



# SUPPORTING YOUTH TRANSITIONS

RESPECTING DIGNITY, FULFILLING DREAMS

A community partnership initiative spearheaded by Community Living Stratford and Area, Community Living Guelph and Wellington, Community Living Cambridge, and Community Living Owen Sound and District.

July 2019

## Citation Information:

Notwell, J., Garner, A., Hill, L., Toro, L., Young, D. & Young, J. (2019). *Supporting Youth Transitions: Respecting Dignity, Fulfilling Dreams: Invitation to Community Partners*. Stratford: Community Living Stratford and Area.



## Acknowledgements

Four local Adult Developmental Services organizations came together to organize this pilot study in 2018-2019: Community Living Stratford and Area; Community Living Guelph and Wellington; Community Living Cambridge; and Community Living Owen Sound and District. We would like to thank all 25 youth who shared their experiences and insights while being interviewed for this research, as well as the many Direct Support Professionals and Managers who attended the 7 focus group discussions and provided valuable recommendations. In the Grey Bruce Region, several agencies participated: Community Living Owen Sound & District, Community Living Walkerton & District, Bruce Peninsula Association for Community Living, Community Living Hanover, South East Grey Support Services, and Community Living Meaford. We also thank the Managers for participating in the research design and implementation.

Special thanks to Ashley Garner, who conducted the interviews, focus groups and literature review on which this Education Brief is based. We are grateful to the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute (CESI) at the University of Guelph, which has provided expertise, resources and financial support. CESI's encouragement and guidance have been invaluable to completing this research. Thank you as well to the Sunbeam Centre, which provided a seed grant to begin working with both youth and Adult Development Services to document their experiences.

We think that the strength of this document testifies to our joint commitment to provide more effective support to youth who are in the long process of transitioning from Children's Services to Adult Developmental Services.



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## Executive Summary

Young people transitioning from Children's Services to Adult Developmental Services, like all young people, want to build futures based on their own priorities, decisions and dreams. Some face multiple barriers to self-determination; several erected by the very systems that are supposed to provide safe places to live and support youth self-empowerment. Community Living is inviting you to be part of the solution. **Supporting Youth Transitions: Respecting Dignity, Fulfilling Dreams** is an invitation to community partnership that can change the future of these young people across Ontario. We invite you to join us on a journey of respect, trust, and supporting young people to reach their dreams.

### Goal 1:

Collaborative community teams work together to effectively support the empowerment of youth at the time of transition and throughout their adult lives.

- (1) Build partnerships between Children's Services, Adult Developmental Services, the education system, healthcare and mental health professionals, probation and parole, the police, and other service providers.
- (2) Ensure that service providers working with youth are trained to provide effective support.

### Goal 2:

Children's Services, Adult Developmental Services and the education system work together to support transition planning and implementation beginning when youth are age 14 and ongoing into the adult system.

- (1) Teach youth the skills they need to take leadership of their own everyday life.
- (2) Facilitate opportunities for youth to participate in meaningful activities that broaden their perspectives, strengthen critical thinking, and support self-empowerment.
- (3) Support youth to address internalized stigma against themselves as people with developmental disabilities.
- (4) Ensure that Transition Plans are current, regularly updated, adequately resourced, and reflect the priorities, needs and dreams of youth.



## Goal 3:

Support each young person to identify their priorities, pursue their goals and achieve their dreams.

- (1) Work with youth to identify their individual priorities and goals, and to create Individualized Support Plans that direct resources toward the achievement of each goal.
- (2) Meet youth where they stand, respecting their goals and dreams even when they differ greatly from those service providers are used to hearing.



# Supporting Youth Transitions: Respecting Dignity, Fulfilling Dreams

Young people transitioning from Child Services to Adult Developmental Services, like all young people, want to build futures based on their own priorities, decisions and dreams. Some face multiple barriers to such empowerment and self-determination; several of which are erected by the very systems that are supposed to provide safe places to live and support youth self-empowerment.

In 2018-2019, Community Living Stratford and Area, Community Living Cambridge, Community Living Guelph and Wellington and Community Living Owen Sound and District conducted research in order to better understand these barriers. The goal of the research was to identify and implement strategies to more effectively support a particular group of youth. Who are these young people? These youth are currently 18-29 years old. They were “Crown Wards” in the Child Welfare System for a significant part of their lives and are in an ongoing transition to being supported by Adult Developmental Services. They have a dual diagnosis of developmental disabilities and mental health disabilities; many have been diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FASD) or Autism. Most have difficulty maintaining a household, sustaining healthy relationships with peers, and claiming their own rights and responsibilities as citizens. Twenty-five of these youth – living in Cambridge, Guelph, Owen Sound and District and Stratford – were interviewed for this research.

