COMPASS CONNECTIONS & PLENTY OF THREADS:

A Report on the Prototype Programs

We acknowledge that this work takes place on the unceded, ancestral and traditional territories of the Semiahmoo, Katzie, Kwikwetlem, Kwantlen, Qayqayt and Tsawwassen First Nations. We recognize the ongoing colonization of Indigenous peoples, which is evident in the disproportionate number of Indigenous children and youth in the care system. We commit to approaching this work in the spirit of reconciliation; aiming to decolonize our practice and amplify the voices of Indigenous youth whenever possible.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth in and from care matter.

Of the approximately 700 youth in BC who leave government care on their 19th birthday each year, anywhere from 50 to 70 youth "aging out" every year call Surrey their home. In 2016, the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition identified youth who had "aged out" of the government care system as a key demographic to support, noting the increased risk of poverty for these young people. They set out on a mission to "wrap the community around youth", and radically rethink the ways youth are supported by the broader community as they transition from the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development into independence when they turn 19.

Over three years, we focused our work in three areas: research, building community, and youth leadership development. In our final year of the project we launched two prototype programs that brought together findings and work from those three areas. Project activities were supported by the collaboration of diverse community members and key stakeholders through an overall Project Planning Committee, and a number of distinct Working Groups. Most importantly, we created a Youth Advisory Committee made up of Surrey youth with care experience to support the project activities. This group of diverse young people provided crucial direction and expertise on the process, the actions, and the intended outcomes. Their voices were central to the project, and paramount to the project's success.

Throughout our discussions with youth, alumni from care, and allied stakeholders in our community workshops, events, and youth activities, two key issues emerged: the immediate and ongoing need for meaningful community connection and social capital. Digging deeper in our conversations, there were two primary focus areas related to connection and social capital where we believed we could have the most impact - adult connections and education and employment.

In our final year, our work in researching ways to support a deeper and wider community connection to youth resulted in the development of two distinct prototypes: Compass Connections and Plenty of Threads. We implemented the prototypes in order to test the models, learn from the implementation, and assess whether or not we should proceed with a full pilot.

Our research and youth engagement both show support for the creation of programs where interactions between youth and adult volunteers are informal, youth-directed, and based on need. This report summarizes that research, the outcomes of our implementation phase, and our recommendations for future programming.

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THE CONTEXT

Approximately 700 youth in BC leave government care every year on their 19th birthday, and around 5,000 young BC adults (aged 19-24) have previously been in government care. While increasing numbers of young people in BC are living with their parents until well into their twenties, young people coming out of the care system are forced into independence at 19; cut off from familiar services and supports before they may be ready.

Surrey has the largest youth population in BC; in 2016, roughly a quarter of the City's population was under 19 years old. But prior to 2016, there wasn't a lot of information specifically about youth with care experience in Surrey. Looking to take action on this issue, the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition commissioned a report by the McCreary Centre Society in 2016 entitled "Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care" to paint a clear local picture of this issue. Their research showcased some important facts: including that amongst Surrey's young people, anywhere from 50 to 70 turn 19 and 'age out' of government care every single year.

The research showed us that most British Columbian parents expect to support their children up to age 28, and most of them do. While just about all of their peers receive some financial or other assistance from their families between the ages of 19 to 28, only a tiny fraction of former youth in care in Greater Vancouver had received any housing or financial support from their family since turning 19. Unfortunately, the pattern across BC is true for Surrey youth with care experience - local youth who age out of care are more likely than their peers to become homeless, have poor educational, employment and health outcomes, and claim income assistance benefits.

The research also showed that the majority of BC adults believe that 19 year olds do not have the necessary skills and resources to live independently, and need the support of their families through their twenties. A 2013 Vancouver Foundation poll showed that only a quarter of BC adults were aware that government support ends when young people in care reach their 19th birthday. Initiatives like Fostering Change, and the work of the Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks and First Call have extremely successful at raising public awareness of this important issue, and so the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition set out to see how to bring individuals, organizations, and local government together to more effectively support young people transitioning out of care in Surrey.

THE PROJECT

This report focuses on the development of our prototype programs, the implementation of the prototype phase, key learnings, and recommendations for these programs moving forward.

RESEARCH

- Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care Report
- Youth in Care Fact Sheet
- Housing Resource Sheet
- Youth Mentorship Program Models
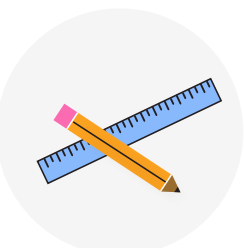- Youth Housing Models
- Youth Housing Survey

BUILDING COMMUNITY

- Stakeholder Workshops
- Holiday Dinners
- BC Children & Youth in Care Week Awards and Community BBQ
- 19th Birthday Installation and Event
- Youth Story Harvest

YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

- Youth Advisory Committee
- Advocacy
- Youth Retreats

PROTOTYPE PROJECTS

- Compass Connections
- Plenty of Threads

Given what the statistics say about the increased risk of poverty for young people with care experience, it was a natural fit for the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition (SPRC) to lead a project focused on supporting youth aging out of the care system. The intent of this work was to "wrap the community around youth", and radically rethink the ways youth are supported by the broader community as they transition from the care of MCFD into independence. And so, in 2016, with the support of funding from the Vancouver Foundation, "Connecting Community to Surrey Youth Aging Out of Care" launched into its first phase. With continued support from the Vancouver Foundation in 2017, and additional funding from Coast Capital Savings, Envision Financial, the Ocean Park Foundation, the Youth Employment and Education Fund (now the Surrey Youth Assistance Fund) and others, we hit the ground running with an ambitious vision to change outcomes for youth in and from care.

We brought together stakeholders, decision-makers, adults and youth with lived experience, and community members to hear from youth and what they need to feel connected to the community as they make the leap into independent living. Our vision was that:

- Surrey youth in and from care will be better supported in their transition into adulthood.

- Youth participants will develop and refine their leadership skills, with the tools and knowledge to more effectively advocate for policy and systems change.

- Individuals and organizations not currently engaged with young people will be actively engaged in providing support to Surrey youth with care experience through financial contributions, in-kind support, or volunteer roles.

Our vision was supported by an approach rooted in shared core values amongst those involved:

- Centre the Youth Voice
- Know the Facts
- Raise the Profile
- Change the System

Over three years, we focused our work in three areas: research, building community, and youth leadership development. At the end of the project we launched two prototype projects that brought together findings and work from those three areas. Project activities were supported by the collaboration of diverse community members and key stakeholders through an overall Project Planning Committee, a number of distinct Working Groups, and the Youth Advisory Committee.

THE CASE

When they turn 19, youth in the care system lose access to the majority of professionals who have been available to support them. As well as no longer benefiting from these professionals' knowledge and skills, there is also an abrupt ending to relationships that have been developed over time. Since many of these youth may have recently left school, they are also likely to lose the relationships they have developed with staff, and, potentially, friends and their families.

As identified by organizations like the Vancouver Foundation, isolation and a sense of belonging are two major contributors to overall health and well-being. We heard many times from care alumni that after more than a decade after transitioning out of the care system and into the community, that emotional and sensitive transition time still created distress in their adult lives. Throughout our discussions with youth, alumni from care, and allied stakeholders in our community workshops, events, and youth activities, two key issues emerged: the immediate and ongoing need for meaningful community connection and social capital.

Digging deeper in our conversations, there were two primary focus areas related to connection and social capital where we believed we could have the most impact - adult connections and education and employment.

