

Current Context for Foster Youth in BC

Rising Cost of Living:

Canadian families and parents have become the main buffer for young people against decades of precipitously increasing housing costs, rising education costs, tighter future job prospects and flattening incomes. It is implicitly expected, within the current economy, that families will subsidize their children through early adulthood in order for them to become self-sufficient at a later date. This same standard of care needs to be applied to youth from foster care; youth who do not have families to help them successfully transition to adulthood and independence. Aunt Leah's Place works to fill this gap.

As such, Aunt Leah's work should not be seen as remarkable. Instead, our work pragmatically follows the example of millions of average Canadian families who deem it both appropriate and necessary to provide increased subsidies to their own children through early adulthood. They do this because they love their children. They want them to successfully enter educational opportunities, housing markets, and labour markets in order to become healthy, independent adults. Parents also know that these investments are cost-effective: early, strategic support for their children during early adulthood can act as an effective bulkhead against a slew of unwanted future outcomes including unemployment, low education, low income, addiction, poor health, homelessness, and early/unwanted pregnancy.

Furthermore, if one of these 'average Canadian families' discovered that, unbeknownst to them, one of their children had experienced the types of abuse, neglect and trauma (and ensuing developmental delay) that many foster youth experience, then even more resources and care (not less) would be delivered to that child. This is the best practice that Aunt Leah's endeavors to give.

In BC, [7 out of 10 parents with 19 to 28 year-olds at home provide groceries and free rent](#). Since 2018, [about one third of young Canadians age 20-29 live in their parent's home](#), mostly to defer rising housing and education costs. Therefore, extended supports for young adults past age 19 is already de facto 'social policy' – Aunt Leah's works to catch up to the 'best practice' of average Canadian families and give young adults from foster care similar opportunities to succeed.

Aunt Leah's mission is to provide youth with the supports afforded to parented children. Aunt Leah's track record proves that investing in youth from care, using a family model, is a smart and compassionate response to homelessness.

Housing & Homelessness – Lack of Affordable Housing



Aunt Leah's work reacts to the very real problem of housing affordability in Metro Vancouver. In 2018, Vancouver was the most [unaffordable housing market in North America](#). In 2021, Vancouver continued to have the [least affordable housing in North America](#) and, following only Hong Kong, is the [second most unaffordable city in the world](#). Combining this fact with a generational flattening of real median family incomes ([increasing by only 19% from 1981 to 2016 in Vancouver while the value of owned dwellings increased 242%](#)), housing affordability is a real issue. Renting has always been relatively difficult for young people, who enter the market with less references or credit history. For parent-less youth from care, this situation includes poverty (often an inability to pay for damage deposits) and a lack of parental advocacy or broad social network which 'opens doors' to housing tenure.

This lack of housing affordability is problematic for educational attainment and future employment, thus delaying or prohibiting long-term personal development, stability and independence. One must work less, or not at all, while attending school. This affects housing tenure and/or one's ability to complete schooling. Yet, education is increasingly necessary in order to get a job in BC. Work BC estimates that, between 2021 and 2031, nearly [80% of jobs in BC will require post-secondary education](#).

Aunt Leah's puts in place housing and supports for young people during that crucial time when they 'age out' of care, therefore directing scarce resources temporally and geographically to spaces in time when & where youth from foster care are most likely to experience homelessness. 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, damage deposits, suite set ups, rehousing, and regular site visits.

The intended impacts of Aunt Leah's work are to end the cycle of poverty, unemployment and homelessness and promote stable housing, academic success, employment and mental & physical health for some of BC's most marginalized youth.

Not insignificantly, there is an intergenerational domino effect to Aunt Leah's work. When young mothers are supported through their transition to adulthood and motherhood their children benefit from their financial stability, housing security and goals attainment. With housing security and financial support in place, another generation of children are kept out of the foster system and given the opportunity to thrive in an environment unfettered from the stressors commonly experienced by youth preparing to 'age-out'. Hence, families are strengthened and children thrive because their parents are secure, stable and properly supported.

The Relationship between Foster Care and Homelessness

Aunt Leah's work is an important part of preventing homelessness:

- The first pan-Canadian study of young people who experience homelessness was complete in 2016, '[Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey](#)' found 58% of surveyed homeless youth had experienced child protection services.

The '[2017 Metro Vancouver Homelessness Count](#)' found 48% of homeless children have been or are currently in foster care. In 2020, the [Homelessness Count revealed that of of the 3634 people counted, 32%](#) had been previously or were at the time of the homeless count in foster care, in a youth group home, or on an Independent Living Agreement.

