

A

Long

Road

Home

An account of  
the first ever  
New Brunswick  
Youth In Care Hearings

YICN  
RIPE





## The NBYICN Leadership Group

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|------------------|-------------------------|
| Alisha Badeau    | Kyla Lapointe           |
| Aaron Barlow     | Zoe Bourgeois           |
| Katherine Adams  | Amber McLaughlin        |
| Melanie Doucet   | Valérie Bouchard Vézina |
| Paul Amdemichael | Sabrina Badeau          |
| Zack Ferreira    | Amanda Walker           |

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Edited by:

Mathieu Cormier, NBYICN Coordinator

Cover photo:

Network leaders Kyla Lapointe, Amber McLaughlin, and Danica Atkinson

The New Brunswick Youth In Care Network is a program developed by Partners For Youth Inc. and funded in part by the Province of New Brunswick.

## Overview

On 29 November 2012, members of the New Brunswick Youth In Care Network (NBYICN) organized the first ever New Brunswick Youth In Care Hearings. The hearings were an opportunity for people who had grown up in the care system to speak to government officials and policymakers about their time in the care system. It was a day filled with raw emotion and fruitful discussion.



This report is meant to serve as a complement to the hearings. It is divided into three sections:

The first section provides a summary of the conversations NBYICN leaders had with various stakeholders during our 2012 consultation process. In particular, this section details the results of conversations we had with three key groups: social workers, foster parents, and adoptive parents. We have also included a summary of key points raised by our own network members over the course of many internal conversations and meetings.

The second part of the report includes a list of recommendations for government. These recommendations come at the heels of many hours of deliberations and discussions. In this, we have attempted to boil down our recommendations to a relatively short list of things we feel would be very possible to accomplish and very beneficial to youth in care.

Finally, the third section of this report provides some suggestions on how our network may help address the recommendations made. As a network of young people who represent youth in care in New Brunswick, we feel we are in a great position to assist in the implementation of many of these recommendations. This section is meant to show that we wish to be part of the solution, and that our door is always open to greater collaboration with all stakeholders who seek the betterment of the care system.

*“My story is just one story out of hundreds of stories of children in care in New Brunswick and in Canada. I’m sharing my story to help people understand...”*

*- Zoe Bourgeois, NBYICN Leader*



## The Consultation Process

Throughout much of 2012, members of the NBYICN Leadership Group travelled to a number of New Brunswick communities to speak to various groups of people who are directly related to the overall functioning of the care system.

In particular, for this round of consultations we chose to target three key stakeholder groups: social workers, foster parents, and adoptive parents. The following pages of this report—a section entitled “Word on the Street”—provides a window into these very informative and fruitful discussions.



In saying this, we understand there are other very important groups of people that we were unable to talk to. We hope to engage these groups, as well as others who may not yet be on our radar, as we develop our plans for 2013 and beyond.

## Word on the Street

Our consultation process relied on a few rules that we felt were important. Chief among these was a condition of anonymity. All of the individuals we spoke to were assured that they would not be identified in any way.

It should be understood that this report follows this very important rule. No manner of personal identification has been added here, and none will ever be given in the future.

We would like to thank all those who agreed to take part in our consultation process. Your opinions and insight were not only remarkably useful, they also helped us to better understand your roles and professions.



## Social Workers

Social workers were our first point of reference when we began our consultation process. The following list highlights some of the most common issues raised during our consultation with groups of social workers.

*“My bachelor’s degree did not effectively prepare me for the job.”*

Virtually all of the social workers we spoke to mentioned that their university studies in social work were inadequate in preparing them for work with youth in care. They spoke at length about the generalist nature of their university education—not all of which were from New Brunswick universities—and noted a distinct lack of specialized coursework in key areas related to child welfare.

*“I’m forced to spend far too much time doing paperwork and justifying my allocation of resources. It takes me away from what I’m really hired to do—working with youth.”*

This issue was perhaps the single most common issue noted by social workers. When asked whether they were overworked, very few social workers felt they had too many youth in their case load; however, almost 100% of all social workers consulted spoke at length about having to devote too much time to writing reports and “fighting” with department administration to justify their allocation of resources.