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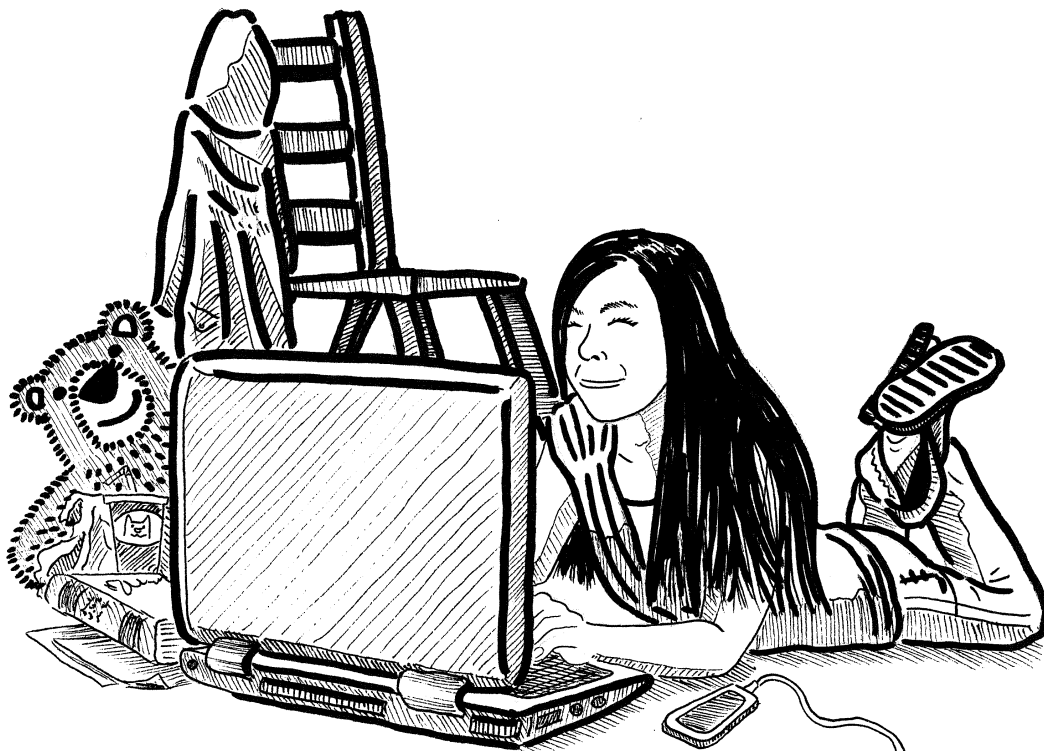
ADULT CONNECTIONS

Over the course of our community workshops and engagement with people who had care experience, alumni shared what helped them in their transition to independent living. They spoke of particular individuals, including social workers, parents of friends, and adults in the community who had provided, and still provide, vital support and connection for them; contributing as an important factor in their future success.

Mentors - trusted adults - can contribute to the lives of youth from care in many ways. Peer and adult support was highlighted as a key contributing factor to the success of many former youth in care. This could look like assistance in navigating various systems such as housing or health care, or practical assistance like cooking meals, or providing a safe place to visit. Beyond the tangible support, having a healthy relationship with an adult who could offer emotional support by listening, to offer general advice, and to celebrate their successes was just as important. The knowledge that there were unpaid adults rooting for you was continuously mentioned as a top priority for young people who may not have any connections to biological family members after they age out of government care.

> "
> You don't have a mom or a dad, and can't call someone and just say 'I'm freaking out.' It was pretty big to just ask someone and get some direction. It was also really nice to have follow-up, and it was lovely reassurance that I can do this.
>
> - Youth Participant, Compass Connections
> "

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

As our research with the McCreary Centre Society showed, youth in care in the region are less likely to graduate high school than BC youth (59% compared to 84% of BC youth); less likely to feel cared for by school staff; and are more likely to feel that they have additional barriers to feeling connected in school. However, for these young people in care, those who felt that teachers cared for them were more likely to have positive mental health and to see themselves having a positive future.

We also found that youth who have been in care are less likely than others to attend post-secondary education. Although there have been increases in government financial assistance for post-secondary education in recent years, our conversations with youth and alumni from care highlighted many of the systemic barriers youth face. We heard that practical difficulties range from navigating an unfamiliar system and paperwork alone, or being unable to afford to volunteer or take on unpaid internships during their studies due to lack of funds.

The research report noted that Surrey youth who had been in care identified that local employers were often reluctant to give young people a chance and felt that if hired, they had to hide their care experience. Those who had found employment reported that they had received support to do so. The need for more support to access job training, work experience, employment and education opportunities are frequently cited by youth from care and service providers. Ultimately, we heard a consistent message that many youth just don't know where to start, or who to turn to with questions about education and employment.

Furthermore, our conversations with youth and alumni revealed that when youth have limited adult connections, they often lack role models in diverse fields which can limit their view on what is possible. It is important that youth are connected to adults in a range of education and employment roles, so that they can imagine themselves learning or working in a diversity of opportunities.
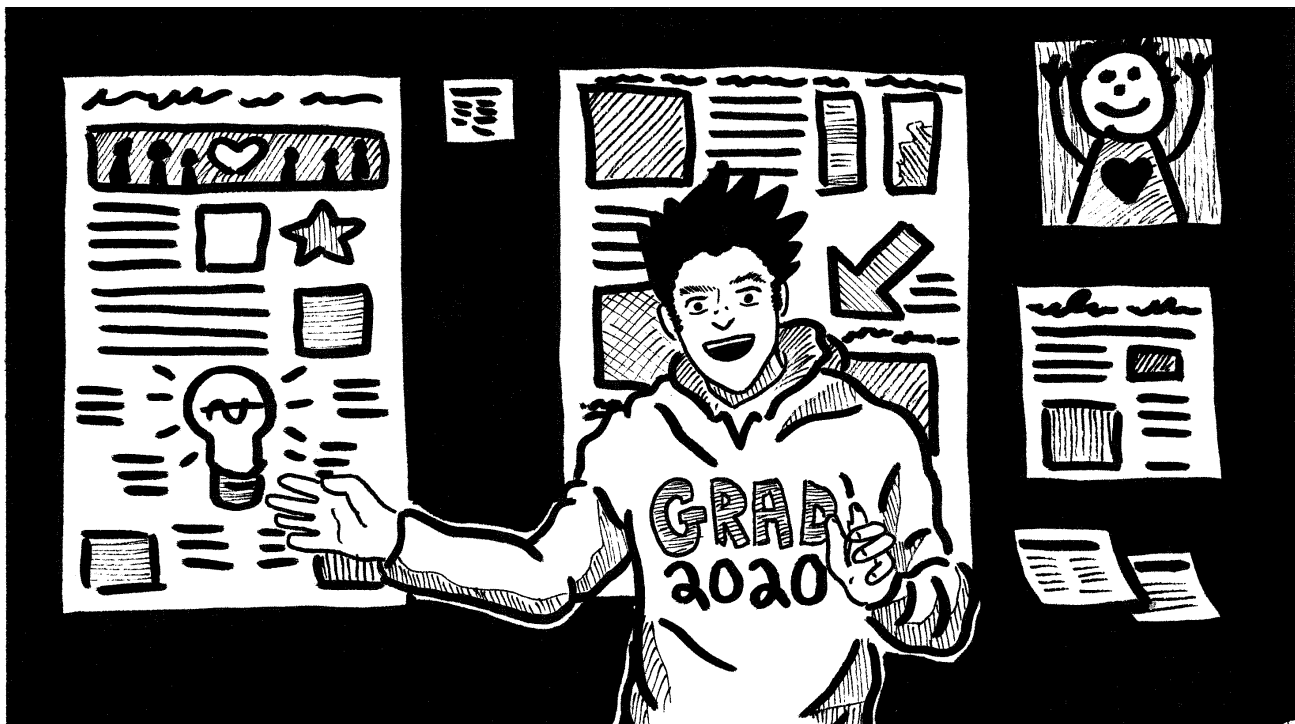
THE ASK

Working with our Youth Advisory Committee, we heard loud and clear that most youth are not interested in forced, high-stakes, rigid schedules, ongoing relationships with adults in the community. Youth 19 and older want opportunities for needs-based connections with adults on an ad hoc basis, and on their terms. They want to be able to reach out to an adult for some practical or emotional support, without feeling like they have to be in consistent communication with that person. Members of our Youth Advisory Committee expressed a desire to be able to learn something about the adult volunteers before meeting with them, and to be able to reach out virtually to someone first, before having to meet in-person.

