



COVID-19 & YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

SPECIAL REPORT #2

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Submitted by:

**BC COALITION TO END YOUTH
HOMELESSNESS**

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BACKGROUND

The factors influencing youth homelessness are increasingly pronounced and complex with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which makes the development of a provincial action plan an urgent priority.

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 is a coalition of over 40 organizations across the province that seeks to magnify the voices of youth with lived expertise by developing 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.

The pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for the sector in meeting the unique needs and distinct developmental considerations for youth. In April 2020, the BCCEYH released the first of two reports on COVID-19. The BCCEYH has engaged with youth and community partners across the province to provide government with this critical information to inform planning. There will be long-lasting and far wide-spread impacts of COVID-19 on vulnerable youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness, which requires a coordinated strategy to ensure no youth is left behind.

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS:

Youth homelessness continues to manifest in devastating ways for young people during the pandemic. Coalition members report that many youth are sleeping rough outside as a result of COVID-19. Some of the reasons youth have cited include:

- Fear that the shelter is not COVID free and wanting to remain physically distant.
- Reduced access to shelter beds as some emergency shelters have closed or have less bed capacity. In Vancouver, mental health teams outside of Metro Vancouver are referring youth to downtown shelters due to shortages in their community.
- Restrictions at shelters including temperature checks and requirements to wear a mask. For youth who have experienced trauma, it can be triggering to see people's face covered up or to feel like their breathing is restricted.
- Fewer opportunities to couch surf due to SRO's restrictions on visitor access.
- Natural supports may be physically distancing and are not able to provide a couch.

- Abusive home situations being deemed safe without a proper home assessment by MCFD.
- Difficulty paying rent and affording food, which has resulted in living in cars.
- Being in recovery and having roommates who have increased substance use.
- Wanting to avoid substance use present at temporary hotels.
- Employment-based housing situations have been lost.
- Displacement with tent cities closing.
- Cowichan has seen an increase in homelessness camps with an overrepresentation of youth. This is due to a lack of in-person services that is compounded by the challenge of finding people who are prepared to do outreach with the youth in these tent cities during COVID-19.
- Reduced government subsidy access.
- Improved weather.

Another challenge with COVID-19 has been the increased access to the online world causing youth to submerge into it without the proper safety mechanisms in place. Perpetrators of abuse are targeting youth who are not having their core needs met and are susceptible to abuse. Trends include:

- Youth report going on dating sites to find somewhere to spend the night, which has led to grooming and sexual exploitation.
- Young women are reporting that they are having to resort to virtual sex work to pay for their rent or food.
- In Vancouver, youth are reporting increased postings on social media that promote “group living” that sounds like a cult. One youth recently responded to an advertisement to go take care of bunnies and has not been seen again by her mental health team.

Due to the quarantine and housing being difficult to secure, many youth have stayed in unsafe living situations because they have nowhere to go and service providers have not been able to connect with them. These youth are at risk of homelessness and their experiences include:

- Increased incidents of abuse and violence at home, including sexual abuse. Youth are being required to share the same space with an abuser for an extended period of time.
- Organizations report that underage youth are disclosing violence and abuse in their home and are being denied MCFD support as their house was deemed safe without any formal home assessment.
- Increased family conflict as there are no breaks for family and negative situations arise.

BARRIERS & SOLUTIONS TO COVID-19 PRIORITY ISSUES:

This report identifies priority issues as a result of COVID-19 that will have a long-term impact on vulnerable youth and provides key solutions that will ensure no youth is left behind.

HOUSING:

Youth continue to navigate complex and oppressive barriers to accessing and maintaining housing that requires a distinct Youth Housing Action Plan. The barriers identified include:

- Youth experience stigmatization from landlords and may not have the credit history or references to be successful in their housing search. Many landlords feel they are irresponsible or unprepared for living independently, which leads to discrimination when applying for housing. As a result of COVID-19, there are fewer landlords willing to rent to youth due to the increased risk they face with government policies that prevent evictions and could result in a loss of money.
- Affordability continues to be an issue. The housing portion for Agreements with Young Adults and Income Assistance do not match the market rates. Other youth may have instable income due to part-time employment and property owners are not able to reduce the rent. Post-pandemic, it is unlikely that youth will step back into consistent, full-time work, and rent needs to be manageable on reduced hours of work. Some youth face evictions for unpaid rent during the pandemic.
- Youth report challenges accessing technology to view local rental sites. Youth may not have access to a cell-phone or Wi-Fi and many organizations are not providing walk-in services, which result in a loss of connection by doing everything virtually.
- Youth are facing a lack of education around housing rights and legal responsibilities.

