

Select Standing Committee on Children and Youth
ANNUAL REPORT 2019-20



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
of BRITISH COLUMBIA

MAY 2020
FIFTH SESSION
OF THE 41ST PARLIAMENT



May 15, 2020

To the Honourable
Legislative Assembly of the
Province of British Columbia

Honourable Members:

I have the honour to present herewith the *Annual Report 2019-20* of the Select Standing Committee on Children and Youth.

This report covers the work of this Committee from May 23, 2019 to April 29, 2020.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Committee,

Nicholas Simons, MLA
Chair

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Composition of the Committee

Members

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| Nicholas Simons, MLA | Chair | Powell River-Sunshine Coast |
| Michelle Stilwell, MLA | Deputy Chair | Parksville-Qualicum |
| Sonia Furstenu, MLA <i>(to February 11, 2020)</i> | | Cowichan Valley |
| Rick Glumac, MLA | | Port Moody-Coquitlam |
| Ronna-Rae Leonard, MLA | | Courtenay-Comox |
| Adam Olsen, MLA <i>(from February 13, 2020)</i> | | Saanich North and the Islands |
| Ellis Ross, MLA | | Skeena |
| Rachna Singh, MLA | | Surrey-Green Timbers |
| Laurie Throness, MLA | | Chilliwack-Kent |
| Teresa Wat, MLA | | Richmond North Centre |

Committee Staff

Jennifer Arril, Committee Clerk
Katey Stickle, Committee Researcher
Karan Riarh, Senior Research Analyst

Terms of Reference

On February 21, 2019 and February 18, 2020, the Legislative Assembly agreed that the Select Standing Committee on Children and Youth be appointed to foster greater awareness and understanding among legislators and the public of the BC child welfare system, including the specific needs of Indigenous children, youth, families and communities, and in particular to:

1. Receive and review the annual service plan from the Representative for Children and Youth (the "Representative") that includes a statement of goals and identifies specific objectives and performance measures that will be required to exercise the powers and perform the functions and duties of the Representative during the fiscal year;
2. Be the committee to which the Representative reports, at least annually;
3. Refer to the Representative for investigation the critical injury or death of a child;
4. Receive and consider all reports and plans transmitted by the Representative to the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia; and,

That, in addition to the powers previously conferred upon Select Standing Committees of the House, the Select Standing Committee on Children and Youth be empowered to:

- a. Appoint of their number one or more subcommittees and to refer to such subcommittees any of the matters referred to the committee and to delegate to the subcommittee all or any of its powers except the power to report directly to the House;
- b. Sit during a period in which the House is adjourned, during the recess after prorogation until the next following Session and during any sitting of the House;
- c. Conduct consultations by any means the committee considers appropriate;
- d. Adjourn from place to place as may be convenient; and
- e. Retain personnel as required to assist the committee;

and shall report to the House as soon as possible, or following any adjournment, or at the next following session, as the case may be; to deposit the original of its reports with the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly during a period of adjournment and upon resumption of the sittings of the House, the Chair shall present all reports to the Legislative Assembly.

The Work of the Committee

The Select Standing Committee on Children and Youth (the “Committee”) is appointed by the Legislative Assembly to foster greater awareness and understanding of BC’s child welfare system, including the specific needs of Indigenous children, youth, families and communities.

This mandate includes acting as a public forum for the review of reports by the Representative for Children and Youth. The Representative is an independent officer of the Legislature responsible for providing advocacy services to children, young adults and families; monitoring, reviewing and auditing the effectiveness of designated services; and reviewing, investigating and reporting on the critical injuries and deaths of children. As an independent officer, the Representative also submits an estimate of the budgetary resources to cover the work of the office for the next fiscal year to the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services.

The Committee is also responsible for reviewing the *Representative for Children and Youth Act* at least once every five years; the most recent review was completed in February 2018. The Committee may also undertake special projects on aspects of the child and youth-serving system; previous special projects examined child poverty and child and youth mental health.

