fostering CHANGE

MESSAGING & COMMUNICATION GUIDE

Vancouver Foundation 2015

vancouver foundation

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Introduction

Fostering Change is an initiative to involve youth, their allies, supportive organizations, and engaged citizens across Metro Vancouver in conversation and action.

The goal: to ensure youth in government care have access to resources, opportunities, and consistent caring relationships they need to thrive in adulthood.

The problem: in BC, youth in foster care must leave care when they turn 19. Once they are discharged, they no longer have access to housing, healthcare, regular financial assistance, or a social worker to call in emergencies. The most dramatic result: 40% of homeless youth have spent time in foster care.

Without visibility, awareness and engagement, the chance this complex issue will get the attention it deserves is low to zero.

The dialogue: We need to start a broader public conversation about better models of support – policy and practice – for youth aging out of care. We need to make communities aware of the issues. We want doorways opened, not closed, to support youth to pursue housing, employment, education, health, financial capability, social networks and permanent relationships.

Our hope: We can empower communities to show up for all youth as they move into adulthood.

This discussion guide has been designed as a tool to assist service providers, funders, youth and their allies, community leaders and advocates to start the conversations and build the relationships that can lead to lasting, measurable change.

As part of the Fostering Change conversation, we are offering summaries of facts, research, suggested messages, as well as some ideas for engaging potentially supportive audiences - whether they are in a position to shape policy or simply don't yet have the facts that might lead them to greater empathy and involvement in their communities.

This guide is one tool to help amplify many voices on these critical issues, and in so doing, to build public awareness and support for progressive solutions.

HOW DID WE ARRIVE HERE?

The content of this guide has been informed by the voices of youth, service providers, front-line workers, policy makers, funders, engaged parents, communications specialists, advocates and in particular, by thousands of British Columbians who responded to a province-wide poll early in 2013.

The unique opinion research explores the values of citizens when it comes to their own children and children in the public system. We've also held story-visioning sessions with youth in care and many stakeholders and allies – they are driving messaging and ways of representing their hopes and experience that steps away from stigma and hopelessness to a place of hope and opportunity to make change.

WHAT ARE THE GOALS FOR OUR WORK?

Vancouver Foundation (VF) is the host of Fostering Change. Along with its allies, partners, donors and grantees, VF is committed to surfacing solutions that build on community knowledge and best practices, improve policy and promote youth empowerment. Fostering Change is a platform to hold the ideas and support action by a broad range of organizations and individuals.

There is a range of possible solutions, but all options lead back to ensuring youth in and exiting government care have access to resources, opportunities, some consistent caring relationships and other supports they need to thrive in adulthood. Some goals, broadly expressed, include:

- ### Policy/ Programs

  Improved policies and programs that support youth beyond their 19th birthdays through sensitive times of transition. These could be a range of post-majority supports similar to those provided by BC parents for all youth until they are in a stable situation with skills to move forward.

- ### Networks/ Communities of Support

  Supporting youth earlier in their teens with skills development, but also with additional networks of support – in schools, in community centres, through kinship agreements where possible, through government and not for profit programs – rather than with single caseworkers or foster homes that can change from year to year.

- ### Meaningful Participation

  Opportunities for meaningful participation and contribution include having opportunities for valued responsibilities, for making decisions, for giving voice and being heard, and for contributing one's talents to the community.

Our hope is that we can spark ongoing conversations, bringing more citizens into this conversation, and highlight not only the challenges but also place-based solutions.

How Do We Lay Out This Problem? The Facts in Brief

An important way to increase the impact of our communications and outreach is to use a common and accepted set of facts or research to talk about the issues.

The repetition of these facts from a variety of spokespeople is an important way to improve awareness with a variety of audiences whether delivered via media or meetings.

FOSTERING CHANGE FACT SHEET – IDENTIFYING THE CHALLENGES

In British Columbia, when a youth in foster care turns 19, he or she is abruptly cut off from the system that has provided a home, adult connections and support.

Their public guardian, our government, essentially says "we believe you are now old enough to take care of yourself." It's often a very lonely, isolating and frightening time in their lives. They are expected to make their way in the world, with little or no support or connections to their community.