- Canadian Observatory on Homelessness determined that "homeless youth are 193 times more likely to have been involved with the child welfare system than the general public" ([Child Welfare and Youth Homelessness in Canada: A Proposal for Action, 2017](#)). Youths aging out of foster care are at high risk for becoming homeless during the transition to adulthood. In one study, between [31% and 46% of participants had been homeless at least once by age 26 years](#). The child welfare system has even been deemed a "[superhighway to homelessness](#)" by youth advocates!

Aunt Leah's operates offices in Downtown Vancouver and New Westminister, serving a region that includes Vancouver, Burnaby, New Westminister, Surrey, Langley and Tri-Cities. These communities constitute where 80% of the 681 youth and children were found to be experiencing homelessness across Metro Vancouver in the [2018 youth homeless count](#).

Aunt Leah's is not alone in identifying youth from foster care as needing extra care and support. BC Housing considers both "youth transitioning out of the foster care system" and "women in need" as priority populations. More recently, the provincial government has improved supports for youth exiting foster care through implementation of a post-secondary tuition waiver, plus expanding eligibility and increasing funding for the [Agreements with a Young Adult \(AYA\)](#) program, which helps cover the cost of things like housing, child care, tuition and health care while youth go back to school, or attend rehabilitation, vocational or approved life skills program. Federally, Canada's national Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) designates youth transitioning out of the foster care system as 'homeless' and

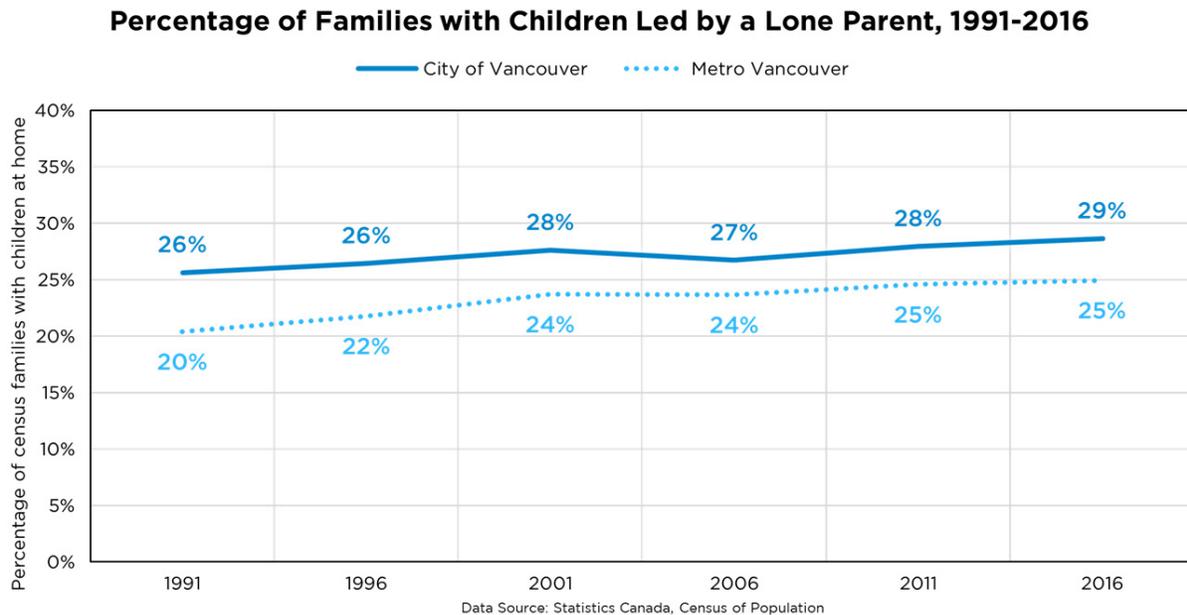
therefore eligible for HPS-funded services. Aunt Leah’s is in fact a provider AYA-accredited lifeskills, meaning that eligible youth [can receive funding](#) while they are also receiving lifeskills support.

Many of these social policy changes are in response to new evidence and research. ‘[Opportunities In Transition: An Economic Analysis of Investing in Youth Aging out of Foster Care](#)’ (2016) 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.

As such, it follows that Aunt Leah’s work would be deemed cost effective. For a fourth time, Aunt Leah’s Place has been selected as a [Top 10 Impact Charity by Charity Intelligence \(Ci\)](#). Ci found that investing in Aunt Leah’s is likely to deliver average returns of seven times on the dollar and that Aunt Leah’s is one of the most effective Canadian charities in the homeless youth sector.

Who is Affected Most?