This report covers the activities of the Committee from May 23, 2019 to April 29, 2020. During this period, the Committee reviewed four reports from the Representative, including the Representative’s annual report and service plan. The Committee also undertook a special project on children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs.

Meeting documents, transcripts and minutes are available on the Committee’s website: www.leg.bc.ca/cmt/cay

Meeting Schedule

The Committee met on the following dates for the purposes described below.

Fourth Session, 41st Parliament

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| May 23, 2019 | Special project on children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs: Public hearings - Kelowna and Castlegar |
| May 24, 2019 | Special project on children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs: Public hearing - Nanaimo |
| June 3, 2019 | Special project on children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs: Public hearing - Victoria |

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| June 4, 2019 | Special project on children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs: Public hearing - Surrey |
| July 9, 2019 | Special project on children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs: Deliberations |
| July 10, 2019 | Special project on children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs: Deliberations |
| July 16, 2019 | Special project on children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs: Deliberations |
| September 20, 2019 | Special project on children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs: Deliberations |
| October 7, 2019 | Special project on children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs: Adoption of report |
| November 27, 2019 | Review of the Representative's Reports - <i>Annual Report 2018/19 & Service Plan 2019/20 to 2021/22</i> (September 2019); <i>B.C. Adoption & Permanency Options Update</i> (August 2019); <i>Caught in the Middle</i> (November 2019) |
| January 23, 2020 | Review of the Committee's Processes |

Fifth Session, 41st Parliament

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| February 24, 2020 | Review of the Representative's report – <i>Raising Young People's Voices on the Issue of Youth Homelessness</i> (February 2020) Special project discussion |
| April 7, 2020 | Planning and discussion of Committee's upcoming work in 2020 |
| April 29, 2020 | Deliberations – Review of <i>Annual Report 2019-20</i> Adoption of <i>Annual Report 2019-20</i> |

Review of the Representative for Children and Youth's Annual Report and Service Plan

The Representative for Children and Youth, Dr. Jennifer Charlesworth; Deputy Representative, Operations, Alan Markwart; Executive Director, Advocacy, Blair Mitchell; Chief Financial Officer, Dianne Buljat; and Chief Investigator, Carly Hyman appeared before the Committee on November 27, 2019 to present the *Annual Report 2018/19* and *Service Plan 2019/20 to 2021/22*, released in September 2019.

Representative's Presentation

The Representative began her presentation with an overview of the office which includes 66 full time equivalent employees and office locations in Victoria, Burnaby, and Prince George. She reported that the office's budget for the 2019-20 fiscal year is just over \$9.7 million and added that she had requested a seven percent increase for the coming fiscal year to address significant pressures in the office's workload.

Reflecting on her first year in the office and her focus on "listening, learning, and launching," the Representative emphasized the importance of listening to as many voices as possible, and reported on the number of events and speaking engagements she had participated in. Based on what the office heard during this process, staff established several areas of focus for their work going forward including: family supports and preventive measures; self-determination regarding Indigenous child, youth and family services; better supports for youth as they transition from care into healthy adulthood; and early interventions as key to improving the lives of vulnerable children and youth.

In terms of launching, or re-launching, the Representative informed the Committee that the Indigenous Strategies and Partnerships team will be renamed the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Relations and Engagement team. This team will continue to establish and nurture relationships with Indigenous partners and communities and advocate for culturally grounded and effective supports for Indigenous children, youth and families receiving government services. The Representative also noted that her office will soon release a posting for a Deputy Representative responsible for Advocacy, First Nations, Métis and Inuit Relations.

The Representative explained that the focus of her office's work has shifted in many ways based on the results of its community engagement process. For example, staff are incorporating more systemic analysis into their investigations to ensure that recommendations are reflective of systemic issues. In addition, they are attempting to improve accessibility with regard to children and youth, Indigenous peoples, and people who speak languages other than English. The office has also engaged in extensive meeting and briefing sessions with ministries to better understand the context

within which reports and recommendations are received. Finally, they have adopted a practice of ethical data-gathering and sharing and are developing an ethical research framework.

