

# Saving our kids: child care reform puts safety first

BY MICHAEL SWAN  
The Catholic Register

Danielle remembers counting down the days until she would turn 16. On that day she was going to sign herself out of foster care, declare her freedom, begin her life for real.

At 23, Danielle is thankful she was talked out of that decision. Today she holds a degree from McMaster University and is planning on enrolling in a Master of Social Work program.

"I wouldn't be where I am today if I didn't have the support of the CAS (children's aid society)," said Danielle, who asked that her real name be withheld from this article.

Macy Hechtman was never in foster care, though she started running away from home at 14 and the Chatham-Kent Children's Services was keeping an eye on her family. At 16 she decided she had had enough of her small town and her angry, dysfunctional relationship with her parents. She headed for Toronto and the shelter system and the drugs and the uncertainty of life on her own. At 24, she's studying at Ryerson University and thankful for the helping hand she found at Covenant House.

"There are so many youth who, especially going into shelters and things like that at the age of 16, they're really lost," said Hechtman. "There's drugs, there's trafficking, things like that. It's very common."

At 15, Jessica del Rosso's mother saw her walking hand-in-hand with another girl and threw her out of the house. "Kicked me out and basically said all my belongings had been thrown out to the landfill, that I no longer had a family and to never come home," del Rosso said.

On the edge of turning 16, del Rosso had two weeks to decide whether to sign herself into foster care as a crown ward. She did and at 26, del Rosso is a social worker and public speaker with a degree from the University of Waterloo.

"Going into care, in a way it saved me from a life of potential homelessness. I don't know if I would have gone to school or not," she said.

This month at Queen's Park, committee work will start on a major reform of the Child and Family Services Act, which will for the first time include children's aid protection for 16 and 17-year-olds.

The age of protection is only one of a whole suite of changes for a child welfare system that Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne threatened with "blowing up" just over a year ago. The reformed law is intended to focus all decision-making on the needs of the child and will enshrine "Katelynn's principle" — named after

seven-year-old Katelynn Sampson, who was beaten to death in 2008 by her legal guardians. It will give the Minister of Child and Youth Services broader powers to appoint board members to individual children's aid societies, to intervene in individual cases and even in classes of cases. The ministry has always had the power to take over boards and societies in certain circumstances, but now that power is to be expanded and laid out in greater detail. The minister can initiate and oversee amalgamations between children's aid societies. Technically, that means the government could fold religious children's aid societies into a single secular body, although the minister himself says that is not in the cards.

The proposed reform would also open up the system to greater outside scrutiny, forcing children's aid societies to share their files with former crown wards and families and giving the Information and Privacy Commissioner oversight whenever children's aid is slow to respond to information requests.

Ontario's two Catholic children's aid societies, in Toronto and Hamilton, agree the change in the age of protection is overdue. Toronto's Covenant House, Canada's largest youth shelter established in 1984 with the encouragement of Cardinal Gerald Emmett Carter, has been campaigning for the change.

From a Catholic point of view, child welfare has to be guided by something more than bare minimums and budgets, said Catholic Charities executive director Michael Fullan, a veteran member of the Catholic Children's Aid Society of Toronto's board.

"All of us are concerned about the kids in care because they're all our kids," said Fullan. "They're our Catholic kids and we have to be concerned about the faith dimension.... The things I'm most excited about in this (new legislation) is the opportunity to support kids up to the age of 18. That's a wonderful thing. Because these kids who are transitioning to adulthood can be helped and encouraged."

This sweeping reform didn't come from nowhere. It follows a string of child deaths, then a 2014 auditor general's



Macy Hechtman (left) and Jessica del Rosso are both success stories who managed to pass through the minefield of bad choices and bad outcomes that so often hit vulnerable kids at the age of 16. The Ontario government is currently working on major reforms to the child welfare system, among them extending the age of protection to 18. (Photo on left by Michael Swan, right courtesy Jessica del Rosso)



report that found that the system inadequately kept track of kids, was inconsistent in performing background checks on guardians and failed to complete investigations in a timely manner. On top of that, the MotherRisk scandal involving lab testing at SickKids Hospital created an atmosphere that suggested kids were being removed from homes based on dubious evidence. All that was rubbing up against some complex, chronic, long-term failures — including the fact that 40 per cent of Toronto foster children are black and 22 per cent of Ontario's foster children are aboriginal, compared to just two per cent of Ontario's overall population.

This drumbeat of bad news in the child welfare system finally pushed the Liberal government to the point of exasperation in 2015. In an end-of-year interview, Wynne gave a clear signal to everybody involved in child welfare. "If we could fix what is ailing the child protection system, child welfare system in this province, by starting from scratch and blowing up what exists — I would be willing to do that, because one child's life

would be worth changing the administrative structures," Wynne told the *Toronto Star* in December of 2015.

