Learning & Change: Using Tracked Metrics & Quantifiable Data at Aunt Leah’s Place

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Learning & Change: Using Tracked Metrics & Quantifiable Data
LEARNING: REFLECTION ON TRACED METRICS & QUANTIFIED DATA
This document describes what Aunt Leah’s Place has learned about its programs over the past few years by reflecting on tracked metrics (such as outputs and/or outcomes) and other quantified data. The following discussion explains about trends seen in the number of people accessing each of Aunt Leah’s core program areas after intake, specific programs where the need/demand is higher than anticipated, plus others lessons learned from tracked and quantified data. The hope is that through this learning, Aunt Leah’s programs and activities are adjusted to better meet the needs of the youth and families we help.
This document also describes the tangible changes made to Aunt Leah’s programs and activities based on what it has learned from its program data. This section describes new programs/services, and modifications to existing programs, based on developmental and iterative learning, third-party program evaluations and evidence-based literature reviews.

Research and Literature Review

2018 METRO VANCOUVER YOUTH HOMELESS COUNT

The first-ever Youth Homeless Count in Metro Vancouver took place throughout the region from April 4 to 12, 2018. Anonymous surveys were conducted over a nine-day period at youth centres, high schools, shelters and other youth-serving organizations (including Aunt Leah’s Place) to better understand the homeless youth population.

The ‘2018 Metro Vancouver Youth Homeless Count’ (October 2018) established that

- A total of 681 youth and children were found to be experiencing homelessness across Metro Vancouver between the 4th and 12th of April 2018.
- Half of respondents (50%) indicated they were currently or had been previously in foster care, a group home or under an independent living arrangement.
- 11% of survey respondents indicated that ‘aging out’ of care was one of the main reasons they experienced homelessness for the first time.

This quantifiable evidence shows the irrefutable connection between having had experience in the foster care system and future homelessness. This suggests that Aunt Leah’s mandate of ‘helping to prevent children in foster care from becoming homeless’ is highly relevant and very much needed in terms of an upstream response to homelessness in Metro Vancouver.

OPPORTUNITIES IN TRANSITION: AN ECONOMIC ANALYSIS OF INVESTING IN YOUTH AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE

The ‘Opportunities in Transition’ research provides an economic perspective on the challenges and opportunities associated with youth ‘aging out’ of government care. Aunt Leah’s staff sat on the advisory committee for this report, providing researchers with data from Aunt Leah’s programs, plus help in creating a full and robust literature review in order to help guide and inform the research.

Over three reports, the following items are considered:
1. current educational, economic, social and wellness outcomes;
2. the costs of those outcomes; and
3. the costs of increased supports in relation to the potential savings and benefits they offer.
These reports offer important new insights into the economic consequences and issues for youth aging out of care. No previous study in BC has attempted to estimate the costs of current outcomes and the potential benefits from better preparing and supporting youth from care in the early years of their adulthood.

The findings are very clear:

• First, youth aging out of government care do not receive the same financial, social and other supports that most young people receive from their parents.
• Second, educational, economic, social and wellness outcomes are poor for many youth ‘aging out’ of government care.
• Third, the immediate and long-term costs of these adverse outcomes are very high — hundreds of millions of dollars every year.
• Last, the cost of increased supports is small relative to the potential savings and benefits to youth from care, and to society as a whole.

The two major conclusions of this intensive economic analysis are that:

1. Youth aging out of foster care in BC deserve the same support and opportunities as all young people.
2. Beyond the moral arguments, the economic benefits alone — reduced need for income assistance, higher earnings and more taxes paid by these youth, reduced government health care, criminal justice-related and other service expenditures — will exceed the costs of this investment. The report demonstrates significant annual costs — up to $268 million — are associated with the adverse experiences many youth aging out of foster care at 19 encounter, while a much lower level of investment - $57 million per year – would be required to improve outcomes and reduce costs.

These conclusions suggest that Aunt Leah’s work to counteract and ameliorate the adverse experiences faced by youth leaving care is both proactive and cost-effective. Interestingly, the cost-benefit ratio found through the above ‘Opportunities in Transition’ research suggests a benefit ratio of $57 million investment to ameliorate $268 million – a return of $5 for every $1 invested – falls in line with the recent social return on investment analysis by Charity Intelligence of Aunt Leah’s Place.

Aunt Leah’s Place has been selected for a fourth time, and the third consecutive year, by Charity Intelligence (Ci) as one of Canada’s Top 10 Impact Charities for 2019. Just as a financial analyst researches potential stocks to find the best investment opportunities, Ci uses similar research methods to find exceptional charities for donors. Investing in youth from care, using a ‘family model,’ is an innovative and compassionate response to homelessness. Ci found that investing in Aunt Leah’s is likely to deliver average returns of seven times for every dollar donated and is one of the most effective Canadian charities in combating issues such as; hunger, homelessness, health and improving education. Aunt Leah’s Place is the only British Columbia based charity to receive this honour.
The above research and commendations suggest that expanding services, and focusing those services increasingly and specifically on youth who have ‘aged out’, is both good policy and practice at Aunt Leah’s. Targeting more and more youth from care with resources, services and supports should have a positive and high impact.

**Third-Party Program Evaluations**

Aunt Leah’s takes youth engagement and feedback very seriously. Gold standard evaluations from third-party evaluators, who engage with program participants anonymously through mixed methods (surveys, focus groups, interviews), help provide feedback on where scarce resources should be directed, and how Aunt Leah’s can and should improve its practices.

A two-year longitudinal evaluation of The Link by the University of Victoria, School of Social Work involved a quasi-experimental design. Individual interviews were conducted with a sample of Link participants \(n=21\) and a sample of youth from foster care who did not access the Link (Comparison Group, \(n=22\)). The youths were interviewed twice, about 9 months apart (*Avoiding the Precipice, 2014*).

McCreary Centre Society carried out an *Evaluation of Aunt Leah’s Link: Housing First program (2019)* which supports young people from government care who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The purpose of the evaluation was to identify the extent to which participants’ involvement in the program contributed to improvements in their lives and to examine the extent to which Aunt Leah’s adaptation of the Housing First model is meeting the needs of youth from care. The mixed-methods evaluation included a youth self-report survey (created with youth participants at Aunt Leah’s), a focus group with program participants, and interviews with Aunt Leah’s managers/staff, landlords, and representatives from other community agencies.

Aunt Leah’s Place (ALP) again contracted McCreary Centre Society to carry out an *independent evaluation of its Supporting Education for Foster Youth (SEFFY) program*. The SEFFY drop-in program supports youth and young adults with their education planning and goals. The evaluation assessed how much SEFFY has helped participants with their academic planning and goals, and canvassed participants’ suggestions for how the program could be improved. The evaluation also captured the degree to which three recent policy changes have affected program participants, specifically the availability of free Adult Basic Education (for high-school level courses); the BC tuition waiver program for youth from government care to attend post-secondary education; and changes to Agreements with Young Adults (AYA), specifically an increase in the age limit from 24 to 27 years and an extension to the length of time a young person can receive benefits (to 48 months). Another goal of the evaluation process was to support Aunt Leah’s in creating a plan and meaningful tools (e.g., participant survey) so that SEFFY evaluation activities can be internally sustained in the future, perhaps with external support to analyze evaluation data the program collects.