More than two-thirds of youth in care in BC will arrive here, at 19, without a high school diploma and very little preparation for adulthood. Yet once they are discharged, they no longer have access to housing, healthcare, regular financial assistance, or a social worker to call in emergencies.

HERE ARE SOME OF THE MOST SALIENT FACTS WE CAN SHARE TO INCREASE KNOWLEDGE OF THE CHALLENGES FACING YOUTH IN CARE IN BC:

- There are approximately 10,000 children and youth in government care at any time in BC. In 2013, there was an estimated 8200 youth in care.
- Every year, approximately 700 youth in various kinds of government care turn 19.
- 40% of homeless youth have been in foster care at some point in their lives.
- Approximately 55% of youth in government care are Aboriginal.

- Almost half of former youth in care will go on income assistance within a few months of their 19th birthday.
- 65% of youth in care have been diagnosed with a mental health issue at least once in childhood.
- In 2007, data on educational and health outcomes for youth in care in B.C. suggested that approximately 21% of children in care graduate from high school, compared to 78% of the general youth population.
- According to Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, the Representative for Children and Youth in B.C., children in care "are over-represented in the criminal justice system." In a 2009 study, her office reported that 41% of children living under ministry supervision (either in foster homes or with relatives) were involved with the criminal justice system by age 21.
- Among teens who are wards of BC, 42 per cent have a diagnosed disability.
- Within six months, nearly half (49%) apply for income assistance – two-thirds of those for disability assistance the rest for welfare.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE SOLUTIONS?

- A major benefit—not just to individuals, but also to society—is that over the long term, extending care generates more profit than expense. Using base analysis from a recent Ontario study, Vancouver Sun reporters examined costs for supporting the 700 foster children who age out of B.C.'s system each year. The B.C. findings indicate a return of $1.11 for every dollar spent on extending care, and an annual net benefit to taxpayers of $6.3 million.

  They projected it would cost $57.96 million to offer these youth extended government care for five more years. But that investment would be a $64.24-million benefit to B.C. taxpayers over the 700 youths' lifetimes, including:

  » $204,634 in avoided incarceration expenditures;

  » $29,872,613 in avoided income assistance and agreements with young adults;

  » $34,167,557 in income tax revenue would be added.

- A research project currently being conducted at the School of Social Work of the University of Washington, titled "Research on the Transition to Adulthood for Foster Youth: The Benefits of Extending Care," points out how an extension of care might benefit foster youth. Evidence shows that allowing them to remain in care until age 21 offers these benefits:

  » It increases their likelihood of pursuing post-secondary education.

  » It is associated with increased earnings, and with delayed pregnancies.

  » It increases their likelihood of receiving independent living services after age 19.

- In 2006, the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS) conducted a survey of 300 youth and 300 Children's Aid Society staff. The survey revealed that the most helpful element for youth during the transition from care to independence is "ongoing and long-term emotional support—someone to call, someone to care, someone who would help when help was wanted."A similar American study, conducted in 2008 by the University of Chicago, also emphasized the importance of emotional support for youth who age out of care: it was the element most frequently noted as being both needed, and missed, by the young adults in foster care. The study went so far as to challenge the accepted definition of independent living, suggesting that it might be more important to teach young people how to build good relationships with others—in other words, that healthy adulthood consists of having more interdependent relationships.
- The importance of emotional support for youth is shown by a study called Promoting Positive Mental Health Among Youth in Transition, conducted in B.C. in 2008. It found that the factors most strongly associated with mental health included the presence of supportive adults. This person might be an informal mentor, a friend, a psychologist, or a child-welfare professional.
- Most youth in the OACAS survey appreciated the personal contact with their social workers, and said that they wanted to stay connected with them "24/7/365" for at least five to ten years after they left care. In the American study, young participants named their social workers as people they could not imagine their lives without.
- The Representative for Children and Youth also agreed that social workers should always keep their doors open for youth who left care. However, as the OACAS survey noted, this task is challenging to social workers, who are usually overloaded.
- All young Canadian adults now live at home for longer. According to the Census, in 1981 only 26.9% of young adults aged 20–29 lived with their parents. But in 2011, 42.3% of young adults lived at home—either because they never moved out, or "because they returned home after living elsewhere."
- Youth who age out of care also want the option of going back "home"—that is, either returning to their foster-care families, or being able to contact their social workers, or staying in touch with their agency. One of the primary messages based on the OACAS responses was: "Youth should be permitted to make mistakes. Youth who leave care to become independent should be entitled to return to agency support, if they find they are not ready at any time before they are discharged."