The office's three mandated areas, advocacy, critical injury and death (CID) reviews and investigations, and monitoring, have all been busy over the past year. In particular, the Representative spoke about the change to the *Representative for Children and Youth Regulation* which, among other things, expanded the advocacy mandate to include young adults up to their 24th birthdays who are on or are eligible for Agreements with Young Adults or a provincial post-secondary tuition waiver. The office redeployed two experienced advocates to work with the vulnerable population that is addressed by the expanded mandate. In addition, the Representative noted that the complexity of advocacy cases had substantially increased over the past seven years, translating into an increased workload for advocates. She noted that workload has also expanded for the CID team with reportable circumstances up by nearly 23 percent in this fiscal year. Regarding monitoring, the office is currently working on a review of cross-ministry services and supports available for children and youth with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder which will highlight the experiences of parents and caregivers.

Committee Inquiry

Members commented on recent and ongoing requests for increases to the office's budget, and asked whether future requests are anticipated. The Deputy Representative explained that this would depend on the circumstances, noting that as the legislative mandate for the office expands, workload also increases which requires additional resources. In response to a question about the cost of having two deputies, the Representative explained that she restructured the office, eliminating two executive director positions to create the opportunity to have a deputy responsible for Advocacy, First Nations, Métis and Inuit Relations, which in her view is critically important.

Another area of interest for Committee Members was advocacy. Members asked about how advocacy is prioritized in relation to other duties and about the increase in advocacy files which involve children with complex needs. The Representative noted that advocacy and other priorities are constantly shifting and that her leadership team will be participating in a one-day session to examine priorities and stressors. She also noted that publishing reports and examining critical injuries and deaths are equally as important as advocacy since these are opportunities to highlight areas requiring systemic change and address issues that are bringing children into harm. Regarding the number of advocacy case files involving children with complex needs, the Representative observed an increased capacity for advocacy at the local community level resulting in her office receiving cases which are more complex and require supports beyond the capacity available at the local level. Furthermore, the Deputy Representative noted that as the overall number of children in care decreases, the percentage of children in care with complex needs increases.

Members requested clarification about the increase in the number of critical injury and death investigations. The Representative explained that the reported numbers do not refer only to children in care but also to children receiving designated and reviewable services in addition to

youth in extended family homes or out-of-care options. Members also asked about the reference to the implementation of an updated policy regarding reportable circumstances. The Deputy Representative explained that previously there was debate about what constituted a critical injury so the Ministry of Children and Family Development did not report some cases that should have been reported. For example, the Representative noted that the loss of a parent is now coded as emotional harm and therefore considered a critical injury when it previously would not have been. Now that there is agreement about this definition, and about the policy, the result has been an increase in cases reported.

In response to a question about the number of Indigenous employees who work at the office, the Deputy Representative reported that last spring 21 percent of staff were Indigenous. Over the last 18 months, the office lost five permanent staff who were Indigenous and gained nine.

Members discussed some of the issues underlying incidences of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder in Indigenous communities, including economic and family stability, and inquired about opportunities to support children and families in this regard. The Representative explained that as part of critical injury and death reviews, her office has started to examine “lifetime issues of interest,” which includes poverty, and noted that poverty was reported as a lifetime issue in 35 percent of these reviews.

Committee Members observed that the number of children in care is decreasing and queried whether the Representative is monitoring the Ministry of Children and Family Development’s activities in this regard. The Representative stated that her office is tracking this change and noted that the Ministry is exploring more out-of-care options, primarily with extended family or people that are known to the child, which explains the decrease in numbers. She added that her office is also examining the impact and success of those out-of-care options.

Review of the Representative for Children and Youth's Reports

B.C. Adoption & Permanency Options Update (August 2019)

Released on August 30, 2019, *B.C. Adoption & Permanency Options Update* is the fifth and final follow-up to the 2014 report *Finding Forever Families: A Review of the Provincial Adoption System*. This report examines the trends in adoption and other permanency placements over time and includes updated information for the 2017/18 and 2018/19 fiscal years.

