

CONNECTING COMMUNITY

TO SURREY YOUTH
AGING OUT OF CARE



We acknowledge that this work takes place on the unceded, ancestral and traditional territories of the Semiahmoo, Katzie, Kwikwetlem, Kwantlen, Qayqayt and Tsawwassen First Nations. We recognize the ongoing colonization of Indigenous peoples, which is evident in the disproportionate number of Indigenous children and youth in the care system. We commit to approaching this work in the spirit of reconciliation; aiming to decolonize our practice and amplify the voices of Indigenous youth whenever possible.

AN INITIATIVE OF



WITH THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT OF

vancouver
foundation



Surrey Youth
Assistance Fund

Ocean Park
Foundation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth in and from care matter.

Of the approximately 700 youth in BC who leave government care on their 19th birthday each year, anywhere from 50 to 70 youth “aging out” every year call Surrey their home. In 2016, the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition (SPRC) identified youth who had “aged out” of the government care system as a key demographic to support, noting the increased risk of poverty for these young people. We set out on a mission to “wrap the community around youth”, and radically rethink the ways youth are supported by the broader community as they transition from the care of Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) into independence when they turn 19.

We brought together stakeholders, decision-makers, adults and youth with lived experience, and community members to hear from youth and what they need to feel connected to the community as they make the leap into independent living. Our vision was that:

- Surrey youth in and from care will be better supported in their transition into adulthood.
- Youth participants will develop and refine their leadership skills, with the tools and knowledge to more effectively advocate for policy and systems change.
- Individuals and organizations not currently engaged with young people will be actively engaged in providing support to Surrey youth with care experience through financial contributions, in-kind support, or volunteer roles.

Our vision was supported by an approach rooted in shared core values amongst those involved:

- Centre the Youth Voice
- Know the Facts
- Raise the Profile
- Change the System

Over three years, we completed a significant amount of work under three broad categories: research, building community, and youth leadership development. Bringing together our findings, we developed and launched two prototype projects, Compass Connections and Plenty of Threads. These prototypes provided innovative ways for youth to create new, supportive connections with diverse community members.

Most importantly, we created a Youth Advisory Committee made up of Surrey youth with care experience to support the project activities. This group of diverse young people provided crucial direction and expertise on the process, the actions, and the intended outcomes. Their voices were central to the project, and paramount to the project's success.

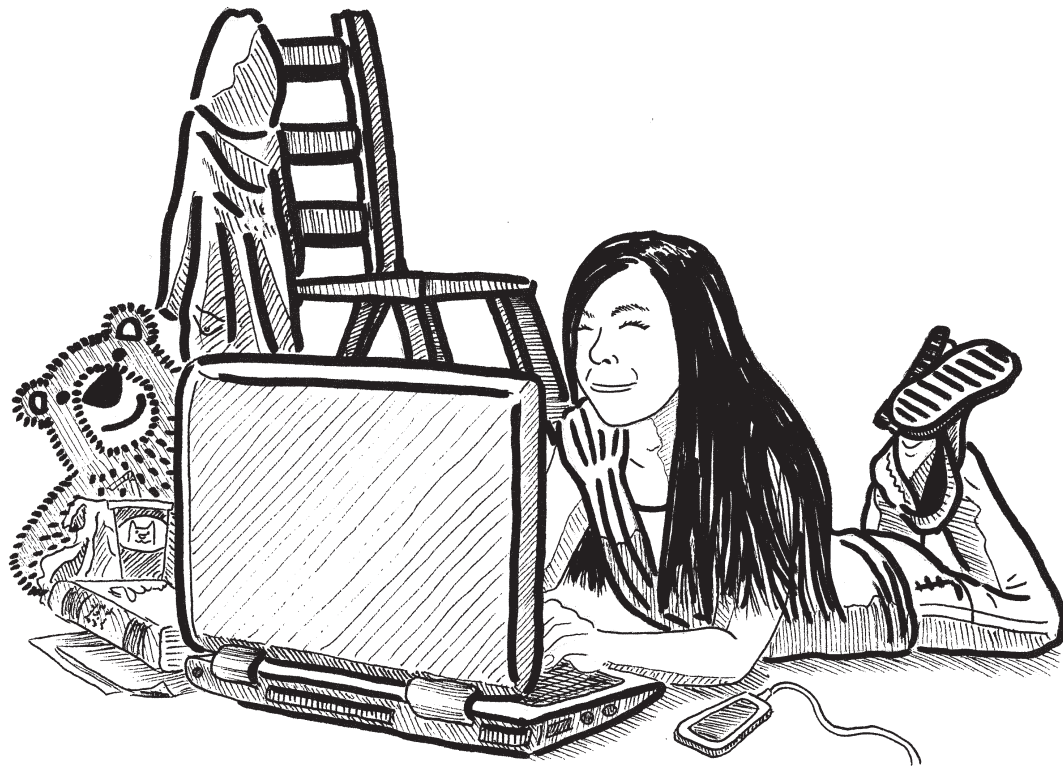
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THE CONTEXT



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Approximately 700 youth in BC leave government care every year on their 19th birthday, and around 5,000 young BC adults (aged 19-24) have previously been in government care. While increasing numbers of young people in BC are living with their parents until well into their twenties, young people coming out of the care system are forced into independence at 19; cut off from familiar services and supports before they may be ready.

Surrey has the largest youth population in BC. But prior to 2016, there wasn't a lot of information specifically about youth with care experience in Surrey. Looking to take action on this issue, the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition commissioned a report by the McCreary Centre Society in 2016 entitled "Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care" to paint a clear local picture of this issue. Their research showcased some important facts: including that amongst Surrey's young people, anywhere from 50 to 70 turn 19 and 'age out' of government care every single year.

The research showed us that most British Columbian parents expect to support their children up to age 28, and most of them do. While just about all of their peers receive

some financial or other assistance from their families between the ages of 19 to 28, only a tiny fraction of former youth in care in Greater Vancouver had received any housing or financial support from their family since turning 19. Unfortunately, the pattern across BC is true for Surrey youth with care experience - local youth who age out of care are more likely than their peers to become homeless, have poor educational, employment and health outcomes, and claim income assistance benefits.

The research showed that the majority of BC adults believe that 19 year olds do not have the necessary skills and resources to live independently, and need the support of their families through their twenties. A 2013 Vancouver Foundation poll showed that only a quarter of BC adults were aware that government support ends when young people in care reach their 19th birthday. The Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition was concerned about the increased risk of poverty youth transitioning out of care face, and set out to explore how the community could play a role in supporting these incredible young people to thrive.

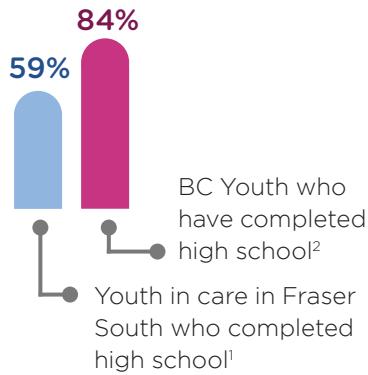
#THEFACTS

Indigenous children and youth are consistently over-represented in the child welfare system across Canada.

In the 2016 census, 650 children were in government care in Surrey. Of them, 305 were Aboriginal; just under half the total amount of children in care.

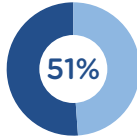
EDUCATION

Youth in Care are more likely than their peers to face challenges in their education.¹



54

The number of youth in the South Fraser region (Surrey, Langley, and Delta) who aged out of government care in 2015-2016.¹



In 2014, over half the homeless youth in Surrey had care experience.³



The percentage of BC parents who continue to provide some level of support for their children until age 28.⁴



Only **9%** of youth with care experience in Greater Vancouver between 19-26 received housing support from their family after aging out.⁵

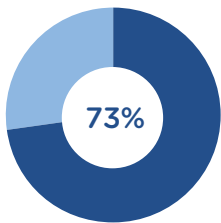


28% More than a quarter of local homeless youth with care experience had worked in a legal job in the past month.³

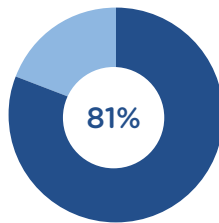


Nearly a quarter of Fraser South youth with care experience had an emotional or mental health condition.⁶

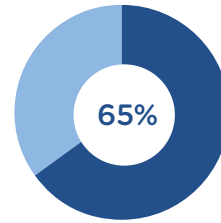
AND DESPITE ALL THIS...