Young people are scared to ask questions about their rights when signing a lease as are desperate for a place to be.

- Youth are reporting a lack of access to low-barrier supportive housing for substance use and mental health concerns. Other youth report a lack of access to housing that supports recovery or abstinence. An organization reports that Vancouver Mental health teams are not accepting any new referrals for mental health supported housing at this time.
- Service providers and youth identified risks with youth being placed in adult supportive housing including sexual exploitation, and substance use. One example provided is an 18-year-old youth in Nelson, who is residing in a temporary hotel, where the closest person to his age is 28.
- There are many barriers to developing permanent youth housing including finding land and building it. Some Coalition members have concerns about delays in construction for new housing projects. For example, a housing project in Penticton was approved two years ago and the organization has sent land and buildings, but nothing has gained traction. There are many young women living in substandard housing that need that permanent solution desperately.
- Some programs have infeasible requirements associated to housing. There needs to be an uncoupling of criteria for low-income housing. Additionally, there have been less inter-agency referrals for housing as some organizations are closed or operating at a reduced rate.
- Many youth face the barrier of not having a place to go when they first become homeless. Sometimes having a youth shelter that provides a stable place to eat and sleep, and access resources is the first step in helping a youth to get a home. For example, Williams Lake does not have a youth shelter, which makes it challenging to connect with homeless youth and do planning towards permanent housing first. In Vancouver, youth reported a lack of communication between shelters.

The key housing solutions post-pandemic recovery includes:

- A BC Youth Housing Action Plan that outlines priority actions and promising models of housing that will be the foundation of a provincial plan to end youth homelessness.
- Develop and build youth-specific housing that includes a variety of accommodations including communal, transitional, supportive, scattered site, and affordable market units.

There should be designated low-barrier housing for youth with mental health and substance use concerns, as well as housing for youth who do not use substances. Youth recommend having teachers, nurses, and life-skills workers onsite.

- Designate housing units to the cohort of youth aging out of care post-pandemic to ensure no youth ages out into homelessness.
- Provide funding to community organizations to support youth in finding rentals and developing life-skills to sustain housing. Youth need support in communicating with landlords to prevent conflict by addressing issues before they arise such as not being able to afford rent one month.
- Create more scattered site program units for youth with rental subsidies and funding support positions in organizations who can partner with property management companies and provide case management. Additionally, organizations should network with other agencies that have access to housing to ensure youth are prioritized.
- Support the development of the Friendly Landlord Network to increase youth's access to market housing. There should be more public education initiatives that engage landlords by creating accountability within community to support youth and fostering a sense of purpose by helping youth. The provincial government could provide tax incentives for individual homeowners to provide affordable rent and become a part of the Friendly Landlord Network or something similar.
- Explore the development of transitional employment-based housing.
- Begin transition planning early on for youth who are in the temporary hotels to ensure no youth is discharged back to the streets. Explore keeping hotels and designating vacation rentals to youth.
- Provide youth with rental subsidies and financial supports that bridge the affordability gap into market housing. The temporary COVID-19 measures should be transitioned into permanent supports such as a universal basic income.
- Increase youth's access to housing-focused workshops that assist them in learning about their rights and responsibilities. For example, the Rent Smart Workshop.
- Increase access to shelters and provide youth with a safe place to be all night, especially if a second wave of COVID-19 hits. Youth recommend integrating places to isolate within youth shelters.

YOUTH IN AND FROM THE FOSTER-CARE SYSTEM:

The most vulnerable and at-risk youth for experiencing homelessness post-pandemic are those who are preparing to age out.