*“Youth today are entering the system with needs that are far more complex than ever before, and we simply don’t have access to the resources required to truly address these needs.”*

Many social workers spoke about a need for greater resources, particularly with regards to mental health and other complex issues. They often noted that accessing resources provided by departments other than Social Development was an uphill battle. At least part of this seemed to be due to inter-departmental struggles over who was responsible for paying for the services needed.

*“Foster parents are burning out, and we don’t have others available to replace them. This leaves group homes. I hate putting young people in group homes, but what choice do I have?”*

A number of social workers spoke about foster parent burn out and a need for more foster parents who are capable of caring for youth with complex needs. Several also spoke of group homes, generally stating that they disliked placing youth in group homes, especially youth with mental health issues.

When asked for suggestions on what resources they would need, a number of social workers spoke of specialized treatment centers and foster parents with specialized training. They were especially concerned for youth with attachment disorders and fetal alcohol syndrome.

*“I sometimes feel the court system is too focused on the parents and not enough on the needs of children. I may be biased, but that seems backwards to me.”*

Several social workers said they felt the court system gives too many chances to parents. They talked about children in care being bounced from foster families back to the home of their biological parents, often for far too long before being taken into permanent care. In their opinion, this was a failing in the system, and it only served to cause greater damage to the children. They added that, more often than not, biological parents in these cases fail to develop the skills required to become good parents, and that returning these children to their parents simply causes any progress made with the child to be erased.

*“It’s hard to tell a young child that their parents are just messed up, and that they’ll likely always be messed up. Some get it, but others just don’t.”*  
- Anonymous (Social worker)



## Foster Parents

Of all the groups we spoke to, foster parents were by far the most varied. Every one of them seemed to have differing points-of-view on what their roles are, and why they chose to begin fostering in the first place. Nonetheless, there were a number of key issues raised in virtually all of these discussions.

*“Sometimes we don’t want to tell social workers when something goes wrong. They’re not in our homes, and they don’t always understand what it’s like to foster. We worry they’ll come to the wrong conclusions”*

The majority of foster parents we spoke to seemed to have a generally good rapport with social workers. However, they worried at times that social workers were too disconnected from the daily lives of the youth in their care. This was especially true when it came to problems in the home. Many stated they were sometimes afraid of giving updates to the social worker because they feared the worker would misinterpret the situation. It should be noted that this tendency to under-report was also brought up by social workers, many of whom spoke of how they often had to beg for regular updates and didn’t know why.

*“Schools need more diversity in education. Most teachers seem to know very little about working with youth who are dealing with complex issues. They’re reactive instead of proactive and just end up making things worse.”*

Difficulty in working with teachers and school officials was a common thread in our conversations with all three targeted groups. In most cases, their issues could be boiled down to a perceived lack of diversification in the education system, and of a need for educational programs designed specifically for youth with complex needs.

*“There needs to be more attention given to the aging out of care transition. Many youth who grew up in care are not prepared for the real world. They’re having a lot of trouble once they’re out of the system.”*  
- Anonymous (Foster parent)



*“It takes far too long for kids to enter permanent care. It breaks my heart every time a child I’ve been fostering has to go back to a family I know is extremely dysfunctional. It brings them right back to square one.”*

Much like social workers, many foster parents felt the court system was too lenient with adults whom they considered to be unfit parents. We heard a great number of stories about children making fantastic progress while in foster care, only to return to their previous problematic behaviours and tendencies after a stint in the homes of their biological parents. Many foster parents spoke of periods of grief and extreme disillusionment with the system because of this issue. In fact, a number of them talked about how they stopped fostering entirely because they couldn’t stand to see another child go through this transition.

*“We take a lot of heat from the community. People don’t want a foster home in their neighbourhood. There’s a stigma there that just won’t go away.”*

Several foster parents spoke of being ostracized from their neighbourhoods once they opened their doors to fostering. Stories of what neighbours would do ranged from simply ignoring them to finding ways to try and expel the foster families from their midst. In most cases, this “not-in-my-backyard” attitude seemed to stem from a stigma that foster children are bad children. Foster parents talked about unfounded worries of criminal behaviour and of the belief that non-fostered youth would be negatively affected by youth who are in care.



