



**Submission to the  
Review of the Child and Family Services Act  
December 17, 2014**

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## **Who we are:**

Our Voice Our Turn is a group of youth and alumni in and from care that is supported by the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth. We partnered with The Advocates Office to create the Youth Leaving Care Hearings and My REAL Life Book.

<http://provincialadvocate.on.ca/main/en/hearings/pages/home.html>

We were also the youth representatives with the Ministry of Children and Youth Services on the Blueprint for Fundamental Change to Ontario's Child Welfare System. Currently we are focused on projects related to the implementation of the recommendations of My REAL Life Book and the Blueprint for Fundamental Change to Ontario's Child Welfare System.

## **The Purpose of Our Submission:**

The Review of the Child and Family Services Act is an appropriate time to share our views and reiterate the themes from My REAL Life Book. We feel it is important for the CFSA to be updated and reflect changes that the youth who experience most articles in the Act feel would make their experiences in care better. Our submission will focus on areas that members of our group identified as important for change.

## **Our Submission:**

1. **Age of protection:** We submit the age of protection should be raised to 18 years old. This would be in line with most other provinces and territories. Most other legislation in Ontario identifies an adult at 18 years of age. Why should the very Act that is in place to protect children be any different? The age of protection should be raised because:

- Young people continue to experience unsafe living situations in their family homes beyond the age of 16.
- Youth aged 16 and 17 experience high rates of homelessness due to being kicked out of their family homes and/or leaving to find safer conditions.
- Youth aged 16 and 17 have high rates of unemployment and therefore struggle to support themselves.

- Youth aged 16 and 17 have high rates of dropping out of school due to factors related to trying to support themselves and keep themselves safe.
- It is more difficult for youth to get Ontario Works when they do not have the support of an adult.
- Support and protection from CAS agencies should be voluntary on the part of the youth.

The government has a responsibility to protect children. A 16 year old should still be considered a child under the CFSA.

**2. Access to files:** We submit that Children and youth in care should have access to their CAS files. Anything written about a child or youth in care should be accessible to them without barriers and delay. This should be included in the CFSA to ensure it is happening across the province for everyone. This is important to children and youth because:

- A youth's file holds valuable information about their past.
- A file and its contents should be written in such a way that it is respectful to the child. It contains things that happened to them and they experience. There should be no barrier to keep them from seeing that information.
- Case files can have valuable medical and family information.
- In many cases, access to files can help a young person bring closure to a difficult time in their lives.
- It is a part of their story, and their life.

**3. Sibling Access:** Siblings should not be separated when brought into care unless there is a serious safety concern. Accommodations should be made to keep them together and not separated for reasons like "bed availability". Coming into care is hard enough without having to be separated from your brothers and sisters. We think this should be included in the CFSA because:

- Sibling's relationships can deteriorate due to lack of visits or visits being cancelled. This is out of the control of the children.
- Sibling's visits should be made mandatory for all children even if some are not in care.
- It is important to keep sibling relationships intact as they will often times be a supportive and constant family relationship.

- 4. Regulation of Group Homes/Foster Homes:** We submit that there should be stricter regulations for group homes and foster homes. The current system is flawed and youth are not experiencing good outcomes when growing up in care. We submit that:
- Group homes should be monitored more closely by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services and/or a third party.
  - “Make sure group homes operate more like homes than jails.”
  - Youth should be included in the decisions of where they live.
  - Foster homes should receive their foster rates until a youth is ready to move out, not when they turn 18.
  - Group home licensing should be based on random and unannounced visits from the Ministry instead of notice given months in advance.
- 5. Adoption and Permanency:** We know that adoption is not for everyone, but we submit that more emphasis should be given to help those who want this option, including older teens. We submit that:
- Wait times for adoption to be decreased by offering more training, bring on more adoption workers.
  - Raise awareness that older youth may want to be adopted as well
  - Provide more subsidies and specialized services to families that want to adopt.
  - More options for open adoptions.
  - Family Finding should continue to develop across all CAS agencies to ensure that children and youth are placed with family before foster caregivers.
  - CAS’s should explore all avenues for permanency.

We are hopeful that the review of the Child and Family Services Act will create opportunities for children and youth in care to experience better outcomes.