They asked us to create something that reflects their needs. So we set out to see what the research said, and what was already available in the region.

LITERATURE **REVIEW**

The literature on mentorship for adult youth leaving foster care generally is limited, and the literature looking at programs that employ something other than the one-to-one match model is even more limited. While we had these constraints in researching potential mentorship models, there is clear evidence to support the Youth Advisory Committee's vision for this program. There is strong evidence in the literature to suggest that when a young person's basic needs are not taken care of, traditional mentorship models are simply not effective.

Specifically, there is evidence in support of:

1. Natural and informal mentorship for youth leaving foster care;

2. Programs that build social networks rather than individual relationships; and

3. Programs that combine skills development and other types of instrumental support with the opportunity for natural mentorship relationships to arise.

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NATURAL AND INFORMAL MENTORSHIP

"Informal mentoring" is a natural element in many relationships both in the workplace and other settings. Informal mentoring occurs in a relationship between two people where one gains insight, knowledge, wisdom, friendship, and support from the other. Either person may initiate the mentoring relationship, the mentor to help the other, the protégé to gain wisdom from a trusted person - it is friendship first, learning and career second and third.[1]

A ''natural mentor'' is one that the youth himself or herself identifies (as compared to being matched in a program to a stranger). The relationships arise naturally and can include teachers, extended family members, neighbors, coaches, and religious leaders.[2] Natural mentoring has been recognized as a promising approach for youth approaching their departure from the care system and the transition to adulthood because these relationships form gradually. That means they are less pressured and trust can develop over time.[3] The end result is relationships that have been found to last longer and evolve over time.

These findings suggest that a program that builds the pool of diverse, supportive adults that youth come into contact with, and that offers the possibility for natural and informal mentoring relationships to arise could be particularly valuable for youth transitioning out of government care in Surrey.

BUILDING SOCIAL NETWORKS

There is evidence to suggest that while having one supportive adult in their lives is important for youth leaving care, efforts to build dense and varied networks for youth exiting government care is even more important for long term success. Supporting Youth in the Transition from Foster Care: Formal and Informal Connections looked at data collected from 96 former foster youth related to the support they received during their transitions from care in order to answer three questions:

• What types of supportive relationships did the sample report?

• What are the characteristics of the supportive relationships?

• What is the relationship of social support to outcomes?[4]

The researchers looked at three types of networks - biological family, peers, foster care. Youth with three strong networks were found to be significantly less likely to experience depression and anxiety. "Network disruption was found to be associated with psychological distress and this relationship was mediated by the strength of the restructured relationship…. Having only one strong network did not result in significant improvement over having no strong domains. Rather multiple strong social networkers were needed to have an ameliorating effect on psychological stress."[5] The authors conclude that: "While much attention has been given to the importance of one consistent adult relationship to youth development, the authors would suggest more attention to tapping the potential of multiple individuals and social networks… Social support is needed by everyone, but particularly by vulnerable populations at times of transition. The information provided by the group of youth in this study underscores the many different types of relationships that can be perceived as helpful."[6]

These findings support the Youth Advisory Committee's position, and our anecdotal findings, that a program that builds new networks will be particularly valuable for youth leaving care in Surrey.

INTEGRATING NATURAL MENTORSHIP

The authors of Supporting Youth in the Transition from Foster Care: Formal and Informal Connections identify the role that faith communities can play in providing networks that include mentorship and instrumental support and are not reliant on one single relationship noting that "[r]eligious settings in particular have a long history and capacity for outreach, service, and support… An advantage of an organizational approach to support is the existing infrastructure in place, receiving support, in whatever form, from an organization may have greater stability because it is not dependent on a specific individual who may move, become ill, or otherwise be unable to maintain a promised relationship."[7] This finding raises the possibility that secular organizations could become the hub in which such networks develop for youth transitioning from care in Surrey.

Existing programs for older youth with care experience, like those intended to teach independent living skills, have also been identified as offering an opportunity to invite important nonparental adults interested in connecting with older youth to youth from care through program activities. "This could take the form of incorporating natural mentoring into existing child welfare services as well as developing programs that provide opportunities for older foster youth to interact and naturally develop relationships with caring, nonparental adults."[8]

In the context of youth leaving care in Surrey, this could take the form of facilitated learning activities and events that include adults with specific skills and interests and an openness to developing longer term relationships with youth.

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1 http://www.journalofleadershiped.org/attachments/article/137/JOLE_4_1_Inzer_Crawford.pdf
2 https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2167696812467780
3 https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2167696812467780
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5 https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20565016 (126)
6 https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20565016 (142)
7 https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20565016 (139)
8 https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2167696812467780

THE LANDSCAPE

As we uncovered in the research, mentorship programs where youth have access to adults for advice and practical assistance, can be very beneficial in reducing social isolation and fostering feelings of belonging. With the acknowledgement of the need for more adult support for young people, we reached out to other youth-serving organizations to learn more about what was already happening regionally, and what the existing models of mentorship or support programs looked like in practice. We spoke to staff at four local and regional agencies to learn more about their programs. Here are some of our key takeaways:

- There are no organizations in the region currently doing anything like the Youth Advisory Committee is envisioning for youth.

- Service providers can see the value and need for a model that does not rely on paid relationships and that provides instrumental support on an as-needed, real-time basis.

- All of the service providers expressed concerns about liability and the need to maintain strict boundaries between mentors and youth.

- There is an overall reliance on paid mentors or on existing relationships with youth workers.

- Effective mentorship programs are time intensive and require staff support for extensive screening, logistics, matching and check-ins. Staff coordinators are very, very involved.

- Screening is extensive and can take up to two months to complete. Even with adult youth there are substantial liability concerns to address. These concerns are exacerbated if mentors and youth were meeting in non-public spaces like home visits or driving, for example.

- Volunteer/mentor attrition is high because they get frustrated if a youth misses an appointment etc.

- It is also very hard to recruit men and mentors to work with older youth.

- Volunteer-led workshops focused on life skills like cooking, housing or financial planning are very popular and a good way to create connection between youth and volunteers.

- There are a lot of transportation needs in Surrey that need to be met creatively.

- Organizations that provide practical support to newcomers or seniors may have examples of how to facilitate some of the practical support youth require, like transportation.

THEN WHAT?

Unfortunately, once youth age out, there isn't much in terms of ongoing, regular support for them. But, there are a few key places youth can turn to in Surrey, when they need a hand.

- Agedout.com is an online resource offering support and information for youth leaving care.

- Federation of BC Youth in Care offers financial and practical support.

- Fraser Region Aboriginal Friendship Centre Association (FRAFCA) supports youth post-19 through various programs.

- Pacific Community Resources Services has some service programs that extend post-19, such as an employment program, housing programs, and counselling.