These statistics are harvested from research in the public domain, but much of it sourced by series and research conducted by journalists.

- Pieta Woolly, writing for The Tyee.ca
- Tracy Sherlock and Lori Cuthbert, writing for The Vancouver Sun
- Irina Sedunova, writing as a Master's Student in UBC's Reporting In Indigenous Communities Program.

What Does The Public Think? What We Heard From British Columbians

Early in 2013, Vancouver Foundation surveyed 1,820 adult British Columbians with the goal of understanding public attitudes, values and perceptions of youth transitioning to adulthood and more specifically, the passage for youth aging out of government care in the province. We worked with Sentis Research, the same opinion research company that assisted the foundation with our ground-breaking research on social isolation in the region.

There were three key areas explored in this survey:

- First, measuring BC residents' perceptions of why young adults live at home and their readiness to make a successful transition from home to living on their own;
- Second, tracking public perceptions and awareness of young people living under government care including assumptions about why and how this happens, the kinds of supports available to young adults as they transition out of care, and assumptions about the extent to which young adults are vulnerable to a range of problems, including homelessness.
- Third, the perceived effectiveness of possible solutions to prevent young adults from becoming homeless as they transition out of care.

BRITISH COLUMBIANS SUPPORT THEIR OWN CHILDREN INTO ADULTHOOD

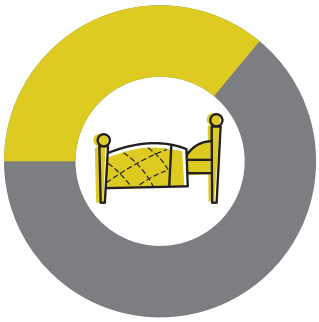
Consistent with Statistics Canada figures, our survey conducted in February 2013 found that 36% of adults surveyed aged 29 or younger live at home with their parents or another relative.

This means that among the approximately 660,000 BC adults in this age range, almost a quarter million live at home. We asked all respondents about when they were ready to live on their own, when they thought youth were ready to live on their own and we probed into those things that were needed to make a successful transition.

Here are some significant highlights from our findings:

- 70% of British Columbians believe that the 19 year olds living in their city or town **do not** have the necessary skills and resources to live away from home and support themselves independently.
- Most parents who have 19 to 28 year old children living at home provide support to their children in six areas: shopping and groceries (69%), free rent (69%), post-secondary education funding (60%), living supplies (56%), transportation (55%) and job advice (53%).
- ***In short: among parents with 19 to 28 year olds at home, 7 out of 10 provide groceries and free rent. The majority are paying at least a portion of their children's post-secondary education, are providing living supplies, transportation and help with finding a job.***

- While 19 to 28 year olds living away from home receive less support than their counterparts living at home, their parents are helping them in a variety of ways. **In fact, 80% of parents who have 19 to 28 years olds living away from home provide their children with some form of support.**
- The vast majority of parents who have children under 19 fully expect that they will be providing these kinds of supports to their children after they reach 19. In fact, 83% of these parents anticipate helping their children pay for post-secondary education.



36% OF ADULTS AGED 29 OR YOUNGER
live at home with their parents or another relative.

70% OF BRITISH COLUMBIANS
believe that 19 year olds do not have the necessary skills and resources to live away from home.

WHAT DO PEOPLE IN BC KNOW ABOUT YOUTH IN CARE AND AGING OUT OF GOVERNMENT CARE? VISIBILITY IS LOW

As we had expected, there was low visibility for youth in care and the issue in general.

- For most British Columbians, youth in care are largely invisible—two-thirds (67%) indicate that they don't know if foster kids live in their neighbourhood or if there are group homes in their neighbourhood.
- 71% of British Columbians underestimate the percentage of youth who are currently in foster care or in a group home.
- Overall, only 28% of British Columbians are aware that government support is not generally available to young people after they reach their 19th birthday.
- British Columbians are far less likely to view broader social factors like poverty, homelessness and a lack of access to social services as being reasons why kids become part of the foster care system. One-third (32%) attribute kids being put into foster care as due to poverty, one-quarter (24%) attribute it to homelessness and 13% attribute it to a lack of access to social services.