The Committee reviewed this report on November 27, 2019. In attendance were: the Representative for Children and Youth, Dr. Jennifer Charlesworth; Deputy Representative, Alan Markwart; Executive Director, Monitoring and Strategic Initiatives, Linda Hughes; and Senior Project Lead and Monitoring, Jaime Wegner-Lohin.

Representative's Presentation

By way of introduction, the Representative noted that this report signals a change in the way in which her office examines adoptions and permanency. While it remains important to understand the barriers and challenges to finding permanency for children and youth involved in the provincial care system, she explained that the initial and subsequent *B.C. Adoption and Permanency Option Update* reports, in her opinion, did not provide adequate information on the extent of permanency experienced by children and youth. In 2014, legal permanency, primarily adoption, was believed to be more desirable than other aspects of permanency, such as relational, cultural, and physical permanency; therefore adoption was prioritized.

Since 2014, Indigenous leaders, communities and families have challenged this conceptualization of permanency, and suggested that legal adoption is a colonial construct that has caused harm. The Ministry of Children and Family Development has also shifted their approach by permitting social workers to pursue permanency alternatives to adoption without the authorization of a regional manager as was required in the past. The Representative pointed to evidence that shows relational permanency, which includes strong enduring connections to family, community, and helping professionals, is the most important dimension of permanency. Given these changes in the understanding of adoption and permanency, the Representative stated that future monitoring reports will take a broader view on this issue, including the exploration of a fifth dimension of permanency, identity permanency, which is defined as the opportunity to develop a more enduring, informed and positive sense of self as youth transition into adulthood.

Committee Inquiry

The Committee inquired about access to adoption services in BC since the closure of CHOICES: Adoption and Pregnancy Counselling. The Representative noted that her office had numerous briefings and consultations with CHOICES: Adoption and Pregnancy Counselling but explained

that it was outside the scope of her mandate to advocate for funding to be provided to them as they are an independent or non-profit agency. She added that the agency primarily facilitated international adoptions which have decreased significantly as many nations no longer want their children to be adopted out of their culture and community. She stated that her office is monitoring how the Ministry of Children and Family Development is supporting the families who have been impacted by the closure.

In response to questions about how the office tracks and supports relationships, the Executive Director, Monitoring and Strategic Initiatives, explained that in their care planning project, staff review cultural planning, permanency planning and transition planning in a qualitative way, rather than using a checklist or form, to better understand relationships. The Representative also noted that the office is currently working on an investigative report which takes a more relationally based approach.

Members noted that many indicators, including the number of children and youth placed for adoption and the number of available adoptive homes, have decreased and asked whether less focus is being placed on adoption and if this is in the best interests of children. The Representative noted that adoption placement does not always lead to a forever home for children which is why the office has shifted its focus in this regard. In addition, the Senior Project Lead and Monitoring noted that fewer children are coming into care which helps to explain why permanency numbers are decreasing. The Executive Director, Monitoring and Strategic Initiatives spoke about a grandmother who is parenting a sibling group of five children as an example of an alternative situation that is preferable to adoption in terms of the best interests of children.

The Committee inquired as to the reason why the number of Indigenous adoptive homes is declining. The Representative explained that this is likely a reflection of the broader issue that adoption outside of family and community is not embraced within many Indigenous communities. As alternatives to formal adoption, many Indigenous leaders have called for greater efforts to place children and youth with extended family members, increased emphasis on cultural permanency, and greater support for customary or custom adoption within Indigenous communities. The Deputy Representative noted that there has been an increase in the number of transfer-of-custody placements, which may be offsetting the number of adoption placements. Furthermore, the Senior Project Lead and Monitoring added that the reported numbers of Indigenous adoptive homes are based on families who self-identify, and a number of Indigenous families prefer not to do this.