FELT GOOD ABOUT THEMSELVES



FELT AS COMPETENT AS OTHERS



FELT THEY WERE GOOD AT SOMETHING

The majority of youth in Fraser South currently in care envisioned only positive circumstances in their future, most commonly having a job or career, being in school, or having a family of their own.⁶

¹Ministry of Children and Family Development (2016). [Youth in care in the Fraser South region]. Unpublished raw data.

²Rutman, D., & Hubberstey, C. (2016). Is anybody there? Informal supports accessed and sought by youth from foster care. *Child Youth Serv Rev*; 63:21-27.

³McCreary Centre Society. 2014 Homeless and Street-Involved Youth Survey.

⁴Vancouver Foundation (2014). *Fostering Change—Perceptions on the challenges facing British Columbia youth transitioning out of government care.*

⁵Morton, B.M. (2016). The power of community: How foster parents, teachers, and community members support academic achievement for foster youth. *J Res Child Educ*, 30(1):99-112.

⁶McCreary Centre Society. 2008 and 2013 BC Adolescent Health Surveys.

#WORDSMATTER

The term “Aged Out” is the most common way people refer to youth who have reached the age of 19 and are no longer eligible for government care such as a foster home, group home, or a Youth Agreement.

But some youth with lived care experience don't like being referred to as “Aged Out”. It's a label that doesn't inspire positive or empowering ideas about young people. Youth in Surrey have proposed phrases like “journeying into adulthood”, “aging into the community”, or “transitioning into independence”, that better reflect that important transition point that happens at 19 when their government care support ends. We respect and value youth perspectives, and have tried to use respectful and affirming language throughout this

report when referencing this important milestone. We also feel a need to sometimes continue to refer to youth as “aging out of government care”, as it is still the most widespread and shared term used between organizations, government, and throughout the community at-large.

The delicate balance between working outside of a system and working within a system to influence change is central to this work. We commit to doing our best to meet immediate needs of those most impacted, while understanding at times we have to “talk the talk” of the current systems, in order to create a lasting culture shift long-term. It is a tough balance, and one we are constantly revisiting; in our actions, beliefs, and language.



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#THELINGO

Attack of the acronyms! Here is a helpful guide to decipher some of the language used in this report, and generally regarding children and youth in the government care system.

Age Out: In B.C. youth “age out” of foster care when they reach 19. At this time, MCFD is no longer the legal guardian of the youth and the youth is considered an adult.

Agreements with Young Adults (AYA): A Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) program that provides financial support to cover living expenses to former youth in care who, at the time of their 19th birthday, were in a Continuing Custody Order (CCO) or a Youth Agreement (YAG), and who were attending a post-secondary educational, vocational, or life skills program. The eligible age for AYA is 19-27.

Child in Care (CIC): A child who is in the custody, care or guardianship of a Director at MCFD.

Continuing Custody Order (CCO): A court order placing a child in the continuing custody of a director, granted when the court is satisfied that the child cannot return to the family.

Director: A person designated by the Minister.

Foster care: A living arrangement for a child who cannot live safely with their family of origin.

Foster parent/Caregiver: An adult who acts as a parent for a child in place of the child’s biological parents, but without legally adopting the child. These adults are screened and trained by the government and receive payment for their services.

Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD): The BC Ministry responsible for providing child protection and child welfare duties, to ensure the safety and well-being of children, including guardianship of children and youth in care, and for supporting youth on YAG, AYA, and independent living.

Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction (MSDPR): BC government ministry responsible for social services such as employment programs, income assistance and disability assistance.

Temporary Care Order (TCO): An order placing a child for a specific period of time in the custody of a Director or another person, with the intent for the child to return home. An order placing a child for a specific period of time in the custody of a Director or another person, with the intent for the child to return home.

Youth: In MCFD, a person who is at least 16 years of age and under 19 years of age. Other government definitions of youth include individuals between 15-24, or 16-28. In this project, youth usually refers to young people between the ages of 19-24.

Youth in government care (YIC): Refers to a young person under the age of 19 who is on a Youth Agreement (YAG), lives in a group home, foster home, or receives support from the BC government or a delegated Aboriginal agency.

Youth with care experience/from care: A young person who has ever been in government care.

Youth previously in care/from care: A young person who is not in care currently but has been previously.

Youth Agreements (YAG): A legal agreement between MCFD and a youth, most typically between the ages 16 to 18, who is unable to live at home or with another family or adult. Youth live independently with financial support.

#THESCENE

There is a lot of important work happening around the region, to increase awareness of the challenges youth face on their journey to adulthood. We are thankful to be engaging in this work, alongside others who have set the stage and turned the spotlight on young people from care.

FOSTERING CHANGE

Vancouver Foundation launched Fostering Change in 2013 with the goal of addressing homelessness by providing opportunities and support for youth transitioning out of foster care. The work is driven by a team of advocates with experience in the care system, and supported by allies. In Spring 2018, the Fostering Change campaign moved to First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, and continues to advocate for policy change that supports young people from care.

FIRST CALL: BC CHILD AND YOUTH ADVOCACY COALITION

First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition is a non-partisan coalition of over 108 provincial and regional organizations who have united their voices to put children and youth first in BC through public education, community mobilization, and public policy advocacy.

FEDERATION OF BC YOUTH IN CARE NETWORKS (FBCYICAN, OR THE FED)

The Fed is a youth-driven, provincial non-profit organization dedicated to improving the lives of young people in and from care in BC between the ages of 14 and 24, to ensure they reach their full potential. Their programs create a safe space for youth to come together, build connections, identify challenges, and feel at home. Throughout the year the Fed hosts youth retreats, provides bursaries for education and skills development, supports youth with training and leadership opportunities, and distributes resources and information to young people and their allies across the province.

AGEDOUT.COM

AgedOut.com is for young adults who were in government care in BC. It's an up-to-date warehouse of information on resources and services available to young adults and a learning tool to help people feel empowered as they leave care. AgedOut.com was developed by the Adoptive Families Association of BC in partnership with the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

THE PROJECT

Given what the statistics say about the increased risk of poverty for young people with care experience, it was a natural fit for the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition (SPRC) to lead a project focused on supporting youth aging out of the care system. The intent of this work was to “wrap the community around youth”, and radically rethink the ways youth are supported by the broader community as they transition from the care of MCFD into independence. And so, in 2016 with the support of funding from the Vancouver Foundation, “Connecting Community to Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care” launched into its first phase. With continued support from the Vancouver Foundation in 2017, and additional funding from Coast Capital Savings, Envision Financial, the Ocean Park Foundation, the YEES (now SYAF) fund, and others, we hit the ground running with an ambitious vision to change outcomes for youth in and from care.