The quantitative outcomes, learning and implemented change from these reports are described and explained in the sections below.
AUNT LEAH’S PROGRAMS & EVALUATIONS

The Link
The Link acts as the umbrella program for all Aunt Leah’s programs that connect former foster youth with housing, food security, life skills, health services, education, and employment opportunities – offering an experience that is more akin to that of their parented peers. For youth in transition, The Link endeavours to provide a continuum of care and planning past age 19, by the same trusted people who cared for them before the age of 19.

AVOIDING THE PRECIPICE: AN EVALUATION OF AUNT LEAH’S LINK PROGRAM IN SUPPORTING YOUTH FROM FOSTER CARE

In 2014, the University of Victoria School of Social Work released a 2-year evaluation study ‘Avoiding The Precipice: An Evaluation Of Aunt Leah’s Link Program In Supporting Youth From Foster Care’ believed to be the first of its kind in Canada, which compared participants in The Link program at Aunt Leah’s Place in New Westminster with a Comparison Group of similar former youth in care. Comparison Group participants (32%)—a substantially higher percentage than the 10% of The Link participant group—said they had experienced some form of homelessness between aging out of foster care and the Time 1 interview with UVIC researchers.

Therefore, non-Link participants experienced three times as much homelessness as Link youth after ‘aging out’. The study demonstrated that the assistance provided by Aunt Leah’s Link program is making an important difference in the lives of former youth in care, particularly in terms of housing, life skills, parenting and family preservation, and sense of belonging.

The major recommendations from the evaluation are as follows:

- **Recommendation 1:** Expand to better serve the increasing number of participants and in terms of its coverage (operating hours and geographic service area(s)).
- **Recommendation 2:** Implement options to better serve its Link participants with satellite services in Surrey.
- **Recommendation 3:** Implement educational and vocational programming.
- **Recommendation 4:** Creation of a housing worker position for the Link.
- **Recommendation 5:** On-site access to: health, mental health, education, and housing-related supports, as well as on-site linkages with (dedicated) income assistance worker and child welfare worker.
- **Recommendation 6:** Work with partners in the public and private sectors to increase and ensure the quality and tenure of the market housing that the youth experience after ‘aging out’.
- **Recommendation 7:** Use results of this study to support extending the age of government care-related supports to young people to age 24.
Historically, Link was its own stand-alone program, where support workers were expected to be all things to the youth who accessed it (e.g. housing worker, education counsellor, life skills support worker, systems navigator, employment coach). Over the past dozen years, Aunt Leah’s has been able to create specialized sister programs where workers (and partner agencies) create expertise and efficiency in the specific areas related to, and in response to, the recommendations above – e.g. service hours, housing, education, employment, health, life skills, food security. Aunt Leah’s full programmed response to these recommendations is listed in the next section below.

NEW PROGRAMS, SERVICES AND MODIFICATIONS IMPLEMENTED DUE TO PROGRAM DATA AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM ‘AVOIDING THE PRECIPICE’ EVALUATION

Since 2014, Aunt Leah’s Place has successfully responded to ALL recommendations from the aforementioned University of Victoria 2-year evaluation, through creation of new 'sister' programs and improvements to The Link as described here:

Recommendation 1: Expand to better serve the increasing number of participants and in terms of its coverage (operating hours and geographic service area(s).

- **Response to Recommendation 1:**
  - **SUNDAY HAVEN** expanded essential skills training to include weekly Sunday evening meals, workshops and counseling. Sunday Haven is an important weekend support, mirroring the typical family Sunday dinner and expanding care beyond Monday to Friday, 9 to 5.
  - **AUNT LEAH’S VANCOUVER** opens a new youth resource and office space in downtown Vancouver, through an innovative partnership with the City of Vancouver. This project brings Aunt Leah’s model of care to Vancouver, geographically expanding The Link, Aunt Leah’s umbrella program for youth who have “aged out” of care and mothers in need of additional support.

Recommendation 2: Implement options to better serve its Link participants with satellite services in Surrey.

- **Response to Recommendation 2:**
  - **CONNECTIONS PROGRAM** helps to create permanency, planning and increasing cultural connections for youth and families attached to Aunt Leah’s Place, while also acting as a compassionate response to the over-representation of First Nations youth in care. Connections operates out of Surrey, in partnership with Fraser Region Aboriginal Friendship Centre Association.

Recommendation 3: Implement educational and vocational programming.

- **Response to Recommendation 3:**
  - **SUPPORTING EDUCATION FOR FOSTER YOUTH (SEFFY)** is the provision of professional childcare staff & educational experts that create long-term and permanent planning, tracking and advocacy of foster youths’ educational careers.
  - **BOOTSTRAPS: EMPLOYING YOUTH FROM FOSTER CARE** connects foster youth with community-minded employers and the wrap around supports of Aunt Leah’s Place.

Recommendation 4: Creation of a housing worker position for the Link.

- **Response to Recommendation 4:**
  - **THE LINK: HOUSING FIRST** provides homeless participants immediate access to permanent housing and regular support services.
**Recommendation 5:** On-site access to: health, mental health, education, and housing-related supports, as well as on-site linkages with (dedicated) income assistance worker and child welfare worker.

- **Response to Recommendation 5:**
  - **COUNSELLING PROGRAM (DAN’S LEGACY):** Aunt Leah’s partners with Dan’s Legacy whose clinical counsellors provide therapy and life-skills support to our youth and families.
  - **AUNT LEAH’S CLINIC:** Through a partnership with regional health provider, Fraser Health Authority, a nurse practitioner holds a weekly Wednesday on-site clinic, increasing health care access and referral opportunities to all of Aunt Leah’s participants.
  - **BRANCHES AYA LIFE SKILLS PROGRAM** operates as a Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) accredited AYA Life Skills Program designed to support and increase access to provincial funding for former foster youth through [BC’s Agreements with Young Adults program](#). Branches creates a new avenue for poverty reduction, economic stability and education through access to life skills training and removing barriers to AYA living supports of up to $1250 per month and connecting youth participants to AYA social workers across Metro Vancouver.

**Recommendation 6:** Work with partners in the public and private sectors to increase and ensure the quality and tenure of the market housing that the youth experience after ‘aging out’.

- **Response to Recommendation 6:**
  - **FRIENDLY LANDLORD NETWORK (FLN)** is an Aunt Leah’s-led Metro Vancouver-wide network of homeowners and property managers who rent suites to youth transitioning from government care with the support of 21 local youth-serving organizations.
  - **AUNT LEAH’S FOUNDATION,** in partnership with BC Housing, operates an 11-unit apartment building, three communal homes, plus a laneway house – giving Aunt Leah’s Society a new capacity to provide affordable rental housing to youth from foster care, plus moms from care and their babies.

