



REPORT FROM THE FIELD

THE POWER OF FIRST VOICE ADVOCACY: RALLYING LIVED EXPERTISE TO SUPPORT EQUITABLE TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD FOR YOUTH IN CARE IN CANADA

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Article abstract

This report describes a national lived experience advocacy movement generated by the work of the National Council of Youth in Care Advocates to support equitable transitions to adulthood for youth in care in Canada. The emergence of the National Council at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic is presented, as well as the ongoing progress and achievements in advocacy and best practice efforts at the national and local jurisdiction levels. This article, by three members of the National Council, is the first to provide an account of the process associated with national lived experience advocacy mobilization by and for youth in care.

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**THE POWER OF FIRST VOICE ADVOCACY: RALLYING LIVED
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Melanie Doucet, Ashley Bach, and Marie Christian

Abstract: This report describes a national lived experience advocacy movement generated by the work of the National Council of Youth in Care Advocates to support equitable transitions to adulthood for youth in care in Canada. The emergence of the National Council at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic is presented, as well as the ongoing progress and achievements in advocacy and best practice efforts at the national and local jurisdiction levels. This article, by three members of the National Council, is the first to provide an account of the process associated with national lived experience advocacy mobilization by and for youth in care.

Keywords: youth in care, youth aging out of care, care leavers, transition to adulthood, child welfare, advocacy, lived experience, first voice advocacy, activism, evaluation, standards, child welfare, child welfare reform

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Young people who are placed in the mainstream child welfare system often experience displacement due to family separation and disconnection from their culture and communities of origin (Doucet, 2020b). At the age of majority, the social and cultural isolation they experience is often compounded by financial difficulties, as most are forced to transition to adulthood abruptly without the family and social supports that are available to their peers who were not in the system (Rutman et al., 2007). This is due to provincial and territorial child protection legislation across Canada mandating child welfare agencies to release youth from their care at the age of majority. In Canada, approximately 10% (6,700) of the youth in care population “ages out”¹ of the child welfare system annually (Flynn, 2003). However, it is highly likely that this unofficial national figure underestimates the number of youth who exit care given that many provinces and territories do not publicly report this data and that there is no national database tracking this information (Doucet & Mann-Feder, 2021). These legislated age-based service cut-offs do not represent youth’s sense of readiness for the transition to adulthood, and have been shown to lead to negative outcomes, including disproportionate risks of homelessness, unemployment, poverty, undereducation, mental health and addiction issues, involvement in the criminal justice system, and early parenthood (Beaupré & Flynn, 2014; Doucet, 2020b; Gaetz et al., 2016; Goyette & Blanchet, 2022; Schaffer et al., 2016).

Most young people gradually take on adult responsibilities with the financial and emotional support of their families. Today, young people are taking longer to transition into adulthood than previous generations (Doucet, 2020b); as of 2011, 43% of Canadian youth between the ages of 20 and 29 were still living with their parents (Statistics Canada, 2011). Socioeconomic and demographic shifts over the last 50 years have led to a developmental period that has been termed “emerging adulthood” by Arnett (2004). During this transitional phase, young people from 18 to 29 are afforded time to explore their roles in larger society and develop interdependent relationships with their support networks (Arnett, 2004; Laut, 2017; Molgat, 2007). This is not the case for youth in care, who abruptly lose formal supports from the state when they reach the age of majority, regardless of their readiness or their emotional and financial needs (Rutman et al., 2007). Due to mandated age cut-offs in child protection legislation, youth in care are forced to exit the system at 18 or 19 and are tasked with adult responsibilities without the support of family, friends, or community. Child protection legislation, policy, and practice have not kept pace with the social and economic changes that have made it much more difficult for young people to live independently (Gaetz et al., 2016; Nichols et al., 2017).

¹ “Aging out” refers to youth who have reached the age of majority and are no longer eligible for child protection services. Although it is a label that is not applied to youth in the general population, it is a term that most people who are or have been in care understand, and is widely used in the literature. “Aging out” is in quotation marks throughout this article to denormalize the term.

For youth in care, the COVID-19 pandemic and its socioeconomic impacts are intensifying an already perilous transition to adulthood. A recent Quebec-based study showed that the pandemic has reduced access to housing, with nearly half (45%) of youth experiencing housing instability after leaving care (Goyette et al., 2020). It has also exacerbated risks linked to mental health problems: 39% of youth leaving care report mental health problems, compared to 5.7% of the youth population in the province (Goyette et al., 2020). While many jurisdictions implemented emergency measures and temporary moratoriums on youth transitions out of care during the pandemic, it is clear that the conditions in place prior to and during the pandemic are not producing positive outcomes. As Canadian governments and society enter a phase of pandemic recovery, it is crucial to also ensure a just and equitable pandemic recovery for young people in care.