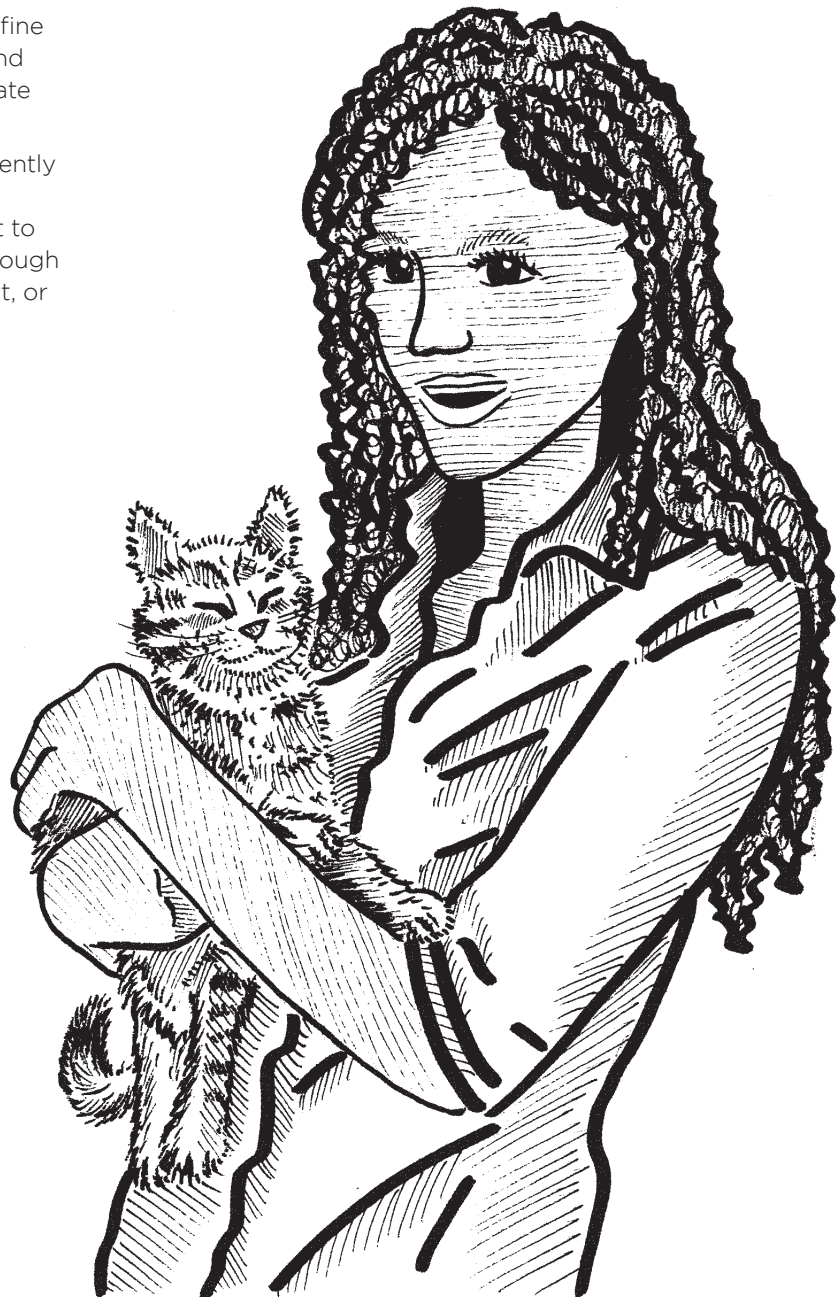


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THE INTENT

The project goals represent short and long-term outcomes focused on increasing community support and improving outcomes for youth transitioning out of government care.

- Surrey youth in and from care will be better supported in their transition into adulthood.
- Youth participants will develop and refine their leadership skills, with the tools and knowledge to more effectively advocate for policy and systems change.
- Individuals and organizations not currently engaged with young people will be actively engaged in providing support to Surrey youth with care experience through financial contributions, in-kind support, or volunteer roles.



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THE APPROACH

With the intent to wrap the community around youth aging out of care in mind, the SPRC and Planning Committee created a project plan based on these commitments:

CENTRE THE YOUTH VOICE:

Youth are experts in their own lives, and know what they need to succeed. Youth with care experience will be empowered to prioritize and promote tools and techniques that will effectively support youth aging out of the care system in Surrey. Through the creation of a Youth Advisory Committee, youth with lived experience will be continuously engaged in an authentic way, with their voices central in all project activities.

KNOW THE FACTS:

We want to understand the issue. We will do the groundwork to ensure our work is rooted in evidence-based research; finding synergies between the specific needs and priorities of Surrey youth, promising practices in other communities, and brand new ideas that will work for Surrey.

CHANGE THE SYSTEM:

Identifying key priorities for young people, we will bring together the necessary individuals and organizations to strategize solutions to address the root causes of the issue. We will remember that traditional service provision doesn't go far enough, and begin to shift community behaviours; advocating for solutions that meet the needs of young people from care and end the cycle of youth poverty. We will think outside the box to engage "unusual suspects" in the community - those people not currently connected or providing services to youth in/ from care - in becoming actively engaged in supporting youth through their transition out of care; rethinking what it means to "age out".

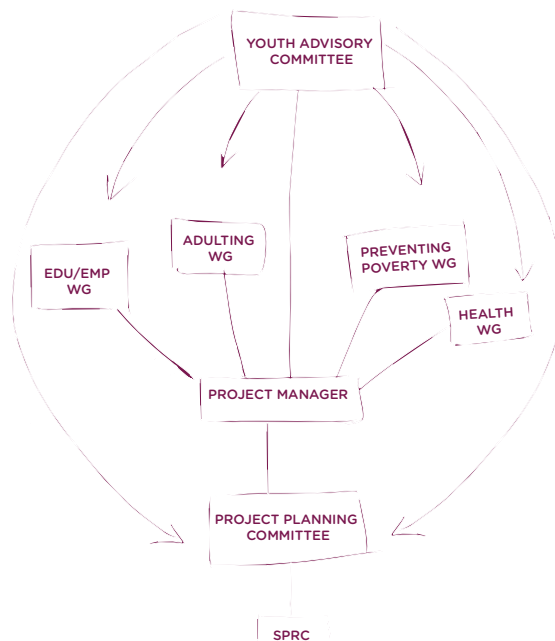
RAISE THE PROFILE:

We will raise awareness of this issue by hosting community events; to highlight the additional risk of poverty youth face, showcase the resilience and strength of these incredible young people, and to provide community members an opportunity to explore ways they might offer support to youth in Surrey.



THE PEOPLE

The SPRC understands that systems-change requires cross-sectoral collaboration and borrowed many aspects of a Collective Impact model of stakeholder collaboration to provide a foundation for the work. Working with SPRC member organizations, and bringing other community and agency representatives along, the SPRC worked diligently to uphold shared values of collaboration in order to maximize the project's reach and community impact.



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Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition (SPRC)

Formed in 2012, the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition (SPRC) aims to tackle poverty in Surrey. Its diverse membership reflects the breadth and diversity of the impact of poverty; with representatives from government, business, health services, community service agencies, and members of impacted or highly vulnerable populations coming together to exchange resources, to collaborate, to plan, and take action.

The SPRC uses its collective voice to mobilize and inspire government, the private sector, the not-for-profit sector, and the entire community to take actions to reduce poverty in the community. The SPRC engages in broad poverty reduction planning, while also undertaking targeted projects that raise awareness and understanding of the effects of poverty, that build the capacity in the community to reduce poverty, and that directly benefit those community members living with low incomes.



[It's been] a privilege to get to tap back into this work, and all of the great work and people that are involved in this kind of work. I have a better understanding of how much harder things have gotten for youth, and appreciating their stories. The young people will stick with me. And the staff who have such passionate advocacy. I have been pushed to do some deeper thinking around some issues, and become a better ally. To better support people who are vulnerable in so many diverse ways.

- Planning Committee Member



Project Planning Committee

The Planning Committee is composed of representatives from SPRC member organizations, Youth Advisory Committee members, and the Project Manager. This group provided support and direction on project timelines and activities, and acted as a liaison to the SPRC.

Working Groups

Following a series of community workshops and a youth retreat, multiple working groups were formed to mobilize on the key priorities and ideas generated by youth. Membership in the working groups varied; each included some representatives from SPRC member organizations, with the inclusion of additional community members, the Project Manager, and members of the Youth Advisory Committee. Originally focusing on six key priority areas, the groups later consolidated into four active planning tables: Preventing Poverty, Employment & Education, Creating Community & Adulting, and Health.