The Relationship Between Single Parenting and Vulnerability to Family Break-Up



According to the City of Vancouver’s [social profile indicators](#), “Measured as a proportion of all families with children at home, lone parent-led families now make up 29% of families with children in the City of Vancouver, a consistently larger proportion than in the region overall. Across the city, lone parents are overwhelmingly likely to be female-identified: 82% of lone parents are female-identified. Lone mothers are more likely to face significant social and economic challenges.” The young mothers supported by Aunt Leahs are likely to have come from foster care and/or homelessness and also likely to lose custody

of their children and fall into homelessness again. Thresholds Outcomes reporting has historically indicated that

- a large percentage of Thresholds Participants struggle with concurrent disorders.
- Thresholds first stage supportive housings forward thinking focus is key in delivering a successful program relevant to the families it supports.
- Thresholds second stage supportive housing is valuable resource for mothers and their children.
- There is a high need for additional second stage and third stage housing; the evidence has shown that some mothers who move out continue to require assisted housing.

Supporting these young women involves providing stable housing and food security for them so they can settle into programs where they learn parenting, tenancy and employment skills. They also require the ability to remain connected to Aunt Leahs even after they exit programming.



Foster youth from BC enter society with little to no financial or community support. This puts them into a precarious living situation, vulnerable to homelessness and other adverse effects. The aforementioned [‘Opportunities In Transition: An Economic Analysis of Investing in Youth Aging out of Foster Care’](#) (2016) shows that youth from care have the following socio-economic background:

- 45% of youth from care have experienced homelessness
- 22% of youth from care have special needs
- 32% have completed high school with an academic stream diploma by age 19
- 45.6% of youth from care access Income Assistance (welfare)
- 68% of youth from care have been involved in the criminal justice system
- 63% received services for mental health disorder

Youth from foster care are arguably the most ‘at risk’ subpopulation of youth in Canada. The recent study, [‘Without a Home: The National Youth Homelessness Survey’](#) (2016), is the first pan-Canadian study of young people who experience homelessness. With 1,103 respondents from 47 different communities across 10 provinces and territories, the study’s sample size enabled researchers to conduct detailed analyses and to draw important conclusions.

- This study found that 57.8% of youth indicated that they had some kind of involvement with child protection services in the past.
- The researchers suggest that this should not be surprising, since a total of 51.1% reported experiencing physical abuse as a child or adolescent, 24% reported experiencing sexual abuse, and 47.5% reported experiencing other forms of violence and abuse.

The recent [‘2018 Metro Vancouver Youth Homeless Count’](#) (October 2018) established that half of respondents (50%) indicated they were currently or had been previously in foster care.

In BC, youth in foster care make up less than 1% of the grade school population yet, both locally and nationally, foster youth represent upwards of half of youth experiencing homelessness.

With regard to labour market integration and incomes “there are clear patterns with respect to employment and earnings for youth aging out of care. Employment rates are low and concentrated in low paying jobs, there is a high degree of reliance on government assistance, and income from all sources is very low, commonly below the poverty line” ([SFU Public Policy, 2016](#)).

Timely, well-executed interventions, based on evidence and experience, can build networks of human capital and social support for British Columbia’s youth from foster care. Currently, this source of human capital does not occur for youth from care. [‘Opportunities in Transition: An Economic Analysis of Investing in Youth Aging out of Foster Care’](#) (2016) found that

“[T]he incidence of poverty for 18 to 24 year-olds does not tend to persist as youth benefit from the human capital they are developing in those years. That too is much different than for youth aging out of care, who typically are not developing human capital and experience to the same extent as other youth”.

For youth in transition from foster care, Aunt Leah’s is one of the few services providers in BC that guarantees a continuum of care and planning past age 19 for foster children, by the same trusted people who cared for them during childhood. Furthermore, youth cannot ‘age out’ of Aunt Leah’s in the same way that they age out of care or other youth-serving programs. Thus, Aunt Leah’s offers youth in/from care an experience that is more akin to that of their parented peers. Additionally, Aunt Leah’s holistic ‘wrap around’ philosophy puts the individual at the centre of the care model, allowing for success to occur on individualized time lines.

[1] Aunt Leah's Link Program, Outcomes 2014-15. (n=98)

[2] Rutman, Deborah, et al. When Youth Age Out of Care, Where to from there?. Victoria, B.C.: Research Initiatives for Social Change Unit, School of Social Work, University of Victoria, 2007.

