



A Long Road Paved with Solutions: 'Aging out' of care reports in Canada

Key recommendations and timelines (1987—2020)

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in collaboration with
the National Council of Youth in Care Advocates**

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Who We Are and What We Do:

The National Council of Youth in Care Advocates is comprised of provincial and territorial advocates, Youth in Care Networks, youth in care alumni and key allies. We first convened as a national group in March 2020 to collectively call upon provinces and territories to issue moratoriums on 'aging out' of care during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the Council was successful in securing temporary moratoriums in most jurisdictions, we do not want a return to the status quo that existed pre-COVID-19 once the pandemic crisis is over — youth in care also need a 'new normal'. We are currently shifting our focus to longer-term solutions by co-developing national transitions from care standards that will guide healthy and supported transitions to adulthood for youth in care across the country. Our ultimate goal is to ensure that youth in care are afforded the same level of support and opportunities for success as their peers who are not in the child protection system.



National Council of Youth in Care Advocates

CWLC  **LBEC**

Child Welfare League of Canada
Ligue pour le bien-être de l'enfance du Canada

NEW BRUNSWICK
Youth in Care NETWORK  **RÉSEAU DES Jeunes pris en charge**
DU NOUVEAU-BRUNSWICK

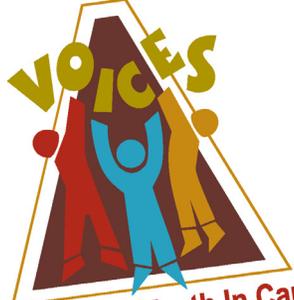


Adoption Council of Canada
Conseil d'adoption du Canada

YOUTH in care CANADA

Jeunes PRIS en CHARGE CANADA


MYCASA
Montreal Youth in Care Alumni Student Association

VOICES

Manitoba's Youth In Care
"EMPOWERING YOUTH"

OCAC
ONTARIO CHILDREN'S ADVANCEMENT COALITION

CARE JEUNESSE


A WAY HOME
VERS UN CHEZ-SOI 



VACFSS
Our Children, Our Future
Our Responsibility

fostering CHANGE  **firstcall** BC CHILD AND YOUTH ADVOCACY COALITION



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for youth by youth



National Council of Youth in Care Advocates

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La fondation
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What does ‘aging out’ of care mean?

The term ‘aged out/aging out’ refers to youth who have reached the age of majority (18 or 19, depending on province/territory of residence) during their time in the child protection system and are no longer eligible for government care due to legislated age cut-offs. This includes adolescents who have been placed in a foster home, group home, and/or institutional care, either long-term or short-term, and are unable to return to their biological families. Although ‘aging out’ is a label that is not applied to youth in the general population, it is a term that most people who are/have been in care understand, and is widely used in child welfare reports, peer-reviewed articles and in the media to illustrate this youth-in-care-specific phenomenon. We mindfully chose to put ‘aging out’ in single quotation marks throughout this document to de-normalize the term, as we advocate for equitable transitions to adulthood for youth in care.

Executive Summary

This summary document highlights key recurring recommendations on ‘aging out’ of care that have been put forward by youth in and from care, advocates and researchers from across the country since the late 1980s. Since 1987, 75 reports centered on youth in care and the ‘aging out’ of care process have been published across Canada, amounting to over 435 concrete recommendations for change to child protection policy and practice targeted to the transition to adulthood for youth in care. The authors of these reports range from national, provincial and territorial youth in care networks, provincial and territorial child and youth advocates, private foundations and university researchers in partnership with community-based organizations.

While the focus of this summary represents only the tip of the iceberg in terms of youth 'aging out' of care research and best practices, much of the academic research mirrors the themes and recommendations highlighted in this document. It is also important to note that there are a multitude of reports published in Canada that are beyond the scope of our summary and that also mention the need for change for youth 'aging out' of care. Specifically, we want to acknowledge the advocacy and work of the First Nations Caring Society, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) Commission, all of which have published reports and public documents calling for change for First Nations, Métis and Inuit youth 'aging out' of care and the creation of post-care services. The recommendations featured in this document can and should be applied to all youth in care, including Indigenous youth, and the federal government is called upon to take leadership in implementing those recommendations.