YAC

Central to the project was the creation of a Youth Advisory Committee (YAC), composed of local youth with care experience. Youth aged 15-24 were invited to meet regularly with a focus on providing insight and expertise to the Planning Committee and Working Groups on all project activities, developing leadership skills, creating connections with their peers, and advocating on important issues affecting young people with care experience. The YAC chose the name VIBE for their committee, which stands for: raising our Voices, Improving services, Be noticed, and Evolve.



THE WORK

We approached this work under three broad categories: research, building community, and youth leadership development. While some of the project activities had more immediate impact than others, each was taken in the spirit of moving towards systems change by wrapping the community around youth as they transition out of government care. The Planning Committee, project staff, and YAC tackled much of the work of building community and youth leadership development, while the working groups took on specific needs identified through the research and by young people at the retreats.



PROJECT ACTIVITIES



RESEARCH

- Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care Report
- Youth in Care Fact Sheet
- Housing Resource Sheet
- Youth Mentorship Program Models
- Youth Housing Models
- Youth Housing Survey



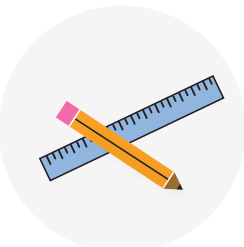
BUILDING COMMUNITY

- Stakeholder Workshops
- Holiday Dinners
- BC Children & Youth in Care Week Awards and Community BBQ
- 19th Birthday Installation and Event
- Youth Story Harvest



YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

- Youth Advisory Committee
- Advocacy
- Youth Retreats



PROTOTYPE PROJECTS

- Compass Connections
- Plenty of Threads

THE WORKING GROUPS

The research and conversations from the early stages of this project gave us a clear picture of what youth need as they make the transition from care into the community. Overwhelmingly, the consensus was that youth need:

- Supportive relationships with adults and peers
- A system navigator
- Access to safe, affordable housing
- Access to employment and job training
- Support to graduate and access post-secondary opportunities

The YAC hosted its first youth retreat in 2018, creating an opportunity for youth with care experience to prioritize some of these broad needs for Surrey youth, and a chance to dive deeper into determining how we could translate some of those needs into actions. At the retreat, youth highlighted the additional need to access sanitary and household care products, addictions support, free extended health benefits, more affordable housing options, increased start-up money, and support “adulthood”. These priorities acted as the foundation for four distinct working groups who began tackling direct needs.

CREATING COMMUNITY & ADULTING

The Creating Community & Adulthood working group focused on how to connect community members to young people as they transition out of government care, and vice versa. Youth identified that they lacked supportive relationships with adults in the community once they turned 19, and that they would have felt more supported in the transition with unpaid adults they could rely on for advice and support. Extensive research around possible models of mentorship programs was undertaken to develop and launch the Compass Connections prototype project that connected youth participants to adult volunteers on an ad-hoc, informal basis to meet their specific and timely needs.

EDUCATION & EMPLOYMENT

The Education & Employment working group tackled connecting youth to diverse mentors for career and educational development. Including representatives from local skills development and training programs, post-secondary institutions, and community organizations, this group developed and launched the Plenty of Threads prototype project; creating a “human library” of supportive adults for youth to connect with.

PREVENTING POVERTY

Recognizing the impact the housing crisis has on youth as they transition into independent living, housing quickly became the focus of the Preventing Poverty working group. Bringing together service providers from youth-serving agencies, along with other key stakeholders, this working group completed research on housing models and funding structures, advocated for rent supplements for youth, and supported the development of a housing resource list for young people.

HEALTH

The members of this working group shared goals around health, including addictions support, the need for extended health benefits at no cost, and sanitary and household products. Given the broad scope of mental health and addictions, the intended focus for this project was to address the lack of access to sanitary products youth identified as a priority (including household cleaning products, baby supplies, and menstrual and hygiene products) and find ways for youth to access these products in a more cost-efficient way. Although this was a priority identified by youth, we decided to focus on other areas during this project phase, but do hope to address issues related to health in future project activities. in a more cost-efficient way.

RESEARCH

YOUTH AGING OUT OF CARE IN SURREY

With a commitment to ensuring our work was evidence-based, an important first step was to complete in-depth research to inform our project activities. The McCreary Centre Society assisted in compiling existing research on youth transitioning out of care; connecting the broad research to the local experience in Surrey. They produced an important report entitled “Report on Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care”, detailing the specific needs and experiences of youth transitioning out of care in Surrey. We also produced a fact sheet that highlights many of the key statistics and needs for this demographic. The Fact Sheet has been circulated and referenced widely throughout the community, and the research completed informed our approach, process, and activities.

Reflecting the priorities outlined by the youth through the initial research, and at the youth retreat, we engaged in additional research on housing and mentorship models.

HOUSING

Members of the Preventing Poverty working group collaborated to perform research on youth housing models, to support the development of a youth housing proposal. They studied a number of different housing models supported by non-profit organizations, and assessed their viability in Surrey. Complementing the general research on existing youth housing models, we also developed a youth housing survey, which was completed by 41 Surrey youth with care experience. The objective of the survey was to get a sense of preferences youth have for their living arrangements to inform potential housing developments in the future. The emerging themes and results of that survey will be circulated to youth-serving agencies interested in developing housing that works for young people.

Another important focus of the Preventing Poverty working group was bringing service providers together to share information and resources. Members of the working group compiled a Surrey-based Housing Resource Sheet, detailing housing options for youth in Surrey. This list will be updated regularly and circulated to youth-serving agencies.

#UNUSUAL SUSPECTS

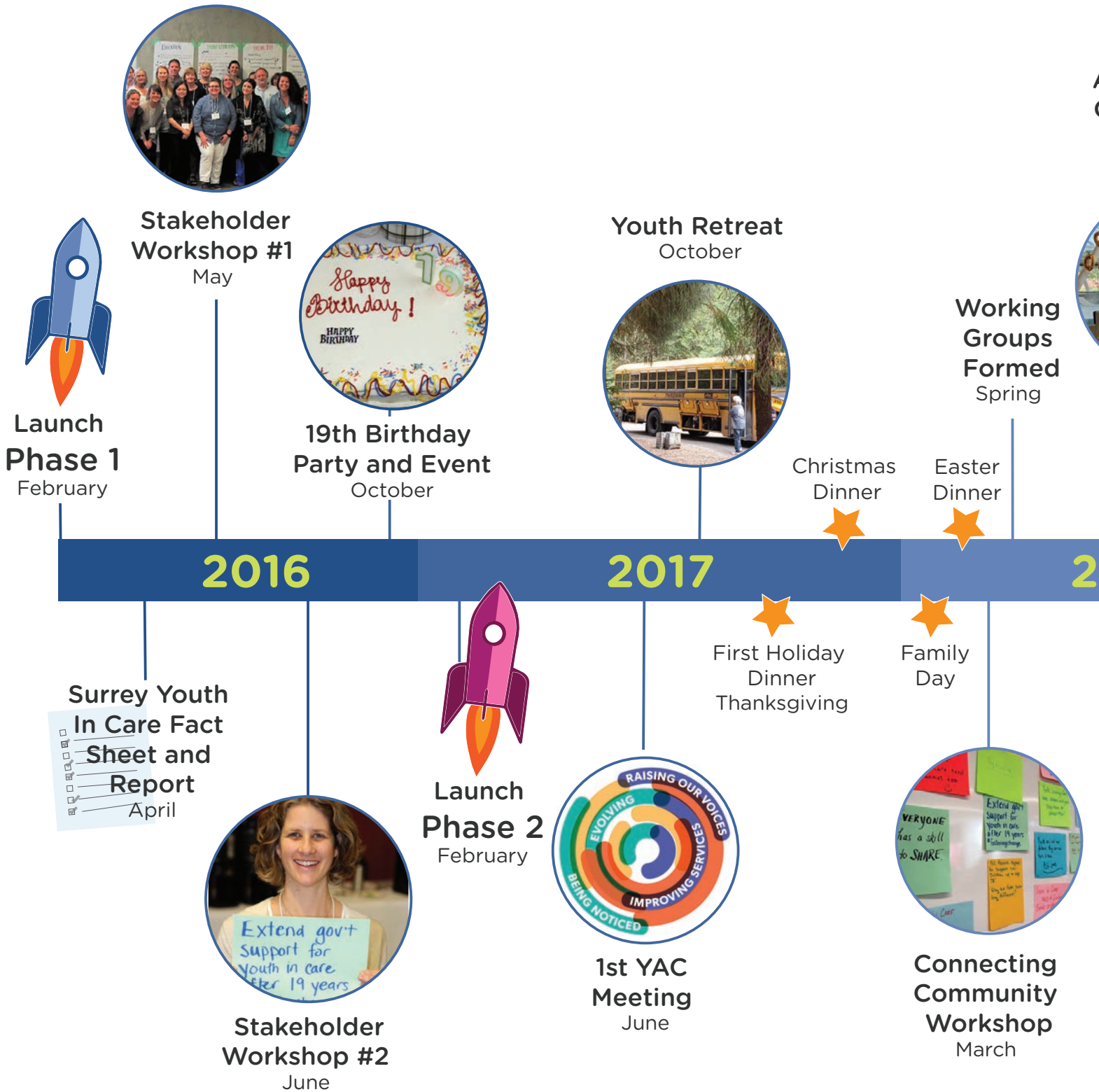
When it comes to youth services, we are often tossing catnip to the cats. Singing to the choir. Lecturing to the faculty. You know.