Degree to which Aunt Leah's programs address the problems discussed

Aunt Leah's Place provides core programs and services in the three domains of

- Housing
 - Education & Employment
 - Life Skills, Food Security & Health
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The Link



The Link acts as the intake umbrella program for all of Aunt Leah's services and resources for former foster youth, offering youth in/from care an experience that is more akin to that of their parented peers. Since 2006, The Link has grown systematically from its beginnings as an unfunded 'off the sides of our desks' promise to continue to give supports to young people from care beyond age 19. The Link has

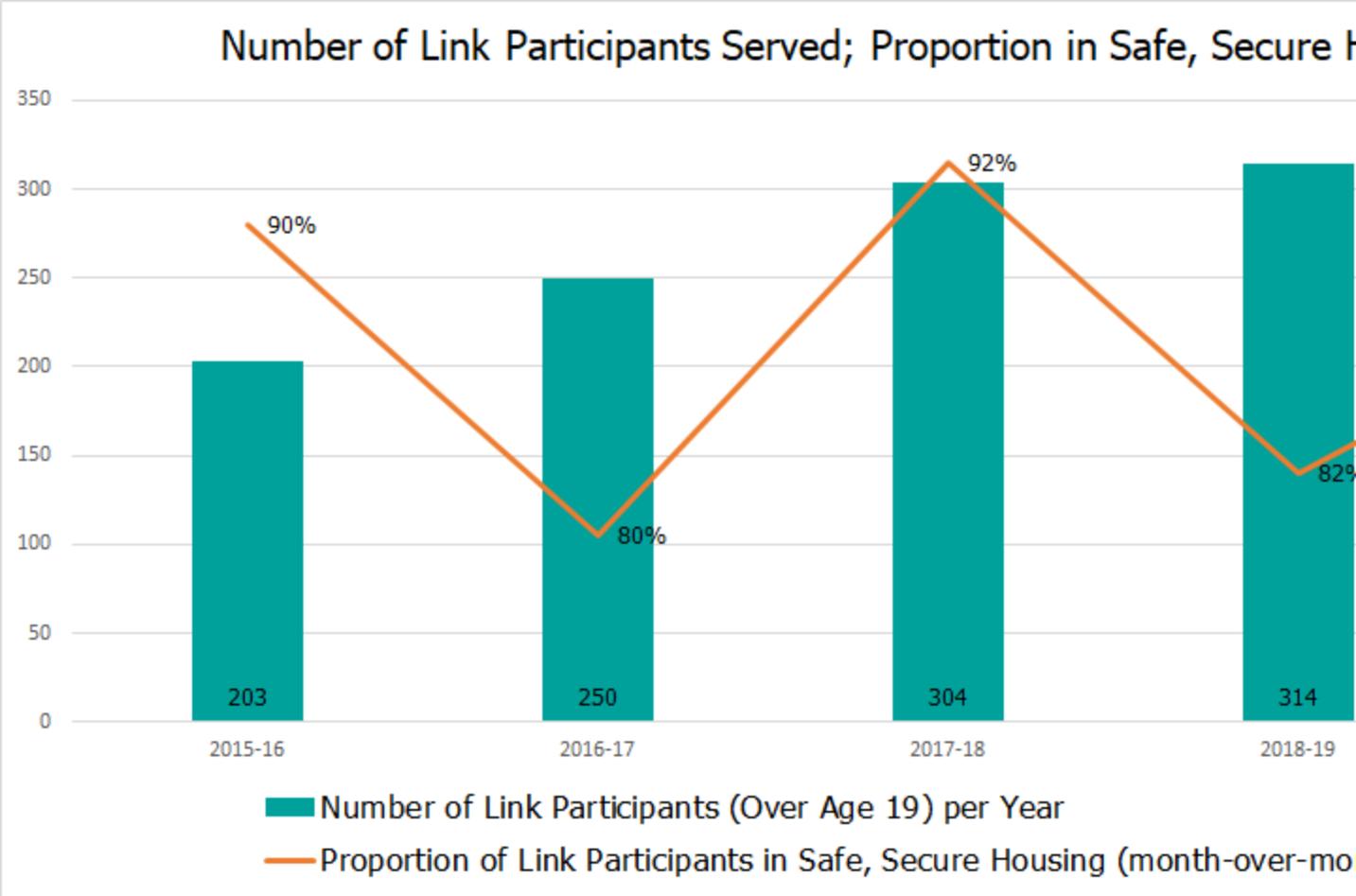
scaled itself organically and sustainably to serve over 300 youth and their dependents per annum in multiple domains.

For youth in transition, The Link works 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. As of September 28th, 2018, Link became an accredited life skills program through the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), meaning that eligible young adults from foster care can receive extra funding through [Agreements with Young Adults \(AYA\)](#) to attend programming through [Branches AYA Life Skills Program](#). Therefore, The Link acts in three main roles:

1. The Link is the first and primary intake for all former foster youth who receive services or resources from Aunt Leah's. It acts as the central intake, planning & tracking portal – determining goals, gaps and planning for each new intake.
2. Works to determine whether youth participants 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 while they go back to school, or attend rehabilitation, vocational or approved life skills program.
3. Refers internally to The Link subsidiary programs (see below).
4. Acts to track & collate outputs and outcomes for all Aunt Leah's former foster youth to inform program decision-making and planning, plus funders and stakeholders.

The Link worked with 330 young adults and their dependents last year.