- Youth highlighted transition planning difficulties and that their first experience of aging out of care will not follow the normal process. Transition planning is especially challenging during a pandemic and the timeline does not provide enough time for planning. For example, youth received 10 days notice that the COVID-19 emergency measures allowing them to remain in place were extended for another two months.
- Youth report a need for government to provide more direction as there is a lot of unknowns to aging out during COVID-19, and this will help reduce anxiety. Young people report that COVID-19 has really “rattled them” and they are seeing their support systems run around “like chickens with their heads cut off” because no one knows how to manage the situation. For example, one youth was supposed to move, but their worker couldn’t help them because of COVID-19 restrictions.
- Although the aging out process has been paused, some youth do not want to stay in care any longer and are experiencing challenges in accessing their own housing. In other cases, a Vancouver organization reports that many youth are choosing to leave their foster homes as some youth are facing pressure from their foster families that could be interpreted as being told to age out faster.
- Youth are facing challenges in not being able to visit family and friends, as well as managing rules and restrictions due to COVID-19. There is a lot of uncertainty about a second wave and youth don’t know how long restrictions are going to be put on them. There is increased isolation and reduction in support, as the connections that are usually there for them are not present. Many youth are reporting challenges in connecting with their social worker and feeling dismissed.
- Organizations report that MCFD has been reluctant to offer supports or guardianship at this time and are not completing thorough home assessments, so many youth are “aging out” who have never been brought into care and will not have access to any supports post-nineteen. Voluntary-care Agreement extensions are a struggle to acquire at this time without family work being done. Covenant House reports that families are requesting respite as they are experiencing parent-teen conflict and not receiving adequate support.

The low-barrier Agreements with Young Adults (AYA) program is a promising practice that must be continued to ensure former youth in care do not fall through the cracks post-pandemic. Youth provided feedback to improve access:

- Youth are anticipating challenges in accessing MCFD support post-pandemic if the low-barrier Agreements with Young Adults program is not maintained. Youth are fearful their support will end without notice and they will become homeless.
- There is a lack of awareness and understanding of AYA supports. There has been a slow roll-out and staff are still doing training and youth receive inconsistent response from centralized screening.
- Some youth are choosing not to access AYA, because some of the requirements they must follow are unachievable. For example, one youth's contract prescribed they must access DBT counseling. These rules and restrictions result in youth not accessing support and trying to find employment instead. Some youth may not understand that they can be cut off their agreement if they don't fulfill school expectations post-pandemic.
- Many youth are struggling with mental health and substance use concerns and are finding it difficult to connect.
- An organization reports that some youth have disclosed they are purposely failing high school, as they are not yet ready for university, but want to stay on the AYA program. These youth are not aware of how this could affect their future ability to access post-secondary.
- Many youth are struggling with online school and may identify as having a learning disability. Youth are concerned they will be cut off AYA if they can't adapt to technology.
- Some youth are not able to access post-secondary education or treatment programs post-pandemic as there are long waitlists and some programs are not accepting new referrals. This will limit youth's ability to access AYA post-pandemic if their program is not available.

The government should support the larger cohort of youth aging out post-pandemic with these strategies:

- Develop a Youth Housing Plan for each youth aging out with all the supports youth need to succeed. MCFD should provide one-year of after-care support.

- Increased flexibility around the timeline when a youth needs to leave care. There should be no hard and fast deadlines or cut-off because a youth is nineteen. Youth are facing extraordinary challenges in transition planning, so need time to secure permanent housing.
- Work with service providers to ensure youth have support to secure housing and receive ongoing, in-person life-skills support gain “adulting skills” in order to sustain housing.
- Provide youth with increased subsidies for housing related items as it is challenging to access the thrift store and buy housing items such as utensils or furniture.
- Ensure every youth aging out has a SIN card and photo ID. Youth are reporting challenges in accessing ID during the pandemic.
- All CLBC and Mental health assessments must be completed prior to youth aging out. Youth report delays on receiving assessments during the pandemic, which will affect the level of support they receive in the future.
- Provide face to face transition planning support. Youth report that the pandemic has increased isolation and anxiety, which makes it challenging to make big life decisions.
- There needs to be a coordinated effort between MCFD and Indigenous organizations to support youth aging out.
- Ensure each youth has stable income, so they are able to afford housing ongoing.
- Ensure schools re-open in September and a plan is in place to ensure classrooms are open for youth in care to attend should a second wave occur.