THERE IS GAP BETWEEN PUBLIC VALUES AND THE CURRENT SYSTEM

The survey showed that BC residents do not view the transition of a youth from care through the same lens as they view the transition of their own child from home.

Despite knowing the kinds of supports that are needed by young adults (their own kids) to help them become independent, BC residents are reluctant to endorse solutions that would provide these kinds of supports to young people transitioning out of care.

Stated differently, they are supporting a policy that their own beliefs indicate will likely fail young adults transitioning out of care.

Potential Audiences/ Allies

Vancouver Foundation is committed to engaging a range of audiences on these issues – public audiences, government decision makers, youth, media gatekeepers, service providers, and other foundations, among others.

The complexity of these issues and the need for a range of solutions means we must activate strategies that reach people where they are – that reflect their values and level of knowledge.

This could be a caring citizen who has been completely unaware of the challenges faced by youth in care to government bureaucrats who are attempting to address systems level challenges in a tough economic climate.

However, our research and conversations with stakeholders has surfaced some ideas about who within general public audiences could be moved to take note and to take action.

What we learned:

- Parents both of younger children and teens were generally sympathetic to the challenges faced by youth in care.
- People who were not born in Canada were generally more supportive of increased support for youth in care.
- Economic circumstances did not change whether people tended to do more for their own children, in fact, those who reported being in tougher economic situations also did more for their kids.
- Overall, women were more sympathetic than men.
- We also learned that knowledge matters and facts are important. Those who are the most knowledgeable regarding the number of youth in care are also the group most likely to see the link between living in care and subsequent homelessness, with 83% believing that young people who have been in care are at greater risk of homelessness.
- People who knew more about youth in care to begin with, were more supportive of solutions related to increased government investment in post-majority services.

- Those who underestimate the number of youth in care in the province feel less compelled to give to charity—they give lower amounts to charitable causes on an annual basis than those who are more knowledgeable regarding the number of youth in care.

Other significant audiences:

- Volunteers, those working in community settings, schools, not for profits working with children and youth
- Policy makers, senior bureaucrats, advocates, municipal leaders
- Media, public storytellers, civic engagement specialists/ facilitators
- Donors, partners, sponsors

WE BELIEVE THAT REACHING OUT TO ENGAGED, PROGRESSIVE PARENTS IS A STRONG FOCUS FOR COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND COMMUNICATIONS OUTREACH.

- The more empathetic public audiences are educated, engaged, and committed to progressive solutions, the more likely policy makers and others who have the power to make change, will begin to prioritize them.

BURSTING THE "FAMILY BUBBLE"

Historically, gaining traction on child and youth issues has been hampered by the public's inability to see society's responsibility for children. Other than education, the public has a tough time connecting children to a broader community. It's not surprising that issues related to youth in government care are all but invisible to the general public.

Communications researchers have referred to this as the "Family Bubble" which they define as "the default mode of thinking in which events within the family (including child rearing and child neglect/ abuse) take place in a sphere that is separate and different from the public sphere. It means that even thinking about the interaction between child rearing and public policy is difficult for people." (*Frameworks Institute, Talking about Youth Development*)

The Family Bubble has several consequences for how people think about these issues. If parenting and child rearing exist in a separate sphere, then parenting is an individual choice and individual responsibility with no role for anyone outside the home.

Other related challenges are fighting negative public representations of teenagers, social workers, bureaucrats and politicians. In some ways, as the issues combine all these players, it is a perfect storm in terms of fighting pervasive negative frames.

How Can We Tell Stories That Engage and Activate Citizens?

So how do we break through? How do we connect the admirable values and supports provided by British Columbians in their own families with the assumptions and misperceptions they have for youth in care?

Stories have qualities that can make public policy more real for public audiences. This is no more the case than when dealing with matters with which they have little or no experience or with sensitive issues related to stigma and exclusion.