- Options Community Services has a life skills program, employment program, a parenting program, and youth transition workers available for youth after they turn 19.

- SOS Children's Village offers a youth transitioning program.

- Métis Family Services has some programs that youth 19+ may be able to access.

- There may be more we don't know about... but we can say with confidence that it's simply not enough.
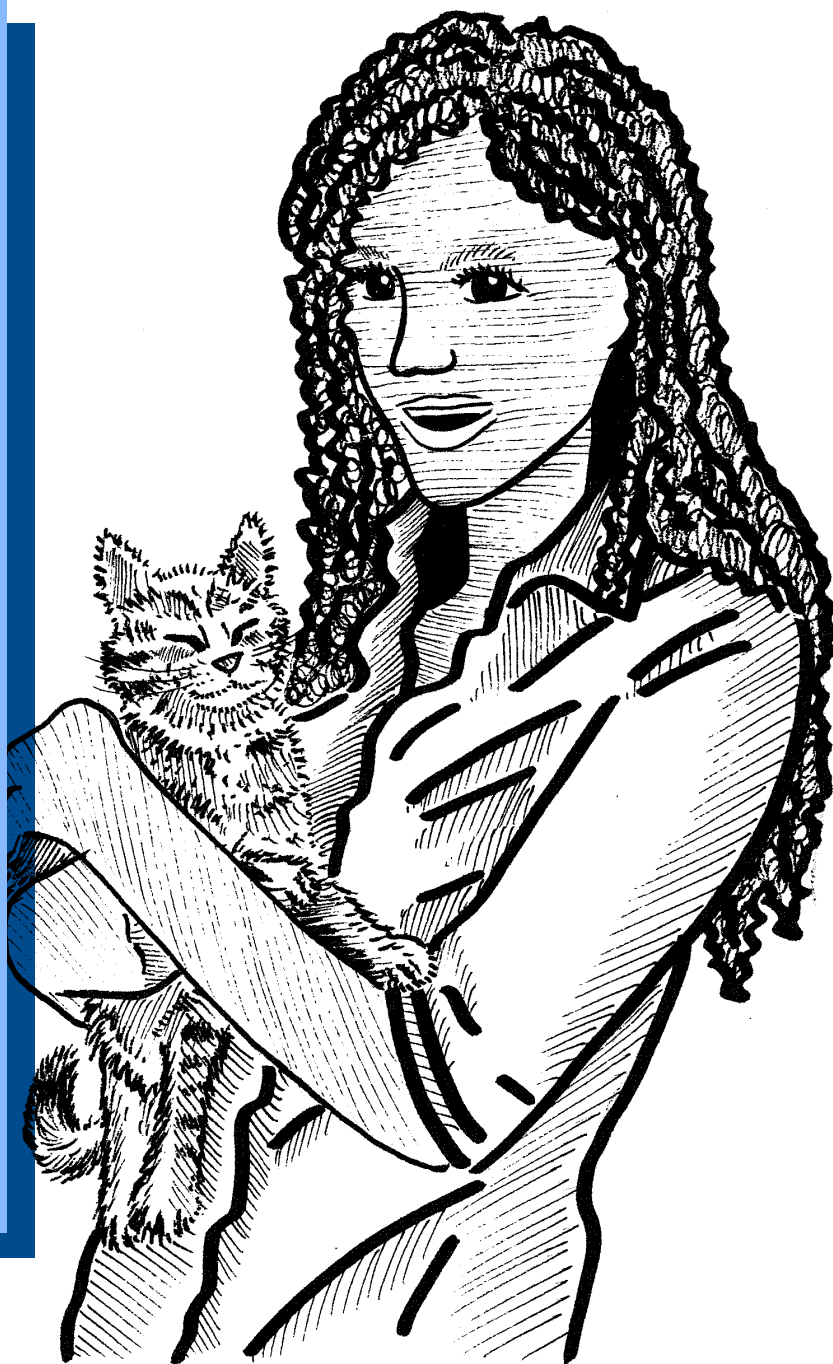
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THE MODEL

While having one supportive adult in their lives is important for youth leaving care, the evidence suggests that efforts to build dense and varied networks for youth is even more important for long-term personal success. Specifically, our findings support the development of natural and informal mentorship relationships, programs that build social networks rather than individual relationships, and programs that combine skills development and other types of instrumental support with the opportunity for natural mentorship relationships to arise.

The Youth Advisory Committee envisioned a model where they could access an online platform to see photos of the volunteers, learn more about their background and experience, and what the volunteers are interested in, or able to support with. There would be a process through which the youth could reach out to supportive adults on their terms, when needed, with no pressure to follow-up afterwards, or to connect any further. But when we looked around, we didn't see this model anywhere in Surrey. Or the province. Or Canada! And so, we set out to build it.

"Prototypes" are by definition an early model to test a process or concept. Our prototype programs were an opportunity to try something completely new and innovative by combining our research with our focus on building community and supporting youth leadership development. With many unknowns, we intentionally limited the scope and breadth of the prototype projects so that we could effectively test the model to assess its potential viability. We did this by:

1. Limiting the number of youth participants to youth we were already connected to, or whom we knew had additional support networks available to them.

2. Only permitting youth 19+ to participate, to eliminate additional liability concerns.

3. Recruiting adult volunteers from our professional and personal networks, whom we knew would be willing to be flexible and adapt as we tested the process.

4. Testing various forms and administrative processes through a free system, rather than invest in the development of a program-specific platform.

5. Building evaluation into each activity, and ensuring all participants understood the test nature of this prototype phase.

6. Having a condensed timeline of two months.

The prototype phase was an opportunity to test the models and answer some of the initial questions we had to assist us in assessing whether or not we should proceed to a full pilot phase for each of the prototypes. Some of these questions were:

- Does this model show some promise for the outcomes that we were hoping to achieve?

- What would need to change for it to meet the needs it was intended to meet? (Eg. the nature of the services offered, the relationships that were/were not formed, the design of the program, etc.)

- What is the cost/investment compared with a model that includes paid mentors?

- What are the intangibles, in terms of costs and benefits?

- Is this something current participants would want to continue to participate in?

- Is this something youth/young adult participants are likely to sign up for, beyond the pilot phases?

- Is this a volunteer program adults will likely sign up for?

- Is this a program adults would commit to?

- How long does the intake process take? What is the administrative investment in each adult volunteer?

- Were there any unanticipated safety, boundary or liability issues?

- What strategies are available to mitigate risks and liability?

- What training do adult volunteers require to be able to offer appropriate support to youth?

- What should an online platform, scheduling, and outreach look like?

- How many hours of ongoing monitoring and staff support is required per number of participants/volunteers?

- What unexpected issues are connected to this model?

Adult volunteers for the prototype programs were required to attend an orientation and training session focused on the specific needs of youth who have transitioned out of care, and some background information about setting boundaries, using a trauma-informed lens, and where to find additional resources. While the adult volunteers had relationships with project staff, volunteers were required to complete an intake from, be interviewed with project staff, complete multiple reference checks, and complete a police record check.

Youth participants were required to either attend a short training session to discuss the program and boundaries, or they received a package with this information to review on their own time. Both the youth participants and adult volunteers were invited to share a meal and meet each other at a launch party following the training sessions.

Evaluation was built into the prototype model, with project staff checking in with adult volunteers and youth participants regularly. Adult volunteers were invited to provide feedback about training and the intake process immediately following the program launch. At the end of the two month trial period, adult volunteers were invited to complete an online evaluation form and speak directly with project staff. Project staff connected with each of the youth participants, either via evaluation activities with the Youth Advisory Committee, or individually. All youth participants received an honorarium for their involvement. All program participants were invited to attend a program wrap event, where participants were encouraged to debrief and share about their experiences and celebrate their involvement.