Caught in the Middle (November 2019)

Released on November 26, 2019, *Caught in the Middle* is an investigative report which examines the events that led to the overdose and death of Romain (a pseudonym), a seventeen-year-old who was bounced between care placements in Alberta and BC.

Dr. Jennifer Charlesworth, Representative for Children and Youth, presented the report to the Committee on November 27, 2019. She was accompanied by Alan Markwart, Deputy Representative; Carly Hyman, Chief Investigator; Alysha Hardy, Senior Investigator; and Dean Campbell, Investigator, Critical Injury and Death, Reviews and Investigations.

Representative's Presentation

To begin, the Representative provided an overview of Romain's case, noting that he was originally from Alberta and was moved at least 40 times while in the care of child-serving ministries in both provinces. Romain and his family did not receive the supports they required to address his trauma and other complex needs, and as a result, Romain was unable to remain in the care of his family who he loved and who wanted to care for him.

Romain was first taken into government care in Alberta at the age of 11 and had already experienced significant trauma and instability by then. He was the victim of physical and sexual assaults and began misusing substances at a young age. Romain was also diagnosed with several psychiatric disorders and exhibited suicidal and violent behaviour on a number of occasions. He experienced multiple placement breakdowns as well as placements in involuntary secure care in Alberta.

The Representative noted that the residential placements and services provided to Romain in BC, particularly his final placement in an emergency bed home, were not appropriate for a boy with his traumatic history and considerable needs. In addition, workers did not support Romain's cultural connections to his black Caribbean heritage or the potential impacts of racialization on him. The Representative explained that Romain's case illustrates what can happen when children who are in government care or are receiving designated services are moved between provinces and territories.

In Romain's case, miscommunication and dropped handoffs between Alberta and BC compromised his care. The Representative explained that there is an established Interprovincial Protocol designed to facilitate the provision of seamless services to children and youth who are moving between provinces; however, the investigation found significant gaps in this protocol and in the way that the Ministry of Children and Family Development deals with interprovincial cases. For example, on multiple occasions the Ministry of Children's Services in Alberta failed to consult the Ministry in BC or follow the proper process regarding interprovincial movement of children when moving Romain to live with family members in BC. Furthermore, in 2016, while Romain was in custody, ministry officials in BC and Alberta identified the need for a specialized placement for him; however, there was confusion about the process around payment for this resource which resulted in him being placed in two separate emergency bed homes instead.

The report makes six recommendations to improve outcomes for children and youth in similar situations. For one, the Ministry of Children and Family Development should take a leadership role in making improvements to the Interprovincial Protocol when it is next reviewed in 2021. These improvements should include the addition of cultural planning to the protocol, clarification about the delegation of guardianship responsibilities, and the addition of details regarding financial expenditures and payment mechanisms to interprovincial agreement forms. The Representative also recommends that the Ministry fully dedicate a full-time Interprovincial Coordinator to work with an adequately resourced network of regional consultants to support, track and monitor interprovincial cases. Currently, this position is not a full-time dedicated role and awareness among Ministry staff about the Interprovincial Coordinator varies widely. Additionally, the Ministry should create provincial practice guidelines or policies, and develop a mandatory online training course for staff working on interprovincial cases. Other recommendations include: directing Ministry staff to speak with all children in care about their ethnicity and desired connections and record them in the integrated case management system; taking steps to ensure that a trauma-informed method is implemented for making decisions about resourcing for children in care who have experienced multiple adversities; and assessing the need for residential care and treatment resources across the province to accommodate children with complex needs and to create sufficient resources to meet those assessed needs in a timely way.

Committee Inquiry

The Committee inquired as to whether the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate and the Ministry of Children's Services in Alberta were aware of this report. The Representative stated that officials in Alberta have known about the report from the beginning and that initially there was an agreement that her team would conduct interviews in Alberta; however, this was ultimately withheld. The Representative provided the Alberta Minister of Children's Services with a copy of the report for administrative fairness.