Part of what makes a story effective is that it can draw out the audience' experience and humanize an otherwise abstract public policy issue, giving individuals many ways to relate to those "characters" and linking the story to their own experiences and lives.

In order to reach audiences outside of our own knowledgeable, committed and connected communities, we must learn how those desired audiences think.

How do you talk about the fact that without family or any other dependable adults to rely on for assistance, these young people are at high risk of homelessness, joblessness, racism, mental and physical illness, and incarceration, without the risk of further stigmatizing them or failing to communicate that they are not past hope or help?

Our survey research shows clearly that once audiences have good information, they tend to react with great empathy and care for the problems of these youth. So we must balance naming the problem with finding positive ways to frame the solutions.

To build support for better solutions, it will be critical to develop positive connections to a broader community and collective responsibility.

We suggest moving from the current framing on the left to the future framing on the right.

CURRENT FRAMING THEMES/ CONSIDERATIONS/public thinks	FUTURE/ PROPOSED FRAMING THEMES/ CONSIDERATIONS/ advocates
Youth as sad, troubled, beyond help	Youth as capable, strong, full of possibility
Bad parenting to blame	A systemic issue related to gaps in government, community, and social support.
Lack of visibility, nervousness, fear for contact with "troubled" youth	Citizen awareness and knowledge and desire for increased involvement/ support for policy
My children	Our children
Family Bubble	Public & private kids deserve the same
I can parent at home, what does parenting as the public look like? Is that more money for social workers? More government spending?	Better policies. Smarter support and transitions, and great community programs as reinforcing parenting.

MESSAGING

Here are several proposed message themes that will help build a case for thoughtful policy and community involvement and that take all these issues into account. They have emerged from extensive quantitative research into public attitudes and values as well as our understanding of the narratives around public and private support for youth in care.

1. Your Kids, Our Kids - We Are The Public Parent

We agree with you that 19 year olds are not ready to go out alone. Youth in care are in the same boat. They need more support, not less.

There are deeply embedded, value-laden assumptions hardwired into public views on youth in care.

Overall, they tend to blame bad parenting, isolating youth in the individual situation of their family home and then, within the public system. This family-centric thinking seeks to blame or find individual cause rather than tracking to larger systemic issues.

- Our initiative's messages need to connect a role for thoughtful parenting within the home AND within the community.
- We see a role for creating some powerful norms – showing public audiences that they are part of a caring majority.

The survey research into public attitudes shows that generally, parents in BC:

- Do not think youth who are 19 are ready to leave home, and would be concerned if they were no longer able to offer support after age 19.
- They support their children well into their 20s with a range of financial and emotional assistance.
- They are attuned to the economic and social factors that make it difficult to "launch" into adulthood.

- The economic and social conditions for young people have shifted in the last 20 years – we see stagnant incomes and high unemployment for youth between 18-24, higher tuition fees, and enormous increases in cost of living for housing and food.
- The result is an expectation that youth can depend on staying in the family home longer.
- We know that parents want to see themselves as being great at what they do, as being caring, connected and effective.
- They also understand that this is a confusing, sensitive time – when youth can go off the rails without the anchor/ tether of a caring adult to offer timely guidance.

What the public needs to know about youth in care that piggybacks on citizens' own parenting values:

- In BC, youth in government care are not given the same meaningful support that many youth receive from their parents at a sensitive time of transition to adulthood.
- Despite having survived a tough road to 19, they are cut off from adult guidance and resources at the very time they need encouragement and resources. These are tall expectations of any youth, not just youth in care.
- The current system says, in essence, *Your life will be safer and better under our care than it would be with your own family.* As parents who live in this society, we need to make good on that promise.
- If we alter our social imagination and begin thinking of youth in care as "our kids", instead of "those kids", we will begin to close the "caring gap" and redefine how we perceive our role and responsibility as individuals and as a society to help them achieve their potential.

TONE, LANGUAGE TO CAPTURE

DO:

- Take the most direct route. Be clear about a comparison between the support we provide to youth in our homes and the experiences and support for youth in the public's care.
- Talk about research explaining adolescent development in a way that adults understand that this is a developmental phase with emergent competencies, which depend on experiences and relationships.
- We know that using social norming can help cement positive opinions or behaviours. Use language that connects us in agreement. "Most people in BC don't think that 19 year olds aren't ready to leave home – we agree with you."
- Also represent community programs, mentorship, strong government policy and friendship as reinforcing parenting and parents.