From 2012 to 2014, researchers from the University of Victoria School of Social Work conducted an evaluation of Aunt Leah's Link Program, '[Avoiding the Precipice](#)'. The evaluation study, believed to be the first of its kind in Canada, compared participants in the Link program with a Comparison Group of similar former youth in care (who did not receive Link supports), therefore, creating a quasi-experimental design. Researchers showed that an important strength of Aunt Leah's model of care is that youth cannot 'age out' in the same way that they age out of care or other youth-serving organizations. Thus, Aunt Leah's offers youth in/from care an experience that is akin to that of their parented peers. As well, the organization has created a positive "home-like" environment where youth feel welcome. During the initial interviews with Link versus Comparison Group interviewees, researchers found that 32% of Comparison Group youth had had experienced some form of homelessness between 'aging out' of foster care and the initial interview, compared to just 10% of Link study participants.

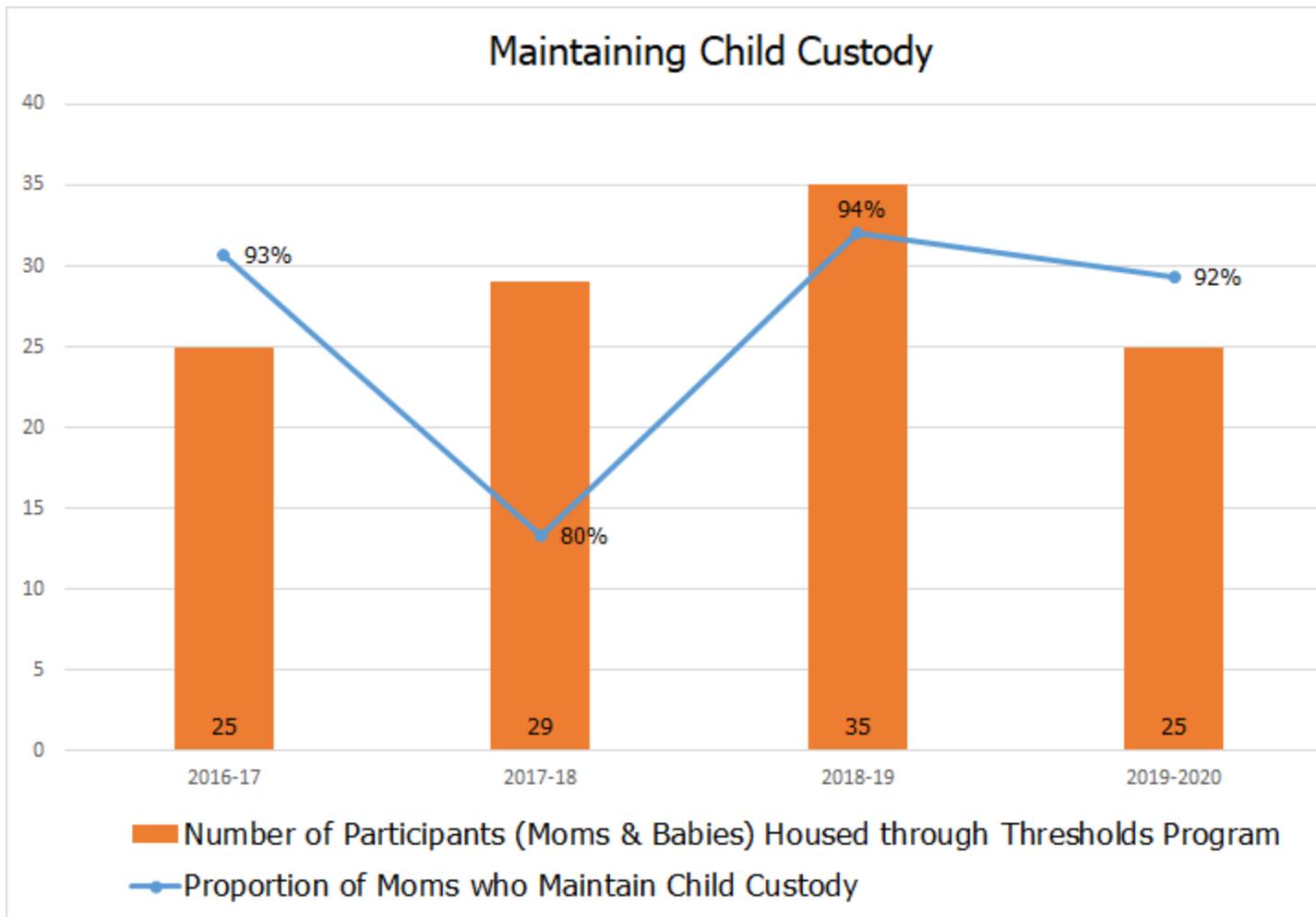


HOUSING

Aunt Leah’s Place provides housing and homelessness prevention for youth from care and families at-risk of losing child custody. 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.

