

# **BUILDING COMMUNITY:**

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*A Report on Project Activities for the Connecting  
Community to Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care Project*



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**

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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 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. They 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 MCFD into independence when they turn 19.

Over three years, we focused our work in three areas: research, building community, and youth leadership development. In our final year of the project we launched two prototype projects that brought together findings and work from those three areas.

This report describes our community building activities, and the key learnings and take-aways for our future work together. Community building activities aimed to raise awareness, increase community support for young people and celebrate the incredible and resilient youth in and from care living in Surrey. Our focus on building community resulted in many direct-impact project activities, including:

- 3 Community and Stakeholder Workshops
- 1 Art Installation and Community Event
- 2 Youth Awards Ceremonies and Community BBQs
- 9 Holiday Dinners
- 1 Final Showcase Community Event

Project activities were supported by the collaboration of diverse community members and key stakeholders through an overall Project Planning Committee and a number of distinct Working Groups. 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.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>THE CONTEXT</b>	5
<b>THE PROJECT</b>	6
<b>THE WORK</b>	8
Stakeholder Workshops	9
19th Birthday Party Installation and Event	13
BC CYICW Community BBQ and Awards	15
Holiday Dinners	20
Youth Story Harvest	23
<b>THE BIG PICTURE</b>	25
<b>THE WRAP</b>	26

# THE CONTEXT

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; in 2016, roughly a quarter of the City's population was under 19 years old. 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 - the research done by the McCreary Centre Society found that 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.

Additionally, 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. Initiatives like Fostering Change, and the work of the Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks and First Call have extremely successful at raising public awareness of this important issue, and so the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition set out to see how to bring individuals, organizations, and local government together to more effectively support young people transitioning out of care in Surrey.



This report focuses on the project activities related to building community, and our efforts to raise awareness of this important issue.

# THE PROJECT



## 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

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 Youth Employment and Education Fund (now the Surrey Youth Assistance Fund) and others, we hit the ground running with an ambitious vision to change outcomes for youth in and from care.

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 focused our work in three areas: research, building community, and youth leadership development. At the end of the project we launched two prototype projects that brought together findings and work from those three areas. Project activities were supported by the collaboration of diverse community members and key stakeholders through an overall Project Planning Committee, a number of distinct Working Groups, and the Youth Advisory Committee.

# THE WORK

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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, youth, and community members who haven't traditionally been working in the youth services field. Our goal was to discuss the issue, increase the community support for young people, and to celebrate the incredible and resilient youth in and from care we are so fortunate to have living in Surrey.

We took a number of initiatives to work on community involvement and awareness-building on this issue. Each had a target audience, an intended outcome, and purpose that aligned with the following project goals:

- Surrey youth in and from care will be better supported in their transition into adulthood.
- 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.

Specifically, we wanted the project activities to be opportunities to:

- Deepen participants' awareness of issues facing youth in and from government care in Surrey;
- Nurture a more empathic understanding of youth in and from government care;
- Gain an understanding of how to more effectively support youth from care in their transition to adulthood; and
- Create a platform to engage youth and adults from the care community in a meaningful way.

To evaluate the impact and success of each project activity, we engaged in a wide variety of evaluation activities. Using valuable feedback from event participants, the Youth Advisory Committee, the Planning Committee, and relevant stakeholders, we were able to draw out key reflections and recommendations for related project activities. These findings and suggestions are summarized and highlighted in each of the following sections.



## STAKEHOLDER WORKSHOPS

Over the course of the project, we held three community-wide workshops with the intent to generate discussion and action to support youth in and from care.

Our initial workshop brought together over 40 diverse stakeholders together from a broad range of the wider Surrey community. Our goal was to deepen the understanding of the challenges youth face as they transition out of care. 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 working in the youth-services field gained valuable insight into how to positively engage youth in their own practice through a review of wise practices from other regions or countries. Participants also engaged in creating information sheets by identifying programs and resources for youth. 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.

In small groups, participants brainstormed ideas and engaged in discussion. Some key systems change themes arose including the need to extend the age of government support, and a desire to see safe, supportive, and accessible housing options after exiting the care system.

Workshop participants were invited to reflect on their role in creating more opportunities for youth as they transition out of care with a special focus on education, skills-training and employment, housing, physical and mental health, and connection to others.

Participants also identified a number of “unusual suspects” who may have an interest in connecting with youth and brainstormed additional ways to engage more community members. Many of the “unusual suspects” the participants identified at this workshop supported various project activities over the following years.