**Recommendation 7:** Use results of this study to support extending the age of government care-related supports to young people to age 24.

- **Response to Recommendation 7:**
  - The aforementioned ‘OPPORTUNITIES IN TRANSITION’ research provides an economic perspective on the challenges and opportunities associated with youth ‘aging out’ of government care. Aunt Leah’s staff sat on the advisory committee for this report, providing researchers with quantitative data from Aunt Leah’s programs, plus help in creating a full and robust literature review in order to help guide and inform the research. This cost-benefit report demonstrates significant annual costs – up to $268 million – are associated with the adverse experiences many youth aging out of foster care at 19 encounter, while a much lower level of investment – $57 million per year – would be required to improve outcomes and reduce costs. This quantitative analysis was an integral part of convincing policy makers to extend Agreements with Young Adults (AYA) up to age 27. For youth had been in foster care or had a Youth Agreement, they may qualify for the Agreements with a Young Adult (AYA) program to help cover the cost of things like housing, child care, tuition and health care for up to $1250/month while they go back to school, or attend rehabilitation, vocational or approved life skills program.

A ‘New’ Link Model
This ‘new’ Link model – built up from the ‘Avoiding the Precipice’ recommendations – is desirable as it necessarily:

- **Creates a team of support** (family) for youth leaving care (as most youth need supports in more than one area, not unlike most young people transitioning through early adulthood)
- **Foments expertise** from support workers in a specific area (e.g. rental and social housing markets, education financial aid system etc.)
- **Diversifies funding** streams creating sustainability from multiple funders with diverse mandates.

The Link remains as the umbrella program for all these interventions, therefore high-level outputs and outcomes for supports to former youth in care are rolled up and called ‘Link’. This is both a philosophical exercise, as it quantifies Aunt Leah’s promise to extend supports beyond age 19 for youth leaving care using a family model, plus it operates (hopefully) as a quantifiable demonstration effect showing that investing in young people from foster care through early adulthood is an efficient use of money and that these young people deserve and need supports just like their parented peers.

**Link Participation Numbers**

The number of participants served by Aunt Leah’s in FY ’15 (191) versus five years later in FY ’19 (349) represents an 82% increase in participants per annum. During the same five-year period, the proportion of ‘aged out’ participants increased from 70% (134) to 90% (314) – a 134% increase in ‘aged out’ participants since FY 2015.

**HOUSING**

Aunt Leah’s Place provides supportive housing for youth transitioning out of foster care and young mothers in need. We also help former program participants and youths who have “aged out” of foster care secure safe, long-term housing.
Aunt Leah’s uses a variety of strategies to help keep participants housed: rental supplements, landlord relations, tenancy education, shared & supportive housing, 2nd stage housing, mixed-income apartments, scattered site housing, damage deposits, suite set-ups, rehousing, and regular site visits.

Our programs target the entry and exit points of the foster care system, with a goal of providing supports, resources and opportunities similar to those provided by average Canadian families. As such, over the past five years – and in response to unaffordable rental housing markets – Aunt Leah’s has supported an increasingly greater proportion of its participants with housing and subsidies.

Housing: Quantitative Outcomes

Last year, Aunt Leah’s Place housed 201 Youth, Moms & Children through all its Housing Programs listed below, plus Housing and Education Link Program Subsidy (HELPs), rents subsidies through BC Housing Homelessness Prevention Program (HPP), federally funded Link Housing First Emergency Housing Funds and Aunt Leah’s Foundation. In the midst of one of the most expensive rental housing markets in the world, Aunt Leah’s increasingly housed and financially subsidized a greater proportion of its participants over the past 5 years while simultaneously serving a greater number of participants overall.

AUNT LEAH’S HOUSE provides safe, supported housing for pregnant and parenting teen moms currently in government care. In FY 2019, the program supported 7 young moms and 6 babies. The program also supports alumni families: 21 moms and 22 children were helped in areas such as housing, parenting, legal supports, social connections and employment.

THRESHOLDS PROGRAM provides supported housing and services for adult moms at risk of losing custody of their child. In June 2017, a second Thresholds home opened, effectively doubling program capacity to keep moms and babies together and preventing another generation from entering the foster care system.
In FY 2019, these homes brought security to 35 moms and babies. In November 2019, Thresholds opened one of the first laneway houses in New Westminster, and the first to be put to a social purpose. This housing resource provides a home for or a small family.

**SUPPORT LINK** provides transitional housing for teens in foster care who want to live independently, yet continue to receive supports in order to develop essential life skills before ‘aging out’ at age nineteen. In FY 2019, staff supported 21 youth in preparing for their 19th birthdays and adulthood.

**THE LINK: HOUSING FIRST** provides homeless participants immediate access to permanent housing and regular support services. In FY 2019, the program permanently housed 22 homeless individuals and re-housed another 12 individuals.

**FRIENDLY LANDLORD NETWORK (FLN)** is an Aunt Leah’s-led Metro Vancouver-wide network of homeowners and property managers who rent suites to youth transitioning from government care, with the support of 20 local youth-serving organizations. FLN housed 11 youth from care last year.

**HOUSING AND EDUCATION LINK PROGRAM SUBSIDY (HELPS)** program provides housing subsidies to former foster kids so they may continue to pursue their education in a supportive space. Aunt Leah’s distributed 34 Education Awards for a total of $39,000 last year.

**LALE HOUSE** gives safe, affordable communal housing for young people transitioning from foster care within a single-detached home. The first tenants began living at the home in June 2019.

In 2017, **AUNT LEAH’S FOUNDATION**, in partnership with BC Housing, acquired a 10-unit apartment building and a five bedroom home – giving Aunt Leah’s Society a new capacity to provide affordable rental housing to youth from foster care, plus moms from care and their babies.

### Housing: Learning Through Tracked Metrics & Quantifiable Data

![Participants in Safe Secure Housing for the Entire Year](chart.png)

We have seen that rent subsidies are the most important tool for housing stabilization. The above chart (‘Participants in Safe Housing for the Entire Year’) fiscal years 2014-15 and 2015-16 represent the time period when Aunt Leah’s first received access to distribute BC Housing rent subsidies through the Homelessness Prevention Program. Moving forward, beyond FY 2016, rent subsidies became maxed out.
and supply could not keep up with demand as the number of participants seeking help through Aunt Leah’s grew year-over-year.

Aunt Leah’s tracks month-over-month housing stability as well (see figure Number of Link Participants Served; Proportion in Safe, Secure Housing per Month). These figures largely mirror the previous annual housed tracking; the major difference being 2017-18 when new housing came online through Aunt Leah’s Foundation. This suggests that ownership of housing through Aunt Leah’s can help stabilize participants’ housing situations.