SOCIAL CONNECTIONS:

Social interaction is a key developmental milestone for youth. Many youth are struggling with physical distancing as it is in conflict with their stage of development and the important role peers play for young people. Some youth worry they are losing their ability to communicate and build social relationships. Other concerns include:

- Youth are reporting risky sexual activity and a potential increase in sexual health diagnoses.
- As a result of everything moving online, there has been an increase in predatory and recruitment activity. For example, one youth signed up on a fitness site and had a male offer to provide her with one on one fitness training as understands her discomfort. She researched him and discovered he had many offenses for sexual behaviors. Additionally, younger youth are using TikTok and predators are exploiting youth online. While the push has been to adapt to technology, there is increased human trafficking and access to sexual pictures. Youth who have no guardians are not being educated on this unknown behavior.
- It is not clear who or how to report sexual exploitation or grooming that is occurring online.
- There is limited transit, which compounds the disconnection and isolation youth face.
- Youth with children are challenged by not being able to access daycares or schools and are with their children 24/7 day without any breaks.
- As more jobs are created in the Social Services sector, youth worry that staff will leave, which will create instability in relationship building and negatively impact the youth.
- Youth are reporting delays in the court and immigration processes. There needs to be lowered community expectations regarding immigration status in order to increase youth's access to social connections.

To address these negative social impacts as a result of COVID-19, there must be an intentional effort to help youth gain social connections.

- Support workers need to provide in-person support to make a strong connection with youth. For those who are unable to, they should provide frequent virtual check-ins.
- Provide youth with ongoing training around technology, so they are able to use it safely to maintain social connections and are able to protect themselves from online bullying or trafficking.
- Provide youth with recreation and free youth-led fun activities to promote positive socialization post-pandemic.

- Youth who have faced stigma around physical distancing would like an opportunity to share with the community their experience of COVID-19.
- Family supports should be identified via eco-mapping and there should be planned visits that maintain that connection.
- Youth should be provided access to free family counseling if they want to return home.
- Non-profits must update resources, so youth know what community supports are accessible.

MENTAL HEALTH:

There will be long-term mental health impacts for youth post-pandemic.

- Self-isolation increases loneliness and anxiety about germs, which has been compounded by the pandemic and will create long-term, mental health implications. There will be a slow bouncing back. For example, in Victoria, there was a 360% increase in access and use of the virtual Youth Chat room.
- Youth are reporting an increase in abuse, including sexual and domestic violence. There is increased violence on the streets and cyber bullying. Other youth are stuck at home in challenging situations without an opportunity to get space, which causes damage to mental wellness.
- Many youth have not been able to receive adequate mental health support during the pandemic due to hospital aversion and a lack of in-person support. Youth are reporting longer wait times for mental health assessments to obtain a diagnosis. Online counseling is not working for all youth. At the Prince George Foundry, youth are requesting face to face support.
- Youth are reporting increased incidents of self-harm. Some youth may be overdosing as a suicide attempt.
- Some youth have lost independence by being forced to comply and follow strict guidelines. Some youth may act out in dangerous ways or will face a lack of motivation.
- One youth forum identified that COVID-19 would impact young people's trust in governmental institutions by seeing how they manage the pandemic. As there are many

diverging approaches to the pandemic, there will be differing outcomes potentially leading to mistrust. Some youth are experiencing fear in accessing health supports.

Coalition members and youth with lived expertise recommend distinct strategies to support youth's mental health. This includes:

- Free counseling should be provided to all youth and should be available on-line and in-person. Youth recommend providing young people with a choice in their counselor.
- Increased mental health services that are pro-active with a focus on self-care and safety plans, including access to online programs and supports.
- Low-barrier support that provides drop in programming or short, easy life-skills workshops such as budgeting, employment, career training, mental wellness, and social activities. Youth recommend non-clinical activities such as walking with a community support worker.
- Services should be extended and provided after-hours and on weekends, as we all know that crises do not happen during 9-5.
- Develop a “no wrong door” policy by ensuring all organizations know what resources are available and what youth need supports to ensure no youth falls through the cracks. Mental health organizations should partner with non-profits to provide youth with clinical supports and workshops. There should be one referral document for all services such as the Wrapforce program in Kamloops and the One Door initiative in Kelowna.
- Provide youth with in-house mental health and cognitive assessments, so they are able to access CLBC and other supports in a timely manner.
- Partner with non-profits to provide health services onsite to youth to reduce their risk of community transmissions by going to a walk-in clinic.
- Utilize First Nations healing knowledge and link this in with support to help youth get connected to the land, nature and community.
- Increase peer support opportunities and engage youth voice in paid focus groups or online surveys.
- Provide health-care and law enforcement professionals with regulated mental health crisis and de-escalation strategies to better support youth.

- Obtain data from Mental Health teams and hospitals to better understand the long-term impacts of COVID-19. Reconsider the 14-day isolation period for youth struggling with mental health and substance use concerns.

SUBSTANCE USE:

The most deadly challenges that youth are facing during COVID-19 are related to substance use.