In March 2018, after the next phase of the project launched, we held a third community event, bringing together over 50 key stakeholders to support action on the priorities identified by young people at the first youth retreat. The Youth Advisory Committee shared their findings, and we formed working groups focused on key priorities that brought on many additional “unusual suspects” to help move the project plan forward.

The workshops had the outcome of inspiring local philanthropists to fund project activities, and to make funding available for work connected to supporting youth with care experience.

## THE LESSONS

### 1. LIVED EXPERIENCE MUST COME FIRST.

Our workshops were successful because of the inclusion of alumni from care. It was powerful to hear the experiences, challenges, and success stories of adults who transitioned from government care into community. While some of the logistics of transitioning out of care have changed in the years since some alumni turned 19, many of the struggles remain the same. It is essential to honour lived experience, and the insights and recommendations provided by care alumni provided a strong foundation for our future work to build on.

### 2. EMOTION CAN DRIVE ACTION.

Cue the tears, consensual hugs, and high-fives. We received a lot of positive feedback that the workshops were filled with emotion. Emotion often compels people to make change and it is important to honour the emotion that may come up when discussing children and youth in care. To do so means ensuring facilitators understand how to effectively and respectfully hold space for participant reactions, and then channel that emotion into empowering participants to take action.

### 3. PEOPLE WANT TO HELP.

One of the key takeaways from our workshops is that the youth-serving community, as well as the community-at-large, want to be involved. They really do. The desire to support youth as they transition into community is far-reaching, and many people either aren't aware of tangible ways they can support this demographic, or there simply aren't any. We realized quickly that we had to find ways to keep community members engaged and create opportunities for them to continually be involved in the project.

### 4. SOMETIMES IT'S OKAY TO PREACH TO THE CHOIR.

A lot of the workshop attendees work in the youth-serving field, human services, or already had a previous understanding of the specific challenges for youth transitioning out of the care system. And that's okay! Go on and preach to the converted, sing from the same song sheet, kick the can down the road... or something. It remains important to bring together professionals in the field; to share experiences, to strengthen relationships, and to build new connections. Despite already being members of "the choir", our workshop attendees expressed leaving feeling reenergized in their commitment to continue to find ways to support young people with care experience.

# THE HORIZON

## 1. BALANCE THE FOCUS.

We can all agree: there is a lot of work to be done, and there are many different perspectives on where to start. We were sometimes challenged to find ways to get front-line service providers and community members to consider the broader systemic shifts needed to effect long-term change when there are so many fires to put out. We anticipated this possible roadblock, and our facilitators had a deep understanding of how to tangibly make the connection between individual action and systemic change. In the end, we feel like we struck the right chord in recognizing and validating the need for quick-wins, while also inspiring action connected to systems change. Maintaining this delicate balance between seeking short-term successes and long-term progression will be crucial for the development of new workshop focus areas in future project phases.

## 2. CIRCLE BACK.

It's generally considered good practice to follow-up with all attendees of events to encourage ongoing commitment, to provide additional opportunities for collaboration, and to build relationships. When you include people with lived experience as speakers, panelists, and guests, it is not only good practice, but imperative to connect with those individuals later to provide updates on how their input was used, project achievements, and projected outcomes. We were successful in reconnecting with most workshop participants and guests when opportunities arose for their continued involvement, and to share status updates on the project overall. People with lived experience deserve to know how their voices are being used, and so moving forward it is important to ensure there continues to be a high-level commitment to circle back to ensure they remain in the loop.

## 3. BE READY.

Throughout the project, it became clear that the presence of backbone support to collaborative project activities was key to success. Before engaging community members in brainstorming activities, ensure the required resources to provide administrative and practical support to cross-sector teams are readily available. If you're going to motivate and excite people to take action, the foundation to make it work must already be laid.

## 4. MAINTAIN ENGAGEMENT.

Of course we want every single person in Surrey to support youth as they transition out of government care. With a small staffing budget, we struggled at times to find the necessary resources to support the diversity of people wanting to be engaged in project activities. Much like the aforementioned recommendation to "be ready" for action, moving forward it will be important to ensure the project has an appropriate volunteer management plan in place and adequate staff resources before reaching out to the broader community. Capitalizing on people's excitement and energy following an event like a workshop is paramount in generating momentum, but ensuring there is a plan and the resources to keep them engaged is equally as important in maintaining it.