The National Council of Youth in Care Advocates wishes to honour the lived experiences and expertise of youth in and from care and to build upon the considerable grassroots research and advocacy work that has been done to date across provinces and territories. These recommendations will guide our work as we co-develop national standards for transitions from care.

The time has come to move from words to action. The National Council of Youth in Care Advocates calls upon federal, provincial and territorial governments to be accountable to the numerous calls for action released over the last 33 years and commit to implementing the following **five key recommendations**:

- 1. Create national standards for transitions from care**
- 2. Extend the transition period and provide developmentally appropriate supports (immediate and short-term solutions)**
- 3. Implement an exiting care framework centered on interdependence**
- 4. Implement a Housing First for Youth Strategy**
- 5. Eliminate age-based discrimination of child protection services by implementing readiness-based transitions to adulthood (requires systemic reform)**

1. Create national standards for transitions from care

10 reports (1988—2020)

In Canada, child protection governance and administration is under the sole jurisdiction of the provinces and territories, except for on-reserve First Nations services, which are under federal jurisdiction. Consequently, transition supports and services for youth ‘aging out’ of care vary widely across jurisdictions. There is currently no federal or jurisdictional legislative framework for the provision of transition supports and services, and data collection and reporting within and across jurisdictions is lacking. Canada is one of the very few western countries that does not have national legislation and/or standards supporting the transition to adulthood for youth in care. Multiple reports have called upon the federal government to lead the development and implementation of national standards for transitions from care, in collaboration with provinces/territories, local stakeholders and youth with care experience, to ensure accountability and equity for youth ‘aging out’ of care across the country.

1988

*To Be on Our Own with
No Direction from
Home (ON)*

2001

*Who Will Teach Me to
Learn? (ON)*

2003

*Children in Care in
Canada (ON)*

2006

*Building a Future
Together (ON)*

2006

*Youth Leaving Care
(ON)*

2006

*Strengthening Our
Youth (MB)*

2011

*Ask. Listen. Believe.
(ON)*

2014

*Success For All
(ON)*

2014

On Their Own (BC)