- Since COVID-19, the border has been closed, which has cut off the normal drug supply. This has caused people to make drugs, so substances are becoming more dangerous and potent, which is resulting in increased overdoses. For example, there have been some experiences where marijuana has been laced with fentanyl. Youth are also switching from their regular drug of choice to whatever is available.
- There is an increased need for low-barrier support services and access to a safe supply. In Cowichan, it has been reported that 4 youth have died related to substance use as a result of the pandemic. The most recent one was a young person who was 13.
- Some service providers are not able to provide life saving techniques to support a youth overdosing due to the complications of physical distancing.
- Youth are increasing their substance use due to a loss of purpose and structure, and are using drugs as a way to cope and connect with people.
- Due to social distancing, youth report increased use alone leading to a higher risk of overdoses. Some safe using spaces have been closed and youth have reported their naloxone kits have not been replenished.
- Youth report unsafe using practices, including the sharing of needles, which transfers diseases. There are increased barriers to accessing suboxone and methadone.
- The cost of drugs has increased, which impacts survival behaviors such as potential crimes to support use.
- Youth are identifying decreased access to treatment centers during the pandemic. For example, in the Okanagan, there is only one treatment center that supports youth ages 17-24, which services youth throughout the Interior and Kootenays. During COVID-19, the treatment center was forced to close, which pushed our number of centers from one to

zero. The Bridge would like to open a treatment center for youth, but is awaiting the necessary funding to be able to do so.

- There are limited treatment options or places for youth to use if they are under nineteen. In many regions, there are no treatment programs available for youth under age 17 with complex substance use concerns.
- The new legislation changes of Bill 22 is going to drive youth's use underground and they may be less likely to report when they feel they may be overdosing. There are no secondary treatment options for youth to transition to within 7 days of their hospital visit, so youth will be released into community with reduced tolerance and mistrust of supports. If youth are going to be detained, there needs to be a pathway into treatment. The only benefit of this legislation is it will prevent premature discharges from the hospital for homeless youth, which will give service providers more time for planning. Please see The Representative of Children and Youth letter: <http://rcybc.ca/reports-and-publications/statements/representatives-statement-in-response-to-governments-proposed-changes-to-the-mental-health-act/> & BC Coroner's letter: <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2020PSSG0035-001150>

There are many key solutions to mitigate the long-term impact of substance use as a result of COVID-19:

- Increase harm reduction services for youth, including appropriate supplies, naloxone kits and training to use safely. In particular, youth in Williams Lake requested harm reduction services.
- Youth report an increased need for safe using spaces, including mobile vans that deliver. Youth request drug testing stations so youth can test their substances. Organizations need to bring the supports to the youth to avoid risk of community transmissions.
- Youth need legal prescriptions that are delivered to their home or to organizations to support safe use.
- There should be pro-active prevention work to help youth access detox or treatment before overdosing. Youth need increased support with safety planning and managing triggers such as connecting with negative people due to boredom or isolation.
- Youth are recommending that non-profits provide medical detox to youth they are already connected to. In Vancouver, youth suggested that the COVID-19 or Covenant House van could help youth detoxing in community.

- Provide youth with access to in-house substance use counselors and face to face NA/AA meetings. Some youth are not able to access the online meetings or they don't work for them. Youth benefit from peer-based knowledge groups to de-stigmatize substance use.
- Provide youth with access to treatment and abstinence-based programs. Ensure they have support workers that can help advocate and transport them to detox or treatment.
- Some youth identified a need for spiritual care to heal from the increased deaths and loss they have experienced as a result of the COVID-19 overdose crisis.
- Youth need support in finding purpose, which provides youth with a reason to access substance use support. This may need to be a two-part process with employers willing to support youth to get connected to the community and support resilience in bouncing back.
- Government needs to help reduce stigma for youth. Community needs to be supportive of youth who are facing increases in substance use and understand why people may have spent CERB on substances instead of punishing people.

EDUCATION:

The impact of COVID-19 on delaying youth's education is detrimental to their future success and quality of life:

- Many youth are finding it challenging to transition to online classes as they are used to using social media for fun. Other youth want to go to school, but can't access it due to a lack of technology or places to study as many youth are not offered extra supports. Some youth can't engage with online schooling due to mental health or disabilities.
- Transitioning back to in-person classes may cause some at-risk youth to miss out on classes. One youth said that, *"Online school makes it easier for youth to drop out as the consequences don't feel as real when compared with in-person school. Some people feel comfortable missing online classes as the punishment of skipping classes was absent."*
- Many youth are in survival mode and not able to plan for the future or consider education and career options, as they are trying to survive day to day, which can be a challenging habit to break.