DON'T:

- Overtly blame, shame or highlight hypocrisy of the "caring gap"
- Talk about lost, abandoned kids further underlining in the public mind that they are beyond help.

2. Showing Up: Connectedness Let's Foster Communities That Are Welcoming for All

Some of the language that has emerged from talking with youth is a feeling of isolation, disconnection and loneliness. Surveying British Columbians" about the descriptors that jump out for them when thinking about youth in care we heard words like, "sad, abandoned, troubled."

While expressing concern, this language can play into the dominant frame, which allows us to think of youth in care as someone else's issue, beyond help, or too scary to contemplate.

We strongly suggest reframing the narrative of the sad, troubled youth to a story of possibility powered by connectedness and community.

What does this look, sound like?

Youth who have come through the system have shown unbelievable resilience in getting to where they are. There is an emerging body of long-term developmental research that has followed children born into high-risk conditions. The findings: when youth were able to develop resilience in the face of trauma and stress – it was linked to their environments — the caring adults, families, schools, and communities that helped them through.

Research reflects that these environments can alter — or even reverse — potential negative outcomes and enable individuals to transcend adversity and develop resilience despite risk.

By focusing on connection, community support, and community environment as playing a central role in supporting youth in care make strong transitions, we can move away from framing the goals of youth development as negatives, i.e., "keeping kids off the streets or reducing crime". We can also offer a constructive and positive focal point to public audiences who may throw up their hands and ask, "what can I do?"

This framing approach also works to sidestep the frame of labeling and stigmatizing youth, their families and their communities as "at risk", a practice that can perpetuate stereotyping, racism and exclusion.

Internal message, tone, approach:

Youth in care and leaving care have what can only be described as courage. They've had to surmount trials and barriers that many of us cannot imagine. But there is a key element needed to help them realize their innate potential: connectedness – a network that builds a sense of belonging and support in our families, schools and communities.

Connectedness is key to supporting youth in care, and, in particular, those youth who have been isolated from stable, long-term familial relationships.

What can we do? We can support and build a sense of belonging and home in our families, schools and communities where youth can find mutually caring and respectful relationships and opportunities for meaningful involvement.

When we create communities with youth that respect and care for them as individuals and invite their participation — their dialogue, reflection, and contributions — we are creating the ground that allows their skills for building relationships, problem solving, a sense of identity and a sense of possibility for the future to grow.

TONE, LANGUAGE TO CAPTURE AND AVOID

DO:

- Demonstrate the benefit to communities of helping launch healthy youth.
- Represent what connected communities look like where youth in care are part of a community with food, programs, caring mentorship, recreation and valued for their contributions and come back to work later on in the programs that benefited them as younger youth.
- Capture and promote youth voice in ways that promote self-representation, creativity, thoughtfulness, and the desire for connection/ community. (Speaker's Bureau, Video projects, storytelling)
- Show youth in positive peer-to-peer situations and with community mentors like teachers, program leaders, and interacting with other adults. Talk about how positive relationships can create great conditions for these youth.

DON'T:

- Blame government or overtaxed social workers. Public entitlements are tricky territory unless there is clear research that analyzes spending. Focus on public values and support while being clear that the system needs rethinking.
- Individualize stories in isolation from all the community factors that have supported them along the way.
- Whitewash the issues while framing possibility. Youth have told us to be up front about what they have faced and are facing. The challenge is to communicate the problem without framing them as beyond help and without strength.

Suggested Activities

We encourage you to use these facts and messages in your communications and engagement work in community. There is tremendous creativity in the sector in terms of designing and road testing new models for using these facts and stories – online, place-based and even nationally to influence progressive changes in policy and practice. Tailor them and make them your own. There will also be a range of activities that can help you deliver these messages. Fostering Change will host and support conversations, but this is your conversation to convene.