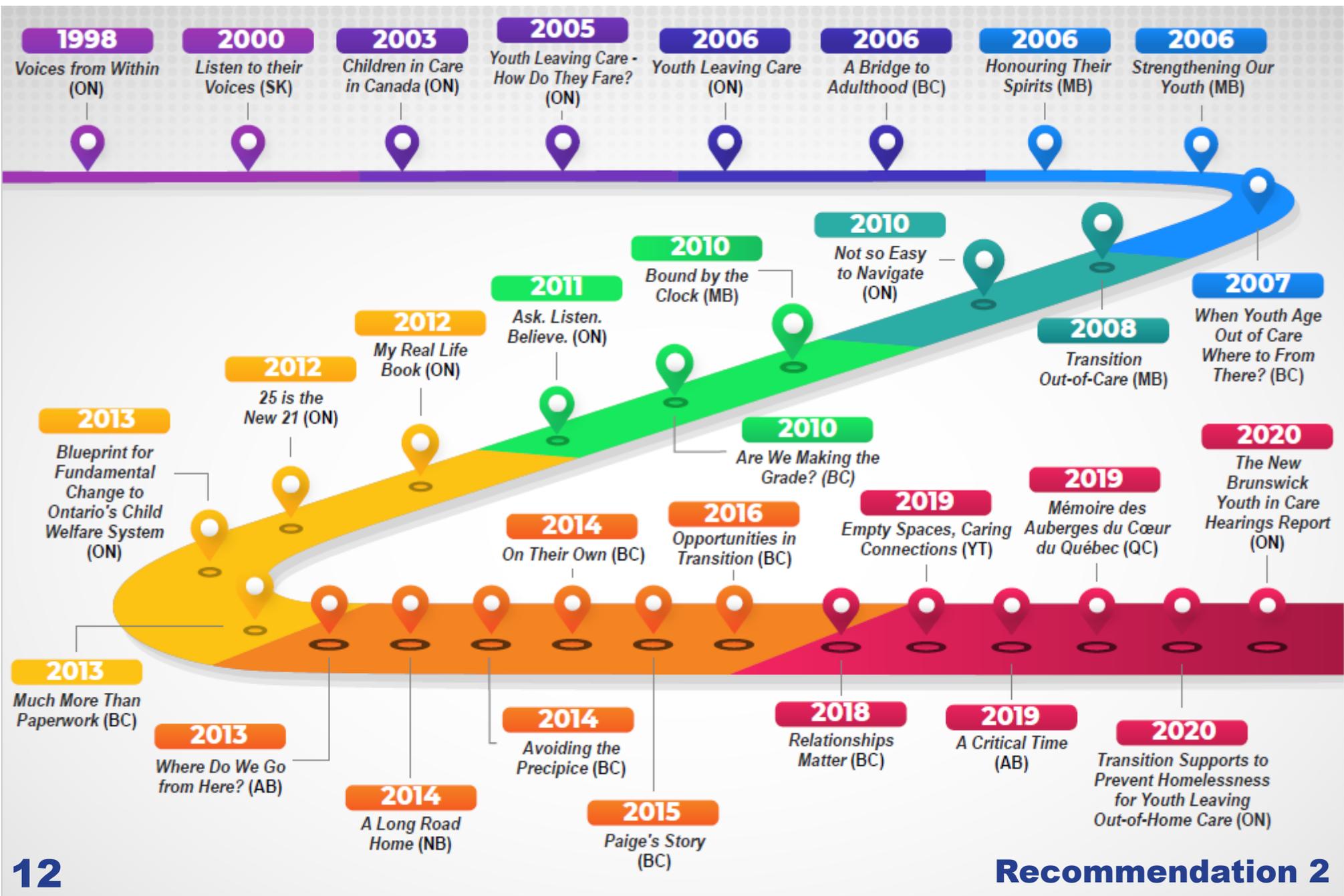
2020

*Transition Supports to
Prevent Homelessness
for Youth Leaving
Out-of-Home Care (ON)*

2. Extend the transition