- Youth are concerned about a lack of full day classes due to physical distancing requirements. This can be challenging for families with multiple children as youth may be attending class at different times or the school schedule may not be compatible with a parent's work schedule, which creates logistical issues for families with commuting and child-care. For youth with immune compromised family members, they may need flexibility in order to access classes from home.
- Even if a laptop or tablet is provided to help youth with transitioning to online classes, they may not be able to access internet.
- Youth anticipate health difficulties including an increased need for eye-care as a result of the amount of time spent online.
- There has been a loss in reporting child abuse with schools closing, which has required increased reporting support from non-profits. Some youth may rely on school, friends, and extracurricular activities to escape abusive living situations. These abusive relationships can take a toll on youth, so they are not able to focus in online school. Some family members who are abusive may discourage youth from doing their work. Youth should not be assessed on their learning abilities right now and school shouldn't be mandatory. Some youth felt school is a positive escape, even if it is only online.

In the COVID-19 recovery plan, there needs to be intentional planning and support provided to help bridge the education gap that youth experienced during the pandemic. Solutions include:

- Increased support and planning for youth at school that are struggling with online school or have learning disabilities. School support workers should help guide non-profits on best practices to support youth and the School Boards should provide tutor supports.
- Schooling should be integrated into housing programs by creating a COVID friendly space.
- Increased partnerships between schools and Indigenous organizations to support youth.
- Provide youth with appropriate technology to do school including devices, Wi-Fi, and a quiet space to study. Interactive learning should be supported to keep youth engaged.
- Education should be subsidized and the province should provide opportunities for project-based learning and apprenticeships. Youth recommend having basic education courses online to support literacy and numeracy development.

- Youth need clear pathways to education and increased access to information on how to obtain their education online. If youth don't find the right resource, this can stop them from applying.
- Provide increased access to post-secondary scholarships and bursaries. Youth report a need for support to be available to youth who are waiting for Canadian status.

INCOME:

As a result of the pandemic, many youth are facing financial challenges and are having difficulties affording rent and the increased costs of food. Other challenges include:

- Many ineligible youth have received the CERB and may face debt post-pandemic. It is reported that some organizations may have unintentionally misled youth by encouraging them to apply. As a result, some youth may face GST and income tax retractions. This debt will primarily impact youth on income assistance.
- The CERB has increased the vulnerability for youth who are struggling with substance use.
- Organizations are anticipating more debt and budgeting struggles for youth. Youth may face hoops to re-establish income assistance or disability supports.

Youth will require monetary benefits to bridge into economic recovery post-pandemic

- There must be priority to keeping income levels consistent to avoid an influx of youth experiencing homelessness. Provide youth with resources and adequate preparation time to transition off government support to employment.
- The Province should advocate to the Federal government to ensure ineligible youth who have accessed the CERB are not accumulating debt during the pandemic. Youth should obtain a pass and not have to pay back CERB or be given longer grace periods.
- If there is a second wave, there needs to be increased education on how the CERB works and who is eligible for it. There should be designated financial supports for youth with disabilities or young people who are working part-time.
- Youth need support with food security and supplies such as home kits provided by non-profits.

- Provide youth with budgeting skills as the CERB is changing how youth view money and they will need support to transition to employment.

EMPLOYMENT:

A post-pandemic recovery plan must include an emphasis on supporting youth to achieve developmental milestones of securing employment. Youth are facing complex barriers to accessing employment as a result of COVID-19. These include:

- Youth are facing increased competition for jobs and there is scarcity in entry level jobs with businesses shutting down. There are more skilled adults with education and experience applying for the same jobs. Some youth with disabilities report they are being rejected from employment due to demand.
- Some youth feel unsafe and uncomfortable with the “new normal” in terms of safety precautions due to anxiety of catching COVID-19. One youth reported that some jobs cannot maintain the necessary degree of cleanliness, which can have health complications for youth. Lower skilled jobs will potentially cut corners for safety and may not be essential, which puts youth at risk. This has resulted in some youth feeling safer on EI.
- Youth are feeling overwhelmed about returning to work with new policies, schedules, and roles, which compounds mental health concerns. One youth reported not responding to their employer’s emails as they felt overwhelmed and needed reassurance and guidance to transition back into the workplace.
- Youth face challenges in taking time-out for their health so early in their career during COVID-19. For example, some youth are worried if they quit their job; they would be punished in future employment searches by not having a good reference or being viewed as lacking work ethic.
- Youth are reporting that many jobs are not advertised and not knowing where to start in terms of securing employment. Youth are feeling overwhelmed and facing a lack of skills to engage in online forums due to learning disabilities.
- There is a lack of services to help youth build resumes, learn interview skills or gain volunteer experience to put on their resume during the pandemic.