ACTIVITIES

There are lots of ways to be involved. Helping to raise awareness is one of them, and to use the opportunity of a launch, website and social media to connect potential supporters. Some potential activities:

- Youth-led storytelling with support and training from adult allies.
- Talking to your local community media and inviting reporters to sit down with you and learn more.
- Community dialogues with organizations, grantees, municipal leaders, businesses, community champions and allies.
- Approaching donors and your stakeholders either in person or through other forms of online or mail to tell this story.
- Sharing these graphics, metaphors and facts in your own work.

A few other ideas…

Op-ed piece and letters to the editor to your local paper

What is an opinion editorial or "op-ed"? This term refers to commentary material that appears on the pages in the newspaper that also contain the article by the editor (usually near the back of the first section). This material is different from news articles in that it is not required to be "objective" or neutral, but is allowed and expected to embody the author's personal opinions. As a service provider, youth or ally, this piece can allow you to present your personal perspective on the issue unmediated by a reporter who is interpreting your views in the context of a news story, which usually includes other sources and uses your comments only selectively. There is also a certain degree of prestige and legitimacy conferred by having your views published in the commentary section, which is usually read by those people in a community who wield influence. **When to use it?** When the campaign is about to make an announcement (we'll let you know) is a great time. When something changes in terms of policies or news items that seem like a good way to hook our messages to the event. **How to use it?** If you have a relationship with the newspaper, you might want to call first and indicate that you have an informed perspective that you'd like to submit in the form of an opinion piece. This gives you the opportunity to find out if they're likely to run it, and/or to convince them to retain space for it, and find out what length they'd prefer and when they need it by. If you don't have an established reputation and/or relationship and don't want to call first, you can write the piece and submit it with a brief cover note, and keep your fingers crossed that they'll use it.

The letter to the editor: The letter to the editor allows you to build on local stories or issues that have appeared in the paper and to bridge to the issues for youth in care. We also know that the letters section is often the best read of all sections of newspapers. If you see a piece that appears in print that you feel warrants a comment or correction, clearly worded and concise (no more than 200 words) letter to the editor can do a lot to either correct misinterpretations or distortions or as a way for you to piggyback our issue on another story if it is relevant.

Social media activities
Social media is the organizing tool to punch above your weight. It is how you can share information and updates, and it is a great way you can help us grow a network of people who are knowledgeable and engaged. Tweet, blog, and feature our content on Facebook. Submit content to the website, Fostering Change.ca, and share reflections on your Twitter feed using the hashtag #fosteringchange

Holding an Event or Wanting to Offer an Opinion on a News Story: write a media advisory and submit it to your local media outlets – print, radio and TV not to mention the calendar sections of newspapers. Media outlets are often looking for content and people still read those local newspapers including politicians and community leaders.

What is a media advisory? This is short document that outlines in one to two paragraphs the principal details of your event, your availability for interviews, and what a reporter will hear, see, and learn at your event. **How do I use it?** Make sure your story is in the first sentence. Write a headline that can help grab attention. Keep the release to one page and make sure your *accurate* contact details are on the page. To distribute, email is easiest. Target the advisory to specific reporters or editors, from ones you know to any who you've noticed have an interest in these issues.

SAMPLE MEDIA ADVISORY:

Title

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE DATE

For more information contact:
[Contact name and phone number]

Who: Your organization and other participants

What: For example: An Arts Exhibition

When: [Dates and schedule of events]

Where: [Your organization's name and address]

Interview Opportunities:
[List any community leaders who are supporting this effort, speakers, participants]
Photo Opportunities/ Visuals:
[List activities that make good pictures. Some examples include: Images of people talking, taking part, and any high impact visuals.]

For interview opportunities please contact:

-30-

SAMPLE OPINION EDITORIAL:

It will also be important to engage champions and allies from constituencies like business, civic government, and other persuadable audiences in your municipalities. In this instance an opinion editorial or commentary pieces for newspapers and other media outlets could be effective. The following four-steps are helpful for laying out arguments. We've included a sample opinion editorial that you could tailor for your own community/ organization.

1. **The situation**
2. **Clearly define the problem**
3. **Frame the benefits and opportunities**
4. **Promote solutions**

    - » A CLEAR PROBLEM STATEMENT: what youth in care and aging out of care are facing
    - » THE COSTS: Identify the human, social and economic costs to society and communities.
    - » THE OPPORTUNITIES: these are resourceful, resilient youth who have shown tremendous grit simply in their ability to overcome numerous obstacles on their way to 19.
    - » THE SOLUTIONS: The provincial government has identified solutions, but there is more that can be done at both a policy and practice level.