THE PROTOTYPES

We focused on the two key areas identified in our early research, and through work connected to youth from care: adult connection and employment and education. Spear-headed by the Creating Community & Adulting and the Education & Employment working groups, we launched two prototype programs to test their viability and impact: Compass Connections and Plenty of Threads. Both of the prototypes demonstrated many early successes, and we can't wait to test both the Compass Connections and Plenty of Thread programs as proper pilot projects in the near future.

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COMPASS CONNECTIONS

THE FOCUS

Youth When asked how the community could support youth after they had 'aged out' of government care, the youth voice was consistent and clear: they needed a network of supportive adults in the community they could call on as-needed for help "adulting". Examples of support they might need could be assistance with finances, landlords, cooking, exercise, or anything you might traditionally call a parent or close family member for throughout your 20s (and beyond).

The prototype was an opportunity to test whether this program model supported youth to be more connected to supportive adults in the community, and importantly, whether the structure supported youth to be empowered to reach out when they need assistance. On a small scale with trusted participants, we wanted to assess the viability of the program, and whether it showed enough promise to warrant a full-scale pilot phase in the future.

A member of the Youth Advisory Committee came up with the name Compass Connections for the program, to symbolize that while youth who have transitioned out of care and into the community are resilient, smart, and self-sufficient, they sometimes just need a person to point them in the right direction.

> "
>
> I think of it like a 'Community Aunt or Uncle'.
>
> - Youth Participant
>
> "

THE PARTICIPANTS

We recruited 7 volunteers we named Community Navigators; trusted adults that were available to support youth on an ad-hoc basis, when youth had a specific need. Over July and August 2019, 4 youth between the ages of 19-27 tested the Compass Connections prototype program, reaching out to the Community Navigators for a variety of support including help finding pet veterinary care, advice on dealing with a landlord, and even learning to swim.

> "
>
> There is a lot of power in asking for something and not having to give with it. Some people would say that's a part of love, or care, but I mean, since I was 14 or 15 I haven't felt that, so it's been a long time.
>
> - Youth Participant, Compass Connections
>
> "

THE OUTCOMES

7 **COMMUNITY NAVIGATORS**

4 **YOUTH PARTICIPANTS**

Over the two months, youth participants reached out to the Community Navigators 8 times. All of the Community Navigators felt like they were able to respond to the request.

When asked whether they reached out for support from the project staff, no volunteers felt like they required any assistance in dealing with the youth requests, and that they were able to effectively respond.

8 **POINTS OF CONTACT**
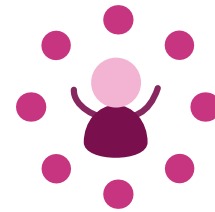
with youth

7/7 volunteers felt they were able to respond to the request

?YOUTH REACHED OUT TO COMMUNITY NAVIGATORS FOR:

- Veterinary care including how to find a veterinarian, options for payment plans or low-cost clinics
- Questions about filing taxes
- Support to learn a new skill
- How to deal with children who are selective eaters
- Advice on travelling
- Support to deal with landlords and housing issues

"IF I WAS LIKE 19, AND FRESH OUT OF CARE, I WOULD HAVE USED THIS LIKE 18,697,000 TIMES."

- Youth Participant

THE FEEDBACK

Our findings reflect the evaluation activities and debrief activities done throughout the prototype phase, and following its wrap. Overall, both the youth participants and adult volunteers were positively impacted by their interactions and developing relationships in the prototype phase. Whether during a one-time ask, or through ongoing conversations, youth reported that they felt supported and cared for. All 7 adult volunteers said they would volunteer again and enjoyed being able to offer informal support to multiple diverse young people. All 4 youth participants said they were interested in participating in a full pilot phase of this program.

Overall, the prototype phase demonstrated that this programming model shows strong potential in its ability to connect youth with community members; helping to meet the need youth express around needing youth-directed adult support once they transition out of government care.

> I liked that it was a stranger. I have a hard enough time maintaining my own friendships. So if I had to add another person I had to be "on" for.. I'm tired. I don't have time to reach out to everyone all the time. And I also see the value in developing relationships, but it's also nice to not have to.
>
> - Youth Participant

> You don't have a mom, or a dad, and can't call someone and just say "I'm freaking out." It was pretty big to just ask someone and get some direction. It was also really nice to have follow-up, and it was lovely reassurance that I can do this.
>
> - Youth Participant

YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

All of the participants preferred having the option to connect with the Community Navigators via phone or email first, before having to phone or meet in-person. Overall, the youth participants found the way we listed volunteer interests and availability challenging to navigate, and in the end selected a Community Navigator to contact based on their image and short bio.

4 OUT OF 4

Youth Participants said they would be interested in participating in a longer pilot of this project.

4 OUT OF 4

Youth Participants said they would recommend the program to their peers.

4 OUT OF 4

Youth Participants felt their request was fulfilled by the Community Navigators.

4 OUT OF 4

Youth Participants felt the Community Navigators treated them with respect and compassion.

> "It was helpful to target a problem, rather than just being in a relationship. The help was about a specific thing."
>
> - Youth Participant

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THERE IS SOMETHING INCREDIBLY POWERFUL
ABOUT REACHING OUT TO SOMEONE
WHO'S NOT BEING PAID TO BE IN YOUR LIFE
AND NOT ONLY HAVING THEM HELP YOU
WITH SOMETHING, BUT FOLLOW THROUGH
WITHOUT JUDGMENT OR EXPECTATION. I, IN
MY ARROGANCE AS A COPING MECHANISM,
THOUGHT I'D NAILED THAT DOWN. "YOU CAN
SOLVE ANYTHING THAT NEEDS SOLVING &
IF YOU CAN'T, YOU CAN PAY SOMEONE FOR
THINGS LIKE THAT," IS AN INNER STORY THAT I'M
FINDING MORE OF MYSELF IN OF LATE. WHAT
I THINK IS HUMOROUS IS THAT THAT'S THE
TEXTBOOK DEFINITION OF A PARENT - NOT TO
SAY THAT I'M CROSSING THAT LINE IN BLURRING
VOLUNTEERS AS PARENTAL ROLES, BUT THAT
A ROOT CAUSE OF THE DISCONNECTION STEMS
FROM BEING 'PARENTLESS.

"

- Youth Participant

COMMUNITY NAVIGATORS

7/7 volunteers said they would participate in this program/ model again.

7/7 volunteers said they would recommend this program to other adults they know.

When asked to rate their experience with the program on a scale from 1-5, with 5 being "completely satisfied" and 1 being "totally unsatisfied" , the adult volunteers responded positively.

1   2   3   4   5

totally
unsatisfied

completely
satisfied

2 people rated their experience 3 out of 5

5 people rated their experience 4 out of 5
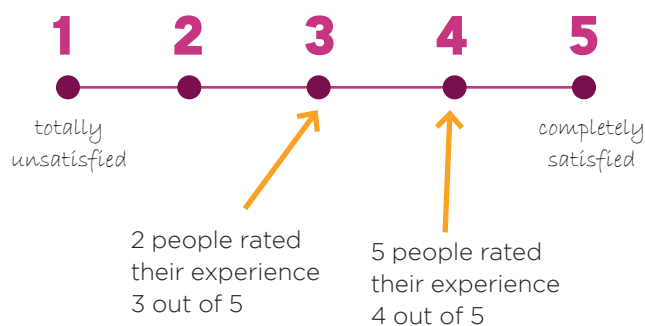
Elaborating on their rating through discussion and the written survey, the volunteers felt they couldn't fairly assess their experience with the program overall with such limited connections and interactions with the youth participants. Most volunteers said the connections they did make were positive, and felt that they would rate their experience higher if they had had more interactions.