We know who the “usual suspects” are: the folks supporting youth on the ground through their paid work, those working in the child welfare system, and of course the magical-unicorn-giant-hearted-community-members who seem to be able to tackle every social justice issue present in the community with grace and conviction. We wanted to extend our reach and include people who weren’t already connected to youth, youth services, or the child protection system: the unusual suspects. The people who maybe didn’t realize they have something to offer young people, or who weren’t even aware that government care ends at 19. We wanted to open the - cats, choir, faculty - er, the circle, up and invite everyone in to be a part of creating a strong and supportive safety net for young people in our community.

MENTORSHIP

We heard loud and clear that youth want to develop healthy, supportive relationships with unpaid adults in the community as they transition out of care. We performed extensive research on various youth mentorship models; and our findings supported what we were hearing from the youth. Youth want youth-directed, informal opportunities to connect with adults, without needing a formal commitment, and without time constraints like traditional support programs. Indeed, the research reflected that the longest lasting and most impactful mentorship relationships begin informally, and develop organically. This important research served as the foundation for our two prototype projects: Plenty of Threads and Compass Connections.

THE TIMELINE



PHASE 1

BC Youth Awards and Community BBQ
June



Youth Retreat
October



BC Youth Awards and Community BBQ
June

Groundwork for Prototypes
February

Volunteer Training
June

Prototypes Wrap Celebration
September

Youth Story Harvest
February

Final Report
March

Christmas Dinner

Family Day

Easter Dinner

Christmas Dinner

2018

2019

2020

Thanksgiving

Housing Model Research
February

GOT YAC
May

Youth Housing Resource Sheet
September

Thanksgiving Dinner

YAC Recruitment

Prototypes in Action
Summer

Youth Housing Survey
October

YAC Retreat
February



PHASE 2

BUILDING COMMUNITY

One of our goals was to continue raising awareness about the challenges youth face as they transition out of government care, and into independent living in the community. At various points in the project, we brought together community stakeholders, adults with previous care experience, and community members who haven't traditionally been working in the youth services field to discuss the issue, get involved with supporting young people, and to celebrate the incredible and resilient youth in and from care we are so fortunate to have living in Surrey.

#DONORSPOTLIGHT

The Surrey Youth Assistance Fund (SYAF, formerly YEES, or the Youth Employment and Education Fund) was started by a generous anonymous donor in Surrey, originally with a focus on eliminating youths' barriers to employment and education opportunities. Following one of our community workshops, the donor was inspired to shift the SYAF's funding mandate to focus on ending the cycle of poverty and supporting vulnerable youth on their journey to adulthood and independence, including youth transitioning out of care.

The breadth of ways the SYAF offers support to young people is inspiring. Whether providing emergency funds to keep youth from homelessness, funds to purchase a computer for schooling, or to pay for driving lessons, the list of ways the SYAF directly supports youth is endless. The SYAF supports a number of groups at Christmas, including ours, providing generous donations for youth and young families in poverty, and youth in the safe house and homeless shelter in Surrey. The SYAF is a saving grace in our community, filling in so many funding gaps and helping youth to thrive.

WORKSHOPS

Our initial workshop provided an opportunity to bring over 40 diverse stakeholders together from a broad range of the wider Surrey community to deepen the understanding of the challenges youth face as they transition out of care. Participants working in the youth-services field gained valuable insight into how to positively engage youth in their own practice, and shared the learnings amongst their own teams and agencies. For participants coming from sectors outside of child and youth care, the workshops presented an opportunity for awareness-building of this important demographic, and a space to develop ideas on how the Surrey community can support its youth in and from care.

A second community-wide workshop focused on action-planning, bringing together representatives from local and provincial government, health, social work, youth-serving organizations, Indigenous partner organizations, education practitioners, individual community members, alumni from care, and youth. Importantly, the workshop featured a panel of alumni - adults who had successfully transitioned out of care - who shared their experiences, successes, and the challenges they faced as young people in the care system. Participants identified a number of "unusual suspects" who may have an interest in connecting with youth, brainstormed additional ways to engage more "unusual suspects", and were invited to reflect on their role in creating more opportunities for youth as they transition out of care. Many of the "unusual suspects" the participants identified at this workshop supported various project activities over the following years.

In March 2018, we held a third community event, bringing together key stakeholders to support action on the priorities identified at the youth retreat. The YAC shared their findings, and we formed working groups that brought on many "unusual suspects" to help move the project plan forward.

19TH BIRTHDAY PARTY

The 19th Birthday Party art installation displayed at Surrey City Hall provided an opportunity for anyone in the community to learn more about what happens to youth in care when they turn 19. The exhibit, created by Fostering Change, is a compelling representation of the challenges faced by youth aging out of the care system, and effective in increasing public awareness and compassion for these young people. It certainly had a lasting impact on those who came through the City Hall atrium, many of whom were moved to action. While the installation was in City Hall, we also hosted a community event, inviting key stakeholders and community members to attend and learn more about youth with care experience. Alumni from care and prominent individuals from the care community, or connected to supporting young people, spoke with passion about the need to support youth through this crucial transition.

BC CHILD AND YOUTH IN CARE WEEK AWARDS AND COMMUNITY BBQ

BC Child and Youth in Care Week (BCCYICW) is a time for everyone to stand in support and celebration of the incredible, courageous, and resilient young people in government care. Partnering with local youth-serving agencies, we held two annual BCCYICW celebrations in Surrey; hosting community-wide BBQs and honouring youth in and from care with individual awards of recognition. Nominated by their peers and staff from youth-serving agencies, we handed out over 50 awards each year, recognizing their personal, academic, or community achievements. Guests were moved to hear about the incredible impact these young people have in their communities, and to have the space to celebrate their unique and important contributions.



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HOLIDAY DINNERS

The community holiday dinners are an example of responsive youth engagement. Early in the project, YAC Members expressed the immediate need to provide space for youth who have transitioned out of government care to have a place to go on holidays. Holidays can be a challenging time for young people living independently, who may not be connected to a biological or foster family, and/or who have a lot of emotion surface around these holidays.

On December 25th 2017, we held our first holiday dinner event. We invited youth and their loved ones to attend, with 25 people attending. The City of Surrey staff led a donations drive to fill stockings for youth with treats, personal items, and gift cards. We were able to secure grants to ensure each young person received a gift. Most importantly, we came together to cook and share a traditional meal, and to celebrate the season together with the youth and their chosen families. We were happy to continue this new tradition in 2018 and 2019.