AUNT LEAH’S HOUSE provides safe, supported housing for pregnant and parenting teen moms currently in government care. Last fiscal year, 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. Last year these homes brought security to 35 moms and babies.



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. Last year staff supported 11 youth in preparing for their 19th birthdays and adulthood.

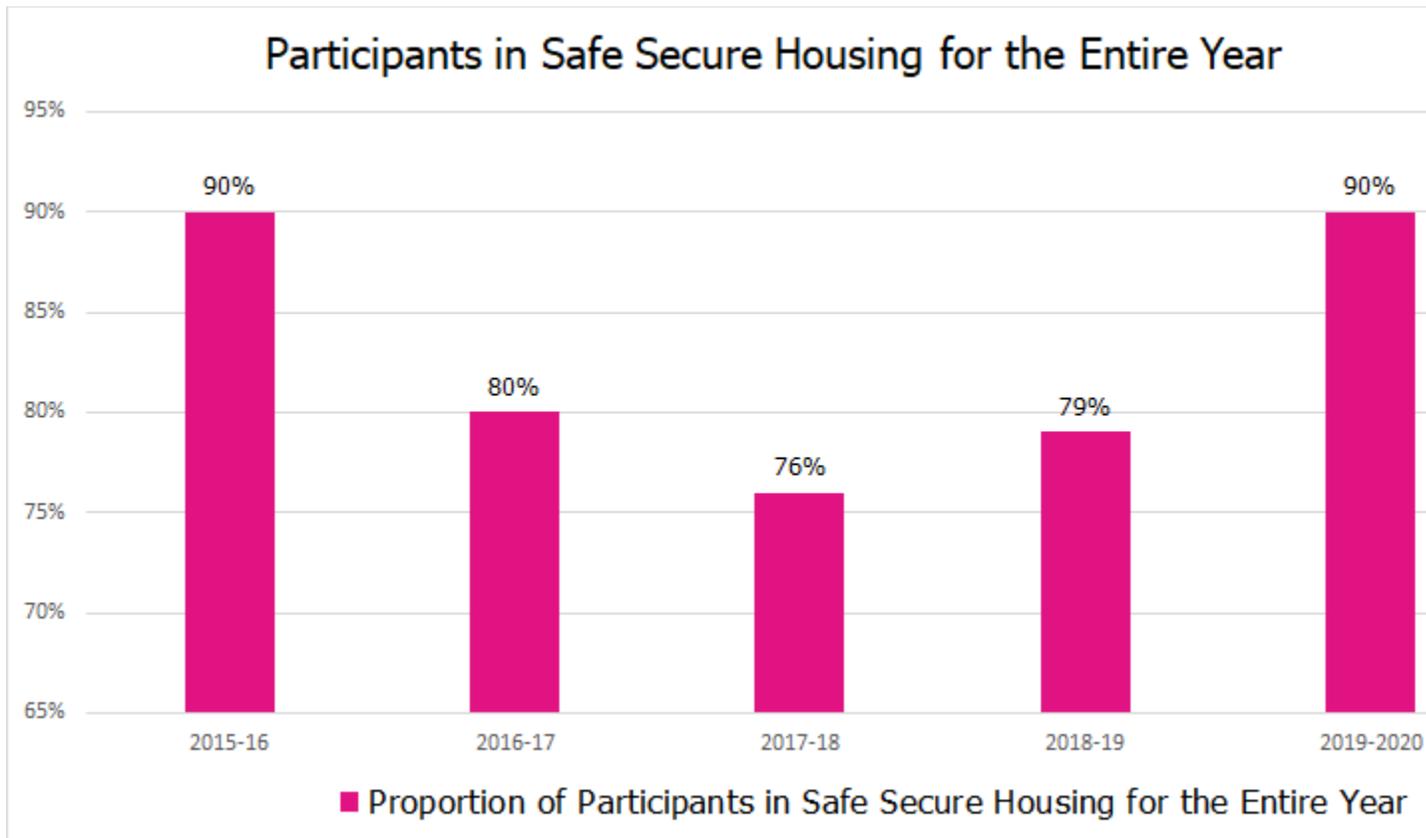
HOUSING FIRST (THE LINK) provides homeless participants immediate access to permanent housing and regular support services. This past year the program permanently housed 20 homeless individuals and re-housed another 10 individuals.