Only one volunteer felt they were able to develop a "meaningful connection" with a youth participant; and this was because they met in-person regularly. Other volunteers felt they didn't have enough interaction to develop a deeper connection with any of the youth participants.

When asked whether the training prepared them for the program, the volunteers rated the training on a wide spectrum with 1 volunteer selecting 1 for "not at all", and 2 volunteers selecting 5 for "completely". Overall, the median rating was 4, and the average was 3.4.

Regarding accessibility to the google drive and related documents, volunteers rated the accessibility and ease of use at 4, with 5 being "very easily accessible".

Here are the volunteer responses to what surprised them through the program:

• Learning what little support is offered once youth are considered adults.

• How long it took anyone to reach out. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but I didn't hear from anyone until the middle of August.

• Just how much I wanted to help however I could! I felt bad that I wasn't able to suggest a low-income alternative to the question I had.

• That I only received 1 message from a youth participant.

• The strength of the human spirit.

> " It's nice that someone thinks that you have something to share. Because you put yourself out there and you think, gosh, no one is going to want an old lady to talk to, so it felt nice to be contacted and it's nice to share something with someone.
>
> - Community Navigator

PLENTY OF THREADS

THE FOCUS

One of the key messages we heard around connecting youth to the community was a need to find people in the community who could act as resources, sources of information, and connections for youth to build their professional and social networks in support of employment and education opportunities. Youth from care are often surrounded by adults in the human services, and may not have the ability to connect with people in diverse education and employment fields. They also often lack the networks many children living with their families have access to, connecting them with volunteer, internship, or paid work opportunities with friends or extended family members.

The prototype phase was an opportunity to test whether this program model shows promise in helping to meet the need youth expressed around connecting to adults when exploring employment and education opportunities. On a small scale, we wanted to determine whether this model was effective in connecting youth to adults outside of their circle, and whether it could act as a foundation for a full-scale pilot in the future.

The name Plenty of Threads comes from the idea that we need 'plenty of threads' to weave a tight social fabric; especially for our young people from care living independently in the community. The program built off the idea of a "human library" concept which originated in New York as an effort to challenge stereotypes and prejudices through dialogue. Through Plenty of Threads, youth received a catalogue of diverse people (ie. the "books"), that they can "check-out" (ie. meet for coffee); providing an opportunity to learn from the education and career experience of individuals they may not have otherwise met.

THE PARTICIPANTS

We recruited 14 volunteers to act as Human Books during the 2-month prototype phase; colleagues and friends of the Education & Employment Working Group. 5 youth aged 19-24 actively participated over July and August 2019, reaching out to many of the 14 human books available. Through their meetings, youth discussed education and employment opportunities from a wide variety of fields including social services, law, and costume design.

> "
> I don't know what I'm going to do with my degree. I would love to be able to talk to someone.
>
> - Youth Participant
> "

> "
> It also reminded me why I started doing what I am doing. Bringing all of those things back to the roots. As an adult participant, being able to sit and have that exploration of self. That was really powerful, in a way that also serves the adult.
>
> - Human Book
> "

THE OUTCOMES

# 14 HUMAN BOOKS

5 YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

Over the two months, youth participants reached out to the Human Books at least 7 times, with more meet-ups still in the planning phase when the program wrapped.

Many adult volunteers were not contacted, and some were contacted multiple times by different youth. When asked whether they reached out for support from the project staff, no volunteers felt like they required any assistance in dealing with the youth requests, and that they were able to effectively respond. One volunteer reported being contacted after they had moved to Toronto, and so were unable to meet with the youth in-person.

YOUTH REACHED OUT TO HUMAN BOOKS IN THE FOLLOWING FIELDS:

- Human Services
- Law
- Costume Design and Film
- The Employment & Education Working Group found it very easy to recruit adult volunteers to act as Human Books, with significant interest from a variety of fields.

at least 7 POINTS OF CONTACT with youth
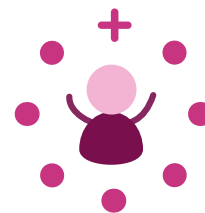
> ... meeting someone who is doing the same career path you want to do. That was pretty cool. Especially if you come from care and your parents didn't do anything like that, if you know what I mean? You don't really have the same connections as other kids. Other kids who want to be lawyers, their parents are lawyers. Or their parents are bankers so they become bankers, or their parents know someone who is a banker.
>
> - Youth Participant

THE FEEDBACK

Our findings reflect the evaluation activities and debrief activities done throughout the prototype phase, and following its wrap.

Overall, the feedback was extremely positive from both the youth participants and the adult volunteers through the prototype phase. Through individual meetings over coffee, youth reported feeling inspired and motivated that they are on the right track. Of the 7 volunteers who responded to our follow-up survey, all responded that they would be willing to participate in a full pilot phase of the program, and that they would recommend the program as a volunteer opportunity to their colleagues. All 5 youth participants said they were interested in participating in a full pilot phase.

Through the evaluation activities, it became clear that there is strong promise with this program model to fill a current need in helping youth connect to adults in their desired education or employment field.

YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

4 OUT OF 4 of the 4 youth participants we were able to reach after the program ended, all said they would be interested in participating in a longer pilot of this project.

4 OUT OF 4 of respondents said they would recommend the program to their peers.

2 of the youth participants reached out to multiple Human Books.

All of the participants preferred having the option to connect with the Human Books via phone or email first, before having to phone or meet in-person. They also appreciated receiving gift cards so that they could purchase a beverage for themselves and/or the adult volunteer when they met.

All of the youth participants reached out to Human Books that were in their desired field or connected to their current education program.

TRISTAN MILLER 2020

"

I DON'T THINK YOU UNDERSTAND HOW MUCH THIS MEANS A LOT TO ME. TO KNOW I'M GOING THE RIGHT WAY, WAS SUCH A BIG STRESS RELIEVER, AND I JUST FELT LIKE YES. IT WAS SO NICE. WHERE I CAME FROM, THE TEACHERS WERE LIKE "WELL YOU'RE A FOSTER KID, YOU'RE GOING TO SCREW UP ANYWAYS". THAT WAS THE ATTITUDE THEY HAD ALL THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL, SO IT FELT LIKE WHY EVEN TRY? NO ONE HELPS ME AFTER SCHOOL, SO WHAT'S THE POINT IN TRYING TO DO BETTER? I CAN'T PAY FOR A TUTOR. I WOULD JUST BE LIKE MY PARENTS AND NOT GRADUATE. WHAT'S THE POINT IN DOING SCHOOL, I'M JUST GOING TO FAIL ANYWAYS. SO TO HEAR VALIDATION FROM SOMEONE IN THAT TIER, IN MY EYES WITH THAT MUCH STATUS AND SUCCESS, TO HEAR THAT SHE THINKS I CAN DO IT. IT WAS JUST... AMAZING.
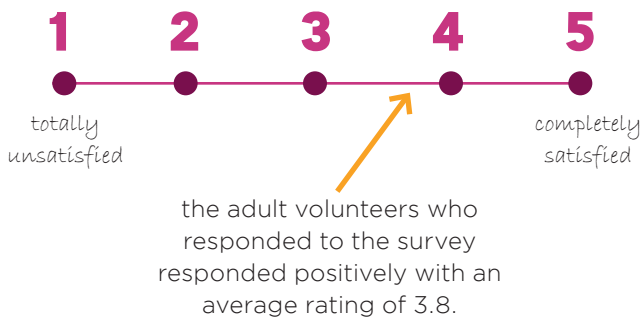
"

- Youth Participant

HUMAN BOOKS

7/14 Human Books responded to the online evaluation survey, and some were contacted to debrief individually after the prototype ended.

