

HIGHLIGHTS 2021/22 LEARNING AND CHANGE

Aunt Leah's Place uses the experience and input of the youth we serve, our observations as staff and volunteers and the data we collect to maintain or adapt the way we work.

We gather information through individual case management conversations, requests for service, surveys and input from our Youth Advisory Committee.

Impact of Context: The pandemic continued this past year and had a huge impact on the needs of youth and how we provided service. Rental rates and the cost of living continued to rise. In-person services were largely curtailed and young people, despite our efforts to provide laptops and cell phones, were reluctant to join virtual programs.

Housing: The need for housing actually stabilized somewhat last year as the BC government placed a ban on evictions. This meant that many youth were able to stay in their housing for longer. However the need to find housing continued to increase.

With the eviction moratorium lifted we are now seeing homelessness rise quickly. Women and children across the Thresholds houses continue to stay with us longer due to the lack of affordable and supportive housing options.

While we are re-organizing our housing services to create greater efficiencies we remain dependent on the funding available for rental subsidies to help young people sustain housing.

Employment: The actual number of youth we moved into job placements was below target. This was due to workplace closures, a labour market in flux, and the fact that we were unable to offer group learning opportunities. We found as well that many young people were uncomfortable with virtual learning. We are beginning to see increased participation now that our in-person training programs have restarted.

Education: We saw an increase in the number of "Supporting Education for Foster Youth" participants from 138 in 2021 to 176 in 2022. Our financial support for bursaries and housing subsidies as well as navigation and guidance through high school completion and post-secondary enrolment attracted more youth. As with employment, our numbers are now growing steadily.

Lifeskills: While youth were reluctant to participate in virtual workshops, we did have great success with the Connections program which welcomed all who wished to join an indigenous lead online support group. Food and transit demand remained constant and requests for individual counseling with Dan's Legacy grew. Lifeskills in-person programming is rebuilding with new approaches to workshops and learning in development.

If you would like to take a deep dive into the research and new data which we collected last year you can find a full report [HERE](#).

2021/22 LEARNING REPORT:

REFLECTION ON TRACKED 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 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 other lessons learned from tracked and quantified data. Aunt Leah's programs and activities are adjusted to better meet the needs of the youth and families we help.

The tangible changes made to Aunt Leah's programs and activities are based on what we learned from our 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

2020 Metro Vancouver Homeless Count- 3634 were found to be homeless and 32% were formerly in care. Youth homeless appears to have declined from 16% of homeless individuals in 2008 to 9% in 2020. 193 people, 9% of the homeless population were under age 25; the report suggests however that youth are more likely to be "couch surfing" than older people and more likely to go uncounted by housing service providers.

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

SFU School of Public Policy

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 support 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 support 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 rated an A+ 5 star charity. It was selected for a fourth time, and the third consecutive year, by Charity Intelligence (Ci) as one of Canada's Top 10 Impact Charities for 2020. 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. ⁴

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. ⁵

EVALUATING AUNT LEAH'S PROGRAMS

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

For a number of years, Aunt Leah's has used a set of well-defined Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) to:

- manage and improve the work of the organization, and
- tell the story of Aunt Leah's to the public, donors, funders and others.

In 2021, the organization consulted with participants, staff, partners and board members to review and update the Key Performance Indicators and settled on these themes:

What is the most important thing Aunt Leah's Place does?	What does success look like for Aunt Leah's Place participants?	How do we know when we've achieved success? What tells us?
Meets the basic needs of youth and connects them to services and supports	Having a sense of community and belonging	When there are improvements in the lives of participants (such as: employment, increased education and stable housing)
Provides customized care (Youth Centered Approach/Meet Youth where they are at/Focus on youth's goals)	Looks different for everyone/ achievement of personal goals	Youth maintain long-term connection to ALP and give back - as mentors, volunteers and return as staff
Prevents/Reduces Youth Homelessness (Provides housing)	When they no longer need to access ALP services	When youth articulate their goals and work towards them

Our next steps include ensuring we record, retrieve and report on the data connected to these outcomes. The implementation of electronic information data system (a database called OTIS) will allow us to track participants and the journey toward their goal.

We are committed to understanding the people we serve and we strive to learn the number of people who need support with respect to

- housing
- food security
- income
- education/training

Aunt Leah's has already begun tracking these KPIs by setting targets for the next 3 fiscal years, starting with 2022-23.