Lived Experience as Expertise

Child welfare policy and practice can often be disconnected from the lived realities of the people it impacts, resulting in minimal systemic change (Abrams et al., 2016). To counter this systems-centred approach, youth in care must be empowered to define their own goals and milestones for success based on their lived experience and the unique context they are transitioning from. The systems who have served them must consider those with lived experience as viable experts and contributors to child protection social policy — especially to programs and interventions pertaining to their transition to adulthood — as opposed to being treated as outsiders on the margins of an adult society (Doucet, 2020b). Youth-centred approaches can be supported by investing in advocacy and mentoring opportunities, involving youth in and from care in the policymaking and reform processes, and engaging them as co-researchers through emancipatory and social justice research approaches (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2013; Dupuis & Mann-Feder, 2013).

Established at the beginning of the pandemic in response to collective concerns for youth “aging out” of the child protection system, the National Council of Youth in Care Advocates comprises members of provincial and territorial First Voice Advocates², Youth in Care Networks, and key allies from across Canada. The National Council also comprises a diverse membership, including Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour with lived experience in the child protection system from across the country. At the start of the pandemic, the National Council was successful in most jurisdictions in securing temporary moratoriums or interim emergency measures to allow youth to remain in their placements and/or continue to receive supports past the age of majority. However, the National Council stressed that a return to the pre-pandemic status quo should not be an option and that youth in care also need and deserve a “new normal”.

As noted in the 2020 summary report *A Long Road Paved With Solutions: ‘Aging out’ of Care Reports in Canada* (Doucet & National Council of Youth in Care Advocates, 2020), over 75 reports centring on youth in care and the “aging out” process have been published since the late 1980s, amounting to over 435 concrete recommendations for change to child protection policy and

² First Voice Advocates are people with lived experience in out-of-home child protection system placements who advocate for change in their communities and jurisdictions.

practice as it relates to the transition to adulthood. These reports were published by national, provincial, and territorial Youth in Care Networks, provincial and territorial Child and Youth Advocates, private foundations, community-based organizations, and researchers from across the country. Multiple reports have called upon governments to work together, in collaboration with local stakeholders and people with care experience, to develop and implement national standards

Figure 1. *The Equitable Standards for Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care*



From Doucet and National Council of Youth in Care Advocates (2021, p. 30).

for transitions to adulthood for youth in care. In addition, the 2019 report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) called upon all levels of government and child protection services to reform laws and obligations with respect to Indigenous youth “aging out” of the system. Their call includes ensuring lifelong support networks for youth in care, and providing opportunities for education, housing, and related supports³.

Advocating for Equitable Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care

Working with current and former youth in care across Canada, Doucet and the National Council of Youth in Care Advocates (2021) researched, developed, and validated the *Equitable Standards for Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care* (see Figure 1). The first of their kind in Canada, these Equitable Standards provide a solid foundation for key stakeholder action and accountability across all jurisdictions, as well as within and across sectors. The Equitable Standards are presented across eight transition to adulthood “pillars” that define the areas in which youth in care need support to ensure a successful transition to adulthood. For each pillar, several required key supports are presented as actionable items to ensure that jurisdictions, organizations, and frontline workers are meeting the outlined standards.

In October 2022, after numerous consultations with over 200 key stakeholders from across sectors (i.e., government, community, academia, private) and within sectors (i.e., frontline service delivery level, regional or agency level, policy and legislation level), Doucet and the National Council of Youth in Care Advocates (2022) released the *Equitable Standards for Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care Evaluation Model*. The evaluation model is an accountability and quality assurance tool that provides a step-by-step approach for those who work with young people in the mainstream child welfare system, whether from within or across sectors, to assess their fidelity to the Equitable Standards and develop a concrete action plan to meet them over time. The evaluation model also takes into account the need for collaboration and integration of supports and services for youth in care, as the feedback gathered during the consultations with key stakeholders indicated that much of the support and service delivery is implemented in a siloed approach across sectors. The evaluation model was developed to be applicable to all key stakeholders, regardless of level of responsibility for youth in care supports and services. For instance, each required key support⁴ provided under each of the eight transition to adulthood pillars is assessed for its full equitable implementation, and for the degree of collaboration and integration between responsible

³ See Call for Justice 12.11 of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019). https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Calls_for_Justice.pdf