Another important metric tracked, which relates directly to housing as well as Aunt Leah’s mission ‘to help mothers in need from losing custody of their children’, is Maintaining Child Custody. Thresholds program communally and supportively houses adult moms in need who are at-risk of losing or not regaining child
custody due to homelessness. Therefore, housing acts as a tool to keep families together and prevent another generation of children from entering the foster care system.

**Implementing the Housing First for Homeless Youth from Care**

In October 2014, Aunt Leah’s place began a federal contract to run, what we believe to be, the first Housing First program specifically for homeless youth from foster care. This program is The Link: Housing First.

Housing First runs under the following principles:

![Housing First Principles](image)

Fidelity to the above principles was found to be very important in launching a successful Housing First (HF) project. The cross-Canada [At Home/Chez Soi](#) project found through its three-year, five-city research found that “supporting all components of the HF model and investing in training and technical support can pay off in improved outcomes...In [this] study, fidelity improved as new programs worked out problems and gained experience, and better fidelity predicted better outcomes. This finding also helps to validate the HF approach. That is, if the intervention was not effective, better fidelity to it would not improve outcomes”. Therefore, strict adherence to the HF model is necessary, and this fidelity adherence is monitored at Aunt Leah’s by federally funded project officers.

However, youth as a population was not specifically studied through any of the five sites and over the three years of the At Home/Chez Soi project. The population focus areas were:

1. Moncton: Rural
2. Montreal: Social Housing
3. Toronto: Ethnoracial
4. Vancouver: Drug using
5. Winnipeg: Indigenous

Yet the study “documented the early origins of homelessness in the life histories of participants, which very often included early childhood trauma and leaving home to escape abuse”. Therefore, the experiences of childhood and youth – the primary populations experiences served by Aunt Leah’s –
were found to have an outsized influence on future homelessness through the At Home/Chez Soi study where the average age of study participants was in the mid-forties.

Therefore, the questions remained – how would Aunt Leah’s roll out the Housing First model, specifically from youth from care; in the context of

- a **rental housing crisis** which disallows immediate housing or choice within market rentals
- within a rental market **without affordable housing** for those at Income Assistance or rent subsidy levels
- a Housing First **service model that had never been formally tested on youth from care**
- serving **youth from care who were actively losing community and individualized supports** as they ‘aged out’
- **HF eligibility requirements that were skewed against youth**

**Housing First Fidelity: Using Data Over Time**
Aunt Leah’s response was to actively monitor fidelity and adherence to the 38-points of the HF model. The fidelity report below, completed by the Housing First team, gives a year-long snapshot example of monitoring HF fidelity through September 2015 to September 2016 using a five-point Likert Scale, with ‘0’ representing no fidelity and ‘5’ meaning complete fidelity to any given metric.
**Housing Choice and Structure**

- 2015-Sep
- 2016-Mar
- 2016-Sep

**Separation of Housing and Services**

- 2015-Sep
- 2016-Mar
- 2016-Sep

**Service Philosophy**

- 2015-Sep
- 2016-Mar
- 2016-Sep
Over this time period, we saw the program struggle to find adherence to metrics regarding housing outcomes (Choice, Affordability, and Availability); yet, interestingly, key adherence outcomes for Service Array improved (Employment & Educational Services, Psychiatric Services, Substance Use Treatment, and Medical Services) improved over this time.

**Housing First Fidelity: Learning from the Data**

The key learning was that youth don’t just ‘age out’ of housing, they also ‘age out’ of pediatric health services and other supports – that is, they actively ‘age out’ of HF fidelity at age 19. They have to get in a new adult queue for these Service supports and are often seen as not as chronic or as in-need – therefore, go to end of the line. Therefore, Aunt Leah’s began to build Housing First fidelity internally and onsite; following a ‘family model’ of supports which also fulfilled HF fidelity. These included programs that Housing first participants could access in the domains of:

- **Education**: Supporting Education for Foster Youth (SEFFY)
- **Market Housing Availability, Affordability & Choice**: Friendly Landlord Network
- **Housing Affordability**: Rent Subsidies through BC Housing Homelessness Prevention Program (HPP)
- **Psychiatric Services, Substance Use Treatment**: Dan’s Legacy on-site clinical counsellors
- **Employment**: Bootstraps: Employing Youth from Care
- **Medical Services**: Aunt Leah’s Clinic, onsite nurse practitioner

Eligibility for federal Housing First support also proved difficult at times for homeless youth from care. To be eligible, a young person would need to be considered Episodically or Chronically Homeless. To be Chronically Homeless, the individual needs to homeless for six months or more in the past year. If we take the example of a middle-aged person, 6 months of homelessness for a 50 year-old (600 months) is equal to 1% of their life time. However, 6 months of homelessness for a 19 year-old (228 months) is equal to 2.6% of their life time. This example represents a proportional barrier to Housing First supports that is over 2 and a half times higher for youth.

Using quantitative analysis, an argument was built for easing entry to Housing First supports for youth leaving care. In March 2017, a federal directive made a clarifying statement on eligibility requirement for those exiting institutions: “Individuals exiting institutions (e.g. child welfare system) who have a history of chronic and episodic homelessness and cannot identify a fixed address upon their release”. The clarifying
directive stated that ‘bounced around’ between foster homes could now be considered to have a history of chronic/episodic homelessness. Nearly all youth in foster care get ‘bounced around’; Aunt Leah’s internal research suggests that for the youth it serves, the average youth will have experienced nine different foster care placements before leaving care. This quantitative analysis helps Aunt Leah’s advocate for policy changes around HF eligibility for care leavers and eased entry to many youth who would have otherwise not received these supports.

Evaluation of Aunt Leah’s Link: Housing First Program

Aunt Leah’s Place contracted McCreary Centre Society to carry out an independent evaluation of its Link: Housing First initiative (from April 2018 to March 2019). McCreary is a non-profit agency in Vancouver, BC that focuses on research, evaluation, and youth engagement initiatives with young people across the province.

McCreary runs a Youth Research Academy, or YRA, for young people aged 16 to 24 in and from government care, and many have also had experience with homelessness. Youth in the YRA are trained to design, deliver, analyze, and disseminate research projects of interest to young people with care experience and the agencies that serve them.

The purpose of the Link Housing First evaluation was to see how much young people’s involvement in the program contributed to improvements in their lives. The evaluation also looked at the Housing First model and identified how successfully Aunt Leah’s adapted it to meet the needs of youth from care.

INvolving Participants in Evaluation Design

McCreary carried out a mixed-methods evaluation. There were interviews with Aunt Leah’s staff; landlords connected to the program; and other community agencies who were familiar with the Link Housing First. There was also a youth focus group and a youth survey. The survey was co-developed by young people at Aunt Leah’s, with support from McCreary researchers. To do this, McCreary carried out a workshop at Aunt Leah’s, in which participants learned how to create a survey. Young people then developed a draft survey for participants in the Link: Housing First program, and McCreary finalized the survey with input from Aunt Leah’s managers and staff.