period and provide developmentally appropriate supports (immediate and short-term solutions)

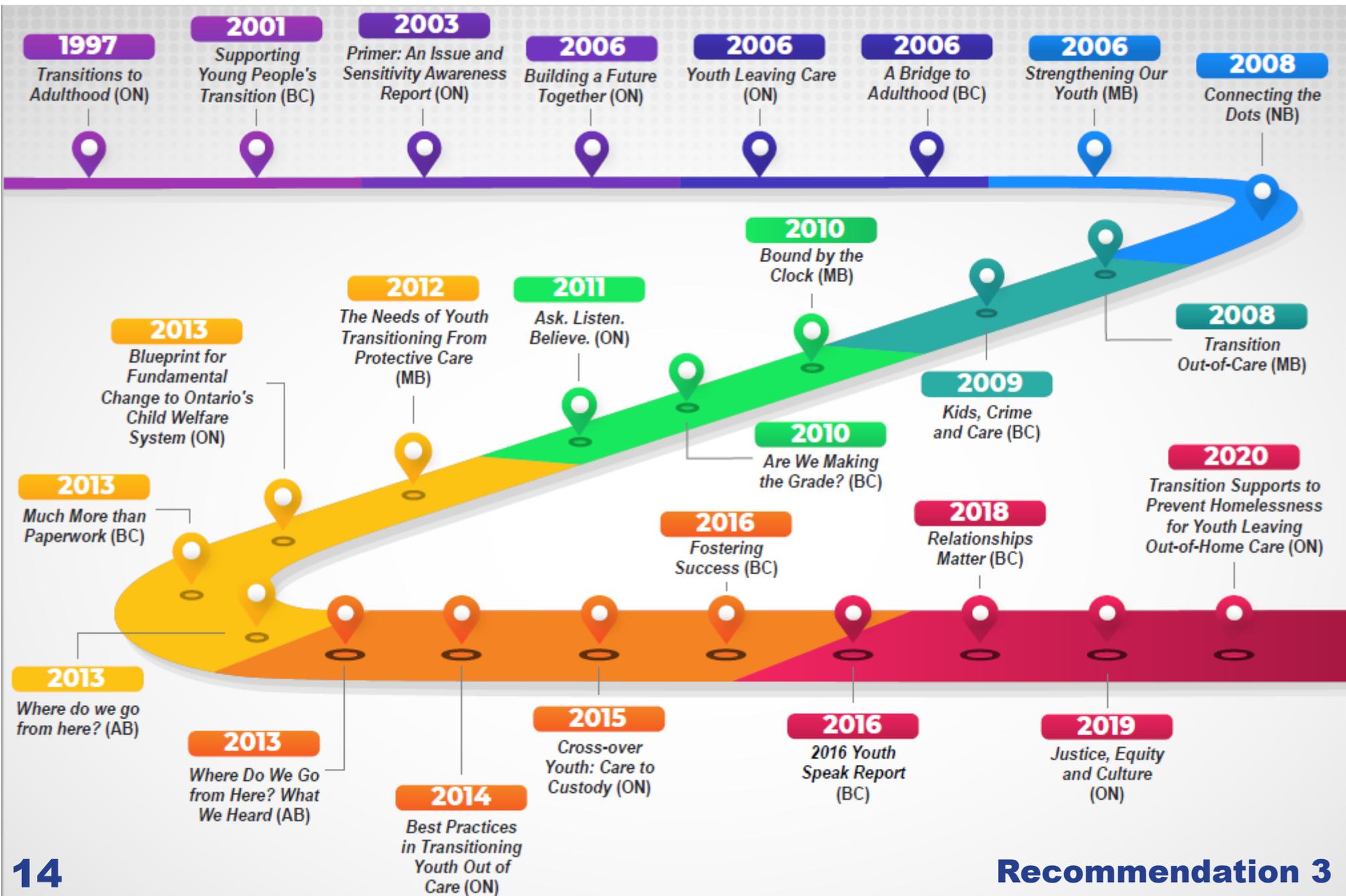
30 reports (1998—2020)