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WE WILL NEVER LEAVE  
SUCH IMPORTANT WORK  
GATHERING DUST ON THE  
SHELF. WE WILL MAKE  
SURE THAT YOUR VOICE  
WILL BE HEARD IN SOME  
OF THE WORK THAT WE  
DO IN THE FUTURE.

”

- Vera LeFranc, *Former Chair of  
Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition*

## 19TH BIRTHDAY PARTY

The 19th Birthday Party multimedia exhibition, created by Fostering Change, is a compelling representation of the challenges faced by youth aging out of the care system when they turn 19. We displayed the installation for the general public for four days in the Surrey City Hall atrium; providing an opportunity for anyone in the community to learn more about the transition from care to community as a young person. The exhibit has proven effectiveness in increasing public awareness and compassion for youth in care, and we are confident the display at City Hall moved many community members to action.

During the exhibition, we held a reception that featured alumni with care experience speaking about their experiences, and key stakeholders in the field discussing what is, and can, be done to better support youth. The event was open to the community, with a goal of engaging as many Surrey organizations and agencies as possible. Approximately 75 people attended, exceeding our expectations.



TRISTAN MILLER 2020

## THE LESSONS

### 1. HOT SPOTS INCREASE ENGAGEMENT.

This exhibition was another powerful reminder to host events and activities where community members already gather. Hundreds of people access City Hall daily, and displaying the installation in the atrium allowed people to stop and engage with the piece as part of their previously scheduled day. It is generally a good engagement practice to go where people already are; effectively reaching many people you wouldn't normally reach, and allowing people to engage on their own terms. Hosting the installation in City Hall gave us a dynamic opportunity to spark a conversation about youth in the care system with a brand new audience.

### 2. MESSAGING MATTERS.

Perhaps it's a call to action, a financial ask, or just important pieces of information about the priorities for youth in and from care. It is important to leave the audience with a handful of key takeaway messages, especially at events that feature multiple speakers. Whatever it is, ensure that all speakers have some consensus of the message you're hoping will resonate with the audience and lead them to action. While we had the same message - that youth transitioning out of care need more support - we could have been more clear about our call to action at the community-level, with additional opportunities for involvement.

### 3. LIVED EXPERIENCE MUST COME FIRST.

It bears repeating that it is essential to amplify the voices of those with lived experience. Ensure that every public event includes and centres youth or alumni with care experience, and that representation is intersectional to include girls and women, Indigenous youth, newcomers, youth from the queer community, youth with disabilities, and others who might continue to be under-represented in policy or the public eye.

## THE HORIZON

### 1. CONSIDER ACCESSIBILITY.

The collective decision to host the 19th Birthday Party installation and event at Surrey City Hall was strategic and successful in the context of our target audience. It's worth noting that over the course of the project, however, many youth expressed that they did not feel comfortable at City Hall, or in more formal event spaces. Engaging youth in the planning process will help to ensure that each event is designed in a way that meets the needs of the intended audience, while simultaneously prioritizing youth involvement. This event made sense to be at City Hall, while others made sense to be held elsewhere. Ultimately, ensuring events are accessible and welcome for everyone is paramount.

### 2. SPREAD THE WORD.

Go live on Facebook, post a tweet, snap that chat, or dance it out on Tik Tok. Reach out to media outlets, and connect events to larger social media movements or campaigns, to increase the reach of each event experience. We didn't plug into social media for this event, and missed some opportunities to amplify our work via online campaigns underway. Community-wide events are the perfect opportunity to invite local and regional media outlets to shine a spotlight on your work. And be sure to never underestimate the power of youth in getting the word out online.

### 3. INVITE FUNDERS.

Most funders love to be invited to events! They appreciate seeing where their dollars are going, and seeing the community rally around a cause their organization supports. And let's be real: it's like a giant, warm and fuzzy pat on the back for them and who doesn't love that?! We were strategic and intentional about inviting current and potential funders to this event and others, and saw those efforts pay off in new direct grants to support our project activities. Personally inviting funders to events will help build your relationship; you know, just in case you ever need funding again.

## BC CHILD AND YOUTH IN CARE WEEK AWARDS AND COMMUNITY BBQ

Proclaimed by the Province of British Columbia in 2011, 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. We wanted to support a community-wide event for BCCYICW, and the Youth Advisory Council were quick to suggest hosting an awards ceremony to honour youth in and from care with individual awards of recognition.