⁴ Each pillar has several key supports. For example, Educational and Professional Development has 15: high school graduation; secondary level education mentorship and supports; school stability; post-secondary applications; full post-secondary supports; post-secondary scholarships, grants and bursaries; peer navigation; secure career path; ongoing learning needs assessments; ongoing specialized learning supports; cultural learning opportunities; alternative hands-on learning; employment training and supports; lived experience income opportunities; and community volunteering opportunities. (Pillar 2: Educational and Professional Development, in Doucet & National Council of Youth in Care Advocates, 2022). <https://www.cwlc.ca/post/equitable-standards-for-transitions-to-adulthood-for-youth-in-care-evaluation-model>

key stakeholders. In addition, those who do not hold responsibility for the implementation of a particular key support are still held accountable for advocating with youth in and from care for the support to be implemented in an equitable way (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. *Three Major Elements of the Equitable Standards Evaluation Model*



From Doucet and National Council of Youth in Care Advocates (2022, p. 2).

The evaluation model shifts accountability for a successful transition to the systems that serve youth in care rather than placing the onus on youth, and focuses on a shared responsibility for positive youth-in-care outcomes among all key stakeholders and sectors. Each key support associated with each of the eight transition to adulthood pillars is assessed on a colour-coded 4-point Likert scale measuring fidelity to the goal of equitable support provision (see Figure 3), providing an opportunity for key stakeholders to assess their progress towards meeting the Equitable Standards, and to take steps to improve their service delivery for youth in care (Doucet & National Council of Youth in Care Advocates, 2022).

Figure 3. *Equitable Standards Evaluation Model Fidelity Scale*



From Doucet and National Council of Youth in Care Advocates (2022, p. 2).

The key supports listed in each pillar module of the evaluation model are provided as a starting point to establish minimum guaranteed supports and services that need to be in place before a young person from care can fully transition to adulthood — a minimum threshold that has been nonexistent to date across all jurisdictions in Canada. While the goal is for key stakeholders to reach this minimum threshold of guaranteed supports and services in the medium term, longer term efforts must focus on raising the bar and continuously striving for excellence in service and support delivery for youth in care. In addition, stakeholders should continue adding new key supports based on the evolving needs of the youth in care population and emerging research and best practices (Doucet & National Council of Youth in Care Advocates, 2022).

The Impact of National First Voice Advocacy

Since the release of the *Equitable Standards for Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care* in the fall of 2021, the National Council of Youth in Care Advocates has met with provincial, territorial, and federal ministers; directors; child and youth advocates and ombudsmen; policy advisors; senators; and members of parliament to advocate for meaningful systemic change. As a result of national and local advocacy efforts, some jurisdictions have extended the moratoriums and have already begun implementing longer-term systemic change. For instance, the British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development made permanent the emergency measures that were put in place during the pandemic for youth in care, and have begun a reform process to support youth transitions up to age 27 (Government of British Columbia, 2022). The Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services is also currently in the process of developing a readiness framework for transitions to adulthood for youth in care, which aims to support young people to transition out of care when they feel ready (Government of Ontario, 2021). The New Brunswick Department of Social Development is currently developing the Child and Youth Wellbeing Act, standalone legislation that aims to modernize portions of the Family Services Act and that incorporates a child- and youth-centred approach to supports and interventions (Government of New Brunswick, 2022). In addition, Indigenous Services Canada (ISC; 2022) has begun implementing its phased-in post-majority care services reform initiative, which includes supports for on-reserve First Nations youth in care up to age 25. ISC cites the *Equitable Standards for Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care* as a framework for this reform process.

Since the release of the *Equitable Standards Evaluation Model* in October 2022 (Doucet & National Council of Youth in Care Advocates, 2022), the National Council of Youth in Care Advocates has been focusing its advocacy efforts on getting key stakeholders to commit to piloting the Evaluation Model over the next year. This will entail a baseline assessment of the fidelity of existing resources, programs, supports, and policies to the Equitable Standards, and the development of a concrete action plan to meet the standards over time. This action plan is to be developed with the involvement of youth in care and is to be released publicly by the end of 2023 to showcase transparency and accountability to the youth in care community. So far, several government and community-based key stakeholders have committed to completing the Equitable

Standards evaluation process, including the New Brunswick Department of Social Development, and Prince Edward Island Child and Family Services as it pertains to its new YES pilot program for transitioning to adulthood.

