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*A note about the front cover image:*
The word cloud is a weighted visual representation of all of the text in this report—words used more frequently are given greater visual emphasis.
Overview

The Office of the Children’s Advocate (OCA) is an independent office of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly. Our independence from government departments allows us to speak broadly and candidly on issues affecting children and youth in Manitoba. As advocates for young people, we represent the rights and viewpoints of young people entitled to receive child welfare service, and work to animate their voices to improve those services and supports. We work from a place of best interests of the child or youth, and advocate that others do the same, understanding that children and youth can be deeply impacted by the public systems in operation in our province.

We connect directly with children, youth, and their families. Their experiences and opinions help to guide our service delivery and objectives. On behalf of children and youth we also engage directly with child welfare agencies and authorities, foster parents, and other caregivers and stakeholders.

As part of the ongoing commitment of the OCA to engaging with children and youth, a university student was hired over the summer of 2012 to plan and deliver a focus group on the issues related to young people transitioning out of care. The summer 2012 focus group planning was initiated with the intent of holding several future focus groups with young people on a variety of topics. This first focus group was held August 21, 2012, at the OCA in Winnipeg with youth who were currently or formerly in care of a child welfare agency. The limited size of the group makes it impossible to generalize too broadly about the issues, views, and needs of the entire youth population of Manitoba; the report herein is intended to provide a snapshot of some of the personal opinions shared by youth who are directly impacted by our province’s child welfare system, structure, policies, and practices. The OCA summer student partnered with a staff member from Voices: Manitoba’s Youth In Care Network (Voices) to organize and facilitate the event. Their progress was supervised and supported by several staff from the OCA and Voices.

This is a summary of some of the key discussions, themes, findings, and possible areas of recommendation and action emerging from that day of consultation. We wish to acknowledge and thank the young people who shared their stories and opinions with us. We also thank the many others who provided information and assistance for this project, including the age of majority staff at the Manitoba child welfare authorities, and the Voices Leadership Team.
Introduction

The youth who met at the OCA discussed a range of issues connected to being in care and leaving care. Most of the young people were in their mid to later teen years, and because of their age, many of them had already begun to imagine life after care. As we heard from the youth, several themes were repeated throughout the day. These included the inconsistent nature of information being provided to young people about the availability of extension to their care agreement. Overall, we heard from youth that extensions of care are valuable and increase a youth’s ability to learn life skills, remain part of a family, and continue with education plans. Clear information about extensions of care and a youth’s rights and responsibilities needs to be provided to them and be consistent across the agencies of the four authorities. Youth expressed that they need time lines that do not increase anxiety at critical times or at crucial points in their academic year. Leaving care should be based on individual readiness and not arbitrary timeframes.

Youth answered questions on four themes during breakout sessions. The following information is a summary and analysis of the information collected from the youth participants in the various breakout sessions, and group discussions.

Experiences of Living in Care

A small number of youth shared that life in care was so unkind there would be nothing to miss, while some youth were confident that the structure and rules of care had been a benefit to them and that they would miss having rules even if they had previously chosen to break them. Youth expressed another positive aspect of care was to have someone look for them when they were missing from their placement or care enough to want to know where they were. Many others revealed that their time in care was a time to be with other people and that despite its shortfalls it had been a time of positive social interactions. A major fear associated with leaving care was described as the sharp drop in supports and positive interaction that these youth experienced.

Of the twelve participants almost all of them had been placed in a home outside of city limits during their time in care. They commented on the availability of activities in a rural setting citing that the city had offered them far less positive chances for interaction and much more exposure to negative peer influence and pressures. Some youth however were sharp to correct any generalization that alcohol and drugs existed exclusively in the city. It seemed that a combination of rural life and positive peer interaction combined with the availability of extracurricular activities fostered better memories and reflections of rural time in care. Although, some youth shared that the remoteness of certain rural settings had led to abusive placements. Overall, youth

The agency could have talked to me about my culture and my family and visits with family. I would tell youth to be strong and give them the OCA phone number.

Just because care from CFS ends doesn’t mean I’m leaving, they’re not kicking me out. Feels like home, it is home.
voiced their preference for stable and safe placements that had consistent staff that would remain during their time in care.

Some youth had healthy ways to realize when best to take quiet time away and when to reach out and engage with peers. One youth reflected on independent living:

*Independent living, in your apartment on your own you don’t deal with isolation very well. I take myself away from the world and be alone, over think things. I will call someone if I am feeling low. I was never taught how to be alone.*

For a few youth there had been a clear breakdown in the relationship with their workers. For some, this was demonstrated by being talked down to by their workers:

*When I told them I am not ready they don’t listen, they just laugh and say, “See you at Siloam Mission and Salvation Army.”*

**Overall Understanding of Leaving Care**

Youth shared mixed responses about their readiness to leave care. Some youth were adamant that their time on the street, running away or having grown up depending on themselves prior to leaving care had prepared them for life on their own.