What we quickly learned is that the need for holiday events extended beyond Christmas. We held gatherings on Family Day, Easter, Mother's Day, and Thanksgiving in 2018 and 2019. Many community members volunteered their time, assisted us in securing additional donations, and joined us to cook food and to celebrate; making these dinners an important opportunity for young people and community members to build relationships and support one another through informal gatherings.

”

The holiday dinners are so family-oriented. It was so nice to actually celebrate the holidays because I grew up never being able to.

- Youth Attendee

“

YOUTH STORY HARVEST

Near the end of the project, members of our Youth Advisory Committee hosted a “story harvest”; an event where they shared their personal experiences of growth and leadership throughout the project to community members. Community members were invited to reflect on those experiences through a specific lens; identifying examples of resilience, hope, empowerment, and connection woven throughout the youths’ individual and collective stories. It was a powerful way to celebrate the work of our Youth Advisory Committee, and to relay the impact this project has had on their personal and professional lives.



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YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Our commitment to supporting youth throughout the project was two-fold: we wanted to amplify the voices of youth in and from care by ensuring the project activities were designed, implemented and evaluated with direct input from youth with care experience, and ensure that there was “nothing about them, without them”. We also wanted to support leadership development of youth, and provide them with opportunities to access skill development opportunities, new experiences, and to build connections with the community-at-large..

#YOUTHSPOTLIGHT

In his own words, Cody Jacques wears a lot of hats. Cody came to YAC with care experience, and a mission to change the system for his peers. Throughout his time with YAC, Cody has made the transition from a youth participant to a valuable project team member, sitting on almost all of the Working Groups, the Planning Committee, facilitating the YAC meetings and ensuring other YAC members had the support they needed to attend. Cody recently graduated from Douglas College with a Diploma in Child and Youth Care, and will be graduating with a Bachelor’s Degree in Child and Youth Care June 2020. Cody, we could not be more proud of you, and credit much of the project’s success to your commitment and drive.

YOUTH ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The YAC is both part of the organizational and decision-making structure of this project, and a case study in itself as the first Surrey youth advisory committee focused on the needs of youth in government care.

Youth aged 15-24 were invited to meet regularly with a focus on providing insight and expertise to the Planning Committee and working groups on all project activities, developing leadership skills, creating connections with their peers, and advocating on important issues affecting young people with care experience. YAC Members were actively involved in planning and facilitating the youth retreats, holiday dinners, and engaging in advocacy in the region. The success of our YAC inspired the creation of several additional YACs throughout Surrey during the course of this project; providing opportunities for youth outside of the care system to engage in the issues and services that impact them.

The majority of the original YAC members remained regularly engaged over the course of three years, which is exceptional in terms of youth engagement. One member who relocated to Prince George continued to attend meetings remotely, via online platforms. YAC members have credited the success of the YAC to the authentic approach to engagement, where the youth felt empowered to steer the project through their decisions about the project priorities and activities.

”

The YAC saw me for the individual I am, and saw me for who I was.

- YAC Member

“

YOUTH RETREATS

The YAC planned and facilitated 3 youth retreats; 2 that were open to any youth in or from care, and 1 for the YAC members.

The name of the first retreat in 2018 was “Changing Our Story, Changing Our Future”, and 17 youth attended. At that initial retreat, we gained valuable insight from the youth around the challenges young people face as they transition out of the care system, with a specific focus on Surrey. These youth were integral in identifying the top priorities that became the foundations for the working groups and all project activities.

The second retreat, “VIBES reYACt 2k19”, had 18 participants, with a focus on sharing the work the YAC had done throughout the project, and to provide a true camp experience for youth. Most of the participants had never camped before, and had high barriers to participation. The itinerary included youth-led activities and workshops, and time for nature walks, archery, ropes courses, and games. The retreats also provided a unique opportunity for youth to connect with their peers outside of their regular routines, creating positive memories and lasting connections.

Our final retreat, held in 2020, was an opportunity for the YAC members to reflect on their experience as part of the YAC, and to celebrate the incredible work they have accomplished.

”

If you give us the chance to speak, and sit there and listen, then you will get to know what we need. This YAC gave me the strength to advocate for myself, tell me what’s right or wrong. And speak up in the system.

- Alex, YAC Member

“

ADVOCACY

An important part of the project was a commitment to amplifying the voices of youth in and from care. Through participation with the YAC, youth gained valuable leadership skills around advocacy and public speaking. The YAC participated in a number of events where they were able to speak out about policies that directly impact them. Whether participating in all-candidate’s meetings during elections, attending policy meetings with groups like Fostering Change, travelling to provincial conferences to speak directly to decision-makers, hosting a podcast about youth in care, or providing feedback to organizations and groups asking for input or advice, the YAC gained the confidence and skills needed to affect change in the community.



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PROTOTYPE PROJECTS

While having one supportive adult in their lives is important for youth leaving care, we found there is evidence to suggest that efforts to build dense and varied networks for youth is even more important for long-term personal success. Specifically, our findings support the development of natural and informal mentorship relationships, programs that build social networks rather than individual relationships, and programs that combine skills development and other types of instrumental support with the opportunity for natural mentorship relationships to arise. But when we looked around, we didn't see this model anywhere in Surrey. Or the province. Or Canada!

"Prototypes" are by definition an early model to test a process or concept. Our prototype projects were an opportunity to try something completely new and innovative by combining our research with our focus on building community and supporting youth leadership development.

Spear-headed by the Creating Community & Adulting and the Education & Employment working groups, we launched two short-term programs to test their viability and impact: Compass Connections and Plenty of Threads. Both of the prototypes demonstrated many early successes, and we can't wait to test both the Compass Connections and Plenty of Thread programs as proper pilot projects in the near future.

#ADULTING

Based on zero credible sources, here is our best guess on how to define this term:

adult:ing

/ə'dɒltɪŋ, 'a,dɒltɪŋ/

- The practice of behaving in a way characteristic of a responsible adult, especially the accomplishment of mundane but necessary tasks;
- the act of being adult-ish; and
- calling out for someone to bring another roll of toilet paper and realizing no one is coming.

COMPASS CONNECTIONS

When asked how the community could support youth after they had 'aged out' of government care, the youth voice was consistent and clear: they needed a network of supportive adults in the community they could call on as-needed for help "adulting". Examples of support they might need could be assistance with finances, landlords, cooking, exercise, or anything you might traditionally call a parent or close family member for throughout your 20s (and beyond, let's get #real.)

We recruited 7 volunteers we named Community Navigators; trusted adults that were available to support youth on an ad-hoc basis, when youth had a specific need. Between July and August 2019, 4 youth between the ages of 19 -27 tested the Compass Connections prototype program, reaching out to the Community Navigators for a variety of support including help finding pet veterinary care, advice on dealing with a landlord, and even learning to swim.

In the short prototype phase, both the youth participants and adult volunteers were positively impacted by their interactions and developing relationships. Whether during a one-time ask, or through ongoing conversations, youth reported that they felt supported and cared for. All 7 adult volunteers said they would volunteer again and enjoyed being able to offer informal support to multiple diverse young people.

”

There is a lot of power in asking for something and not having to give with it. Some people would say that's a part of love, or care, but I mean, since I was 14 or 15 I haven't felt that, so it's been a long time

- Youth Participant, Compass Connections

“

PLENTY OF THREADS

The name Plenty of Threads comes from the idea that we need 'plenty of threads' to weave a tight social fabric; especially for our young people from care living independently in the community. The working group's objective was to connect youth from care with people in the community who could act as resources, sources of information and connections for youth to build their professional and social networks in support of employment and education opportunities. The program built off the idea of a "human library" concept which originated in New York as an effort to challenge stereotypes and prejudices through dialogue. Through Plenty of Threads, we provided youth with a catalogue of interesting people (ie. the "books"), that they can "check-out" (meet for coffee); providing an opportunity to learn from the education and career experience of individuals they may not have otherwise met.