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 21 local youth-serving organizations. FLN housed 8 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. This beautiful new home fulfills two local philanthropists’ innovative

desire to provide children in foster care with housing after they turned 19. In April 2019, the perfect house was found, giving Aunt Leah's the capacity to provide shared accommodation for 4-5 young people. Lale House provides immediate and affordable housing for homeless and at-risk youth from care; housing stability to gain education, employment and/or rehabilitation; builds social capital through peer-to-peer and staff-to-participant relationships; and refutes the notion that "aging out" necessarily means being "on your own". The first tenants began living at the home in June 2019. In its first year, Lale House provided housing and support for 10 young people including 2 youth in the Supportive Suites.



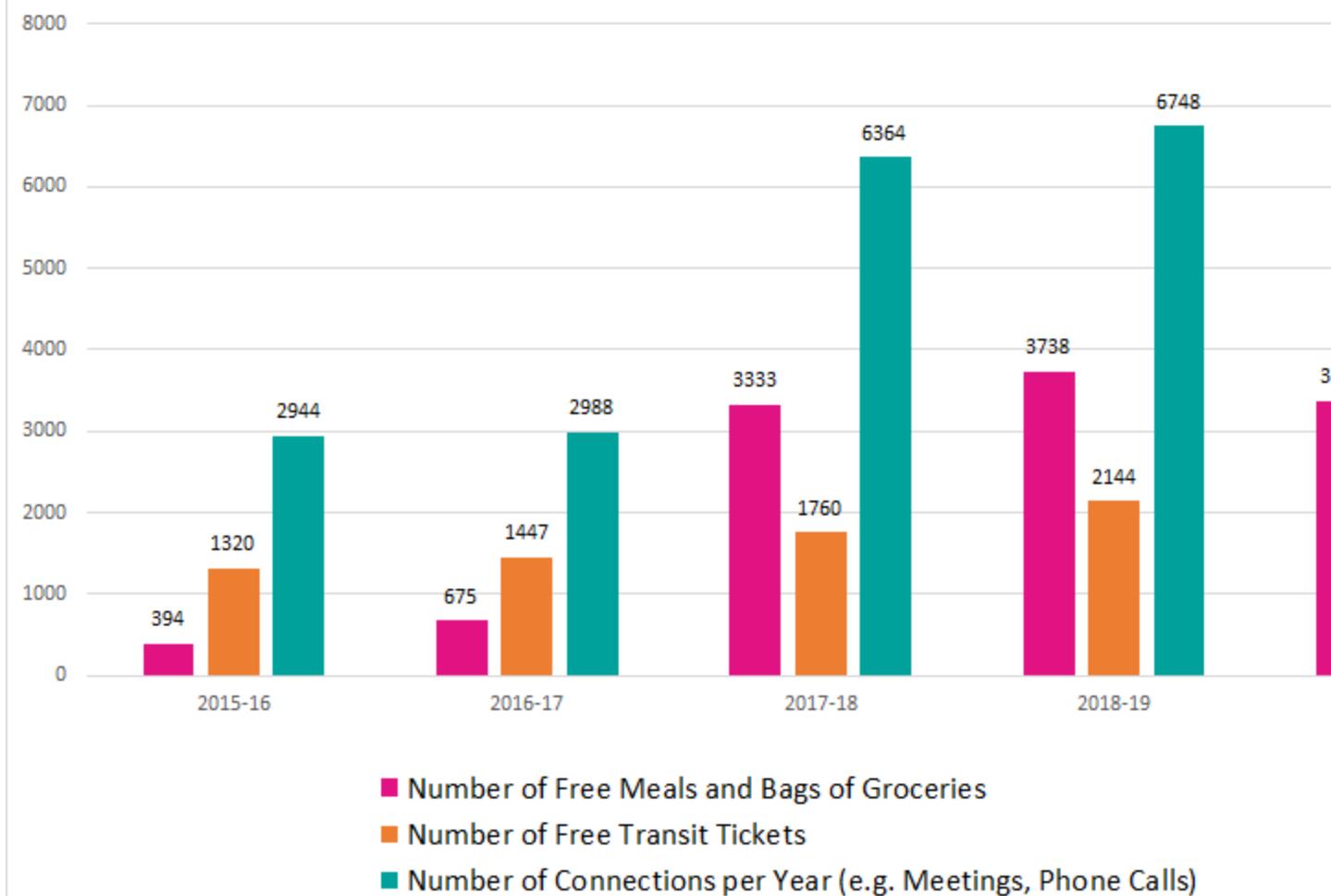
[Life Skills, Food Security & Health](#)



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.

THE LINK DROP-IN & OUTREACH acts as the one-to-one life skills provider for Aunt Leah’s former foster youth. Last year The Link distributed 2203 Transit Tickets, provided 3376 Meals or Groceries, and created 7079 Connections (e.g. Meetings, Phone Calls) for Link youth.

Connections, Food Security and Transportation for Link Participants



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. Last year, ESW held 49 workshops/meals and workshops attendance was 463.