The idea was that involving young people in developing the survey could be a meaningful experience for them, and could help to ensure that the survey captured what youth felt was important to ask about.
Also, it was hoped that their involvement in creating the survey would encourage program participants to complete it (i.e., it would help with buy-in). A total of 26 program participants completed the survey. All survey respondents had experienced challenges finding housing at some point. They most commonly identified inability to afford the rent and discrimination as barriers to finding housing.

### MOST COMMONLY REPORTED CHALLENGES TO FINDING HOUSING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Couldn't afford the rent</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination (based on looks, age, etc.)</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being on Social Assistance</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shortage of safe &amp; affordable housing</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couldn't pay the damage deposit</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health challenges</td>
<td>46%</td>
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<tr>
<td>No phone to receive calls from landlords</td>
<td>46%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Substance use challenges</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had a pet</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No résumé</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similarly, focus group participants talked about discrimination from landlords, due to youth’s age, as a barrier to finding housing. Some landlords who took part in the evaluation noted that their personal experiences renting to youth were as positive, if not more positive, than their experiences renting to adults. However, they felt that many landlords held negative perceptions and stereotypes regarding young people, which needed to change on a systemic level so that more landlords would feel comfortable renting to youth. Another comment in the focus group was that it was difficult to stay motivated to look for housing when young people had already been looking for a long time and had experienced multiple barriers to securing housing.

Program participants were asked what they have needed to help them find housing, and they most commonly identified a housing subsidy.

### WHAT PARTICIPANTS HAVE NEEDED TO HELP THEM FIND HOUSING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requirement</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rent subsidy</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to a housing database (list of available housing)</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support with getting references</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good connections</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive adult to accompany them to rental viewings</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income (from a job, Income Assistance, etc.)</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of tenancy rights and responsibilities</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roommates to share costs</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Landlords who were interviewed felt it could be beneficial for youth from care to complete a program such as Ready to Rent to help them find housing. They felt that youth who had a certificate from such a course would look favourable to landlords and would have an advantage over other young people in securing an accommodation. Access to a website that listed available rentals (e.g., a database) was also identified by landlords, as well as program participants, as something that could help young people find housing.
Most survey respondents (85%) had difficulty keeping their housing at some point. Among these participants, their most commonly reported challenges included problems with roommates and being unable to afford the rent.

**MOST COMMONLY REPORTED CHALLENGES TO KEEPING HOUSING**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problems with roommates</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couldn’t afford the rent</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health challenges</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication problems with landlord</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty with day-to-day life skills</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance use challenges</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broke up with partner</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had a pet</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In line with the survey answers, focus group participants highlighted challenges with roommates as contributing to them losing their housing in the past. They underscored the importance of finding reliable roommates and developing a positive relationship with them. Mental health challenges—experienced by roommates and themselves—had also contributed to difficulties maintaining housing.

Landlords identified some challenges associated with renting to young people (not necessarily those connected to Aunt Leah’s Place). Some felt that many young people were not “rent ready” in terms of the level of responsibility and the skills that were needed to live independently. When asked on the survey what was helping them to keep their current housing, participants most commonly identified a rent subsidy. Focus group participants also highlighted the importance of youth receiving long-term rent subsidies to help them maintain stability. Some also felt that financial literacy courses could be helpful.

**SUPPORTS THAT HELPED PARTICIPANTS TO KEEP THEIR CURRENT HOUSING**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rent subsidy</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income (from a job, Income Assistance, etc.)</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to a safe and supportive worker</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing their tenancy rights and responsibilities</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Focus group participants also said it was vital for youth to learn conflict-resolution skills, to prepare them for living with roommates. They felt that adults should start preparing and guiding youth from care at a young age (such as age 15 or younger if possible) on how to live with roommates, because having these skills increased their likelihood of experiencing success with roommates later on. Also, youth and landlords felt that young renters needed support to learn skills to communicate effectively with their landlord, such as connecting with their landlord when something needed to be fixed, and responding to landlords’ messages.

Feedback from program participants was that this program was different from other housing programs they had been involved in, because there was no age limit, as opposed to other programs that had an age
cut-off. They also felt this housing program was more flexible and had fewer rules than other programs, which they appreciated. For example, they were allowed to bring their own furniture into their rental, which had not been the case in other programs, and this helped to make their place feel like a home.

Participants also noted they felt a strong connection to this program, unlike other housing programs they had been involved in. For example, they said that staff took the time to view rentals with them, and they felt that staff were dependable and genuinely cared about them.

Staff and partners felt that a strength of the program was its flexible and trauma-informed approach to working with youth from care. Staff’s involvement with the program highlighted to them that sometimes youth were not ready to find housing or to access services, and it was important to understand a young person’s situation and experiences and to be flexible in the supports they offered. For example, it was important to engage in outreach work with program participants who needed it, rather than expecting youth to attend a meeting in an office setting. Staff and partners stressed the value of relationship-building with program participants.

**LANDLORD ENGAGEMENT**

Staff saw the relationships that Aunt Leah’s developed and maintained with landlords as another program success. They also felt Aunt Leah’s helped to raise awareness among landlords and others in the community about youth from care, and to reduce negative stereotypes associated with young renters. Staff realized it was important to ensure that the landlords felt appreciated because they were supporting vulnerable youth and made a decision to charge less rent than they could in the current market.

Although the program has been successful in engaging landlords, an ongoing challenge has been to engage a greater number of landlords to increase housing availability for youth from care. Staff came to realize that more needs to be done to raise awareness of the challenges that youth from care experience (including homelessness), and to encourage more landlords to rent to this group of young people.

**HF SUPPORTS AND SERVICES**

Another identified program success is that it supports participants not only with housing but also in other areas (e.g., education, employment, mental health), which helps them to feel stable and connected. Staff who took part in the evaluation felt that Housing First should not exist in a silo, and that program participants should have access to a wide range of supports and services, even if they have not yet found housing.

They highlighted the importance of developing as many partnerships as possible with other agencies so that the Housing First program could offer participants wrap-around supports that extend beyond their agency (e.g., to allow participants to access supports that Aunt Leah’s does not offer). Staff felt the Link: Housing First program has been successful in developing these partnerships and in offering such wrap-around supports (including supports for youth with FASD and for those who experienced sexual violence).

Program participants were asked if they had experienced changes in their life because of their involvement in Link Housing First.
Most survey respondents reported that their involvement in the program helped ‘quite a bit’ or ‘very much’ to improve their housing situation and their knowledge of their rental rights and responsibilities. Around half indicated that the program helped them quite a bit or very much to reduce their moves from one housing situation to another, and to reduce their risk of homelessness. The vast majority reported that their involvement has helped at least a little in these areas.