Members noted that according to the current Interprovincial Protocol, services are not to be delayed due to budgetary, administrative, or jurisdictional issues or disputes, and probed into why this was not practiced in Romain's case. The Representative noted that this report is an opportunity for the Provincial Director of Child Welfare to reinforce that these disputes should not be getting in the way of appropriate action. She added that although an informal agreement for Alberta to pay for services was in place, the Ministry in BC was waiting for a more formal agreement about the allocation of finances. The Chief Investigator noted that the staff involved did not have a clear understanding of the mechanisms for paying for a service and then seeking reimbursement from another province which is why there is a recommendation to bring forward an amendment to the protocol which would outline the details of financial expenditures and payment mechanisms.

In response to a question about the number of children affected by interprovincial agreements, the Representative informed the Committee that the actual number is not known as there is no central repository for these cases. She estimated that about 200 children (100 from BC who reside in other provinces and 100 from other jurisdictions who currently reside in BC) are affected by these agreements. Members followed up as to why there is no recommendation to create a

centralized system to track interprovincial cases. The Representative explained that her office has an understanding with the Ministry that a central repository would be included as a responsibility of the recommended Interprovincial Coordinator.

Committee Members asked if the Ministry has accepted previous recommendations from her office with respect to trauma-informed practice. While acknowledging that the recommendations have been accepted and that some trauma-informed resources are available, the Representative stated that she is not confident that trauma-informed processes and approaches are embedded in decision-making processes and integrated within practice. The Representative noted that embedding such processes and approaches would require training for many staff as well as a significant culture shift in a large ministry so it may take some time. In response to a follow up question about the consequences for not making such a shift, the Representative stated that in her view, not paying attention to the impact of trauma and shifting to trauma-informed practice means that the best service for children and youth is not being provided. The Chief Investigator added that their office has recently created a new process to monitor the implementation of their recommendations which they hope will result in more accountability for public bodies that accept those recommendations.

Members noted the references to secure care in the report and asked for the Representative's perspective on the usefulness and appropriateness of secure care for children with mental health issues. The Representative shared her view that eight placements in secure care caused further disruption and trauma in Romain's life, and noted that this case did not convince her that secure care (as it is operationalized in Alberta) should be used in BC. She added that her colleague advocate in Alberta is undertaking a review of secure care as they do not feel confident that this practice is in the best interest of children.

The Committee inquired as to whether there was an intended effort to get around the Interprovincial Protocol by saying that Romain was visiting BC on a temporary basis. The Investigator, CID, Reviews and Investigations explained that staff who were interviewed about this thought that it was intentional as evidenced by the three times Romain arrived in BC with no notification. The Chief Investigator added that Romain really wanted to be with his family who were in BC, so staff were honouring his wishes; however, they did not follow the notification requirements set out in the protocol.

Raising Young Peoples' Voices on the Issue of Youth Homelessness (February 2020)

Released on February 20, 2020, *Raising Young Peoples' Voices on the Issue of Youth Homelessness* is a special report which highlights the issue of youth homelessness as a significant concern of the Representative for Children and Youth. The report introduces and appends another report, *From Marginalized to Magnified: Youth Homelessness Solutions from Those with Lived Expertise*, which examines youth homelessness by elevating and featuring the voices of young people with lived expertise. This report was written by Katherine McParland, Executive Director of A Way Home Kamloops Society, with the assistance of staff from the Office of the Representative for Children and Youth.

Ms. McParland and Dr. Jennifer Charlesworth, Representative for Children and Youth, presented the report to the Committee on February 24, 2020. They were accompanied by Alan Markwart, Acting Deputy Representative – Operations and Blair Mitchell, Acting Deputy Representative and Executive Director, Advocacy and First Nations, Métis and Inuit Relations.

A Way Home Kamloops Society Presentation

The Executive Director of A Way Home Kamloops Society explained that the goal of the report is to magnify the voices of marginalized youth to ensure their expertise on the issue of youth homelessness is heard. As part of the methodology, she worked with Youth Against Homelessness BC to create interactive youth forums in 12 communities across the province. Overall, 163 youth participated in 13 forums to share their experiences of homelessness and recommendations for change. A further 68 youth participated in an online survey.