Key Learnings and Program Development initiatives evolving from the 2014 Evaluation of The Link Program

The Link is Aunt Leah's core and central service delivery program. It is a housing program for youth because housing is their primary need. Link staff connect former foster youth with housing as well as other necessary supports like 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 do 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.

- Branches, Bootstraps, Retail Training and Sharing Circle have continued to deliver service to youth, in spite of COVID restrictions.

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 ran as a virtual Sharing Circle between April 2021 and March 2022 and welcomed 623 in 89 sessions!

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. 121 people received education support between April 2021 and March 2022.
 - **Bootstraps: Employing Youth From Foster Care** connects foster youth with community-minded employers and the wrap around supports of Aunt Leah's Place. Between April 2021 and March 2022, 74 people enrolled in Bootstraps so they could explore and advance their skills to find meaningful and sustainable jobs.
- **Branches:** Between April 2021 and March 2022, the Branches program had 28 people receiving AYA support, that is, monthly funding while they develop Interpersonal Skills, Employment, Housing, Education, Health and Wellness and Financial Literacy.

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. In the last fiscal year, 33 participants who were homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness were housed or re-housed.

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 Lifeskills 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. In the last fiscal year, the FLN worked with 44 youth.
- **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.
- Aunt Leah’s is a member of the BC Coalition to End Youth Homelessness (BCCEYH)- in 2017 the BCCEYH was founded with the purpose of leading the development of a provincial plan to end youth homelessness in BC. The BCCEYH is a coalition of over 40 organizations across the province that seeks to magnify the voices of youth with lived expertise by developing reports on various provincial ministries’ roles and priorities related to youth homelessness. These reports are used to work collaboratively with the Office of Homelessness Coordination and provincial ministries towards our goal of preventing, reducing and ending youth homelessness. See reports at: awayhomekamploops.com

Aunt Leah’s is a member of Feminists Deliver which is a grassroots collaboration of BC-based Two-Spirited people, non-binary folks, Indigiqueer, trans women, lesbian women and cis women and girls, and the organization that support them. Feminists Deliver began in 2018 and now boasts involvement of 25 organizations spanning disciplines and intersectional equality seeking efforts including girls/women aging out of foster care.

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 needs supports just like their parented peers.

Link Participation Numbers

The number of participants served by Aunt Leah's in FY 2015-16 (229) versus five years later in FY 2019-20 (351) represents an 53% increase in participants per annum. In FY 2021-22, the number is 622, almost triple the number of persons served! During the same five-year period, the proportion of 'aged out' participants increased from 89% (203) to 94% (330) – a 62% increase in 'aged out' participants since FY 2016. ⁹

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. ¹⁰

Housing: Quantitative Outcomes

Last year, Aunt Leah's Place housed 117 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 and **Thresholds** programs provide 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 2019-20, these homes brought security to 30 moms and babies. In November 2019, Thresholds opened one of the first laneway houses in New Westminister, 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 2021-22 staff supported 7 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 2021-22 the program permanently housed or rehoused 59 vulnerable young people.

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. FLN housed 14 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 45 Education Awards for a total of \$59,000 last year.

Lale House gives safe, affordable communal housing for young people transitioning from foster care within a single-detached home. The house had 7 tenants in 2021-22.

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.

We have seen that rent subsidies are the most important tool for housing stabilization. In 2021-22, 59 people received rent subsidies that made their rent more affordable. 22 of these people received federal support from Reach Home and 37 received provincial support from BCHousing

CONNECTIONS, FOOD SECURITY AND TRANSPORTATION FOR LINK PARTICIPANTS

Number of Free Meals and Bags of Groceries

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 2019-20, ESW held 49 workshops/meals and workshops attendance was 463. Although the pandemic forced us to pause face-to-face delivery of workshops, we continued to provide food for participants to take away.

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 2021-22, Sunday Haven held 52 workshops and provided a total of 1356 dinners to 156 participants.

Bootstraps: Employing Youth from Foster Care connects foster youth with community-minded employers and the wrap around supports of Aunt Leah's Place. In 2019-20, Bootstraps provided 46 Participants in Retail Training/Bootstraps and 23 job starts.

EVALUATION REPORT FOR AUNT LEAH'S SEFFY PROGRAM

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 AND 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.³³

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 program challenge with the continued demand of the SEFFY program. They felt that with the steady demand, staff ratio in comparison to participants, (currently 3 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 fulltime 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.³⁵

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, as 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