Feedback from the focus group was consistent with the survey findings. Some commented that the program helped them to transition out of homelessness, and said they would still be homeless if not for the support they received through the Link: Housing First. They also described the housing subsidy they received through the program as key to helping them maintain housing. Similarly, most survey respondents reported improvements in their well-being, including mental health, hopefulness, and confidence, as well as their social connections and engagement in their community, which they attributed to their involvement in Link: Housing First. Focus group participants talked about really appreciating the emotional support they received from program staff, which they said helped to improve their overall well-being and sense of stability.
youth from care felt a sense of belonging and a sense of community, which many would otherwise not experience.

Survey respondents reported improved knowledge of available supports and services because of their involvement in the program. They also reported greater access to needed services and supports, including income supports, education, and employment-related supports. In the focus group, participants explained that involvement in the program helped to improve their employment situation because staff had informed them of job opportunities, which they applied for and were successful in securing. Some had also worked at Aunt Leah’s tree lot, selling trees during the holiday season. Some also mentioned that program staff have helped them with accessing education supports and enrolling in school programs.

When asked about skill improvements because of their involvement in the program, survey respondents most commonly identified improvements in housing-related skills, including finding housing, keeping their housing, and communicating with landlords.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Those who indicated ‘quite a bit’ or ‘very much’ improvement which they attributed to their involvement in the program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Keeping housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating with landlords</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping with life challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaching their goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting skills (among young parents)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining healthy relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budgeting/money management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaning, housekeeping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding or keeping a job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthy living (sleeping well, eating healthy, etc.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most also reported improved skills in stress management and coping with challenges. Around half reported improved skills in budgeting, cleaning/housekeeping, finding or keeping a job, and healthy living (e.g., sleeping well, eating healthy, and exercising).
PARTICIPANT SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE LINK: HOUSING FIRST

• Evaluation participants were asked if there were any supports they had not yet received through the program which they wanted to access, and if they had any suggestions to improve the program. Many stated they were receiving all the supports they needed, and they had no suggestions because they were satisfied with how the program was running. Others had some suggestions, including:
  • To offer more one-on-one support around learning life-skills, including budgeting and money-management. So while many felt they had gained skills through Link: Housing First, they felt they could be further supported to develop their life-skills.
  • Another suggestion was to offer more check-ins for participants who wanted them.
  • Some felt that harm-reduction could be better supported. For example, participants should be allowed to keep their substance use equipment, such as bongs, rather than have them confiscated. They felt that when these are confiscated, there’s a greater likelihood that participants will engage in riskier substance use.
  • They also identified that more funding is needed so that program participants can receive the supports they need in a wide range of areas (e.g., school and training programs; eating healthy). Staff also felt that more funding is needed to increase staffing so that participants can receive the one-on-one support they need.

LANDLORD SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE LINK: HOUSING FIRST

Landlords were asked if there was anything Aunt Leah’s could do to better support landlords connected to the program. Those who were interviewed had no suggestions because they were satisfied with the support offered.

AUNT LEAH’S STAFF, PARTNERS, AND LANDLORDS SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE THE HOUSING FIRST MODEL FOR YOUTH

Beyond suggestions specific to the program, Aunt Leah’s staff, partners, and landlords offered suggestions for how the housing model could change to better support youth from care.

• They felt should be greater flexibility in the Housing First eligibility criteria, such as by not excluding youth who couch surf. The criteria should also place less importance on the amount of time a youth has been homeless, and more emphasis on preventing homelessness by including younger youth at risk of homelessness.
• The reporting requirements for expenses should be re-structured to become less onerous.
• Increasing the amount of each rent subsidy would give program participants more housing options. Also, further increasing the duration of the subsidy (beyond 12 months) would support participants to maintain housing stability.
• Some expressed that the Housing First model is not viable in Greater Vancouver due to the housing market. A suggestion was to increase the availability of temporary modular housing.
• Landlords felt that in order for more landlords to rent to young people, including those from care, a system needs to be in place which guarantees compensation to landlords who experience a loss due to renting to youth (e.g., resulting from not paying rent or from damages).
• Also, landlords could share their positive experiences renting to young people, which would hopefully encourage other landlords to do the same, and help to combat the negative perceptions and stereotypes relating to young renters.
• Program participants who took part in a focus group were asked what their housing program would look like if they could design their own program.
They said that ideally, participants would be offered more housing options so they could exercise more choice in where they live.

Also, the program would own some housing, which could be rented to program participants.

There would be a community room or communal space within the building, for participants to connect with one another. One participant commented that the laundry room in their building was currently the only communal space and they wished there was an alternative space for people to socialize.

Participants said that many youth became homeless because they did not want to surrender their pet, and having more pet-friendly rentals would help with this situation.

They also felt that any youth housing program shouldn’t adopt a ‘one size fits all’ approach. They emphasized that offering individualized support is helpful in supporting young people to achieve their goals and stability.

Also, it would be important to support participants to gain skills and knowledge relating to living independently, such as how to resolve conflicts with roommates; tenancy rights and responsibilities; and other skills to help them keep their housing.

PARTICIPANTS: WHAT SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN A HOUSING PROGRAM FOR YOUTH?

Survey participants were also asked about what should be included in a housing program for youth from care. They most commonly identified a rent subsidy, followed by support to develop life-skills.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What survey respondents most commonly felt should be included in a housing program for youth from government care</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rent subsidy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support with life-skills (money management, cooking, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support with making a place feel like home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning about tenancy rights and responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support communicating with landlord</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help with making a back-up plan in case housing falls through</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No age limit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support with setting meaningful goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support with reaching goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help applying for income supports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ADAPTING HOUSING FIRST FOR YOUTH FROM CARE

The evaluation included an analysis of how Aunt Leah’s adapted the Housing First model to their Link: Housing First program. The analysis showed that the program has adhered to many components of the Housing First model that have been deemed best practice for addressing homelessness. This includes the things on the side, such as partnerships and collaborations with other programs and agencies and offering participants supports beyond housing, to enhance their overall well-being.

Challenges

A Housing First principle that program participants felt could be emphasized more in the Link Housing First program was harm-reduction, to better support program participants who use substances. Also, there’s a systemic issue of lack of affordable housing in Greater Vancouver that has created barriers for the program to adhere to two core principles of the Housing First model, specifically of offering
participants immediate access to permanent housing and of offering them some choice in the type of housing they receive.

**Strengths**
A strength of the program is that it has expanded the original Housing First model to offer participants a wide range of supports and services even before they secure housing. There’s also flexibility in the type of accommodation that participants can secure through the program, including living with roommates to reduce costs. In addition, because of a shift in the eligibility criteria for Housing First funding (through the Homelessness Partnering Strategy), the program has been able to offer supports to youth who are preparing to exit care and are at risk of future homelessness, as well as to those who are homeless. This shift has enabled the program to contribute to reducing the risk of chronic homelessness among youth from care, who we know are over-represented among the homeless population. Evaluation participants saw this as a positive step but felt that the funders (HPS) could do even more to expand the eligibility criteria and to address homelessness prevention.

