



BC COALITION TO END YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

COVID-19 & YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

SPECIAL REPORT

Background

In 2017, the BC Coalition to End Youth Homelessness (BCCEYH) was founded with the purpose of leading the development of a provincial plan to end youth homelessness in BC. The BCCEYH seeks to magnify the voices of young people with lived expertise to inform this plan and is supporting a provincial youth-led youth homelessness conference in partnership with A Way Home Kamloops.

The BCCEYH is a coalition of over 40 organizations across the province which meets regularly to work toward the development of the provincial plan to end youth homelessness, to discuss current youth homelessness issues and to develop 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.

COVID-19 Special Report:

COVID-19 has presented as an urgent and pressing policy issue that requires government to be responsive to the distinct and unique needs of youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness. This report was developed by the BCCEYH and is informed by service organizations located in diverse areas of the province, including urban, rural and remote centers.

This report seeks to answer these three questions:

- What are the impacts and challenges arising from COVID-19 for youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness?
- What are the Promising Practices to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in BC communities for youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness?
- What are the Recommendations for our Provincial Government to best meet the needs of youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Impacts and challenges arising from COVID-19:

The BCCEYH identified significant risks of homelessness for youth in the foster-care system as a result of COVID-19. The greatest challenges included:

- Youth are facing placement instability as foster parents and residential providers are concerned that some youth are not social distancing and still going out with friends.
- Youth are in a developmental stage where peers are critical to their wellness, which is sometimes more pronounced in the foster system where all supports are paid. This leads to the possibility of homelessness as youth may be asked to leave their placements and there are not enough alternative placements.
- Caregivers are expressing concern about youth not following physical distancing and other safe practices. This could pose a risk to the home – and a possible risk of youth losing their home as a result. It was noted that many foster parents are elderly, at higher risk for COVID-19, magnifying this issue and risk.
- Extended Family Care programs are breaking down, especially in rural areas. For example, in Nelson a youth went into town and was asked not to go back.
- Visitations with parents and children are being cancelled and families are being asked to do this via Zoom, which is challenging as not everyone has access to this technology.
- MCFD needs to reconsider their position on technology for youth in care. COVID-19 has demonstrated the increased disparity in access to internet and cell phones (digital divide) for youth in and from government care. Technology needs to be funded to support education and access to education.
- Youth who are struggling with substance use do not have access to appropriate harm reduction plans in the care home that supports safe use.
- Service providers and youth report that Social Worker caseloads continue to be high and youth from care are finding themselves underserved and overlooked during this time of COVID-19.
- Because youth do not have access to services, there is uncertainty to planning, and in some cases, planning has come to a halt. This is negative especially for youth aging out of care or transitioning to adult services.
- With youth not aging out during this time, will this mean a larger demographic aging out at a later date? If so, non- profits will need more resources to meet this need.

- What is then plan when youth in care are asked to leave where they are staying? There should be a COVID-19 Contingency Plan for every youth in care that addresses family visiting plans and alternatives, and technology.
- Some youth in care are being put in inappropriate placements in hotels and other non-youth-friendly settings.

The BCCEYH identified a lack of access to technology as a significant barrier and challenge for youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness. This includes:

- Youth can't afford the hardware or the data plans and ongoing internet costs. In the past, youth could access wi-fi at the library, but in this time cannot access the existing supports, which leaves vulnerable youth unable to connect to service organizations.
- Access to technology should be considered a right and a basic need to help youth keep up with education. In the UK, there is a class action suit from youth **experiencing poverty to increase** access to internet **and technology tools** for education.
- Services providers identified that MCFD has never recognized technology, internet, and the needed support in a residential resource. This leads to non-profits having to be tech leads during this time of COVID-19.
- The technology side related to the School District has been challenging, as not all youth have access to wi-fi even if they are provided the hardware. Youth are not allowed in the schools or other places where they could access wi-fi.

BCCEYH members have reported a worsening of mental health concerns, substance use, and crises for some youth as a result of COVID-19. There is a lack of support or emergency housing to help youth in this uncertain time. This includes:

- Ongoing worries and concerns from participant about losing service due to closures. Many youth are cut off from their natural and formal service provider supports during this time.
- Youth are experiencing increased mental health emergencies. Youth are presenting in hospital for mental health concerns such as suicide attempts and are being sent home, due to a lack of resources related to COVID-19.
- Youth are struggling to access prescriptions and it feels like everything is a band-aid and crisis response. One youth in Nelson has been waiting a long time just for approval on a prescription.
- Youth are at increased risk of overdose, as they may be using alone, trying a different substance due to limited supply, or having their substances cut.
- Non-profits are facing many challenges of not having the needed resources to respond to COVID-19 and adequately support youth. Many funding initiatives require justification

that it is in response to COVID 19 and do not include impacts such as mental health and substance use.

- Many non-profits are not eligible for Wage Subsidies as they cannot show a wage loss, but are clearly responding to greater need.
- Non-profits providing supportive housing are challenged to provide the comprehensive support for youth in social isolation.
- **Some** services have shut down in Victoria, including the Youth Shelter funded through MCFD. Youth are sleeping outside in the parks. Outreach workers are providing mental health support. All normal services have changed, which is alarming and confusing to youth. A lot of youth feel like this isn't real, doesn't feel it is serious, and there is a lot of avoidance. How do we inform them? We are trying to protect them from confusion and fear.
- There is a need to focus on communications to help youth be informed about what is really happening and what services exist to help.
- Service providers would like the Ministry of Mental Health & Addictions to support them to provide the increased mental health resources that are needed at this time.
- Non-profits are experiencing challenges in supporting staff with their personal anxieties. The sector was already stretched thin on resources, but are now on the front line of this pandemic and don't have the staffing resources to respond.