*“The decision to foster was really my wife’s idea. We had three children of our own already, and I was worried we just wouldn’t have time for more. I also didn’t know if I could do it really. I think it takes a special kind of person to be a foster parent. Now I’m happy we did it though. We always wanted a big family, and the kids need us.”*

*- Anonymous (Foster parent)*



## Adoptive Parents

All of the adoptive parents we talked to had adopted children who were previously in care in New Brunswick. We also attempted to focus as much as possible on people who had adopted “older” youth—9 years old and above. We found this demographic in particular to have more to say about the system than parents who had adopted children from care at a very young age.

*“We feel the government underestimated the level of support needed to adopt successfully.”*

While some adoptive parents felt they had no real need for additional support, many others believed there was a distinct lack of support for parents adopting older youth from care. They spoke of not being provided with enough information on the youth and most especially about the family environment from which they came. In their opinion, questions of privacy were the main reason for this lack of communication. They also talked about a lack of resources offered to them for youth with complex needs, and of having to fight to gain access to services they felt should have been offered from the onset (e.g. counseling).

*“There are far too many barriers between departments. They never seem to work together, which means we have to try and deal with each one individually. I don’t understand why they can’t just talk and work together more.”*

A number of adoptive parents spoke about their struggles in finding the resources needed for their adopted youth to succeed. Many felt they needed to act as mediators to try and link departments together in working with their youth. This comment seemed especially prevalent when it came to a perceived lack of integration between social development and mental health. It should be noted here that many of the adoptive parents we spoke to were very active in pursuing the needs of their youth. A number of them wondered how it must be for parents who are perhaps not quite as involved as they are.



*“In my opinion, government needs to enlist the help of other organizations. They try to do everything themselves, and they can’t. The bureaucracy is too complex.”*

*- Anonymous (Adoptive parent)*

*“We had to really debate the pros and cons of adopting. They just have so much more support while they’re in care than when they’re officially adopted. We almost didn’t go through with it.”*

This issue was common not only in our conversations with adoptive parents, but also with a number of our own network members. In many cases, adoptive parents had to wrestle with the loss of support and funding they felt would inevitably happen following an adoption. Whereas a handful of adoptive parents had managed to secure some funding via subsidized adoption agreements for things like braces and one-off medical needs, most were largely unaware that subsidized adoption was even an option. In more than a few cases, the decision to adopt or not was given to the youth themselves. Often this was presented to the youth as a choice between having a permanent family and having access to funding for things like extra-curricular activities and post-secondary education. When faced with this decision, most youth we spoke to chose to retain the access to funding rather than being adopted. Many of them came to regret this decision later in life, when they no longer felt they had a place to call home.

*“Children should only be in temporary care for a short time before they are provided with opportunities for permanency. They’re bounced around way too much right now.”*

Much like foster parents and social workers, adoptive parents were often troubled with the situation of children being in care on temporary agreements for long and recurring periods of time. In their case, many adoptive parents saw this as a boundary to successful adoption. They recognized how older youth were less often chosen for adoption and felt a major contributor to this issue was the length of time they were in temporary care without any form of permanency. In their view, the more often a child was bounced around, the more likely they were to have developed complex needs—needs they felt would make prospective adoptive parents more likely to look elsewhere to adopt.

*“I don’t believe in fostering to be honest. I believe in adoption. It doesn’t make sense to me that people would be paid to raise someone else’s children. Children need permanency above all else, and I don’t think that type of relationship can come from fostering.”*

*- Anonymous (Adoptive parent)*



## The Voice of a Network

As a group made up of people from care, we would be remiss if we didn't include some information from our peers. As such, the following section provides an overview of the main things we heard from current and former youth in care. While it would be impossible to note everything, we feel this list does a good job of providing key insights into the more common thoughts expressed by our network members.

*“Youth in care should be involved in helping to train foster parents and adoptive parents. If you haven't been in the system, you can't understand how it feels. They need to hear it from us.”*

Many of our network members spoke of foster parents who seemed ill-equipped to foster. During our consultation process, we spoke at some length about current training opportunities. While we certainly applaud these programs and believe they are largely successful, we feel that training for foster parents and adoptive parents should be enhanced with more input from current and former youth in care.

