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Ontario should help foster kids until they turn 25

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On an impulse, while working on a social policy fellowship years ago at St. Christopher House, I asked a number of low-income adults in a community reference group — some in their 40s and 50s — if they had ever been in foster care.

Slowly, more than half put up their hands. At that time, I was surprised. But I have asked the same question again in similar settings with similar results. I am no longer surprised.

At age 21, youth who “age out” of care are not allowed to have any further relationship with the system that brought them this far — the foster care system or a group home. They often have nowhere to go.

Well-meaning social workers have no other option but to accompany them to the two places where they can get the money or services they need to live: the welfare office or a shelter. These are not great options at the best of times but it’s a lot worse when it’s your birthday. You can be sure that there will be no candles or cake at either venue.



Irwin Elman, Ontario's Advocate for Children and Youth, asked for an analysis on extending benefits to age 25 for children aging out of foster care.

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But if this is where government agencies take vulnerable young adults, should we be surprised that welfare offices or shelters are the places they will go for a good chunk of their adult life?

Fortunately, Ontario’s children’s aid societies have several programs to help support young people as they age out of care. These include Extended Care and Maintenance (ECM) agreements that extend financial and emotional support past the age of 18 until age 21. These agreements are available only to youth who are Crown wards or to those in customary care or other specified arrangements.

But these agreements only extend to age 21 and that’s simply not long enough. Studies show that 20-24 year-olds now stay at home at three times the rate their counterparts did just two generations ago. Youth aging out of care do not have this option.

It is an understatement to say that not all kids have sorted themselves out by age 21. Those who have been separated from their parents understandably need even more help and guidance.

Youth aging out of care say that programs that avoid welfare can be helpful with educational attainment, employment and mental health improvement while avoiding the criminal justice system, homelessness, early pregnancy and teen parenting.

But instead of having more supports to address these challenges, these kids often have fewer.

Expanding resources to these youth by extending help would be one important addition in an array of extra social supports that could help youth leaving care attain positive outcomes.

For example, extending benefits to age 25 would help former Crown wards attain goals such as post-secondary education and employment.

Last year, I was asked by Irwin Elman, Ontario’s Advocate for Children and Youth, to conduct a cost-benefit analysis, the first such study we know of to have been completed in Canada. The result is a new report — *25 Is The New 21* — released on March 1.

Our team analyzed the best and most promising aspects of seven cost-benefit analyses undertaken in the U.S. and Australia. These studies examined the costs to society of providing extra funds and supports. They revealed vastly different approaches, assumptions and data sources, yet all reached the same conclusion: increased investments in services for youth transitioning from care will yield positive benefits in the long term.

Our report examines available Ontario data, as well as Canadian and international sources, to estimate the cost of a program extension in Ontario and, in turn, estimate the savings that could be achieved by bettering the lives of youth aging out of care.

If special supports — not welfare and shelters — are extended to youth aging out of care for four additional years, fewer youth will likely become involved with the criminal justice system, none will access basic social assistance, and more will likely finish high school and post-secondary education, thereby increasing their earnings and the taxes they would pay.

For every \$1 the province of Ontario spends supporting its youth by extending supports to age 25, we estimate that governments could save or earn an estimated \$1.36 over the working lifetime of that person.

Governments are looking to save money and to do things differently in a cost-effective manner that results in better outcomes. Ending the welfare and shelter option for young people leaving care is a great place to start.

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