

Government of New Brunswick Response To A Long Road Home



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Introduction

In November 2013, the New Brunswick Youth in Care Network presented its report entitled *A Long Road Home: An Account of the first ever New Brunswick Youth in Care Hearings* to government. The report was based on hearings that were held in the fall of 2012 that brought young people who have experienced the care system together with key government officials and community stakeholders.

It was determined that there was no better way to know where improvements to the province's child welfare system could be made than to hear the stories of youth who have experienced it firsthand.

The hearing was an important opportunity for youth in care to have their voices heard by those accountable for the system that is responsible for them.

The Government of New Brunswick welcomes the network's work on this important issue. The report outlined a number of recommendations to improve the care system which were carefully considered by the province.

This response sets out the path ahead and how government will work to make a real difference in the lives of youth in and from care in New Brunswick.

Recommendations and Responses:

- 1. Proclaim May 14th 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.**

Response:

Government supports and is committed to children and youth in New Brunswick. This recommendation supports the philosophy of informed, engaged and involved communities. The Department of Social Development recognizes the value in having a day proclaimed as Children and Youth in Care in New Brunswick. Such a date would serve to help raise awareness, reduce stigma, debunk myths and recognize children and youth in care.

Since the release of the A Long Road Home recommendation report, the department has been working with the New Brunswick Youth in Care Network on this initiative. Based on their request, Social Development is in the process of having November 29 declared as Children and Youth in Care Day in New Brunswick. This date is significant for the New Brunswick Youth in Care Network as it is the date of the original youth in care hearings in New Brunswick.

- 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.**

Response:

The department agrees that public awareness of the barriers faced by children and youth involved with the care system is beneficial to all. The department will make available information about children in care to help raise public awareness. Having an annual Children and Youth in Care Day would also provide an ongoing opportunity for public awareness and education.

The department looks forward to working with the New Brunswick Youth in Care Network to develop creative ways to increase public awareness.

- 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.**

Response:

The department acknowledges the importance of relationships in the healthy development of children and youth. The Child in Care Program Standards provide minimal contact standards that social workers meet with a child in care once per month unless otherwise stated in the case plan but at least every three months in every case.

A revision of the Child in Care Program standards began in January 2014 and is expected to be completed in fall 2014. It provides the opportunity to review current best practices in the field, including the important relationship building work. The New Brunswick Youth in Care Network has been identified as a key stakeholder in the review process. Representatives from the New Brunswick

Youth in Care Network leadership group will be consulted during the program standards review process to ensure a youth perspective is represented.

This recommendation also emphasizes the need of training social workers working with children in care about the importance of relationships for youth. Training opportunities will be explored within the existing Child Welfare Training System.

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.

Response:

The department supports this recommendation. The recent announcement to implement Structured Analysis Family Evaluation (SAFE) as the methodology for all home assessments for foster and adoptive applicants and provisional homes also provides an optimal opportunity to review and update the PRIDE training. The department will engage the New Brunswick Youth in Care Network in the review process. The revised training sessions will involve the Facilitated Discussion section of the training and include representation from the New Brunswick Youth in Care Network for all PRIDE pre-service courses.

5. Develop a cross-departmental policy that includes stricter conditions on the renewal of temporary care agreements.

Response:

The department has made significant enhancements to the child protection system since 2006. The New Direction in Child Protection Initiative has resulted in more children being able to stay safely in their homes. The department has introduced concurrent planning as a standard expectation of practice recognizing the importance of planning for permanency for the child. Family Group Conference and Immediate Response Conference services have been introduced to support family relationships and better engage families in the planning process. Currently, when a renewal of a custody order is considered, the decision of this application is reviewed by the permanency planning committee. A board of supervisors and specialized social workers review each child's situation with permanency in mind for these children. Work will continue with these initiatives.

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.**

Response:

The department acknowledges this recommendation. Social Development offers a subsidized adoption program that provides financial assistance and other support to meet the specific child's needs once they are adopted. The service provided depends on the child's specific needs and are determined on a case-by-case basis.

This program recognizes the irreplaceable opportunity that adoption presents in providing children in care with lifelong connections to a family that provides support and nurturing which is crucial to physical, social and emotional development.

The department recognizes that the importance of post-secondary education has increased significantly in the last decade. Social Development provides employment readiness training and post-secondary educational opportunities for children in care who have demonstrated an interest and capacity to benefit from this opportunity. The Child in Care Program provides the opportunity to review the post-secondary education supports provided to youth in or from care.

The department is also currently exploring options with an external stakeholder towards the establishment of a scholarship specifically for a youth in or from care who is pursuing post-secondary education.