- Restaurant workers reported reduced tips and increased struggles to pay their bills. The cost of living has not decreased, and youth are earning less money to bridge the affordability gap.

The recovery plan post-pandemic needs to include youth-specific employment strategies to ensure this generation is able to better compete in the economy and is not left behind.

- Youth need job training programs that provide case management, wraparound support, employment certificates, and workshops. There should be Indigenous specific programs.
- Increase the number of paid work experience programs that build on youth’s lived expertise. For example, the youth-led “Light the Way Youth Homelessness Conference.”
- Provide youth with personalized support to transition back into the work-place and transition off of government benefits in a stable way. Youth will need support stabilizing mental health and substance use to be successful in future employment opportunities.
- Zero Ceiling is a promising practice that has integrated employment and housing to help bridge youth out of homelessness into a sense of purpose. They provide mental health support and a strong recreation component that helps youth thrive in wellness.
- Develop fun workshops that connect youth to employers and gets employers feeling a sense of responsibility and achievement from employing youth.

SUPPORTING A RESILIENT SECTOR:

Non-profits are facing increased pressures and have been stretched as a result of the pandemic. In the recovery phase, they will be on the frontlines supporting youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness. In order for youth to be safe and well, the sector needs to be supported to bounce back post-pandemic. The sector recommends:

- Increased and sustained funding to manage additional expenditures of housing and supporting youth. Funding for wages should be adequate, so organizations are able to hire qualified and trained staff to offer meaningful support to youth.
- Increased transparency from government organizations on the recovery plan.
- Advocacy with the Federal government to ensure Indigenous organizations are able to access benefits as the current benefit through Indigenous Services Canada is only for

people on reserve resulting in a gap. There needs to be advocacy so Indigenous youth are equally able to access relief funds and the same benefits provided to youth on reserve. In Burns Lake, the Friendship Centers are struggling to provide hampers, food, and to continue providing services to those most impacted by the pandemic.

- Continued access to phones, computers, and personal-protective equipment in order to maintain a quicker recovery response in the event of a second wave.
- Support with administrative and operational costs such as buildings and proper infrastructure. It is common in our sector to have “bunk-bed desks”, which don’t work during a pandemic.
- Funding for staff development and wellness to ensure frontline staff are taken care of.
- Some youth recommend training for service providers to understand the unique needs of youth and how the pandemic has changed them.
- An opportunity to connect with other organizations and a community of practice to support the sector’s ability to look into the future.

In light of all the challenges, many non-profits spoke about their ability to adapt and the silver linings that have been created with COVID-19. Non-profits report:

- There has been increased access to health care supports through virtual doctor appointments. Rain City spoke about youth who have had long-term struggles with isolation and struggled to get connected or go to the doctor’s office. COVID-19 created an opportunity for youth to connect virtually, which has been valuable and should continue.
- Virtual case management meetings have worked well for some youth. Covenant House is engaging in a process of what worked during COVID-19 and found that virtual meetings worked better for some youth and also allowed staff an opportunity to reach more youth through efficiencies.
- Cowichan Friendship Center has helped close the gap around food security by rechanneling resources to be able to deliver nutritious food to help reduce the pressure for families. They have engaged in innovative partnerships with a bread making company that has helped non-profits fill the gap. They have noticed a societal shift with less waste and more caring and compassionate resources.