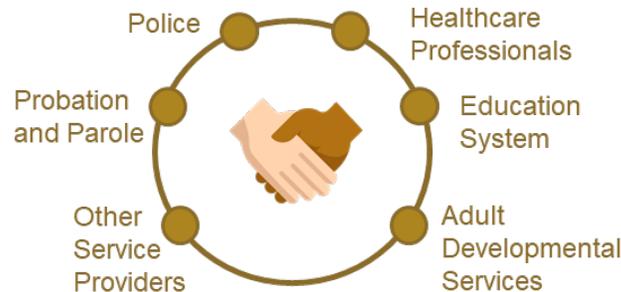
However, these youth are so much more than their labels. Many are building the skills necessary to maximize their safety and independence in everyday life. Some are trying to rebuild fractured relationships with their birth or adoptive families. Several have completed college or university, while a number are actively seeking employment or volunteer placements and working hard to overcome discrimination based on their disabilities.

Community Living is advocating that we meet these youth halfway. They have a right to be respected and supported by their communities; particularly by the services mandated to support their self-empowerment.

Community Living is inviting you to be part of the solution. Together, Children’s Services, Adult Developmental Services, the Education System, healthcare and mental health professionals, Probation and Parole, and the Police have the expertise needed to effectively support these youth to thrive.



**We need you at the table!** The youth we interviewed need you to fill the cracks they are falling through and to meet them where they stand. Together, we can extend seamless community supports that create opportunities for these youth to live in dignity, health and safety while pursuing their dreams.



*Supporting Youth Transitions: Respecting Dignity, Fulfilling Dreams* is an invitation to community partnership that has the potential to change the future of these young people across Ontario. Pull up a chair at the table. Join us on a journey of respect, trust, and supporting young people to reach their dreams.

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### **Tara's Story**

*Tara is a 20 year-old Anishnaabe woman from the Cambridge area. She was removed from her parents' home when she was three years old and lived in foster homes all her life until her 18th birthday. That was the day she moved into a shared apartment with two people she had never met before. The relationship between Tara and her roommates is tense. One of them yells at Tara a lot and reminds her of her last foster dad, which is bad. Tara is also trying to heal from the trauma of the abuse she experienced at the hands of her last boyfriend. She is really struggling with her mental health. Tara missed the last appointment with her psychiatrist and is having trouble taking all of her medications according to the instructions. The worker at Community Living can tell that Tara is struggling but when Tara transitioned to Community Living, Children's Services wasn't able to share anything about the abuse she suffered nor strategies that were helping her to heal. At the same time, Tara finished the Office Administration program in college last year and has a part-time job at Tim Horton's. She wants to get full-time work, get off of ODSP and live by herself. Tara is also an artist and dreams of having enough money for an easel, paint and canvasses so that she can create the beautiful pictures she sees in her mind.*

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## Goal 1:

Collaborative community teams work together to effectively support the empowerment of youth at the time of transition and throughout their adult lives.

Community Living staff invite Children's Services, the Education System, healthcare and mental health professionals, Probation and Parole, and the Police to come together at the same table. At this table, we will work together based on the shared values of mutual support and ongoing learning, sharing strengths to address challenges, and youth-centred service provision. Through sharing information we can build understanding of service boundaries, identify strategies to fill gaps, and change the way we work with youth who are currently being failed by the system. No one of us has all of the skills and qualifications necessary to support the youth who participated in the research. Together, we have what it takes to support youth to reach their dreams.

"I have had bullying by my best friends and a bunch of others, where they would threaten me, beat me up and stuff, or worse. And I'm like, "that's enough! I don't want that." I need new friends. I have been looking for new friends, and I found few. I hanged out with them this week, which was fun" (*Youth Living in Owen Sound*).

**Objective 1:** *Build partnerships between Children's Services, Adult Developmental Services, the Education System, healthcare and mental health professionals, Probation and Parole, the Police, and other service providers.*

Partnerships that best serve the youth who participated in this research will include professionals and service providers involved in the issues that touch the lives of these young people. For example, because many youth are involved with the justice system, it is important that Probation and Parole as well as the Police are at the table. We want to have regular inter-agency meetings in each community to provide opportunities for sharing knowledge of potential resources, effective practices in supporting youth, and strategies for connecting youth with additional resources, supports and services.