The work of the National Council of Youth in Care Advocates also entails engaging with the media to raise public awareness on the issues youth “aging out” of care in Canada face, and putting pressure on political leaders to take action. The National Council has been featured in several prominent media pieces since it began its advocacy work at the start of the pandemic, including CBC Radio Nova Scotia (2020), CTV News (Press, 2020), The Globe and Mail (Bains, 2021), CBC News New Brunswick (Cave, 2021), CBC News Manitoba (Lam, 2021), IndigiNews (Klukas, 2021), Radio-Canada Toronto (2021a; 2021b), the Vancouver Sun (Cordasco, 2021), and CBC Radio Quebec (2022). Opinion pieces were featured in The Conversation (Doucet, 2020a) and Policy Options (Doucet & Gouin, 2020); these focused on advocating for moratoriums for youth “aging out” of care during the pandemic and for amnesty on CERB repayments⁵.

Members of the National Council of Youth in Care Advocates have also been engaging a wider audience of caregivers, practitioners, policy decision-makers, advocates, academics, and students via expert panels, conference presentations, online webinars and workshops, and guest lectures in university classrooms. In addition, a public letter-writing campaign to members of parliament and members of legislative assemblies in support of the Equitable Standards was undertaken in December 2021, with letter templates provided on the Child Welfare League of Canada (CWCL) website⁶.

Local Impacts of Advocacy Work in Ontario and Manitoba

The work of the National Council of Youth in Care Advocates spans the country, with provincial and territorial representation from British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, the Northwest Territories and the Yukon⁷. The descriptions below of the local impacts of advocacy work were written by two representatives of the National Council, one from Ontario and one from Manitoba.

⁵ During the COVID-19 pandemic, some young people who had “aged out” of the child welfare system and were no longer in government care received funds through the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) program, as did many others. Due to bureaucratic mix-ups over the eligibility of applicants, some recipients were not actually entitled to these funds and are now being asked to repay them.

⁶ The CWCL is a national, membership-based charitable organization dedicated to promoting the safety and well-being of young people and their families — especially those who are marginalized and systemically oppressed. The CWCL is one of the two key ally organizations of the National Council of Youth in Care Advocates (the other being A Way Home Canada), and is currently the lead organization for the Equitable Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care and a Just Pandemic Recovery project (2021-2023).

⁷ View the full National Council of Youth in Care Advocates membership here: <https://www.cwlc.ca/canadian-council>

Ashley Bach (Ontario), First Nations former youth in care and advocate

My advocacy efforts are usually focused on First Nations youth in and from care, many of whom fall under the federal First Nations Child and Family Services⁸ (FNCFS) program administered by Indigenous Services Canada (ISC). While these efforts are not quite local, my involvement with the National Council has had a positive impact on my local efforts. I presently work as a freelance consultant on First Nations child welfare issues, combining my lived experience as a First Nations foster child with my knowledge base in First Nations rights and child welfare.

Over the past year and a half, I have found the *Equitable Standards for Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care* report (Doucet & National Council of Youth in Care Advocates, 2021) useful to share with the organizations and advocates that I've worked with, including national Indigenous organizations and First Nations provincial and territorial organizations. In my experience, the report has been well received in the field and by key decision-makers. More specifically, my collaboration with the National Council's advocacy efforts for moratoriums on youth leaving care during the pandemic helped to lead ISC to pause the practice of "aging out" First Nations youth in care who are funded under the Federal FNCFS program. As it became clear that the pandemic was not going away, the National Council continued to put pressure on ISC through advocacy letters to key decision-makers and meetings with ISC officials. Subsequently, ISC extended their moratorium.

Furthermore, in Budget 2021 the Government of Canada acknowledged the issues First Nations youth in care face by committing \$118.7 million of increased funding for the FNCFS program, with one purpose of the funding being to "permanently ensure that First Nations youth who reach the age of majority receive the supports that they need, for up to two additional years, to successfully transition to independence" (Government of Canada, 2021, Chapter 8, 8.1⁹). The National Council's persistent and continuing advocacy in this area has also influenced ISC to further improve their policies. The ISC website now states that, under the FNCFS program, First Nations youth will be able to receive post-majority supports and services if they are under 26 (or the eligible age limit set by applicable legislation in their province or territory, whichever is higher). The ISC website cites two reports¹⁰ that I have been involved in as informing the activities (the post-majority supports and services) that are eligible for this funding: the National Council's *Equitable Standards* report and the *Children Back, Land Back* report (Fayant & Bach, 2021),

⁸ <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1100100035204/1533307858805>

⁹ <https://www.budget.canada.ca/2021/report-rapport/p3-en.html#chap8>

¹⁰ Under the heading "Funded Costs", the ISC website states that, "Eligible activities under post-majority support services are based on needs of the youth or young adult. The below examples are informed by *Equitable Standards for Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care* and *Children Back, Land Back*." <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1650377737799/1650377806807>

which was partially informed by my work on and knowledge of the *Equitable Standards* report (Doucet & National Council of Youth in Care Advocates, 2021).