Currently, there are limited post-majority supports available to youth ‘aging out’ of care across Canada, with most extended supports targeted to those who are employed, in school full-time or diagnosed with a disability. In addition, none of the transition support programs start automatically as a young person ‘ages out’ of care — youth must know how to navigate the application process, meet the restrictive eligibility criteria, and obtain approval prior to deadlines. This results in the majority of youth not accessing the transition supports they need: in a 2017 B.C. estimate, the Tyee found that only one third of youth exiting care accessed some form of extended government supports. In addition, the age of majority cut-off is counter to well-documented adolescent brain development research. Evidence indicates that the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for impulse control, decision-making and strategic planning, does not reach full maturation until age 25. Multiple reports have called upon provincial and territorial governments to extend the transition to adulthood period for youth in care — with the majority of recommendations ranging from age 24 to 29 — to ensure developmentally appropriate services and supports.



3. Implement an exiting care framework centered on interdependence **25 reports (1997—2020)**

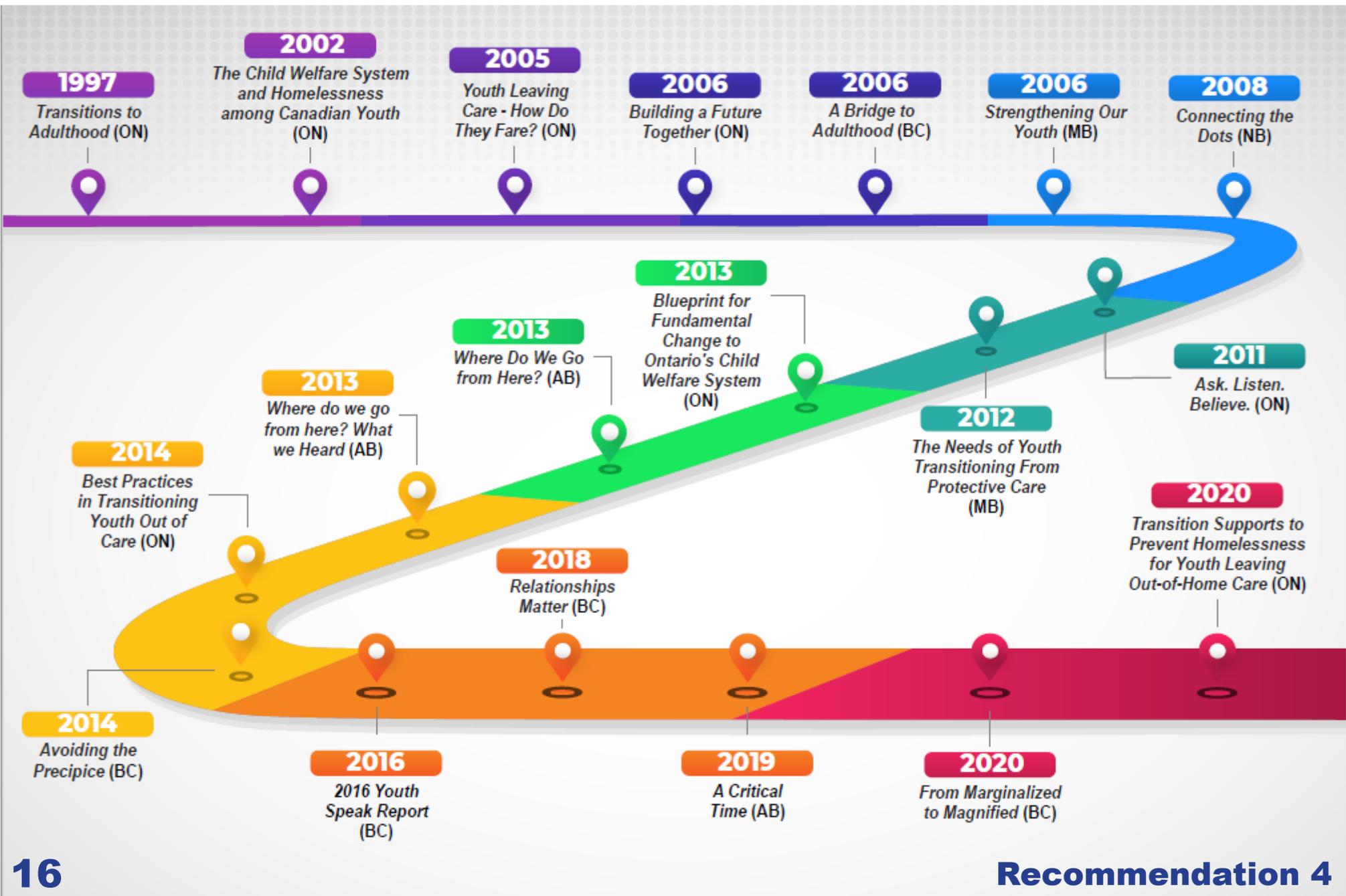
Currently, preparation for the transition to adulthood for youth in care focuses primarily on independence and self-sufficiency through the teaching of ‘hard’ life skills, such as cooking, cleaning, budgeting and preparing a CV. These are often taught through short-term, classroom-based, independent living programs. However, there is ample evidence showcasing that such approaches are inadequate, as they do not incorporate a focus on ‘soft’ life skills, such healthy relationships and mentorship, connections to peers from care, fostering a sense of belonging and community engagement. Also, such programs are often institutionalized and agency-based, and do not provide youth opportunities to practice these skills in real-life situations. Youth who are not in care tend to rely on their parents, friends and communities throughout their transition to adulthood, and tend to experience a much more gradual transition that can take up to age 29. Youth ‘aging out’ of care need to experience this same level of interdependence, such that relationships are at the heart of their transition to adulthood. This includes lasting connections to culture, spirituality and communities of origin, particularly for Indigenous and racialized youth. Multiple reports have called upon provincial and territorial governments to shift transitions from care approaches to a focus on interdependence.



4. Implement a Housing First for Youth Strategy

19 reports (1997—2020)