**CONCLUSION**
The evaluation findings showed that the Link: Housing First program has successfully adapted the Housing First model to support youth from government care, despite the challenging housing market in Greater Vancouver. The findings also showed that the program has contributed to improvements in participants’ lives, which can contribute to their stability and well-being into adulthood.

**LIFE SKILLS, FOOD SECURITY & HEALTH**
Aunt Leah’s life skills, food and health programs provide valuable resources and teach participants the essential skills needed to navigate living on their own. Youth and Moms learn through community workshops, hands-on experience and expert counsel. Aunt Leah’s food based programs help ensure that youth from care and young moms along with their families avoid hunger and are taught the skills to make nutritious, affordable meals. Our health programs concentrate on providing on-site physical and mental health supports.

**Life Skills, Food Security & Health: Quantitative Outcomes**
THE LINK DROP-IN & OUTREACH acts as the one-to-one life skills provider for Aunt Leah’s former foster youth. In 2018-19, The Link distributed 2144 Transit Tickets, provided 3738 Meals or Groceries, and created 6748 Connections (e.g. Meetings, Phone Calls) for Link youth.
ESSENTIAL SKILLS WORKSHOPS (ESW) offers a variety of weekly workshops, which have become a tradition that our young people and families rely on to gain valuable life skills, connect socially and enjoy a healthy meal together as well as have an opportunity to participate in creative and recreational activities. In 2018-19, ESW held 50 workshops/meals and served 476 young people.

SUNDAY HAVEN expands essential skills training to include weekly Sunday evening meals, workshops and counseling. Sunday Haven is an important weekend support, mirroring the typical family Sunday dinner and expanding care beyond Monday to Friday, 9 to 5. IN 2018-19, Sunday Haven held 53 workshops/meals, serving 1004 individuals.
COOKING CLUB AND AUNT LEAH’S FOOD NETWORK: Cooking Club is a comprehensive 12-week program that helps moms from Aunt Leah’s House and Thresholds Programs get employment and life-skills training in food preparation, while increasing the capacity of low-income mothers to access food and increase their skills in order to provide healthy food for themselves, their children, and their community. In 2018-19, Cooking Club served 23 moms and 21 children; Aunt Leah’s Food Network distributed over $65,000 worth of food to Aunt Leah’s participants.

COUNSELLING PROGRAM (DAN’S LEGACY): Aunt Leah’s is proud to partner with Dan’s Legacy whose counsellors provide therapy and life-skills support to our youth and families. Seventy-two participants received 1037 counselling sessions in 2018-19.

AUNT LEAH’S CLINIC: Through a partnership with regional health provider, Fraser Health Authority, a nurse practitioner holds a weekly Wednesday on-site clinic, increasing health care access and referral opportunities to all of Aunt Leah’s participants. In 2018-19, 42 individuals had 75 visits with the nurse practitioner.

SPOONS UP is an online guide of accessible, free and low-cost food resources in the Lower Mainland designed with youth leaving care in mind (see: www.spoonsup.ca). Each location has been personally visited by allies with lived experience and has been included because it offers quality food and is safe and welcoming for youth.

PLATES OF POSSIBILITY Since 2018, Plates of Possibility (PoP) has hosted a series of crowd-sourcing events organized by youth in and from foster care for youth in and from foster care. Each event provides a platform to share their community-based project ideas that will benefit themselves and other youth. Youth present their projects throughout the evening while attendees enjoy a delicious meal. At the end of the night, attendees vote on the project that they want to see brought to life, and the chosen presenters go home with a full stomach and funding for their project. Three events have funded three projects since November 2019.

BRANCHES AYA LIFE SKILLS PROGRAM Starting November 2018, Aunt Leah’s Branches Program began operating as a Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) accredited AYA Life Skills Program designed to support and increase access to provincial funding for former foster youth through BC’s Agreements with Young Adults program. Branches is a 3 to 6 month program for past youth in care wishing to pursue life skills, including training, education and/or employment. Participants receive an individualized program using classroom-based training and one-to-one mentor-ship in the areas of Interpersonal Skills, Employment, Housing, Education, Health and Wellness and Financial Literacy. Branches creates a new avenue for poverty reduction, economic stability and education through access to life skills training and removing barriers to AYA living supports. The total number of youth enrolled into the program from November 2018 to March 2019 was 21.

Starting 2018, CONNECTIONS PROGRAM has been dedicated to permanency, planning and increasing cultural connections for youth and families attached to Aunt Leah’s Place. ‘Connections’ encourages exploration of each participant’s roots with the goal of linking each individual with long-term permanent connections that increase coping mechanisms and protective factors. This program works to increase the level of cultural safety and permanency at Aunt Leah’s Place while also acting as a compassionate response to the over-representation of First Nations youth in care.
Aunt Leah’s education and employment programs help give youth opportunities to jumpstart their life, connect with mentors, and establish a base for a lifetime of success.

**Education & Employment: Quantitative Outcomes**

**SUPPORTING EDUCATION FOR FOSTER YOUTH (SEFFY)** is the provision of professional childcare staff & educational experts that create long-term and permanent planning, tracking and advocacy of foster youths’ educational careers. In 2018-19, **SEFFY worked with 98 individuals, 58% of these individuals graduated or are on track to graduate from high school.**

**BOOTSTRAPS: EMPLOYING YOUTH FROM FOSTER CARE** connects foster youth with community-minded employers and the wrap around supports of Aunt Leah’s Place. In 2018-19, **Bootstraps provided 36 job placements with community employers.**
This evaluation canvassed program participants, Aunt Leah’s staff, and external stakeholders for their feedback on the SEFFY program. Evaluation participants were also asked about systemic education related barriers and policy changes, as well as lessons learned and recommendations to best support youth in and from care with their education.

Program participants identified barriers that youth in and from care often experience to graduating from high school, including lack of financial and emotional support, and adults not expecting them to succeed at school. Mental health challenges were the most commonly identified barrier to pursuing post-secondary education. Evaluation participants shared feedback on how the SEFFY program addresses barriers and how it supports young people to achieve their education and employment goals.

Youth participants expressed appreciation for the range of supports they received through SEFFY, including emotional support and encouragement to persevere with their education. Over half of survey respondents felt that Aunt Leah’s staff expected them to do well at school, and some focus group participants described feeling motivated to achieve their goals knowing that staff cared about their progress. Similarly, most survey respondents reported increased motivation to reach their academic goals, as well as better education planning and a greater chance of succeeding at school because of the support they received through SEFFY. The more times they had accessed supports through SEFFY, the more likely they were to report these positive outcomes.

Findings also suggested that program participants gained greater knowledge of how to navigate the education system and access funding. Further, SEFFY supported participants, including young parents, to
complete high school; undertake short-term training and certification programs; pursue post-secondary education; access a tuition waiver and other education funding; and/or secure a job.