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.**

Response:

Social Development recognizes the importance of permanency planning for children and youth in care. In recent years, there has been a departmental shift in the philosophy of the child welfare system to emphasise the importance of permanency for children and youth. The revision of the Child in Care Program Standards, which began in January 2014 and are expected to be completed in fall 2014, will be written from a permanency perspective as this is now the core program philosophy. Part of the consultation with the New Brunswick Youth in Care Network for the program standard review will focus on their perspective on permanency planning tools and techniques.

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.

Response:

The department currently offers youth in care who are up to the age of 19 years old access to an independent living program. The independent living programs are regionally planned and resourced. The revision of the Child in Care Program Standards, started in January 2014, provides an opportunity to provide clear guidelines and enhance the consistency of the independent program across the province and research best practices in the area of independent living programs. Consultation with the New Brunswick Youth in Care Network through the standards revision process will provide the youth perspective on independent living requirements.

Social Development is in the process of expanding the Family Group Conference service to the Child in Care program. Access to this service will provide the opportunity for youth to engage in a youth centred planning conference to plan for their future and support family connections and lasting relationships as they transition out of government care.

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 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).**

Response:

The department recognizes that the importance of post-secondary education has increased significantly in the last decade. The department provides employment readiness training and post-secondary educational opportunities for children in care who have demonstrated an interest and capacity to benefit from this opportunity. The Child in Care Program provides the opportunity to review the post-secondary education supports provided to youth in or from care.

The department recognizes that there may be cases where a youth would request post-guardianship support after the age of 21. In order to assist those youth, and recognizing the individual circumstances that they face, the department will establish a standardized provincial process to make a determination on support for those situations on a case by case basis.

The department is also currently exploring options with an external stakeholder towards the establishment of a scholarship specifically for a youth in or from care who is pursuing post-secondary education.

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

Response:

The department agrees with this recommendation. Social Development values the perspective, knowledge and experiences that youth can contribute to policy decisions. As part of the revision of the Child in Care Program Standards, started in January 2014, the department will develop, in collaboration with the New Brunswick Youth in Care Network, a youth-focused exit interview process for youth who are leaving the care of the Minister.

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

Response:

Social Development accepts this recommendation. The department has committed to consulting with the New Brunswick Youth in Care Network during the revision of the Child in Care Program Standards. The New Brunswick Youth in Care Network was invited by the department to participate in the training session for the Structured Analysis Family Evaluation for Administrators. Social Development has also identified the New Brunswick Youth in Care Network as a key stakeholder for all child welfare programs.

12. Ensure that all youth in care above the age 13 are made aware of the NBYINC 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 counselling, guidance, and leadership training, and encourage government professionals to contact our coordinators on a regular basis.

Response:

The department acknowledges and congratulates the New Brunswick Youth in Care Network for the dedication and effort they have put forth over the last four years to develop a strong foundation. In November 2013, Social Development announced a five year contract extension with Partners for Youth Inc. for the New Brunswick Youth in Care Network. As they move forward, the department will continue to partner with continual efforts in raising awareness of the New Brunswick Youth in Care Network and its mandate.

The Child Welfare Training and Clinical Auditing Team from Social Development will revise the child welfare CORE training for social workers to include reference to the New Brunswick Youth in Care Network and to inform new social workers about the resource. The revision of the Child in Care Program Standards, started in January 2014, will include reference to the New Brunswick Youth in

Care Network to ensure that when youth are coming into care they are provided information about the network and invited to become involved.

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.

Response:

The department is committed to supporting the best possible outcomes for children and youth in care. The youth who presented at the New Brunswick Youth in Care hearings clearly articulated times in their journey as a child in care where an opportunity to connect with a mentor would have been valuable. Social Development is committed to explore with the New Brunswick Youth in Care Network opportunities for a mentorship program for children in and from care.

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.

Response:

The department looks forward to continuing to work in partnership with the New Brunswick Youth in Care Network. The assistant deputy minister for Program Delivery Division will be responsible for the issues and recommendations put forth in the recommendation report A Long Road Home: An account of the first ever New Brunswick Youth In Care Hearings.

Conclusion

Child welfare services are the greatest responsibilities of a government and children are the greatest hope for the province's future.

Youth in and from care offer a unique perspective on issues surrounding the care system and their participation in this process has been invaluable.

Youth in care need to be supported and the province must strive to provide programs and services where young people can get the assistance they require.

Progress has been made to strengthen our child welfare services in New Brunswick; however, there is always room for improvement.

With the ongoing support, participation and collaboration of the Youth in Care Network, the goal of helping children and youth reach their full potential will be achieved.