The report outlines five significant pathways into youth homelessness as identified by youth. These are: unsafe family home experiences; an unsafe and non-responsive foster care system; addiction and mental health issues; the housing affordability crisis; and discrimination and stigma. In addition to these major pathways, youth also identified a lack of preparation and transition planning for aging out of care as a factor which resulted in their experiences of homelessness. Many youth also cited significant barriers in accessing youth agreements from the Ministry of Children and Family Development. The Executive Director stated that these pathways demonstrate the important need to find ways to prevent youth homelessness.

The Executive Director also described some of the solutions that youth proposed to help inform a provincial plan to prevent and end youth homelessness in BC. According to the Executive Director, the most important solution is for government to develop a continuum of housing options for youth. This includes: increasing the number of youth-specific housing units; developing low-barrier housing options with reduced eligibility requirements and expectations; allocating a designated percentage of existing housing stock for youth; and providing distinct LGBTQ2S+ housing. Other proposed solutions include: improving the foster care system; improving the emergency response to youth homelessness; increasing financial support for vulnerable youth; increasing wraparound supports for young people; and increasing Indigenous cultural services and programs.

The sole recommendation of the report is for government to develop, and begin implementing by January 2021, a provincial plan to end youth homelessness.

Committee Inquiry

The Committee inquired about the extent of youth homelessness in BC. According to the Executive Director, it is difficult to enumerate youth homelessness as many aspects of the issue are hidden. For example, many youth who experience homelessness are couch surfing or living in temporary accommodations like hotels. The Executive Director explained that there have been recent efforts to better understand youth homelessness by revising traditional point-in-time counts with youth-specific methodology. In the case of this report, one method was to partner with a school district to interview all grade ten students. The Representative also noted that, while not perfect, point-in-time counts can help to begin to understand the extent of the issue; for example, in Vancouver, these counts identified 700 young people who are actively homeless, while in other communities counts varied between 50 and 200 youth.

In response to a question about why helping youth return to their home and families was not a recommendation in the report, the Executive Director explained that it is unsafe for many young people to return home. She acknowledged that in situations where it is safe to reconnect young people with their homes, that is the ideal solution as it will significantly reduce the likelihood of experiencing homelessness in the future. She noted that a provincial plan would include both strategies to prevent and respond to youth homelessness. For example, one proposed solution referred to natural supports, which includes the need for family mediation and counselling support, to help prevent homelessness. She also referred to a promising practice regarding family preservation called Host Homes where young people can stay with a community member to have a period of respite from their families as they're working through difficulties. Similarly, the Representative spoke about whole family response, in which the parent is removed from the home, rather than the child, as another way to prevent youth homelessness. The Representative added that for many youth, their situation had deteriorated to the point where going home was no longer a viable option.

Committee Members noted recent government actions including eliminating tuition fees for youth formerly in care, creating a comprehensive poverty reduction plan, and investing in community social services, and inquired as to whether the youth interviewed for the report spoke about the impact of these initiatives. The Executive Director shared that some youth were excited about the removal of an eligibility rule, which required youth to be independent of their caregivers for two years, for income assistance; however, some young people also noted that there were still some gaps regarding eligibility for tuition waivers. Furthermore, she noted that the Agreements with Young Adults only benefit the highest-functioning youth who are ready to access post-secondary education, and this is not the case for many youth aging out.

Noting the recommendation to establish a provincial plan by January 2021, the Committee asked about specific actions that could be implemented immediately. The Executive Director emphasized that a commitment to develop a provincial plan is the solution that youth have recommended;

however, she noted that one solution that would have an immediate impact is the implementation of youth rental subsidies. This would support youth to access housing and would help to address youth poverty. Members followed up with a question about implementing a basic income pilot for youth. The Executive Director noted that young people called for a distinct income support plan which would reduce some of the barriers to income assistance, such as the earnings exemptions, to help youth bridge the connection into employment. She agreed that such a program would make a significant difference for youth. The Representative also stressed that public policy to address youth homelessness must extend beyond transactional and financial matters to include life skills, and transitional, emotional, and social supports.