*“I never talked about being in care when I was growing up. There's a stigma attached to it. People think we're all bad—druggies, criminals, whatever. There's all sorts of stereotypes.”*

The realities of the care system are difficult for many to understand, in no small part because the system itself is rarely talked about. As such, we feel many people in New Brunswick communities have an ill-informed understanding of what it means to be in care.

This gap in understanding is detrimental for a number of reasons. Firstly, it feeds the stereotype that youth in care are problematic and must be kept under strict control; secondly, it creates a veil of secrecy and shame for youth who are in the system; finally, it means that too few people open their doors to foster care and local adoption. This is especially the case for teens in care.

*“I lived in over six foster care placements in just a little under four years, including extended family placements. Some of them were inappropriate placements, and some did not have the tools to deal with the situation, even though I was a very independent and self-assured teenager.”*

- Melanie Doucet, NBYICN Leader



*“I felt alone in my struggle, even with a strong support system. My friends could not fully relate to what I was going through; they could only sympathize and not empathize with me.”*

The feeling of alienation that often goes along with foster care was another common theme. A number of youth in care noted how they knew very few others who were also in care before getting involved in our network. Siblings were an exception to this, but experiences with siblings differed widely from one person to the next.

Some people spoke of good relationships with their siblings, and of how they wished they could have gotten to know them better, others mentioned that they were better off when separated from their sibling, usually because of rivalries and arguments.

*“During my time in care, I had three different social workers, each with different approaches. They mostly only had time for me whenever something was wrong.”*

Opinions on social workers were extremely varied from one person to the next. We heard stories of fantastic social workers who always made an effort to fulfill their youth’s needs as best as possible. In our opinion, these workers should be recognized and commended for their efforts.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the opposite was also true. A number of youth in care spoke of how they rarely ever saw their social worker unless something went wrong. We heard of people in care who sought time and again to contact their social worker, and who were met with a lack of response or worse.

*“The more I get to know people who were adopted, the more I feel something’s missing. It’s hard when all your friends have somewhere to go for the holidays, and you don’t.”*

A number of people in our network were eventually adopted from care. Some were adopted very young, while others were only adopted in their teenage years. Over the course of our conversations, we found that an interesting narrative developed between those who had been adopted and those who had not.

In particular, people who were not adopted soon began thinking about how different their lives might have been if they had. This was especially true for people who had aged out of the system. In many cases, youth who age out are largely left to their own devices. Foster parents and social workers were often phased out of their lives once they aged out of the system, leaving them with very few options for support.

On the other hand, people who were adopted from care did not have these fears. They felt they had stable and loving relationships that would not go away. We also noticed that adoptive parents in general seemed much more invested in the lives of their youth.

*“I saw awful things in the group home. No young person should have to deal with that stuff. The workers there never seemed to know how to react. They just hid behind their rules.”*

Over the course of our consultation process, very few topics were capable of generating more discussion than group homes. This was just as true for social workers as it was for our peers from care.

For many social workers, group homes seemed to be regarded as a last resort. They were the places youth were sent when foster families in the region had burned out. While we did speak with some youth from care who had decent experiences in group homes, they seemed to be very much a minority.

*“I really don’t feel ready to be on my own. My foster parents have already told me I’ll have to leave once I age out. I don’t know what the next step is.”*

When the youth in care hearings were first imagined, the intent was to make it entirely about the leaving care transition. While we eventually decided to take a different approach, the truth is the hearings could easily have been about this one subject.

The reason the transition from care is so important to us is because virtually all of our members—with the notable exception of those who were adopted—have noted it as a major concern. Those who have already aged out generally feel the support they were receiving was cut off without any true transition period; Those who are facing this reality in the near future speak of how they have no real idea what the next step will be in their lives.

*“I really wanted to continue my post-secondary education, but I couldn’t. The funding was cut off after my first program, and I can’t get a loan because I have no one who can co-sign.”*

In many ways, this speaks once again to the transition process when someone from care ages out of the system. Many of our network members spoke very positively about the fact their post-secondary education was funded; however, a number of these were frustrated by existing limitations on this funding.