Working in partnership with the local youth-serving agencies Options Community Services, FRAFCA, and PCRS, the Youth Advisory

Committee hosted two annual BCCYICW celebrations in Surrey. Both events featured a community-wide BBQ and awards ceremony for youth.

Nominated by their peers and staff from youth-serving agencies, we handed out over 50 awards each year to young people, recognizing their personal, academic, or community achievements. Guests were moved to hear about the incredible impact these young people have in their communities, and the youth community was thrilled to have a space to celebrate their unique and important contributions.





## #ROUND OF APPLAUSE

There was not a dry eye in the house, when reviewing the award nomination forms. Here are some of the excerpts written about Surrey youth:

- He is so kind, caring, and determined.
- She never gave up.
- She has a beautiful heart.
- He has become very independent and has successfully overcome many challenges experienced and has remained optimistic and excited for the future.
- She sets her sights on something and she exceeds that goal.
- He is making sure that he is heard.
- He does not give up on himself, or his goals.
- She is living independently with success.
- He provides mentorship to other youth.
- She is a great advocate for herself.
- She is reliable, responsible, and does what she needs to survive.
- Her insight and open mind is a warm welcome to those around her.
- His resilience and openness make him an incredible young man.
- She has been reaching for the stars since she was in care.
- She cares so deeply for people, and pushes them because she knows they deserve greatness.
- She actively seeks out how to make change and does it with every ounce of her soul.
- He exemplifies hard work and dedication by volunteering and being a positive influence in the community.
- She is leading a healthy lifestyle and preparing to be a great mom.
- She shows up, helps out, and supports the community.



“

IT WAS MY FIRST TIME  
BEING ACKNOWLEDGED,  
I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO  
REACT. IT SHOWED ME  
THAT EVERYTHING I HAVE  
DONE OR ACCOMPLISHED  
HAS BEEN NOTICED AND  
THAT I'M WORTH MORE  
THAN MY PAST.

”

- Award Recipient

## THE LESSONS

### 1. YOUTH IN CARE ARE OFTEN INVISIBLE.

Youth in and from care are doing incredible unpaid and paid work in the community all the time. We likely know many of these young people, but may not know they have care experience. Yet, through discussion with the YAC, we realized there are not a lot of ways to publicly recognize youth for not only for their contributions, but for what they have overcome. The majority of youth who received awards at this event said it was the first time they had been recognized for anything. These young people deserve to be heard, seen, and celebrated for all of the greatness they bring to our community.

### 2. YOUTH ARE HARD TO FIND.

While we had a large number of nominations, all of the nominations received were connected to social service providers, or youth-serving organizations. It was challenging to get the word out to the greater community to solicit nominations for youth or alumni that are no longer connected to social services. We know there are incredible young people from the care system who deserve to be recognized for their contributions, but it will take some creativity to find them, as (see #1) they are often invisible.

### 3. YOUTH WANT TO LEAD.

Our Youth Advisory Committee members made it clear: they wanted to be in charge! Youth wanted to have an active role in planning, executing, and hosting the event for their peers. But like any group, their desire and ability to participate is on a spectrum and leadership can take many forms. Wherever possible, have project staff take a supportive role to provide administrative and logistical support and allow youth to be the true stars of the show.

“

[They] saw me for the individual I am.

- Youth Advisory Committee Member

”

## THE HORIZON

### 1. SHARE THE SPOTLIGHT.

Everybody wins! One of the most important aspects of the awards ceremony was that youth could be nominated for anything. Whether it be their personal accomplishments or contributions to the community, every single youth nominated each year received an award. Let's continue to spread the love and make sure every nominated youth is recognized. Some may think that lessens the award's impact, but we like to think that these youth deserve to be showered with love and appreciation, and that every contribution - big or small - is worth celebrating.

### 2. ELIMINATE BARRIERS.

It can be hard just to show up. Only half of the award recipients attended the awards ceremony, for a variety of reasons. There are many additional ways we could have, and can eliminate barriers for youth to attend an event like this moving forward. The Youth Advisory Committee said it would ease some anxiety by providing award recipients with an agenda, the event format, and a script of their acknowledgement in advance. Other ideas they brainstormed included offering transportation options, or developing a buddy system so that youth don't have to arrive alone. Finally, the Youth Advisory Committee suggested creating day-of roles that youth could take on and receive an honorarium for; helping them feel like they have a purpose and aren't awkwardly standing idle. Let's continue to design events that work for youth, especially the incredible young people nominated for awards.