**Objective 2:** *Ensure that service providers working with youth have the training necessary to provide effective support.*

The youth who participated in this research are young people who defy the expectations and design of the system. The problem is not the young people. It's the system. In order to provide effective support to youth, many of us need additional training. This includes training on working with youth with dual diagnosis of mental health and developmental disabilities including FASD, working with people with histories of trauma, working with people who are living with addictions to drugs and/or alcohol, and training on supporting youth to balance risks against safety. We recognize that we also need to work with colleagues with qualifications relevant to youth realities and dreams such as a Postgrad Diploma in Autism and Behavioural Science or a Child and Youth Worker Diploma.



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### *Jerome's Story*<sup>1</sup>

*Jerome liked the group home he was living in in Guelph. He had a friend there who really “got” him. The staff cooked every day but he did his own laundry. Since he turned 18, he has been living with three roommates. The guys are ok, but none of them knows about cooking. Jerome mostly eats Ramen because it’s cheap and easy to make. Jerome volunteers unloading the trucks at the food bank once a week. He likes being there because it makes him feel good about himself. He might have to stop going, though, if they find out he was in jail last year. It wasn’t his fault. He and Tammy really cared about each other. Neither one of them knew there was a law against their relationship because Tammy was only fifteen. But Tammy’s parents knew. Since he got out, Jerome tries to stay away from girls. He wants to volunteer more days a week and really feel like part of the team. But sometimes he gets angry and the other guys don’t always want to work with him. He wants to learn to control his anger so that he can become friends with the other guys at the food bank.*

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## Goal 2:

Children’s Services, Adult Developmental Services and the education system work together to support transition planning and implementation beginning when youth are age 14 and ongoing into the adult system.

It is important that we create opportunities for youth to connect with Adult Developmental Services staff while they are still in their early teens to help them understand and plan for the future based on their goals, needs and dreams. With the consent of each young person, the cooperation between Children’s Services and Adult Developmental Services must include the sharing of information that will allow Adult Developmental Services staff to effectively support each individual based on their specific strengths and skills combined with histories of trauma, involvement with the justice system, addictions, and other factors that impact the possibility that young people will reach their dreams.

*“Staff help me with like groceries, budgeting, phone bills; a lot of stuff. I’m afraid to move out on my own. I have a fiancée. If I do move out, I’m going to be in debt and lose everything. That’s what I’m afraid of. I know I won’t be able to manage money” (Youth Living in Guelph).*

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<sup>1</sup> In order to protect the confidentiality of the young people who participated in the research, each story shared in this Education Brief amalgamates aspects of the stories of multiple youth. In this way, we are able to provide a realistic picture of youth experiences to help the community understand their realities and dreams.

**Objective 1:** *Teach youth the skills they need to take leadership of their own everyday life.*

It is important that youth have time to learn the skills of daily living that they will be expected to know as adults, such as grocery shopping and cooking meals, taking care of household chores, budgeting and managing finances, as well as managing healthcare appointments and medications. In order to take more control and responsibility over their own lives, youth transitioning to Adult Developmental Services must be given the opportunity to learn vital self-determination skills including setting goals, advocating for themselves, problem-solving, and decision-making based on situation analysis.

**Objective 2:** *Facilitate opportunities for youth to participate in meaningful activities that broaden their perspectives, strengthen critical thinking, and support self-empowerment.*

It is important for youth to participate in activities and experiences which are based on their own priorities and choices and which challenge them to act and think in ways that support their long-term wellbeing. This might include playing sports, joining clubs, creating art, participating in workshops on topics such as cyber-bullying or healthy eating on a budget, having a Big Brother or Big Sister, or connecting with the LGBTQ+ community. As part of this process it would be ideal if Children's Services and Adult Developmental Services, in partnership with the education and healthcare systems, worked to strengthen youth skills in building and sustaining healthy relationships with peers as well as community participation and citizenship.

**Objective 3:** *Support youth to address internalized stigma against themselves as people with developmental disabilities.*

It is critical that the transition planning process address the internalized stigma many youth reported during the research, including internalized bias against people with developmental disabilities. Many of the youth who participated in the research complete a number of the tasks of daily living on their own and feel that it is insulting to be labelled as having developmental disabilities. As a result, they may refuse supports in the short-term that they realize in the long-term are important for their wellbeing. In the short-term, this hurts youth who may become homeless and/or involved in illegal activities after temporarily refusing supports. Addressing internalized stigma will help to break this cycle.