Stories in this regard include: People who sought to go to university one year too late and were told they no longer qualified for funding; Others who were completing a college program and would have liked to add a complementary program to it, but were told they could only receive funding for one degree; Others still who were part of a very small minority looking to continue to graduate studies, only to be told there is no funding available beyond an undergraduate degree.

*“There are definitely foster families out there that leave you wondering what the process is to become a foster parent. I guess sometimes they just take whatever they can get.”*

While we did hear a number of stories of problematic foster families—including, for instance, questions of abuse, drug trafficking, and racism—most people spoke of foster families as decent places to live for a period of time, without being especially positive or negative about the experience.

That said, we feel it should be noted how very few people spoke of foster care as a truly positive place to be. In most cases, foster care was described as a sort of boarding house or a place to rest their heads. Most did not keep in contact with foster parents once they left care or moved away, and a number of them were left to question the process for becoming a foster parent.

*“It’s hard to get attached to someone when you don’t know how long you’ll be living with them. I was going to be moving again soon anyway—why bother?”*

The number of foster homes each person had lived in differed widely. Some lived in only two or three families, while others were closer to a dozen or more. The most we heard was over 25 moves, but this seems to have been an outlying case.

Beyond this, many people we spoke to talked about bouncing around between foster care and living with their biological parents. In most cases, these same youth eventually ended up in permanent care; however, it was common for this back and forth period to take years.

A number of foster parents and social workers we spoke to had considerable difficulty with this situation as well. Several foster parents talked about burning out because they were tired of seeing children return to the very negative environments provided by biological parents.



## Our Recommendations

Our network members put a lot of thought into the following list of recommendations. On the one hand, our many discussions and preparations for the hearings, combined with the consultation process, left us with a lot to say. On the other hand, we wanted to ensure that our final list of recommendations were comprised of things we felt could realistically be done. The following list has been worked and limited to a series of things we feel are very realistic and have the potential to be very beneficial for youth in care.

### System Upgrades

# 1

Proclaim May 14<sup>th</sup> as **Children and Youth in Care Day in New Brunswick**. Use this day each year to raise awareness on the realities of youth in care throughout the province.

# 2

Design a **public education strategy** that seeks to breakdown the stereotypes associated with youth in care, attract new foster parents, and promote local adoption of older youth in care.

# 3

Reduce the **administrative and report-writing workload of social workers**, and ensure that one-on-one time between youth in care and their workers is not limited to times of stress.

# 4

Engage the NBYICN in a process aimed at **reviewing and enhancing foster and adoptive parent training programs**, and ensure that delivery of this program includes the participation of youth in care.



## Permanency First

# 5

Develop a cross-departmental policy that includes **stricter conditions on the renewal of temporary protective custody orders**.

# 6

**Eliminate disincentives to adopting youth from care by:**

- Allowing any youth who is adopted from care at 12 years old or older to maintain funding for post-secondary education and extracurricular activities (on par with being in care)
- Ensuring that any youth who is adopted from care is provided with opportunities for ongoing counseling, tutoring, and health services until they reach 24 years of age
- Similarly ensuring that adoptive families are provided with ongoing opportunities for family counseling to help them address any issues that may arise as the youth grows older

# 7

Make the following **enhancements to permanency planning:**

- Make finding a permanent adoptive family prior to aging out of the system the number one objective for all youth in care.
- Ensure that social workers never disregard adoption as a possibility for any youth in care.
- Revisit permanency planning with all youth in care on a regular basis, even those who may have previously refused to be adopted.





## Aging Out

# 8

Develop an **educational program for youth who are preparing to transition out of care**. This program should include components on career development, financial literacy, and independent living.

# 9

**Extend post-secondary funding availability** by making the following improvements to the Post-Guardianship program:

- Allow youth to maintain post-guardianship funding until 24, even if they've completed a first degree (e.g. Allow them to start a second degree if they're still under 24)
- Eliminate the 21 year old cut off and allow youth from care to obtain post-guardianship status anytime up to 24 years old, even if only for 1-2 years
- Allow post-guardianship youth to change programs as often as they choose while maintaining their funding
- Create a scholarship for people from care who wish to pursue graduate studies
- Ensure that all youth have completed a transition from care program prior to having post-guardianship funding cut off (see recommendation 8)

# 10

Offer and encourage the use of **exit interviews** to all youth exiting care, and use any feedback provided to inform policy development and service delivery.