### 3. CONNECT THE DOTS.

While it is important to ensure that awards can be given out for any personal growth, achievements, or community contributions, the awards ceremony also provides a great opportunity to specifically showcase youth who have been connected to a structured volunteer program. In our evaluation of the event, it was suggested that we consider partnering with community organizations to create specific programs youth can be involved in and recognized for. There are local and regional examples of youth leadership programs that build these types of opportunities into their program structure. The feedback has been that knowingly working towards receiving an award can foster a great sense of achievement and pride for young people. Additionally, the Youth Advisory Committee suggested using the awards as an opportunity to further connect youth to the community by potentially awarding a youth with an internship opportunity at a local organization, or winning a lunch meeting with a local leader. Finding additional ways to connect the awards with deeper community engagement will help move the awards ceremony from immediate impact closer to the direction of systems change.

## HOLIDAY DINNERS

Early in the project, members of the Youth Advisory Committee expressed the need to support youth who have transitioned out of government care to have a place to go on holidays. Holidays can be an especially 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 emotions surrounding these holidays.

On December 25th 2017, we held our first holiday dinner event. We invited youth and their loved ones to attend a Christmas dinner graciously hosted by a Surrey City Councillor in their home. 25 people - including youth, allies, alumni, and staff - attended this uplifting and fun event. City of Surrey staff led a donations drive to fill stockings for youth with treats, personal items, and gift cards and we were able to secure

a grant 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 delighted to continue this new tradition in 2018 and 2019.

The holiday dinners are an example of responsive youth engagement. We quickly learned that the need for holiday events extended beyond Christmas. In 2018 and 2019 we held gatherings on Family Day, Easter, Mother's Day, and Thanksgiving. 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.



TRISTAN MILLER 2020

“

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

## THE LESSONS

### 1. HOLIDAYS ARE HARD.

No one wants to be alone on Christmas. Or Easter. Or Thanksgiving. And especially not on Family Day. We quickly learned that youth in and from care often live independently in the community and do not have a place to go on holidays, as most service organizations are closed on the actual day of the holiday. For youth with care experience, holidays can be especially hard; bringing up many mixed emotions about family. It is important to have a space for youth to gather with their peers, loved ones, chosen families, and supportive adults on the actual holiday day, when they might otherwise be alone.

### 2. YOUTH NEED STAFF SUPPORT.

Holidays can be hard for anyone. To ensure that all youth and volunteers could safely attend a holiday dinner, we mindfully built a staffing team that was available to support all youth in attendance. With the additional emotion that the holidays bring, it is essential that all aspects of the plan are considered through a trauma-informed lens: from gift-giving to meal-sharing to crisis support. A clear risk management plan, and the right people, will help ensure a smooth and successful holiday celebration; keeping the event open, accessible, and safe for all. Which, when we think about it, is the best gift we can give.

## THE HORIZON

### 1. DIVERSIFY VOLUNTEER ROLES.

Holidays can be both the easiest and the most challenging time to recruit community volunteers for. We consistently found that on the one hand, people feel generous and want to help, but the reality is that many people are busy with their own families and holiday traditions. The holiday dinners created an inviting entry point to bring in additional “unusual suspects” and so it was important to engage community members as volunteers whenever possible, providing a diversity of tasks that fit their availability and skills. Whether it’s organizing a gift drive at their workplace, cooking and dropping off food, cold-calling businesses for donations, putting up posters around the city, or showing up to help at the event, there should be a role available for anyone who wants to be involved.

### 2. OPEN INVITATIONS.

All youth in and from care deserve to have the option of celebrating the holidays with a warm meal and good company. While some youth expressed they preferred having the holiday events at a community member’s home, that format undoubtedly limits the amount of people who can attend. After two years of hosting Christmas dinner at someone’s home, in 2019 we decided to test run hosting the event at the Newton Youth Hub, to see whether it remained as festive and welcoming. We had a great turnout, new volunteers, familiar faces, and nothing but positive feedback. Moving forward, continue to host the holiday events in spaces where youth feel comfortable, but that can also accommodate anyone who wants to attend, as well as any youth who may decide to drop-in unexpectedly on the day-of. Let holidays be a place where everyone is welcome.

# 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 with an audience of community members. Guests 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.

“

These [events] make it feel like being a youth from care isn’t an obstacle, it’s a benefit.”