The Committee inquired as to whether the solutions proposed in the report have been quantified in any way. The Representative explained that this report does not include any quantification and that would have to be considered in formulating a provincial plan. She noted that some of the proposed solutions would be relatively easy to quantify, such as rental subsidies and making transitional and life skills supports available. She added that the costs of not addressing homelessness, such as repeated hospitalizations, are quite expensive and could be offset by implementing a provincial plan.

Committee Members asked about ways to improve foster care which was described in the report as “a superhighway to homelessness.” The Executive Director stated that providing permanency and reducing the number of moves experienced by youth in care would be one way to improve foster care. She also described opportunities to address a lack of sense of belonging and relational supports in residential group homes.

In response to a question about the relationship between young people and their social workers, the Executive Director noted that many youth spoke about social workers’ significant caseloads and about feeling like they did not receive the care and attention that they needed as a result of these caseloads. She also shared that some youth spoke about social workers being a positive support and explained that reducing caseloads would provide more time and opportunity for mentorship. Another challenge that youth highlighted was that they felt that adult voices were given more weight than youth voices during assessments for youth agreements and similar types of supports.

Other Activity

Special Project: Children and Youth with Neuro-Diverse Special Needs

On November 22, 2018, the Committee agreed to undertake a special project on children and youth with special needs. Following initial briefings from the Representative for Children and Youth and the Ministry of Children and Family Development in January 2019, Committee Members refined the scope of the project to children and youth with neuro-diverse (e.g.: ASD, FASD and developmental delay) special needs with a focus on eligibility and assessment processes.

Committee Members received additional briefings in March 2019 from the Representative for Children and Youth and the Ministry of Children and Family Development, as well as the Ministry of Health and the Provincial Health Services Authority, the Ministry of Education, Community Living BC, and the Advocate for Service Quality.

The Committee held a public consultation between April 15 and June 7, 2019, inviting British Columbians to share their input and experiences regarding children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs at one of eight public hearings or by providing a written or video submission. To encourage participation, the following guiding questions were provided:

- Briefly describe your experience with children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs. Are you a parent or caregiver of a child with neuro-diverse special needs? A service provider?
- What is your experience with how children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs are identified, monitored, and referred for services? How could this be improved?
- What do you find are the gaps, barriers and challenges with respect to assessments? Do they adequately take into account the needs of the child and the skills and capacities of parents and caregivers? Are there additional factors that should be taken into consideration?
- How does support change from early years to school age and from school age to Community Living BC? What are the challenges with these changes? How could processes and supports at these stages be simplified and improved?
- What changes could be made to eligibility and assessment processes for children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs that would have the most positive impact?

In total, the Committee heard 87 presentations and received 137 written and video submissions. Committee Members carefully considered input received from all sources during their deliberations.

On October 30, 2019, the Committee released its report, *Children and Youth with Neuro-Diverse Special Needs*, making 16 recommendations to improve services and supports for children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs and their families. Recommendations included: establishing family navigators in communities across the province to help families navigate the system of

assessments, supports and services; enhancing universal screening of neuro-diverse conditions to improve early identification and long-term outcomes for children; ensuring early years and school-based services and supports are provided based on need and functional ability; and increasing access to respite care. The report is available at <http://www.leg.bc.ca/cmt/cay>.

The Committee expects to meet with officials from the Ministry of Children and Family Development, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Health in the next fiscal year to discuss their response to the report and the work they are undertaking to address the recommendations.

The Committee extends their heartfelt appreciation to all family members and caregivers who participated in the consultation and shared their journeys including challenges, successes and hopes for the future. Members also sincerely thank all service providers, professionals and organizations dedicated to supporting children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs and their families.