Youth are facing increased risk of homelessness and malnutrition during the COVID-19 pandemic and there is a lack of supports and housing inventory to respond to this need.

- The need for access to food and housing has increased for youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness. COVID-19 compounds already existing challenges around food and housing security.
- There is increased anxiety over food security. Aunt Leah's has had to expand programs, as grocery shopping has become too intense and stressful of a process. They are doing up care packages and getting medications filled up to support youth.
- Youth are at risk of losing their housing due to the impacts of mental health and substance use. This includes breakdown in familial relationships, and a lack of resources to help families stay together. Some youth may need to be reminded/educated that they can still be evicted for bad behavior as some youth in Williams Lake think they are invincible.
- Youth may face increased abuse at home and lack the resources, including access to youth shelters, to safely leave a crisis situation.
- It is increasingly becoming more challenging to secure market housing or shared accommodations during this time of social distancing.

- There is increased housing insecurity as youth are losing placements and not having placements available. There is no specific funding around housing for youth through MCFD.

Promising Practices to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth:

The BCCEYH would like to recognize the promising practices and swift response that the provincial government has already taken to help prevent and respond to youth homelessness. This includes:

- The Ministry of Municipal Affairs & Housing and BC Housing has proclaimed that no one is to be evicted during this time, which is good for youth.
- BC Housing is looking at a youth-specific response and trying to secure designated spaces for youth. For example, Nelson is working with BC Housing and has secured 75 motel rooms with separate entrances for people who have COVID 19. This program is accessible for youth, but youth-specific supports and safeguards will be needed.
- The Ministry of Children & Family Development has adopted an interim policy that will not require that you “age out” during the pandemic and youth will have the choice to stay in their current placement or not. Additionally, they have increased flexibility in the eligibility constraints of Agreements with Young Adults, including suspension of calendar months. Could this be an opportunity for government to extend after-care services post COVID-19?
- MCFD has continued meeting with the Fostering Change team on a weekly basis even during this time of COVID-19, which shows commitment to pro-active communication.
- School District 8 is distributing Google Chrome tablets to students who don't have it.

Non-profits across the province are developing innovative strategies to continue supporting youth during this time of COVID-19.

- Although community centers are closed, many non-profits are still providing access to workers via phone and Zoom. Non-profits are helping with food programs and helping to get prescriptions filled out. Aunt Leah's is providing groceries to go for youth.
- Non-profits have had to rapidly change policies and procedures such as providing food services outside of the building and outreach services to provide food and clothes. One developed a Facebook page where youth can say their needs and they can meet them.
- Some organizations have temporarily expanded age mandate. For example, at Covenant House, no youth will age out of their programs during this time.
- Aunt Leah's has received increased financial support for their Emergency Housing Funds Subsidy program that allows the Society to immediately house youth. The organization

provides a letter to the landlord guaranteeing that rent will be paid and damages covered. To support youth's education acquisition, they are providing software and hardware to ensure youth do not fall behind during the pandemic.

- A webinar on Supporting Harm Reduction in COVID-19 Shelter and Self-Isolation is helpful. It can be found at: <http://cnh3.ca/resources/>
- Aunt Leah's has received financial support to provide executive coaching support for the Leadership Team during the pandemic.
- A Way Home Kamloops continues to provide youth with access to coordinated housing and supports throughout the pandemic and has provided youth experiencing homelessness with emergency housing through donated hotel stay coupons from community. This helps youth stay out of the shelter system.
- Private philanthropists such as foundations are taking initiative to respond to the gaps youth are experiencing as a result of COVID-19. For example: <https://www.cafdn.org/for-youth/covid-19-youth-support-fund/#1561663407827-64b3ba97-458b>

During this time of COVID-19, communication becomes critical. The BCCEYH would like to acknowledge these resources for information and online resources.

- The Office of the Representative of Children & Youth have taken the lead on a pro-active Social Media Campaign with their Youth Social Media team. This is helping to educate youth on social distancing to help prevent homelessness by helping youth maintain their placements.
- <https://kidshelpphone.ca/get-info/were-here-for-you-during-covid-19-novel-coronavirus>
- <https://mindyourmind.ca/>

Recommendations for the Provincial Government to best meet the needs of youth during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Provide reliable technology to all youth in need. Technology for all youth needs to be seen as a basic need and high priority at this time. The inequities in access to technology are resulting in increased disparity in access to education - and potentially life-saving support to vulnerable youth. Youth need access to internet, cell-phones, laptops, and printers in order to have equal access to education and supports.
- Provide universal and comprehensive after-care supports post 19 for all youth in the foster care system regardless of their circumstance with waitlists eliminated. Non-profits are concerned about their capacity to support a larger cohort of youth aging out all at

once. There should be a wind down period where non-profits can get their level of support back to “normal.”

- Develop a Contingency Plan for every youth in care that includes alternative housing options and supports, including considerations and plans based on the youth’s culture.
- Support foster parents with increased pay or respite to help youth remain in the home. Provide education to the youth and foster parents around social distancing.
- MCFD may need more resources (perhaps hire more intake and assessment staff) in to address backlogs and inaccessibility. Additionally, MCFD needs to review its systems of approval to improve efficiency. Concern was also expressed that when school resumes, there is a need for greater efficiency and responsiveness to youth requesting permission for field trips.
- Develop youth-specific emergency housing options in light of COVID-19. These should not be at the same hotels as the adult response and should be tailored to the youth's unique developmental needs.
- Ensure all youth shelters are accessible for youth at this time (many closures reported).
- Provide increased resources to non-profits to respond effectively to the needs of youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness.
- Provide additional support staff that can help youth sustain housing and wellness during these challenging times.