- Youth Participant, Plenty of Threads

”



## THE LESSONS

### 1. STORY-TELLING IS POWERFUL.

We chose an event format that centred the youth voice in a unique and intimate way. Focusing on stories, rather than project activities or achievements, was a powerful way to build deeper connections and empathy. The nature of this format created an event that felt personal and authentic for everyone in attendance. Youth became storytellers, sharing their experiences and emotions, and community members were invited to actively listen and engage in stories, allowing them a rare glimpse into the youths' world in a safe and accessible way.

### 2. YOUTH WANT TO FOCUS ON THE PRESENT, NOT THE PAST.

What the Youth Advisory Committee members made clear to us is that they wanted to share their experiences with their involvement in the project, and not their personal histories. To ensure they felt safe and supported, we had a familiar face from the Planning Committee at each table, facilitating the discussion to ensure that it stayed focused on the project. It is important to honour and empower youth in their "present", enable the community to see them as more than just their "past", and to provide them with the space to be who they want to be - outside of their history.

## THE HORIZON

### 1. SHOWCASE YOUTH.

Let's shine the light on young people. Moving forward, it will be important to continue to find ways to highlight the time, energy, and work youth put into supporting project activities. The Story Harvest was just one way of centering the youth voice and celebrating their many successes. Finding opportunities to put youth in the spotlight is crucial to both empower young people to be actively engaged, and to shift the broader conceptions of the role young people play in the community.

### 2. EXPAND THE REACH.

Clang the bells, ring the alarms, shout it from the rooftops! While we had a great turnout for the Story Harvest, the majority of guests were people already connected to the project, or youth-serving agencies, already. Looking ahead, it is important to strategize on how to bring in as many community members as you can to these feel-good, celebratory events to continue to expand the reach of this project's work and build an even wider community net to wrap around these young people.

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We are amazed whenever people can share such deep, personal stories. We kind of live in a society where we seem to just pass right by each other. You know, working for the government I know that so much pain has been caused, and the fact that people are still open and willing and happy to talk and to welcome us in - it's so amazing.

- Story Harvest Attendee

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# THE BIG PICTURE

When we look at the ways we took on building community throughout the project, there are some key takeaways as we prepare to move this work forward in 2020.

## 01 FIND THE RIGHT BALANCE.

Many of our project activities responded to an immediate need highlighted by youth and the community (eg. holiday dinners). While those events are an important part of community building, they aren't necessarily the most efficient ways to move forward some of our goals of systemic change. Partnering with local community-serving organizations with a mandate to offer direct services to young people can help ensure that these events happen, but with less financial and staffing resources needed from the project. Our job is to find the right balance between recognizing the need for smaller-scale community gatherings, while ensuring that our resources remain primarily focused on systems change. Additionally, building relationships with decision-makers and systems stakeholders is crucial both to help identify the levers or openings for change, and so that we have vocal champions advocating in the systems they work within. We spent three years building meaningful partnerships with a variety of people and organizations, and in our next phase we will build on those partnerships and seek additional champions at every level.

## 02 FINDERS, KEEPERS.

Over the three years of this project, we saw just how many people want to support youth from the care system. Overwhelmingly, this is an issue that generates empathy, compassion, and support. Finding community members and those we called "unusual suspects" was easier than we imagined. Keeping them engaged and involved, however, was more challenging. As we move forward into the next phase of building community project activities, it is important to strategize on how to best capitalize on the strengths and resources of local businesses, organizations, and individual community members; engaging them in ways that support our project goals. Whether it is working with a car-sharing program to provide discounts for youth or inviting local businesses to sponsor holiday dinners, we need to ensure the project has the appropriate resources dedicated to keeping interested groups and people actively involved. We can find them, let's make sure to keep them, too.

## 03 LEAN IN FOR THE WIN-WIN.

We know there are many people and groups working on supporting youth as they transition out of care. Between advocacy for policy change, and the development of frontline programming, there are many regional activities underway that we can tap into; supporting their work and easing our load. Hosting an event for the provincial BC Child and Youth in Care Week, and featuring Fostering Change's 19th Birthday Installation are two great examples of connecting our work to other successful initiatives around the province. Sharing the load helps move all of our work forward.

# THE WRAP

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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.

Building community is a long term commitment. You simply cannot “build community” overnight. We are confident that our efforts to raise awareness, to pull new people in, and to continue relationship-building amongst current stakeholders will have a butterfly effect of gradually moving the dial over time. By and large the community wants to be involved in supporting our young people; we just need to find a way to do so.

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.