**Objective 4:** *Ensure that Transition Plans are current, regularly updated, adequately resourced, and reflect the priorities, needs and dreams of youth.*

The ongoing planning process, from when a young person is age 14 into adulthood, should include regular reviews and updates of the transition plan to ensure that all plans are current and reflect the changing circumstances of each individual. This will allow the appropriate supports and resources to be put in place each step of the way and maximize opportunities for youth to act on their priorities, meet their needs, and pursue their dreams.



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### **Robert's Story**

*Robert was removed from his mom at birth because his mom used drugs throughout her pregnancy. Robert was diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder when he was still young. None of the foster families wanted him. He doesn't talk about the abuse much because he doesn't want to remember. It was a relief when he was removed from his last foster family and started living in a shared apartment with support from Community Living. Robert loves heavy metal music, going to concerts, and gaming. One of the workers at Community Living totally gets him, which feels awesome, but he also wants his own friends. Robert tried to make new friends recently, but these "friends" are pressuring him to buy them drugs with his ODSP cheque. Robert wants to save his money to travel instead. Last year he went to Cuba. If he is careful, maybe in a couple of years he will be able to afford to go to Norway to see his favourite band, Mayhem, play. Maybe not. He has a court date coming up in a few weeks because of the last time he bought drugs for his friends. He really doesn't understand why. He wasn't taking the drugs, only buying them. It doesn't make sense to him that he is the one in trouble.*

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### **Goal 3:**

Support each young person to identify their priorities, pursue their goals and achieve their dreams.

For many youth who participated in the research, staff at Community Living were the first people who had ever asked them about their dreams for the future; about what is important to them. When you spend most of your life in survival mode, dreaming is a luxury you just can't afford. It can be difficult and emotionally-taxing to be asked this question for the first time at 18 or 24 or 29 years of age. It is critical that we encourage and create opportunities for youth to decide what they want for the future, to set and work toward goals, and to dream.

*"I have a dream. One day I want to be able to live on my own; be able to go hold a job, have a girlfriend, and travel to different places" (Youth living in Cambridge).*



**Objective 1:** *Work with youth to identify their individual priorities and goals, and to create Individualized Service Plans (ISPs) that direct resources toward the achievement of each goal.*

It is important for all service providers to support youth to know themselves, identify their priorities, and set and work toward goals. This is true for Children's Services and Adult Developmental Services but also for teachers, school counsellors, healthcare and mental health professionals, Probation Officers, and others. If we are all on the same page, this will put youth at the centre and allow us to work in concert to provide individualized supports to each young person. At the same time, the priorities, goals and dreams of youth must be the basis for their ISPs within Adult Developmental Services. This will help youth to budget their finances to support the attainment of their goals. It will also help youth to continue to strengthen particular skills they need to reach their dreams, such as having healthy relationship skills in order to build long-term friendships that give youth a place to belong.

**Objective 2:** *Meet youth where they stand, respecting their goals and dreams even when they differ greatly from those service providers are used to hearing.*

Whether youth dream of travelling to other countries, attending rock concerts, earning an income from gaming, coming out as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, or having a regular sexual partner, it is critical that as service providers we remember that they are young adults with the right to make decisions about how they live. Rather than judging, our job is to support youth wellbeing by providing opportunities for youth to strengthen decision-making and other skills that will allow them to pursue their goals safely and with an awareness of possible risks and options. If a young adult wants to find a regular sexual partner, it is important they understand and have the skills to negotiate safe sex. If they want to travel, they will need both financial management skills and a level of comfort navigating unfamiliar places and situations. This objective links back to the need for service providers to have additional training on topics such as safe sex and consent. As service providers, we must resist the temptation to put youth into the boxes we have become familiar with. Instead, we must challenge ourselves to meet youth where they stand and to build the respect and trust needed so that youth allow us to accompany them as they pursue their dreams.





## Goal 4:

Get involved today!

Do you want to be part of the solution? Are you interested in joining community partnerships for ***Supporting Youth Transitions: Respecting Dignity, Fulfilling Dreams***? Contact Trevor McGregor, Executive Director, Community Living Stratford and Area, at [tmcgregor@clsa.ca](mailto:tmcgregor@clsa.ca) to learn more about how you can help us support youth transitioning from Children's Services to Adult Developmental Services to reach their dreams.