Over the two-month prototype phase, 5 youth met with many of the 14 human books available, discussing education and employment opportunities from a wide variety of fields including social services, law, and costume design. The feedback was extremely positive from both the youth participants and the adult volunteers, with many youth leaving feeling inspired and motivated that they are on the right track.

”

I would recommend this program to other adults to volunteer. There is a lot of value to connect and support with the next wave of youth that would/could be entering the labor force in whichever area they choose. It is about providing guidance to reassure that they can contribute and have something to offer.

- Human Book, Plenty of Threads

“

#HUMANBOOK

human

/ˈ(h)yō omən/

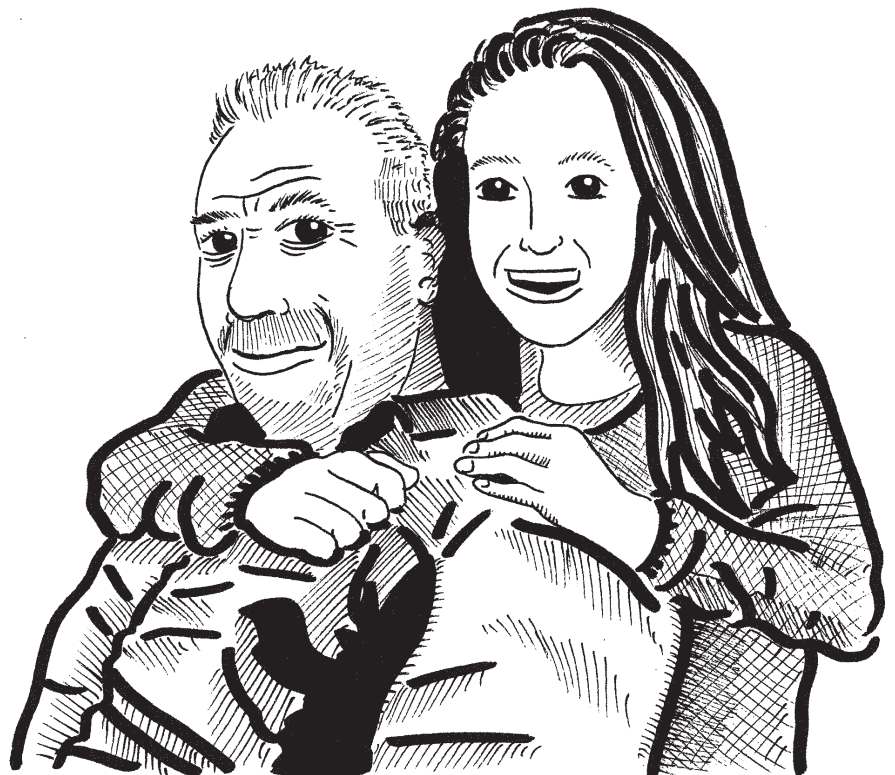
Relating to or characteristic of people or human beings.

book

/bō ok/

- A written or printed work consisting of pages glued or sewn together along one side...

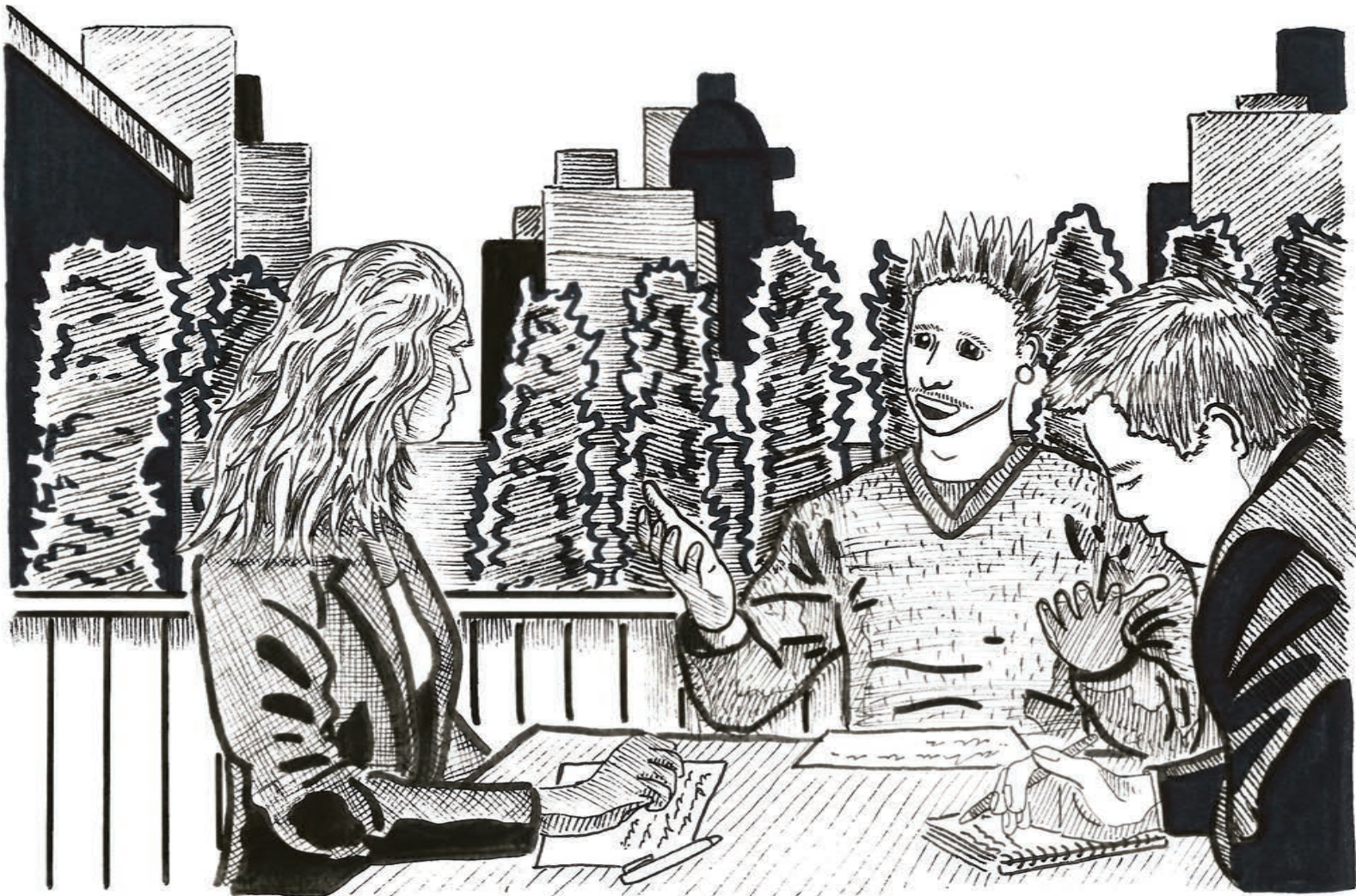
Okay this isn't working. A human book, in the context of a "human library", is a volunteer with a particular knowledge set or personal experience that is willing to share their experiences with others. Someone can "take out" a human book, and learn a bit about whatever the book wants to share. Anyone can become a human book. We all have something valuable to share with others.



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THE LESSONS

Over the course of three years, we did a lot of learning and a lot of growing. Here are some of our high-level takeaways from the overall project.



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01 SYSTEMS CHANGE WORK IS HARD.

And long. And hard. The work requires authentic collaboration between people with lived experience, community members, service providers, and decision-makers. We recognized early on that we could only tackle a piece of the systems-change, and that some of our goals were too ambitious. We refocused our energy on finding the next step to affect change. We know the actions we took that supported immediate impact are part of the shift of broader systems-change, and so while we didn't end youth poverty, for example, we took many valuable steps in that direction.