While nearly half (42%) of young Canadians between the ages of 20 and 29 are still living with their parents, youth ‘aging out’ of care abruptly lose basic supports and services due to age-based cut-offs, regardless of their level of readiness to live on their own. This propels many care leavers into a life of housing insecurity and poverty — research has shown that youth ‘aging out’ of care in Canada are up to 200 times more likely to experience homelessness than their peers who are not in care, with Indigenous and LGBTQ2+ youth experiencing an even higher risk. In addition, most care leavers live below the poverty line, creating a cycle of poverty that many struggle to break out of during their transition to adulthood. Multiple reports have called upon provincial and territorial governments to allocate housing specifically for youth ‘aging out’ of care, supported by holistic programs that address the root causes of housing insecurity and foster youth resilience, such as education and employment supports, mental health and addictions services, and the creation of long-term supportive social networks. The ongoing understanding of emerging examples of Housing First for Youth (HF4Y), combined with a need to clarify how it actually needs to be implemented on the ground, led to a consideration of the need to build a framework and develop a more comprehensive HF4Y program model guide (**THIS is Housing First for Youth: A Program Model Guide**). Led by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and A Way Home Canada, the considerable insights and expertise of local and international partners contributed to the enhancement of an effective and achievable model of HF4Y. This guide can support and steward the implementation of the model more broadly.



5. Eliminate age-based discrimination of child protection services by implementing readiness-based transitions to adulthood (requires systemic reform)

8 reports (2000—2015)

Young people in the general population do not ‘age out’ of their families upon reaching the age of majority — they can continue to rely on their parents, extended family, friends and communities for support throughout their adult lives. Most youth in care do not get to experience this lifelong support and belonging due to the age-based cut-offs established by the child welfare system. Thus, current legislation discriminates against young people in care based on their age, rather than focusing on their sense of readiness for the transition to adulthood. This is a basic human rights issue, given that current policy frameworks often propel care leavers into homelessness, poverty, and the criminal justice system, as well as the medical system when there are mental health and addictions issues. Also, young people from care have experienced multiple traumas as victims of abuse and/or neglect, which are often left unaddressed during their time in care, due to the focus on moving towards independent living over their emotional and mental health needs. The needs and issues of youth in care do not simply discontinue based on reaching the age of majority or upon exiting the child welfare system, and can persist long after leaving care. This can pose significant challenges to youth’s ability to transition to adulthood at the same pace as their peers in the general population. With these realities in mind, multiple reports have called upon provincial and territorial governments to implement an exiting care framework that is centered on young people’s readiness, rather than age, to ensure they are provided with the same level of care and unconditional support that their peers receive. In addition, grassroots mobilization is currently underway in Ontario to establish ethical readiness-based transitions out of care.

2000

Listen to Their Voices (SK)

2004

Are You Listening? (BC)

2006

Building a Future Together (ON)

2006

Youth Leaving Care (ON)

2007

When Youth Age Out of Care Where to from There? (BC)

2008

Connecting the Dots (NB)

2012

My Real Life Book (ON)

2015

In the Fast Lane Towards Adulthood (NB)

Words of Support from the National Council of Youth in Care Advocates

“Developing national standards and best practices to address the systemic barriers impacting the socio-economic security of the approximately 6,000 youth aging out of the child welfare system each year would demonstrate our governments’ commitment to protecting the rights of children and youth across Canada, and supporting them to reach their fullest potential.”

Alisha Bowie, Aging Out Program Manager, Adoption Council of Canada



(photo: Denise Holliday)

“We believe every youth should look forward to their age of majority birthday. By creating a national standard of transitions, we will ensure every youth receives equitable treatment for a dignified transition into adulthood. With the current provincial mandates, that isn’t happening — youth are being subjected to multiple adverse outcomes, because legislation has let them down.”

Susan Russell-Csanyi, Campaign Organizer, Fostering Change

“The Child Welfare League of Canada is proud to champion First Voice Advocates and representatives of youth in care networks, who have joined efforts to make sure that every young person in Canada makes life transitions with love, supportive relationships, services, benefits and a place to call home.”

Rachel Gouin, Executive Director, Child Welfare League of Canada



“I believe a housing first strategy is fundamental for youth transitioning from care because having a stable, safe, and healthy place to live is necessary for wellbeing. No youth should be homeless and no youth should lose their housing because they’ve reached a certain age or are leaving care.”

Ashley Bach, Secretary & Director for B.C., Youth in Care Canada

“Youth in care need to be provided with the same level of unconditional love, support and belonging as their peers who are not in care receive from their families, friends and communities throughout their entire adult lives. The message that is being given to youth in care by the current legislative context is that ‘you are not worthy of love, belonging and support once you turn 18 or 19.’ This is inhumane and can no longer be accepted as the status quo during the pandemic and afterwards. Our governments must take accountability and do better. Youth in care deserve to thrive, rather than having to survive the system.”