Other youth shared that they felt completely unprepared and felt that they were currently in a state of crisis and lacked support. These youth said that having the system do everything for them may have hurt their ability to be self-sufficient.

*When I was in care they didn’t teach me anything. Everybody did everything for me- shopped for me, cooked for me, did my laundry. I didn’t learn anything from them, and when I was done, that was it. They didn’t prepare me.*

There were also mixed feelings about being on their own. Some youth felt that they had new and exciting things waiting for them with upcoming education opportunities. For these youth it was exciting to see what was to come and less about fleeing from care. Others, however, were just excited to get out of their care setting where they would feel safer. When budgeting came up most participants agreed that the reality of paying bills was not as attractive as the idea of getting out of care had initially been. Participants mostly agreed that their ability to budget was limited and that managing money posed a significant problem once on their own. This was based on the feelings associated with being completely alone.
When asked about the presence of supportive adults in their lives youth identified foster parents, social workers, counsellors, fellow youth in care, staff at Voices, and OCA staff as supports. However, depending on the relationship between the youth and their supports, the youth predicted that only some supports would continue after eighteen. A number of youth were unsure if OCA services would still be available to them after age 18, highlighting the gaps in youths understanding of extending care.

Youth sometimes rejected the idea that their social workers adequately understood their level of readiness to leave care, noting that for some youth, their workers simply didn’t know them well enough to make such a weighty decision. Participants said they had felt unheard while in care many times. It had been hard to get workers to listen when youth wanted to leave care or were interested in staying in care and receiving more support. Many youth seeking information on extensions of care felt they met a lot of resistance from the system.

Some youth shared frustrations that it seemed some social workers were better prepared than others to connect with youth and support them. They felt that workers and youth should be more appropriately matched.

**Level of Understanding and Experience with Extending Care**

Youth were somewhat familiar with the idea of an extension of care but had some confusion about who could get them, and for how long the extensions could last. Some youth had been given only short extensions and others were still on extensions of care. A few participants had negative experiences with the extensions. This response demonstrated the wide range of experiences and the lack of consistency of information from child welfare agencies and authorities in Manitoba.

One respondent shared that their extensions had been terminated because of a lack of employment while the youth was still in their graduating year of high school.

*I was denied because I graduated. They wanted me to get a job.*

Youth unanimously agreed that an extension would allow them more time with family to develop important skills including the emphasized money management skill that was a recurring theme in discussions. In this way, respondents agreed that financial support during transition is of the utmost importance. Transitions were hard on youth and they indicated that they would have benefitted from a more consistent social worker during that time. Youth also mentioned that many of their in-care peers did not know about extensions and the concept seemed hidden from youth.

In the opinion of our youth participants, leaving care should be based on readiness and not arbitrary timeframes. They informed us that
chronological age is a poor indicator of emotional maturity and development. Youth perceived that a lack of client-worker relationship made it difficult for the worker to accurately assess the youth’s readiness to leave care.

When asked if youth thought it would be beneficial to discharge themselves from the extension of care with the option of coming back into care if needed, almost all youth saw the value in being able to return to an extended care situation. Some participants noted that reasonable measures should be in place to ensure move in or out would create or sustain positive milestones such as a renewed interest in school. The participants noted that it was the choice to be able to come back into care that seemed to hold the greatest value and feelings of support.

Youth decided that follow up after care was important and that within the current system this expectation would fall on social workers to follow up with their youth. Some youth also indicated they hoped to stay connected with certain foster parents and care providers.

**Family Connections**

Youth respondents identified feeling a level of responsibility to their siblings and shared that although their strong connections with their siblings were important, efforts to maintain contact were often hindered by their workers especially during their initial time in care. Among certain youth there were feelings of upset related to being kept from family without explanation.

*I tried to ask for visits when I was in the group home but they said it was up to the agency as I was Permanent Ward. The agency sheltered me about my bio family. I knew about my family and the problems but the agency did not talk about it.*

One youth shared how hard it was to be away from family:

*I am close to my sister who was 6 and I missed her. I was taking care of my sister and my mom was out drinking. I am so close to her. Not seeing her for 4 months almost killed me. I told my social worker I wanted to see her but they did not let me see her I ran away and then they let me see her.*

Youth shared that being in care would teach them what not to do as parents. Some youth just hoped that they would be able to keep a sense of family together even if there were eventually separations or blended families:

*My parents argued and used my brother and me in the middle. My earliest memory of seeing my dad is him sitting in a cardboard box when I was five. I was thinking he was an uncle but they told me he was my dad. Now, I only talk to mom and dad at Christmas... I don’t want my own kids to be embarrassed by me.*

Children are scared about being in care, worried about family at home.

No, they didn't help my sister, just me. She is still on the reserve and she was abused too. I want to be with her. I want to take care of my sister. They did not give her a chance or opportunities.
Focus Group Outcomes & Themes for Further Consideration

Overall, the youth participants described that experiences of transitioning out of care and information being provided to them about extensions of care are inconsistent. Information about extensions of care varied widely from one agency to another and from one social worker to another. Emerging from this theme has been the idea of a possible research project on consulting with youth from around the province to look at how information is being distributed on various issues, and where improvements in this area can be made.