02 BACKBONE SUPPORT IS CRUCIAL.

We know it is extremely challenging to find the financial and personal resources to have consistent backbone support for working and planning groups in a collective impact project structure. Working off the "side of a desk" just isn't sustainable or effective. We also know that a collective impact structure is the most effective for addressing broad community needs. When we reflect on this project, it's pretty clear that the working groups that had dedicated administrative resources had the most consistent membership and the most impactful outcomes. Finding sufficient resources and committed people and organizations who are willing to provide ongoing organizational support is key to the overall success.

03 NEVER DOUBT THE POWER OF COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS.

This project was initially supported by a strong community advocate for youth justice who was a leader with decision-making power. This community champion had a clear vision, made connections, and used their personal and professional network to support the work. While a community champion is an invaluable resource, it is equally important to structure the work so it is sustainable, regardless of who is able to be involved. Achieving success in long-term systems change work requires community champions - plural. A shared and consistent vision, and a commitment to collaborate amongst all stakeholders, will ensure that even when you lose your community champion, or encounter any bumps in the road, the work will maintain momentum and can be carried on with success.

04 YOUTH-LED MEANS BEING RESPONSIVE.

Part of what made this project so impactful was our ability to be responsive to emerging needs, and to prioritize what the youth wanted. This was supported by our funders' flexibility, and the intention of everyone involved to do this work in a good way. Over the three years, we added new project activities, dropped some, and refocused when we needed to. Hey, we even took a year longer than we anticipated to make sure we got it right. If you want to center the voice of young people, you have to walk the talk and shape the project around their needs.

05 YOUTH WANT TO BE CONNECTED TO UNPAID ADULTS.

It's safe to say that youth who have been through the care system are resilient, resourceful and self-sufficient. But just because they can do it alone, doesn't mean they want to. We have heard loud and clear that youth want to be connected to unpaid adults in the community; adults that aren't tied to the time constraint of a service program, and that they can build an organic relationship with over time, and on their terms. Our two prototype projects were so successful because they connected youth to supportive, healthy adults in meaningful ways; and it turns out that adults in the community want to be connected to these youth just as much.

06 YOUTH NEED SUPPORT TO SHOW UP.

It was really challenging to connect with youth who had already transitioned out of government care and were living independently in the community. Because most youth over 19 aren't connected to services, we had to think creatively about how to engage them and ultimately a lot of our success came down to word-of-mouth. Once engaged, many of the youth participants faced a lot of barriers to participating - whether in YAC, the holiday dinners, retreats, or the prototype projects. Many of the youth participants required a lot of additional staff support to show up, which further supports the need to wrap the community around these young people to make sure they can continue to show up in every aspect of their lives.

07 THE YOUTH ARE IN SURREY. THE FUNDING AND CAPACITY IS NOT.

One of the most valuable findings from our project was a better understanding of how many Surrey youth transition out of care into the community, and what their specific needs and challenges are. Surrey has the highest population of young people, and anecdotally we know that youth who transition out of care in other nearby cities often end up in Surrey, searching for affordable housing solutions. The number of youth who transition out of care in Surrey also doesn't include youth on YAGs, so we know the estimate of 50 - 70 youth aging out annually is low. And yet, we see other cities with far more resources, funding, and practical support for this demographic. While we feel we helped put a spotlight on this issue in Surrey, we know there is still a lot of work to be done.



I think this project also allowed for the opportunity to bring different agencies together to work towards a shared purpose and built connections among organizations. Overall, I think the project raised awareness about youth in/ from care in Surrey and the incredible strength/assets they bring to the community, but also the need for more holistic community support and systemic change to enable them to thrive.

- Working Group Member



THE HORIZON

It's always hard to know exactly what the next cycle of a project will look like, but here are some of the key pieces we believe are important in whatever we take on next. More specific recommendations for future project activities are included in the project activity reports.



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NARROW THE FOCUS.

Have you heard that quote by Desmond Tutu about eating an elephant? One bite at a time? That's what we plan to do, but without the elephant, of course. While we have a vision to end poverty and improve the outcomes for youth in and from care, we know it's going to take a lot of time, work, and resources to get there. We are committed to thinking strategically about what small steps we can take to effectively impact systems-change, and who needs to be at the table to make it happen.



CONTINUE RADICAL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT.

The voices of youth with lived experience are central to this work. We will continue to push ourselves to think radically and creatively about what authentic youth engagement looks like, and how we can support them in a good way. This means meeting when youth are able to, meeting in places that feel safe for young people, removing barriers to attending meetings and events, compensating them fairly for their expertise, ensuring the work is reflexive, and sometimes... eating a giant piece of humble pie when we get it wrong.



DIVE DEEPER.

Our prototype projects, Compass Connections and Plenty of Threads, were huge successes. But to really understand both the challenges and long-term impact of these programs, we need to launch a longer pilot phase that includes more youth and more adult volunteers. This approach to informal mentorship isn't being done elsewhere, and we want to figure out how to do it. This is what the youth have asked for, this is what they need, and this is what the research shows to have the strongest impact on participants - so let's put it to the test and figure out a way to make this work for young people.



CHECK-IN EARLY AND OFTEN.

It is really challenging to evaluate the impact of project activities, beyond the personal experience. A rigorous evaluation plan that includes multiple strategies to measure progress and success will assist in project planning, and allow for possible course correction along the way.



FIND AND KEEP THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS.

We will continue to go beyond our circles, to connect with people who never imagined themselves involved in this field. We discovered that so many community members want to be involved in supporting these young people; our job is to find ways for them to do so! Moving forward, we want to have ongoing, consistent engagement with the “unusual suspects”, to ensure that they remain connected to project activities, and more importantly: the youth.



BUILD BRIDGES.

We will continue working collaboratively at every level necessary to work towards systems-change. Nurturing the relationships we have built through this project, we will look for synergies with other local agencies and organizations. Importantly, now that we have helped put this issue on the map in Surrey, we can connect with the other groups organizing regionally and provincially, to ensure that our message is clear and consistent, adding to the unified call for change.

THE WRAP

We accomplished a lot over three years together. Our successes span from immediate impact on the ground, to important work behind the scenes, bringing new people in, building partnerships, and gaining a better understanding of the challenges and barriers Surrey youth experience as they transition out of care.

The consistency and commitment of the youth and adults involved over three years is a testament to both the need, the sense of urgency, and the desire to make lasting change for youth. Our work has built on the efforts of others, and will be an important foundation for work in Surrey to come.

Youth who have experience in the care system have been through enough. Let's continue to work together to ensure their next chapter into adulthood is one that includes healthy relationships, a strong sense of community, self-empowerment, access to resources and opportunities, and endless hope for a bright future ahead.

”

Everyone keeps saying “oh the YAC is coming to an end.” I don't think of it that way. I think there's a lot more work to be done, and there's no doubt in my mind that we will find something, because this is just... it can't end now. I feel like we are picking up, we are on a roll, and there's no way you can just stop something in its prime.

- Edward, YAC Member

“

#ITTAKESAVILLAGE

This project was not possible without the financial and in-kind contributions from so many organizations and individuals. This list is not exhaustive, but we would like to thank the following groups for their generous funding, donations, and in-kind support to ensure that we could shift our focus from dollars to action.

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Simon Fraser University
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Van Tel/Safeway CU Legacy Fund
Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks
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Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition Member Organizations

City of Surrey
SFU Surrey
Ministry of Children and Family Development
Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction
Immigrant Services Society of BC, representing the
Local Immigration Partnership
Surrey School District
Surrey Libraries
Fraser Health Authority
Surrey Board of Trade
Vancity Credit Union
Pacific Community Resources Society
SOURCES
Fraser Region Aboriginal Friendship Centre
Options Community Services
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YAC

For confidentiality reasons we can't list the names of all our YAC members, but know they are spectacularly awesome and we couldn't have done this work without them!

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Cody Jacques
Alice Sundberg
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McCreary Centre Society

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INCRECIBLE



COURAGE.



PROUD OF MYSELF