Evaluation participants identified a number of program strengths, including SEFFY’s emphasis on developing trusting relationships with participants; the holistic, individualized, and low-barrier approach; and the dedicated staff. Many of the strengths were consistent with the lessons that staff and stakeholders had learned about how to best support youth in and from care with their education. Under-staffing was seen as a major program challenge, as was limited funds. Evaluation participants suggested that more staff and program funding were needed to provide youth with the supports necessary to experience education success. They also offered other program suggestions, as well as broader recommendations (beyond SEFFY) to best support youth in and from care with their education.

The mixed-methods evaluation approach enabled the integration of quantitative survey data with more in-depth qualitative information. Findings in this report suggest that the SEFFY program is meeting its objectives of helping participants reach their education goals.

**PROGRAM STRENGTHS & CHALLENGES**

Evaluation participants identified strengths and challenges associated with SEFFY. Many of the strengths were consistent with the lessons they had learned about how to best support youth in and from care with their education.
STRENGTHS

Stakeholders felt that SEFFY staff knew how to engage program participants; were reliable and conscientious; and were dedicated to helping youth pursue their education and succeed at school. Aunt Leah’s staff working in other programs also expressed gratitude and admiration toward SEFFY staff.

Low-barrier

External stakeholders described SEFFY as very accessible, low-barrier, and accommodating to young people. Stakeholders felt the program was flexible not only in meeting youth where they were at, but also in not imposing age restrictions. They valued that the program offered support to youth who had aged out of care, and that SEFFY was available to support young people with their education whenever they were ready.

Supports for youth transitioning out of care

Aunt Leah’s staff felt that the training opportunities which SEFFY offered to youth aged 19 and older were invaluable because these youth would have difficulty accessing such training without the program’s support, and the training helped to improve their skills and bolster their résumé. Stakeholders felt that more of these supports should be available in the community for youth aging out of care, to ease their transition to adulthood and to narrow the gap in services that exists.

Individualized

Evaluation participants explained that SEFFY staff adapted the learning and supports they offered in order to meet each youth’s individual needs. They regarded this as a strength of the program and highlighted the importance of flexibility and tailoring education supports to each youth’s needs and learning style.

Holistic approach

Youth, Aunt Leah’s staff, and external stakeholders said the wide range of supports which SEFFY offered to program participants—including housing (e.g., rental subsidy), transportation (transit pass), emotional support, and access to food—helped youth to meet their basic needs and contributed to their readiness and ability to pursue their education goals. Staff and external stakeholders highlighted the importance of education programs taking a holistic approach by addressing all of a young person’s needs, rather than focusing only on education and employment.

Integrated internal supports coupled with external partnerships

Some stakeholders said that offering a variety of supports and services out of one building within Aunt Leah’s was a good model because it enabled different Aunt Leah’s programs to work together to support each young person’s range of needs. They also said that when education support was offered in a location where youth already felt comfortable and safe (e.g., where youth already accessed other supports), it can help to increase their likelihood of staying engaged with the education support. Another program strength was that SEFFY staff were well-connected to a range of supports outside Aunt Leah’s to which they could connect youth to pursue their education and employment goals if needed.

Supporting autonomy

Evaluation participants said that SEFFY supported youth in and from care to develop autonomy, which they felt was critical for young people’s successful transition to adulthood. Development of autonomy included teaching program participants the skills they needed to ultimately access resources on their own, and supporting them to learn how to seek knowledge and advocate for themselves. (One youth described it as “training of self-responsibility”.)

Trusting relationships

Youth described the support they received from staff as “relieving” because it helped to reduce their school-related barriers and stress. They valued the relationship they had with program staff and felt that staff took the time to understand them and nurture them. Youth said that SEFFY staff in some ways took on the role of a parent because of the all-around support they offered to program participants. For
example, one participant recounted that staff drove them to school if they needed a ride, and gave them the emotional support they needed to succeed. Evaluation participants identified relationship-building with youth as a strength of the program. Aunt Leah’s staff said that developing a trusting relationship with program participants, and being attuned to their needs, was key to success. Youth also valued that SEFFY staff stayed connected and checked in with program participants even after they finished their school program or vocational training. Youth expressed great appreciation for SEFFY staff’s faith in them and staff’s commitment to helping them succeed.

Celebrating successes
Participants said they valued the emotional support they received from staff both during stressful times as well as during times of celebration, such as when they successfully completed a training course. Aunt Leah’s staff explained that the program hosted celebrations for participants to mark their achievements—both large achievements such as graduating from a school program, as well as smaller ones along the way. Staff felt that these celebrations helped youth to feel proud and empowered, and helped motivate them to persevere with their education and employment pursuits.

CHALLENGES
Under-Staffing
Aunt Leah’s staff and stakeholders identified under-staffing as a major program challenge. They felt that having too few staff to run the program (1.5 staff members) led to staff being over-stretched and over-worked. Also, the full-time staff member regularly had to train new part-time staff, because the latter would often move on to new positions. This situation further increased the workload of the full-time staff. Moreover, insufficient staffing led to many youth not receiving the one-on-one education support they needed. Staff explained that many of the youth needed individualized support to learn basic skills which would help them develop “education maturity” and succeed at school. This need tended to be greatest among young people who had been disengaged from school for some time and struggled to complete high school.

Financial Aid
Another challenge was that funds available to youth through SEFFY (e.g., bursaries) were limited, which resulted in SEFFY staff needing to access funds and resources through program partners or other agencies, or in youth needing to directly apply for external funds. A few stakeholders who facilitated education or employment workshops at Aunt Leah’s said that youth attendance was low, and that sometimes there were more staff than youth in attendance. Stakeholders explained that it was difficult to motivate youth to attend an optional workshop, facilitated by an outside person (as opposed to Aunt Leah’s staff) whom the youth had not developed a trusting relationship with.
Mental Health

Aunt Leah’s staff explained that youth in and from care have many challenges, including with mental health. These challenges can lead to reduced motivation and loss of momentum when it comes to pursuing their education, and it can be difficult for staff to keep youth engaged in working toward their education goals. Staff identified the importance of being accommodating, flexible and understanding of youth’s circumstances, but that it was also important to support them to move forward and to persevere. They felt these two facets were sometimes difficult to balance. This situation also highlighted to them the importance of offering youth support in areas beyond education, including mental health.

Life Skills

Another challenge was that many youth in and from care struggled with basic life-skills, which created barriers for them to pursue their schooling and experience educational success. For example, they might miss meetings at school due to challenges with time-management, or might not have the study skills which are needed to do well on tests. This situation underscored to staff the importance of supporting youth to learn basic skills, which they acknowledged was a gradual process rather than achieved through one-off workshops.

Familial Supports

Finally, staff pointed out that program participants tended to not have family who could help them navigate the education system, and SEFFY stepped in to fill that role. For example, program staff have met with officials at a youth’s school to ensure the youth did not lose their funding, and have also accompanied youth to job sites to offer them emotional support while trying to secure employment.