When asked to rate their experience with the program on a scale from 1-5, with 5 being "completely satisfied" and 1 being "totally unsatisfied."

1   2   3   4   5

totally unsatisfied   completely satisfied

the adult volunteers who responded to the survey responded positively with an average rating of 3.8.

The 3 respondents who selected "3" were either not contacted by youth, and therefore felt they could not accurately rate their experience, or they had moved provinces and were unable to meet in-person with the youth. The 4 respondents who met with youth rated their experience either 4 or 5 out of 5.

During their meetings the Human Books reported they did one or more of the following:

• Shared information their career;

• Made a list of people the youth could contact for more information;

• Provided a framework for the industry and guidance on seeking employment; and/or

• Followed up after the meeting with additional information and resources.

2 of the respondents felt they developed a meaningful connection with the youth participant,

2 while 2 reported that while they had a positive experience, they did not develop a connection.

When asked whether the training prepared them for the program, the volunteers rated the training on a wide spectrum with 1 volunteer selecting 1 for "not at all", and 2 volunteers selecting 5 for "completely".

Overall, the median rating and average rating was 3.5.

1   2   3   4   5

not at all   completely
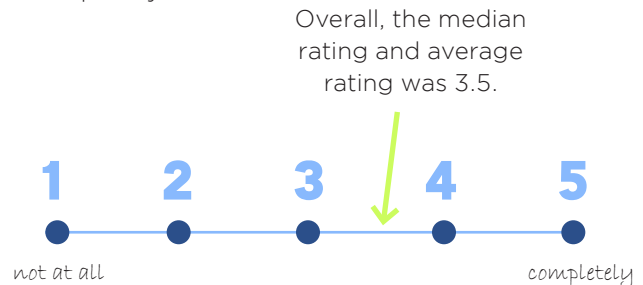
No respondents reported needing assistance from project staff to fulfill youth requests. One volunteer commented that she was surprised to connect with a youth in their early 20s, as her perception of "youth" was 13-18.

All 7 volunteers who responded to the online survey said they would be open to participating in a full pilot program.

THE PILOT PHASE

After running a prototype phase of these two programs, we are confident that a program that relies heavily on volunteers from the community is possible and would have some important benefits in terms of building relationships and fostering a sense of intergenerational community.

However, in order to be effective, both the Compass Connection and Plenty of Threads programs would need an organizational home, a dedicated staff person with an appropriate skill set and reasonable time horizon to develop. This is a very new service delivery model and a rushed, under-resources, or improperly developed program would at best be ineffective and would, at worst, cause harm. Specific recommendations for a future pilot program are based on feedback from youth participants, the Youth Advisory Committee, adult volunteers, working group members, and our findings from the literature review and local research.

TRISTAN MILLER 2020

TIMEFRAME

The program needs to be ideally piloted for a minimum of two years to build a roster of volunteers, allow relationships to develop and to meaningfully evaluate how it is being used and how it is working. This would also allow time for participants to get set-up in advance of their 19th birthday.

> "
>
> I'm thinking about that bridge between turning 19 and the journey into adulthood. This could make the transition a little easier, a little lighter. The fear of turning 19 is so enormous, and that all the people I know will be gone and I'll have no one. So maybe we connect youth when they are 18, so they aren't as scared to transition.
>
> - Adult Volunteer
>
> "

OWNERSHIP

Compass Connections and Plenty of Threads need to be housed within an organization or service hub that young people are already accessing with the infrastructure required to provide:

- Supervision and support of staff
- Space for meetings and training
- An address and phone number as well as administrative and IT infrastructure
- Support with police record checks and insurance
- Institutional signatory on agreements with participants and volunteers
- Established risk management strategies
- Relationship with funders and other stakeholders

STAFFING

The program requires at least 0.5 to 1.0 FTE coordinator depending on the number of participants. This person should have strong youth advocacy, volunteer management, and administrative skills.

This person should have strong networks in Surrey, should be very knowledgeable about existing programs and resources so that they can direct participants to resources and supports not provided through the program.

This person should have the ability to work some evenings and weekends to provide support to volunteers and participants with full-time jobs as well as having office hours during the day to coordinate with other services and with youth workers and social workers if needed.

This person should be responsible for:

- Maintaining program infrastructure
- Making sure youth serving organizations, youth workers, and MCFD staff know about the program
- Recruiting volunteers on an ongoing basis, with a focus on both diversity of lived experience/identity and diversity of skills. Certain skills may be specifically recruited for.
- Ensuring they have up-to-date information about services and programs that already exist to make strong referrals and avoid duplication
- Doing intakes and screenings with youth and potential mentors, checking references, and police record checks
- Maintaining the database and other administrative work
- Developing a robust training program and hosting regular trainings and meet-ups
- Ongoing check-ins with volunteers and participants
- Evaluation, advocacy and fundraising
- Crisis management as required

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT AND ONBOARDING

Information about the program should be provided to a 19+ youth who has had a Continuing Care Order, Youth Agreement, or has/currently has an Agreements with Young Adults. All of our youth participants in the prototype phase were between the ages of 19-24. While this reduces some of the liability for volunteers and the backbone organization, we know anecdotally that it will be challenging to recruit youth for these programs once they have already transitioned out of care. It is recommended to work with MCFD to see whether youth can be connected to these programs as part of their transition plan at age 18, so they have these resources available as soon as they turn 19.

Ideally, anyone in Surrey working with young people about to turn 19 or who have recently turned 19 would be aware of the program. The Compass Connections program would likely best serve the needs of youth 19-24 or 25, but the Plenty of Threads may be an important resource for youth 19-27 or 29.

The ideal participants should be youth who are quite independent, have some stability in their lives and are looking for some additional support and resources as well as to build more connections in the community.

Once a young person is connected with program staff and fills out an intake form, they could then speak to the coordinator about the specific support they are looking for whether either of the programs meets their needs. Youth participants would sign an agreement to respect the program code of conduct.

They would be invited to the next training/meet-up event and then be given access to the online portal for making connections.

VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT AND ONBOARDING

Volunteers would ideally have a connection to Surrey, a few hours a month to offer, and a skill they can share or task they would like to help with or be interested in sharing information about their education or professional background.

In order to take part in the program they would:

• Complete an initial intake questionnaire

• Go through an interview with the coordinator

• Go through a reference check

• Go through a vulnerable sector police record check

• Attend training and meet-up event

• Provide a bio, photo and other information for the online portal

The on-boarding process is rigorous and time consuming but necessary to ensure fit and most importantly, the safety of youth . Most agencies we spoke to said that the length and effort required to on-board has the unintended benefit of determining which volunteers are committed to the program. After the training, they would be given access to the appropriate part of the portal, provided with some referral resources, and be provided with a tracking document that includes crisis supports. Volunteers can change their availability and add or edit their interests at any time, though the coordinator should be kept appraised.

“

IN THE ORIENTATION, MAYBE INCLUDE SOME PARTS AROUND FEAR OF REJECTION, PEOPLE NEED TO KNOW AND UNDERSTAND THAT KIDS IN THIS PROGRAM HAVE BEEN KICKED BY PEOPLE THEY SHOULD HAVE BEEN ABLE TO TRUST. SO DON'T JOIN THIS PROGRAM IF YOU'RE NOT GOING TO FOLLOW-THROUGH. MAKE A LIST OF THINGS KIDS IN CARE HAVE TO DEAL WITH, SO REALLY HAMMER HOME THE COMMITMENT NEEDED. MAKE IT CLEAR THEY HAVE NO RIGHT TO LET THESE KIDS DOWN. DON'T VOLUNTEER THEN.