THE SITUATION:

In BC, when youth in government care turn 19, they are generally forced to leave the system even when they have nowhere to go. A good portion of the thousands of youth who leave care annually will never enjoy that sense of a secure base as they face the challenges of early adulthood. Instead they will have to cope with the anxiety, uncertainty and disruption of trying to find housing, employment and assistance at a time when those basics are extremely tough to come by for all young people in the critical ages of 18-24.

A strong majority
– 72% of British Columbians –
believe that young people who have been in care are at greater risk of becoming homeless.

But the reality is that when youth are disconnected from community, home or family, they have no one to turn to for help with the big and small needs of everyday life; no one to guide them to success or through tough times. It's in this context that we learn that a majority of British Columbians don't believe youth at 19 are ready to leave home.

In a 2013 provincial survey, a representative group of nearly 2000 people across the province reported that they do not think that 19 year olds are ready to go it alone. Parents among those who responded told us that they would worry about the ability of their children to get along in the world if they couldn't support them after age 19. Respondents also said they expect to provide and do provide a range of financial and economic support to youth well into their 20s.

THE PROBLEM: The challenges of surviving the government care system coupled with aging out at 19 are sending a lot of youth into tough situations. Youth homelessness is a persistent and growing issue in our cities. According to a recent report (May 2013) by the Canadian Homelessness Research Network, 20% of the estimated 30,000 people who are homeless on any given night are youth. How are they getting there? The child welfare system is a major pathway to homelessness. By 19, only 21% get through high school. A number are involved in the criminal justice system and have challenges related to mental health and addiction. These issues are directly related to their experiences and lack of ongoing community and adult support through times of transition that can be challenging for ALL youth. The costs to society are

immense. The costs of investing in preventative measures and a range of supports are far less.

THE OPPORTUNITY: Youth who have come through the system are resourceful. They are survivors. But they have a new and arguably tougher road ahead: to find stable housing and employment without education, contacts, and the kind of bridging financial support that most British Columbians provide to their own children.

What we know is that for those who have been able to move on in their lives — social connections play a role in their success — the families, mentors, schools, programs and opportunities to contribute. When these factors are present, they can alter or even reverse the negative outcomes of a tough childhood and help youth build on their reserves and strength.

What can be done?

We have an opportunity to head off one of the major pathways to homelessness saving costs to the system as well as preventing terrible outcomes for young people who have only had the misfortune to have been separated from family homes.

Only 14% of BC residents want the age of support to remain at 19.

We also have an opportunity to build stronger more connected communities by providing youth in care with adequate support, connection to caring adults and opportunities to contribute.

The complexity of the problem calls for a range of possible solutions.

- **Policy/ Programs**

  Improved policies and programs that support youth beyond their 19th birthdays through sensitive times of transition. These could be a range of post-majority supports similar to those provided by BC parents for all youth until they are in a stable situation with skills to move forward.

- **Networks/ Communities of Support**

  Supporting youth earlier in their teens with skills development, but also with additional networks of support – in schools, in community centres, through kinship agreements where possible, through government and not for profit programs – rather than with single caseworkers or foster homes that can change from year to year.

- **Meaningful Participation**

  Opportunities for meaningful participation and contribution include having opportunities for valued responsibilities, for making decisions, for giving voice and being heard, and for contributing one's talents to the community.

As a community, we are coming to terms with the fact that the persistence of youth homelessness is not simply a product of individual choices, but of a system currently unable to help all young people find the homes, resources and connections they need in their journeys to adulthood. A broader conversation is critical.

What Can You do to Participate?

This guide is a preliminary resource that is pulled from a number of sources and voices. It suggests ideas, messages, and statistics to help those young people, advocates, allies, workers and friends of youth in care to connect more effectively with decision maker and public audiences.

If you are interested in learning more about anything in this guide, or if you would like support in activating some of these messages and themes in your organization, please contact the team at Vancouver Foundation to learn more about the initiative.

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