## Youth In Care Leadership

11

Provide NBYICN leaders with the **opportunity to contribute to policy development** discussions and processes.

12

Ensure that all youth in care above the age of 13 are made **aware of the NBYICN** and given the opportunity to speak with members of our leadership group. Promote the network within the system as a support group that is fully capable of providing peer-based counseling, guidance, and leadership training, and encourage government professionals to contact our coordinator on a regular basis.

13

Encourage and promote more **mentorship opportunities within the system** to allow older or even former youth in care to act as mentors for youth who are still in the system.

14

Appoint an **Assistant Deputy Minister to act as a direct point of contact** for the NBYICN on the issues and recommendations put forth in this account.





## How the NBYICN can help

In making these recommendations, our intent is not to simply provide input without offering suggestions on how to address the issues. As representatives of youth in care throughout the province, our network wants to be part of the solution. As such, we have prepared a short list of ways we feel the NBYICN could help.

### Public Education Strategy

Plan regular events to take place every year on Children and Youth in Care Day

Film a series of videos aimed at dispelling stereotypes and raising awareness of youth in care issues.

Design information sessions and related documentation to be provided to social workers, high school guidance counselors, and other related professionals throughout the province

Assist government communications specialists in other possible capacities with regards to a broader public education strategy

*In line with:  
Recommendations 1 and 2*

### Transition From Care Program

Assist government officials by providing input on what is needed in this type of program, including the development of an educational framework

Act as a coordinating body for developing mentorship and training skills for youth from care who could then help deliver various parts of the transition program

*In line with:  
Recommendation 8*

## Youth In Care Leadership

Provide assistance to PRIDE trainers in revising and enhancing the current training program

Help inform the development of an exit interview process for youth leaving care

Provide a number of key network leaders to assist the development of a policy aimed at outlining strict limits for youth who find themselves in temporary care agreements

Develop an NBYICN information session and workshop that can be delivered in communities throughout New Brunswick to increase youth in care exposure to the network

Continue providing mentorship opportunities for youth in care involved in network projects

*In line with:*  
**Recommendations 4, 5, 10, 11, 12, 13**



## Final Remarks

What the youth in care hearings represented for me was a chance to embrace the feeling of real and true change. It felt almost like an evolution within the system -- something I feel that all of us (youth in care) dream of. It was a tremendously powerful day in my life -- a baby step in a spiritual landmark I could check off! Every child deserves to have their human rights respected, to have permanency as a focus, and to have access to proper resources to help them be the best he or she can be! But most importantly, children deserve to be loved :). I feel this is the message that was able to shine the brightest!

*Kyla Lapointe, NBYICN Leader*

I am beyond honoured to have taken part in the first ever youth in care Hearings in New Brunswick. The young people who spoke demonstrated courage, resilience and the will to make a difference. It was amazing to see the support of the Premier and Ministry of Social Development. These Hearings was truly a step forward on the part of New Brunswick's government to work toward better outcomes and experiences for their children in care, and a step forward for the young people who will live better lives as a result of these Hearings. Unforgettable memories and stellar work New Brunswick!

*Anna Ho, Office of the Child and Youth Advocate of Ontario*

On behalf of the New Brunswick Youth In Care Network, I would like to thank all those who supported us both during the consultation process and at the hearings themselves. For a population that often feels weak and forgotten, this event marks a significant step forward towards a better system for youth who are taken into provincial care. We hope that you will all continue to be interested in the work we do in providing youth in care with a voice.

As mentioned at the hearings, this is just the beginning. We hope this report will serve to push the discussion ever forward, but we certainly do not see this as the end of the process. Our network continues to find ways to enhance the system, and we are looking forward to working with both the government and other key stakeholders as we move along.

Thank you for listening—and thank you for caring.

*Mathieu Cormier, NBYICN Coordinator*





Melanie Doucet  
Leadership Group  
Groupe de leadership  
Brunswick