- BC First Nations Health Authority is looking at the social determinants of health and a youth-specific strategy.
- First Nations Leadership Council has been participating in two calls a week to discuss priority issues for Indigenous peoples during the pandemic. They are actively preparing for the anticipated second wave in the fall.
- Fostering Change has administered a survey about COVID-19 to inform MCFD how the community of youth in and from care have been impacted as a result of the pandemic.
- McCreary Centre Society was already completing a longitudinal study on youth aging out and incorporated questions about COVID-19 to understand the long-term impacts.
- In Vancouver, a COVID-19 Taskforce has been created to coordinate the work happening to reduce duplication and fill gaps. The first priority was managing the digital divide, which resulted in 68 phones from TELUS and a Vancouver Foundation grant for laptops and tablets.
- During COVID-19, Homelessness Services Association rolled out 3 free webinars for Outreach and Shelter programs to support organizations with managing rent issues, emergency supports, and providing Q & A with the Ministry of Health. They have been contacting their 200+ members on a weekly basis and hosting regional roundtables to support the sector's work.
- This global crisis has presented an opportunity for youth to obtain much needed housing.
- COVID-19 has built resilience in their youth and some youth have found strengths and supports they didn't know they had.

COMMON THEMES:

1. Provide unique and youth-centred ways to increase income levels for youth who are risk of homelessness that don't include complicated eligibility factors.
2. Youth aging out of care is the most vulnerable population at risk of homelessness as a result of COVID-19. The sector recommends a staggering approach of youth aging out post-pandemic as service providers will not have the capacity to support this larger cohort. MCFD must continue providing the low-barrier Agreements with Young Adults to help bridge youth into safe and secure housing.

3. Develop a BC Youth Housing Action Plan that provides a continuum of housing and access to rental subsidies to ensure no young person is left without a home post-pandemic.
4. The sector has identified increased substance use and overdoses as a result of the pandemic. The Coalition recommends low-barrier services that are implemented through a harm reduction lens, providing youth with a safe supply, and increasing the number of youth-specific treatment programs. The lack of treatment supports for youth is compounded by the risks associated with Bill 22 without the appropriate services for youth to transition into after being detained.
5. COVID-19 has exasperated mental health and wellbeing concerns for youth. The Coalition recommends increased youth-specific services and support around mental health.
6. Increase youth's safety and security around online activities to mitigate risks of exploitation and online bullying.
7. Create a cohesive system of youth-specific supports that continues to provide in person services for at risk youth to ensure they don't slip through the cracks. While the pandemic pay for essential service staff is useful, providing long-term pandemic pay increases will allow the sector to hire qualified staff to respond to the increased needs of youth.
8. During the pandemic, unemployment has impacted the youth demographic particularly hard and will have long term impacts. The government must develop a strategy to help youth achieve developmental milestones of employment and education.

CONCLUSION:

COVID-19 has created unprecedented challenges for marginalized youth at risk of or experiencing homelessness. As part of the recovery plan, we need to bring communities together to create a sense of purpose and connection for our youth who are so desperately searching for a sense of belonging. Each community should be supported to champion a recovery action plan that puts youth in the center and includes a holistic response to ensure no youth is left behind.

The province must continue to invest in youth and prioritize a provincial plan to end youth homelessness. The voices of youth must be elevated and as one young person says, "*Recovery is everyone coming together and collectively deciding how is going to come out of this... [by*

ensuring] everyone gets an opinion.” Sometimes a crisis presents an opportunity and our hope is this global pandemic results in intentional investments in ending youth homelessness in light of “Recovery for all.”

This report seeks to elevate the collective voices of many organizations and youth with lived expertise, as there is no time to wait. Every youth must be provided a way home. We stand rooted in action. Please stand with us.

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BC COALITION TO END YOUTH HOMELESSNESS:

YOUTH WITH LIVED EXPERTISE

Aunt Leah’s Independent Life-Skills Society

A Way Home Kamloops Society

BC Federation of Foster Parents

BC Non-Profit Housing Association

BC Poverty Reduction Coalition

Boys and Girls Club of Williams Lake

Covenant House

Cowichan CMHA

Cowichan Housing Association

First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition

First Nations Summit

Fraser Region Aboriginal Friendship Centre Association

Hollyburn Family Services Society

Homelessness Services Association of BC

Impact Abby

McCreary Centre Society

Nanaimo Aboriginal Centre

Nanaimo Women’s Centre

Nanaimo Youth Services Association

Nelson Committee on Homelessness

Nelson Community Services

North Okanagan Youth and Family Services

Office of the Representative of Children and Youth

Prince George YMCA/Foundry

Punky Lake Wilderness Camp Society

Rain City Housing and Supports Society

South Okanagan Women In Need Society (SOWINS)

TRRUST

Victoria Coalition to End Homelessness

ZERO Ceiling