Our research and advocacy within the child welfare system supports what the youth told us that day and specifically indicates that, for example, an important condition for assessing a young person’s appropriateness for an extension of care is an effective, open, trusting relationship with their social worker.

We heard from the youth that a number of them did not feel their social workers knew them well enough to accurately assess their readiness for leaving care. Some youth indicated they felt this was due, in part, to frequent reassignment and changes of social workers. This is an area of concern for the OCA and an issue on which we have written in previous reports. We will continue to listen to how worker instability can affect youth. We will also continue to promote awareness of the potential negative impact of having multiple workers coming in and out of the life of a child or youth.

Based on the feedback from youth, OCA staff have discussed the possibility of developing a briefing paper for Standing Committee or the Child Protection Branch outlining suggested rights and responsibilities for extensions of care. We also will examine ways for us to advocate for legislative changes that might allow young people to leave care, but then return under an extension of care due to changing circumstances in their lives.

One issue that was discussed was the impact that coming into care had on the youths’ relationships with their siblings. A number of the youth participants described feeling cut off from contact from their siblings and many of those youth indicated that it was in the first few months of being in care that this occurred the most. Youth have a right to contact with their families while they are in care and they also have the right to be informed by their agency of the rationale if contact with family is being limited. This is also an issue on which the OCA has previously expressed concern and this concern remains. This particular area of discussion from the focus group has become a possible topic for a future focus group.
We want to hear more about the experiences of children and youth on the issue of family contact while in care.

OCA-Specific Recommendations

The youth also participated in a closed-door session with two of the day’s facilitators in order to discuss some aspects of OCA service. Those are summarized here and are being used by this office to inform discussions about how we can continue improving our service delivery for children and youth.

The youth participants said that all children and youth coming into care should have a session with OCA staff where rights and services are outlined, but that this should happen after the initial, hectic transition period. Arguably, not every child could be seen given that there are more than 9400 Manitoba children in care and length of time in care can vary from one day to several years. The youth suggested that having a full time staff dedicated to reaching out to new children and youth in care could help provide young people with many critical pieces of information. We commit to exploring ways to better inform all children and youth who should know about us of their rights and responsibilities while in care or while receiving child welfare services.

Youth shared that an office whose available hours that almost entirely coincided with their school day gave them only an hour to attempt a visit unless they missed school. Youth felt strongly about the OCA having the ability to be open during evenings and weekends. Youth shared that advocacy-type concerns most often occurred in the evenings: around meal time, bed time, or curfew. Some youth expressed concern they would forget important details of an incident if the follow up did not occur until the next day. Unlike their staff, they would not have taken notes in order to remember. Some of the youth participants indicated they felt that a lack of availability of OCA staff in the evenings and on weekends meant that this would result in the staff being believed due to possible inconsistencies in the youth’s story. Some youth shared that due to lack of trust for the system and staff, they would most likely tell no one if they couldn’t reach out during an incident. Further discussion about accessibility is ongoing at the management level of the OCA and will also be discussed at our upcoming organizational strategic planning meeting in March 2013.

When asked what makes a place welcoming, youth almost unanimously described the homes of their friends. They said that what made those locations welcoming was that they were able to spontaneously drop in without an appointment and that the people there were welcoming. As a result of this feedback, the OCA plans to examine aspects of how we can increase our ability to welcome young people who might feel otherwise hesitant to drop by. For example, we are looking at the physical design of the entrance area and meeting rooms.
Youth suggested that television commercials or large billboard space be used with positive supportive images showing the OCA and its people. Further they felt that different images paired with slogans like “We help foster kids when they don’t feel heard” or “We are here to help” would get the attention of youth in care and would prompt more phone calls. They did point out that these calls may still come after hours at times that might diminish the effectiveness of the advertising campaign.

Youth indicated the OCA website could be useful, but the website seemed less relevant to them if they couldn’t reach someone online. Youth indicated the website was not very helpful if they had to use phone numbers listed on the website to call the OCA to actually make contact.

Youth indicated that social media is a preferred way to connect and also suggested using Twitter to promote important announcements about extensions of care and other topics of interest. The OCA has in fact been communicating via Twitter (@OCAAdvocate) for a number of months and is continuing to reach out to youth and system stakeholders through an increasing social media presence as a way of disseminating information and of advocating for children and youth.

**A Final Thought**

We genuinely appreciate the candid nature of the discussion and the honest opinions that our youth consultants shared with us during the focus group process. It has long been our experience that when youth are provided with opportunities to contribute and provide consultation, they do so in meaningful ways. We thank each of them for their trust in us and we look forward to our ongoing dialogue with the children and youth involved in the child welfare system in Manitoba. A special word of thanks to our co-facilitators who helped design and deliver the focus group, Shimon and Amanda – thanks for everything!