”

- Adult Volunteer

TRAINING DELIVERY

Because recruitment will be ongoing, rolling training sessions could happen every three to four months. The amount of time we allocated for training (two hours plus time for mingling and getting to know young people) in the prototype phase, was not nearly sufficient. An important question to consider is how to deliver a longer training session. Options for delivery could be a 6-8 hour session on a single weekend day, or multiple 2-hour sessions over three evenings.

Instead of combining training with a meet-up event for new participants and volunteers each time, training sessions could instead be followed by a workshop on an issue of interest, a speaker, a film screening, or some other special event that allows for sharing of food and connection. Anyone in the program could participate to build ongoing connections and community and to learn from the events.

More than one volunteer expressed an interest in hearing actual stories from youth or adults about their lived experience transitioning out of the community. It will be important to balance that need with confidentiality and respect to those with lived experiences; ensuring no further trauma is done by retelling peoples' stories. While it is important to share the realities young people face, we also need to share information from a strengths-based perspective and to ensure we do not create an image of youth as victims.

PROGRAMMING

The two prototypes, Compass Connections and Plenty of Threads were imagined and initiated by youth. While they are different in their focus areas, it would make sense for both programs to be connected, and coordinated by the same organization. This would allow youth participants to be referred to whichever program would support their needs, and easily give the adult volunteers an ability to participate in both programs if they choose to.

Youth participants and our Youth Advisory Committee members recommended having an online portal that both youth participants and adult volunteers could access. There, youth could post a question publicly and receive a diversity of responses from the adults, or they could message privately with a volunteer of their choice. Connecting via an online portal would eliminate confidentiality concerns between youth and adults sharing their personal contact information. It would also allow the adult volunteers to login when they are available, rather than asking youth to wait to reach out to adults during specified times. Through the portal, youth and volunteers could see links to various resources that may assist youth with concerns that are beyond the scope of the programs. Youth expressed that they would like a mobile-friendly website for this platform, instead of an app, as some young people do not have cell phones. Ultimately, we see the value for youth and adults to connect in-person, and we saw this reflected in participant feedback. However, youth continually express more comfort reaching out virtually to begin with, and then possibly pursuing in-person connections based on a positive, or series of positive, experience(s).

The question of reimbursement for volunteers access money for young people (coffee cards/transit) and of adult volunteers providing food and/or other items of monetary value will need to be considered in advance of the pilot phase. We did not provide for this in the prototype, although we made coffee cards available for meetings in the Plenty of Threads program. At the training there was a conversation about volunteers buying coffee or a meal, or providing supplies. The questions for exploration include:

- Whether that would be expected of navigators and whether that would be a barrier to some participants

- Equity among participants (if one participant receives something of value)

- How to maintain boundaries for each party if money or gifts are exchanged

COMPASS CONNECTIONS

This program would allow participants to connect directly with screened and trained Community Navigators who have volunteered to share specific skills or offer specific supports.

Skills and services could include:

1. Talking to young people about budgeting, taxes and other financial matters;

2. Teaching a craft, sharing a hobby or supporting a new fitness routine;

3. Offering advice on cleaning vehicle maintenance or home repair

4. Coaching on relationship or career issues;

5. Interview preparation or review of resumes and cover letters;

6. Providing support in looking for housing or dealing with a landlord;

7. Help with school-related questions or challenges;

8. Cultural, spiritual and/or identity-based support;

9. Help finding community resources and professional support; and

10. Transportation of furniture or other large objects.

Transportation remains an important question and this program could include something similar to the ride programs that exist for seniors if it was resourced to do so, or could look at taxi/ride-share voucher programs as a supplement to this program. Home visits for things like repairs are also an open question to be considered by an expanded program, as is the possibility of Community Navigators volunteering to be "emergency contacts" for a participant. The question of offering driving lessons has also been raised. These possible supports require additional risk management strategy as they are deemed higher-risk activities due to the nature of one-on-one contact in private settings.

PLENTY OF THREADS

This program would allow participants to connect with individuals in an education or employment field of interest.

Through the prototype we saw that the youth who participated were already enrolled in post-secondary education, or had a clear idea of their desired education or employment path. Given this, it will be important to explore deeper connections to post-secondary institutions to increase the ability to connect with youth who have already transitioned out of care.

Youth participants would benefit from receiving gift cards to use at their informational meetings. Through our evaluation activities, we also discussed opportunities to scaffold the risk associated with meeting someone by attending with a peer mentor, youth, or another third party.

> "
>
> I'm super shy. I'm nervous and intimidated. So it would be great to have youth in care as peer mentors, because there is that comfort already there.
>
> - Youth Advisory Committee Member
>
> "

MONITORING & EVALUATION

We were able to answer some of our evaluation questions through the prototype phase, but many require a more robust pilot phase of the programs to fully answer. Regular evaluation of the program should happen at least twice a year during the scale-up/pilot phase, and undertaken by the coordinator. This should include separate evaluations for volunteers and participants, as well as some kind of check-in with referring workers/organization. The pilot should remain flexible enough that it is able to be responsive to feedback throughout the entire phase.

A part of the evaluation for this program should include identifying services that would more appropriately be provided by providing resources directly to youth or by funding paid positions. The Youth Advisory Committee and the Surrey Poverty Reduction Coalition could advocate for the provision of these services.

Through a pilot phase, the following questions should be addressed:

- Do the pilots achieve the intended outcomes? To what extent?

- What resources would be needed to scale this/ make it permanent?

- If that happens, where should it live? What should the skillset of the coordinator be?

- How should relationships that emerge be managed (or not)? If a mentorship or kin type relationship emerges should that be considered outside of the program?

- What would be required to make organizations comfortable referring participants to the program?

- What is the cost/investment compared to a model that includes paid mentors?

- How many hours of ongoing monitoring and staff support is required per number of participants/volunteers?

- Is this a program adult volunteers would commit to long-term?

- What would be required to add participants with more complex needs?

- What would be required to add more crisis line/ 24 hour-type support?

- What is the appropriate age range for participants?

- Were there any unanticipated safety, boundary or liability issues?

- What strategies are available to mitigate risks and liability?

THE WRAP

It is clear that Youth Advisory Committee members are not looking for forced relationships, high-stakes relationships, forced schedules or paid friendships and do not believe a model that included those elements would serve their peers. Ideally, they are looking for needs-based connections with adults on an ad hoc basis, from which relationships may grow.

Recognizing that this model is brand new, the 2-month prototype phase provided an opportunity to examine a number of questions we had about the logistics, the liability, and the possible outcomes of a program like this. Using a prototype approach, we tested the model with a small group of trusted youth and adult volunteers. We were able to answer many of the questions we had about this model, but most importantly, this one:

Do the programs provide opportunities for youth to reach out and be connected to a diverse group of community members, either to help with life skills, or employment and education fields? Does this model meet this currently unmet need of creating a stronger social fabric for youth who have transitioned out of care?

Yes. Yes, it does.

The youth participants of Compass Connections and Plenty of Threads unequivocally responded yes - this model meets a currently unmet need in the community for youth who have recently transitioned out of the government care system into independent living in Surrey. Our prototype phase gave us a lot of information, and also raised a number of new questions. We look forward to seeing how the findings from the prototype phase can influence and inform a full pilot phase of both programs, and identify what is required to ensure both programs have the positive impact we believe they are capable of achieving.