is attuned to diverse cultural backgrounds and needs. Particularly in the many cases where systemic injustices have led to inequality and the neglect of children and youth from equity-deserving groups, it is critical that government, practitioners and researchers put the needs and experiences of these youth at the center of their work.⁵⁶ This includes:

- ▶ Recognizing and addressing the impact of structural oppressions on youths’ situations and outcomes, including the historical impacts of colonialism on Indigenous communities and the role of intergenerational trauma
- ▶ Acknowledging and responding with sensitivity to the different definitions of family and care embedded in different cultures
- ▶ Using a strengths-based approach that emphasizes identity and culture as important assets for youth as they move forward in their transition to adulthood

The shared principles outlined here are meant to provide conceptual clarity into the values and frames that should guide our work in creating equitable and effective legislation, policies and practices to better supports for young people who will be transitioning from care.

54. Gaetz et al. (2021) THIS is Housing First for Youth. [Part 1 – Program Model Guide](#).

55. Shewchuk, et al. (2020) [Transition Supports to Prevent Homelessness for Youth Leaving Out-of-Home Care](#)

56. Nichols et al. (2017) [Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness in Canada: A Proposal for Action](#).

Conclusion

This symposium has been designed to bring together change leaders from across Canada who are championing this issue to spread knowledge about what's working, spark the co-creation of new solutions, and build lasting and sustainable partnerships. With this document we have reviewed relevant policy, practice and research to set the stage for what is to follow. The shared principles that conclude this document draw from such knowledge, and provide some important building blocks to help us collectively work to define what a brighter future for young people leaving care can look like.

We hope that this document provided a useful primer on the current state of transitions from the child protection system. We look forward to hearing your comments, reflections and ideas at the Symposium.

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Appendix A

Examples of policies/programs for supporting youth transitioning out of care

British Columbia – In 2022 British Columbia introduced a new provincial framework for supporting youth in transitions (known as SAJE or Strengthening Abilities and Journeys of Empowerment). The framework includes the introduction of a new \$600-a-month rent supplement; the removal of earnings exemptions for financial benefits; enhanced funding for life-skills, training, and cultural programming; expansion of tuition waivers; enhanced medical benefits; and hiring more specialized transition workers that can help youth prepare for and navigate their transition.⁵⁷

Ontario – Ontario introduced the Ready, Set, Go program in spring 2023 to provide enhanced supports for youth transitioning out of care. The program specifies requirements for transition planning, with the expectation that youth will begin discussing their goals and building their life skills at 13-15 years of age. As part of the transition planning process, caseworkers work with youth to conduct an in-depth needs assessment. Ontario has also expanded financial supports for youth up to age 23, adjusted earnings exemptions for the financial benefits youth access, and dedicated additional funding to support post-secondary and apprenticeship training for youth leaving care.⁵⁸

Alberta – In 2022 Alberta introduced the Transitions to Adulthood program which provides social and emotional supports, mentoring, mental health services, and helping youth on their education and employment journey, with supports delivered by dedicated caseworkers. These new supports complement existing financial supports that are available to youth up to age 22. Alberta also offers the Advancing Futures program, which provides funding, emotional and social supports for youth leaving care to pursue post-secondary studies.⁵⁹

57. Government of British Columbia (n.d.) [SAJE \(Strengthening Abilities and Journeys of Empowerment\)](#)

58. Government of Ontario (2023) [Policy directive: CW 003-23 – Preparing Youth for Successful Transition from the Care of Children’s Aid Societies](#)

59. [Government of Alberta \(n.d.\) Transition to Adulthood Program](#)

Scotland – In Scotland, youth “age out” of care at 16. From ages 16-19, local authorities are required to support youth with aftercare supports. After age 19, youth up to age 26 (increased from age 21 in 2015) can request aftercare supports, and must undergo an assessment and receive supports to address any unmet needs. Assessments are based on a set of wellbeing indicators known as SHANARRI (Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected, Responsible, Included). The supports provided are flexible and include financial support for education and training, as well as connections to other health, housing, and education services. The policy also sets standards and expectations for caseworkers around building helping youth build consistent relationships, providing social and emotional support, and involving the young person in assessment and planning.⁶⁰

Ireland – Ireland is one of the few countries that has implemented an “aftercare guarantee” meaning that youth are automatically entitled to receive ongoing support from the state after leaving care. Aftercare is available to youth up to the age of 21, or 23 if they are participating in full-time education or training. Support includes connection to a dedicated social worker or aftercare worker, development of a needs assessment and transition plan, and a one-time grant to support independent living as well as a monthly allowance.⁶¹

New Zealand – In 2019, New Zealand created a new nation-wide transition service for young people leaving care and the youth justice system. The service includes new specialist transition support staff, supported accommodations dedicated to young people in transition, and options for extended placements with caregivers. The service is primarily delivered by community partners, iwi and Māori organisations.⁶²

60. Scottish Government (2016) [Guidance on Part 10 \(Aftercare\) of the Children and Young People Act](#)

61. Tusla Child & Family Agency (n.d.) [What are aftercare services?](#)

62. New Zealand Government (2019) [New service for young people leaving care](#)