Marie Christian (Manitoba), Program Director at VOICES: Manitoba's Youth in Care Network

Young people in and from care deserve — and, in fact, have — the right to be heard on what is working and what needs improvement in the child welfare system. As Neveu (2020) stated, “By respecting [the young people], we think of them as relatives and ask ourselves if this was our life circumstances what would we want and how can we make that happen in a safe way” (p. 30). However, there is currently no formal structure in place to evaluate the effectiveness of the services and supports from a lived experience perspective, both during and after care. Because provinces and territories have responsibility for the child welfare system, there is no national legislation and no national standards for service delivery, which leads to inconsistencies across Canada in supports and resources offered to young people transitioning from care. By welcoming the voices of lived experience experts, systems also gain opportunities to improve outcomes for young people transitioning from care in ways that are grounded in their lived realities: there is reciprocity inherent in restructuring the system in ways that centre the lived experience of the young people it serves.

The contemporary mainstream child welfare system is the not-so-distant cousin of the colonial practices of residential schools and the Sixties Scoop — implements that were created for the assimilation of Indigenous peoples into mainstream culture. In Manitoba, 90% of children and youth in the child welfare system are Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit), a highly disproportionate rate given that Indigenous children only make up about 26% of the youth population (Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth & First Nations Health and Social Secretariat of Manitoba, 2021). This higher rate of child welfare involvement “reflects the larger structural inequalities, systemic racism, current child welfare policies, and the legacy of the residential school system and Sixties Scoop” (Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth & First Nations Health and Social Secretariat of Manitoba, 2021, p. 10). Although awareness and understanding of the colonial structure that underpins the mainstream child welfare system has increased, it will take intentional and meaningful systemic changes to create a system that is truly centred on the well-being of children, youth, and their families.

As of March 2020, there were 9,849 children and youth in care in Manitoba, the highest rate per capita across Canada (Manitoba Families, 2020). Of all the children and youth in care, “70 percent are permanent wards, 3 percent are under a voluntary placement agreement, and the remaining 27 percent are children in care under a temporary legal status where reunification with families is the primary goal” (Manitoba Families, 2020, p. 74). The legal status of children in care in Manitoba impacts the supports and services they are eligible to receive when they reach the age of majority at 18. As of March 2020, the Government of Manitoba reported that 811 young people were on post-majority extensions of care under the Agreements with Young Adults (AYAs) program, which extends care and support services for young people who were permanent wards

until they turn 21 (Manitoba Families, 2020, p. 79). The 30% of youth in care who do not have permanent ward status are ineligible for continued supports and services past the age of majority.

In Manitoba, our child welfare system is divided into four authorities in the hopes of providing culturally appropriate care for Indigenous children and youth. Each authority is governed by The Child and Family Services Act (1985) and the regulations manual (Department of Families, 2022), and although these provide “the mandate for services to youth aging out of care, the legislation does not place specific duties upon Authorities and agencies to ensure that youth leave care in circumstances that will ensure positive outcomes for them” (McEwan-Morris, 2012, p. 13). During the consultations held with stakeholders this past spring, we found that there are many kind and compassionate workers doing their best to create supports and trainings that may benefit young people as they transition from care, but there is no consistency across the authorities, and no reporting or accountability required for the services they provide. Consequently, as McEwan-Morris (2012) reported, “In the absence of consistent practice policies and standards, case planning decisions are often left to the discretion of caseworkers and supervisors to determine the level of transition planning that will be offered to young people leaving care” (p. 27).

Conclusion

The *Equitable Standards for Transitions to Adulthood for Youth in Care* (Doucet & National Council of Youth in Care Advocates, 2021) is a practical framework for the development of antioppressive, anticolonial, and equitable practices. Since the Equitable Standards were developed by and for youth in care and were validated by young people in and from care across the country, we have been able to release a framework that reflects the current experiences and needs of young people as they transition out of care. Our hope is that this work will continue to make an impact through the *Equitable Standards Evaluation Model*, an evaluation framework that can be implemented across Canada and would provide a holistic accountability process for meeting the needs of youth in care and improving their outcomes as they transition to adulthood. All young people with care experience deserve a standard of support and services that minimizes that risk of additional traumas such as “aging out” into homelessness, and launches them into a healthy, secure, and interdependent adulthood.

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