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. Last year, Sunday Haven held 52 workshops/meals, with an attendance of 751.

BRANCHES is 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 last fiscal year was 46.

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. Last year, Cooking Club served 7 moms and 13 children; Aunt Leah's Food Network distributed over \$148,000 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-five participants received 1658 counselling sessions last year.

AUNT LEAH'S CLINIC (THE LINK) 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. Last year, 47 individuals had 145 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 (POP) is 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! Last year POP hosted two successful event with over 100 people in attendance in the first event of the year.

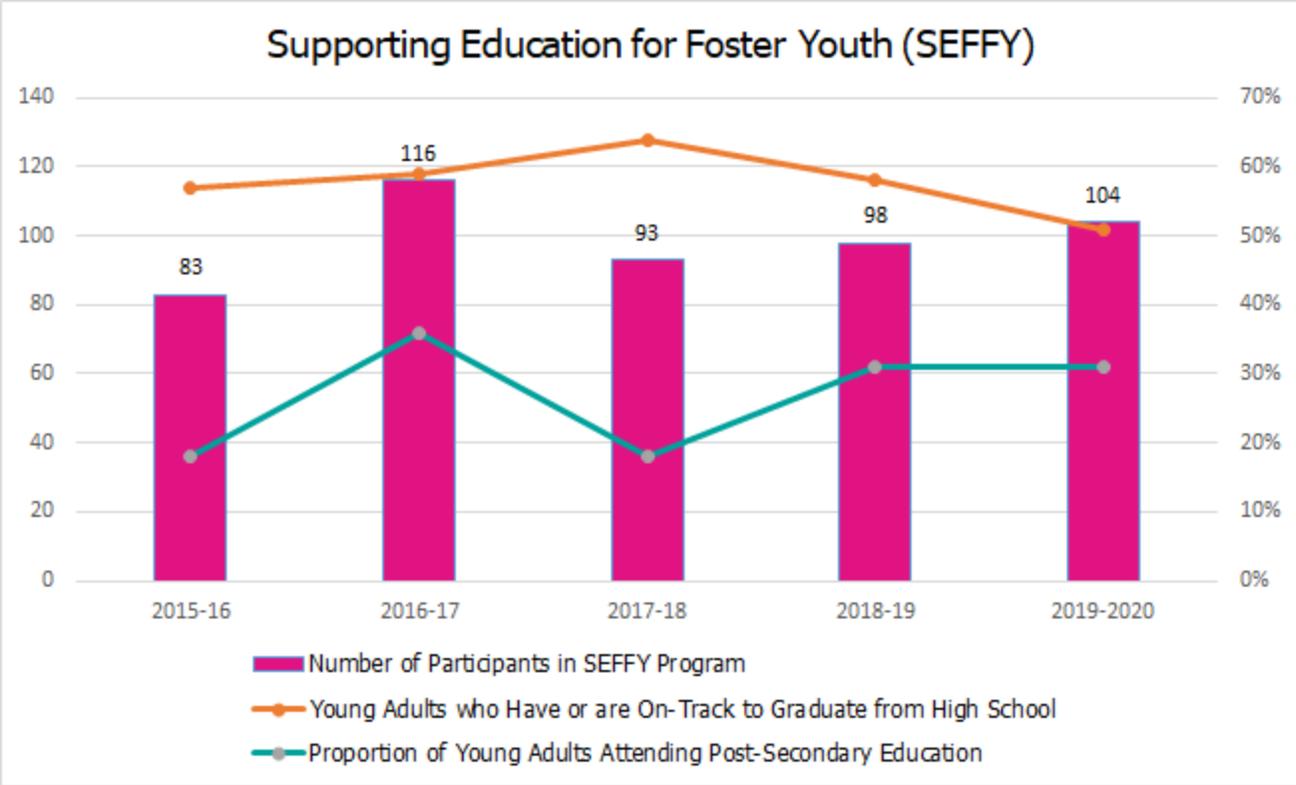
CONNECTIONS is dedicated to permanency, planning and increasing cultural connections for youth and families attached to Aunt Leah's Place. 'Connections' encourages exploration of each participant's roots with the goal of linking each individual with long-term permanent connections that increase coping 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. This past year this new program provided one to one support to 53 individuals and families connecting them to 27 internal and external community programs and resources with the goal of linking each individual with long-term permanent connections that increase coping mechanisms and protective factors.

[Education and Employment](#)



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.

SUPPORTING EDUCATION FOR FOSTER YOUTH is the provision of professional childcare staff & educational experts that create long-term and permanent planning, tracking, and advocacy of foster youths' educational careers. Last year, SEFFY worked with 104 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. Last year, 46 individuals accessed Bootstraps employment services. Bootstraps provided 14 job placements with community employers.