Melanie Doucet, Co-founder, Montreal Youth in Care Alumni Student Association (MYCASA)



“The number of years that a person has been living is not the only measurement that should be used to determine their readiness to be on their own in the world. Emotional readiness, financial readiness, abilities, capacity, available resources and supports are all factors that need to be taken into consideration before the child welfare system, which has the responsibility of raising these children and youth, decides to cut ties with them forever and leave them to try to navigate life on their own.”

Jennifer Dupuis, President, CARE Jeunesse

“No youth should have to ‘age out’ of the child welfare system at the age of majority. That is too young to expect a young person to thrive by themselves with little to no support. A few youth that I work with stated that ‘aging out’ was one of the worst times of their life; it was like being re-traumatized and thrown back into abandonment. We are not setting youth up for success when we allow them to ‘age out’ at such a vulnerable age where support and positive, healthy relationships are crucial in the upcoming years. We need to allow youth to transition out of the system when they themselves feel ready. We also have a responsibility to make sure that youth are set up with the best support system so they can work towards creating their best life possible. It is the child welfare system’s responsibility to look after our children and youth, they are in the position of being ‘loco parentis’ which means they are their parent — and parents do not abandon their children at 18 or 19 years of age. We need to do better and we can do better.”

Zo Bourgeois, Coordinator, New Brunswick Youth in Care Network



“Currently the child welfare system is based on age indicators, but this one size does not fit all. Other kids have their parents past 18, so the least we can give the provinces’ and territories’ legal children is a chance to decide for themselves when they are ready — with Readiness Indicators.”

Conner Lowes, President, Youth in Care Canada

“A Way Home Canada fully supports all of the ‘aging out’ key recommendations but in particular, Implementing a Housing First for Youth Strategy carries particular importance and significance within our collective bodies of work. The knowledge base both locally and internationally around Housing First for Youth (HF4Y) continues to grow. What continues to be revealed is HF4Y’s flexibility when working with specific populations including youth ‘aging out’ of care. The Core Principles of HF4Y include immediate access to housing with no preconditions, youth choice and self-determination, positive youth development orientation, individualized and client-driven supports, and social and community integration. Mapping these principles onto healthy and readiness-based transitions for youth would not only support housing stability and security but lifelong opportunities for growth.”

David K. French, Managing Director, A Way Home Canada



“Every young person transitioning from the child welfare system deserves and has a right to safe, affordable housing, where they can continue to grow and develop in stability, as they build the life they want for themselves.”

Marie Christian, Director, VOICES Manitoba

“While the Ontario Children’s Advancement Coalition (OCAC) continues its work in partnership with Youth in Care Canada (YICC) to build a Readiness Based System (RBS) in Ontario, we know the importance of making sure that we also advocate on a national level with First Voice Advocates (FVA) and allies to develop a national framework. There are discrepancies and disparities across the nation regarding policies and practices, and this means that Canadian children are not always provided a high standard of experience and care that is ethically sound. Child welfare is the largest pipeline into other violent systems, such as homelessness, prison, and poverty, and the likelihood of experiencing social and interpersonal violence (human/sex trafficking, domestic/intimate partner violence, gender-based violence, etc.). As a person who grew up in the child welfare system, and who experienced much of what I describe, and as a professional in both the child welfare system and other interlocking systems, I know and understand the urgency of meaningfully addressing a crisis that has been occurring for far too long. It is not enough to give a system a facelift; those changes end up superficial, as root causes of violent outcomes are not addressed — this is why I coined the term ‘Ethical Systems Reset’. When we do work centered around ethics, it becomes easy to comprehend why our collective recommendations listed in this document do not just make sense, but are vital to ensure safe transitions and successful outcomes for Canadian children. I do not want others to experience what I and others have experienced. These experiences can have chronic and complex outcomes that can be life-long. Canada and its respective jurisdictions across the nation must do better. It is not an ask; it is an obligation to the children under its guardianship.”

Cheyenne Ratnam, Co-Founder and Executive Lead,
Ontario Children’s Advancement Coalition (OCAC)



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