

## SUBMISSION: YOUTH LEAVING CARE HEARINGS

***You know, children in foster care have wings, but they need someone to teach them to fly, someone to lead them in the right direction, someone to be there when they fall. I am here today because of those people who taught me how to fly.<sup>1</sup>***

Young people in the care of a children's aid society in Ontario can leave care when they turn sixteen. Many do. It sounds tempting to be free of adult control and to have some money of one's own on which to live. Moreover, unless they qualify for an Extended Care and Maintenance Allowance until the age of 21, they know that they would be expected to support themselves from the age of eighteen. Preferring to leave on their own initiative instead of waiting to be thrown out, many will choose to leave as soon as they can. Up to now the youths could not return to care if they regretted the decision to leave. Thanks to the "Building Families and Supporting Youth to be Successful Act, 2011," the door now remains open until they turn eighteen.

Generations ago, there was the expectation that young people would leave home after finishing elementary school, but that did not mean that they would be left to fend for themselves. Most likely they would have had an apprenticeship or, for girls, a homemaking position. Now, we send young people out into the world before they have finished their education. We, who have grown up in a family and have our own young adult children, cannot imagine what it is like not to have homes to return to: for holidays, for advice, to live with for a while. And yet, when it comes to the youth whose care we are all responsible for, we accept that they should be left on their own when they are not even ready for adult life and its responsibilities. Even though North American society stresses the importance of the individual, human nature has not changed. We are social beings. Other people are important to us. We need a social context. We live interdependently, not independently. If former youth in care are not lucky enough to have foster homes that keep doors open (in spite of getting no support from CAS) or to be adopted or to have (re)established ties to their families, they might end up in unhealthy social contexts.

Similar conditions for youths in the States induced Ruth Massinga, former President and C.E.O. of Casey Family Programs and Peter J. Pecora, working for the same program, to look at how to provide better opportunities for older children in the child welfare system. The Casey Family Programs work nationally to provide and ultimately prevent the need for foster care. Just as in Canada, former foster children in the U.S. are at higher risk of ending up abusing drugs or homeless and unemployed due to lack of secondary education. These youths are over-represented in the criminal justice system and they are at a higher risk for teen pregnancy.<sup>2</sup> As Massinga and Pecora say, older youth in care need support in terms of stable living situations, healthy friendships with peers, stable connections to school, medical

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<sup>1</sup> A former foster child quoted in Ruth Massinga and Peter J. Pecora, "Providing Better Opportunities for Older Children in the Child Welfare System," *The Future of Children*, 14, no. 1 (Winter, 2004), 153.

<sup>2</sup> Massinga, 150, 153.

care and any necessary therapy and counselling.<sup>3</sup> Youth living with non-relative foster families need help locating and reuniting with their families of origin, possibly by means of family group conferencing. Youth, formerly in care, need permanent ties to a family whether the family of origin, an adoptive family or a foster family.<sup>4</sup> Nobody should be left without a nuclear and an extended family.

*Recent reports on adolescent development indicate that for youth with multiple risks in their lives, a caring relationship with at least one adult ... is one of the most important protective factors. Teens that have that support develop better social skills due to "the trust, compassion and self esteem that accompany such relationships." And they have more success completing an education.<sup>5</sup>*

Even though older teenagers are well developed physically and cognitively, there are still developmental tasks ahead. Developing capacity for intimacy with a love partner is one of those tasks. Without the experience of trusting and lasting relationships with parental figures, it would be difficult for them to develop a trusting relationship with an adult partner. Unmet emotional needs would get in the way.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, all youth, whatever their background, need to consolidate a sense of who they are and to become comfortable with their physical selves. Affect regulation, the capacity to regulate emotions, is also one of the ongoing tasks. The transition from childhood to adulthood is difficult for anybody even without the added stress of being in care of CAS, and feelings of alienation, vulnerability and uncertainty about achieving success in the adult world are prevalent.<sup>7</sup> Relationships with parental figures are very important in this transitional phase.<sup>8</sup>

*As individuals enter young adulthood a key developmental task is to maintain engagement with parents {or parental figures} while changing aspects of the relationship which are no longer adaptive. For example, young adults may find that adolescent behaviours, such as acting out in rebellious or excessively compliant ways, no longer serve any purpose for them. As immature features of the parent-child relationship are abandoned, they are replaced with increased levels of mutual respect and a growing awareness and appreciation of each other's unique and separate identity.<sup>9</sup>*

This renegotiation of the adolescent-parent relationship is a critical developmental task of late adolescence, say Hauser and Greene.<sup>10</sup> If youth are living by themselves, they, of course, do not have the opportunity to learn these important lessons about themselves in relationship to family.

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<sup>3</sup> Massinga, 153.

<sup>4</sup> Massinga, 156.

<sup>5</sup> Massinga, 157.

<sup>6</sup> Eugene H. Kaplan, "Adolescents, Age Fifteen to Eighteen: A Psychoanalytic Developmental View," in Stanley I. Greenspan and George H. Pollock, editors, The Course of Life, vol. IV, Adolescence (Madison, Connecticut: International Universities Press, Inc., 1991), 213.

<sup>7</sup> Cox, 1970 quoted in Stuart T. Hauser and Wendy M. Greene, "Passages from Late Adolescence to Early Adulthood" in Greenspan, 378.

<sup>8</sup> Hauser, 382.

<sup>9</sup> Levinston et al. quoted in Hauser, 384.

<sup>10</sup> Hauser, 385.

As Freud said, the measure of mental health is: the ability to love and to work. If young people do not have a caring social network, they cannot develop a strong, positive sense of identity, empathy, goals for the future and the emotional stability that would allow them to love (themselves and significant others) and to study and to work.

**Recommendations:**

- **Change the age of protection to 18.**
- **Extend care and maintenance until 25.**
- **Ensure a forever belonging to a family, whether biological or not. Provide help to find and connect with family or clan.**
- **Ensure that young people are informed about their own and their family's history.**
- **Adhere to U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child.**
- **Give children and youth a voice in any decision regarding their lives.**

Society will be amply repaid for investing in the health care, education and social resources it provides for youth in care. They deserve Ontario's full support, so that they can live up to their full potential.

Respectfully,

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## **Bibliography**

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