The January 2016 meeting of the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies was a very sober affair, said Catholic Children's Aid Society of Toronto executive director Janice Robinson. There was soul searching.

"I think a fair criticism of our sector would be that we have made decisions based on structures and processes as opposed to the child who is in the middle of the table," said Robinson.

She also concedes that there is racism in the system. That doesn't mean the social workers are malevolent racists, but somehow the system is short on solutions for black and aboriginal kids. Homelessness and deep-rooted, lifelong poverty among former clients has not been enough of a concern to the societies, Robinson said.

"We really need to be thinking about outcomes," she said.

"It's not good enough to say we're doing a good job and we have all these services and look at our agency."

Children and Youth Services Minister

Hechtman and del Rosso — three success stories in a system that cares for 18,000 of Ontario's 3.1 million children — extending child protection up to the age of 18 and educational support up to the age of 25 better reflects reality.

Under the old law "you're pretty much saying that at 16 you don't need a guardian," said Danielle, who was under the care of the Catholic Children's Aid in Hamilton. "I think everyone can agree, that's a little young."

There are very specific dangers when it comes to young women 16 and 17 years old, points out Coteau.

"We're finding that young girls in some cases are more likely to be involved in the sex trade that's out there, if they're that age and they don't have the type of protection put in place. So, human trafficking," he said.

It's a change that's going to cost the province "tens of million of dollars," said

Coteau. An extra 1,600 teens are expected to enter the system. At an average cost of \$45,000 per year to care for a crown ward, that would translate into an extra \$72 million tacked onto the system's \$1.5 billion annual budget.

The new legislation won't solve all the problems, said Coteau. It's going to take a culture change, willingness to try new things and patience.

Seven years ago, Covenant House and Catholic Charities looked at the situation of homeless youth in Toronto and decided there must be something more they could do. Province-wide, four out of every 10 homeless youth have had previous contact with the child welfare system.

Covenant House alone sees 2,200 to 2,500 youth a year between the ages of 16 and 24. About 300 of them are 16 and 17-year-olds.

In Hamilton, Catholic Children's Aid has seen a similar pattern.

"We know that 52 per cent of (homeless) kids in our local community, from our studies and tracking, have been involved in child welfare," said Catholic

Children's Aid Society of Hamilton executive director Rocco Gizzarelli.

With a grant from Catholic Charities, Covenant House started its Youth in Transition pilot project. Specially trained child and youth workers were assigned exclusively to homeless teens. They help them with housing, clothes, doctors' appointments, dental care, registering for school.

"They engage with the youth much like an extended family member might," said Covenant House executive director Bruce Rivers. "That's what's often missing here. These young people often don't have a person in their lives who can bring a relationship of trust and care to the situation."

The YIT workers don't just hand a kid a list of phone numbers for apartments, or tell them where to enrol in school. They go with them and help them every step of the way. Nor is this an office-hours job.

"If the kid wants to meet at Tim Horton's at 10 at night, or at 10 in the morning, they do that," said Rivers. "They text a lot. This is moving out of what you would call a traditional approach."

It quickly became an approach that provincial officials liked. As part of a sweeping set of changes to the provincial welfare system under the title "Blueprint for Fundamental Change" the province consulted with agencies across the province, including Covenant House. Youth In Transition workers were an easy win for the government. Today there are 60 YIT workers spread across 49 agencies. There will be six more starting in March.

Early in Macy Hechtman's Toronto sojourn, she was staying at the YWCA surrounded by women 10 years older and more. Drugs held the key to getting along with her shelter mates.

"I just wanted to be cool with them and the YWCA is mostly older women," said Hechtman.

"There's youth, but it's mostly older women. So, I was 16 hanging out with 25-year-olds who were, like, addicts. And I just wanted friends."

Hechtman was thrown out of the YWCA. She was thrown out of Horizons

for Youth. She was thrown out of the now defunct Second Base youth shelter in Scarborough. She was thrown out of Covenant House several times. In fact, her drug use and the behaviour that goes with it got her thrown out of every possible shelter in the city.

"My own fault, though," she said. "I needed money. I needed stability. I needed some sort of guidance from anybody who wasn't another person in a shelter."

A meaningful relationship with a responsible adult isn't just something social workers and psychologists identify as critical for teens. Teenagers themselves, as they age out of the system, bring it up over and over.

"They often say, we need important adult relationships, we need stability," said provincial child advocate Irwin Ellman. "Because we don't have stability in the system."

From the age of three to 19, Danielle lived in five different foster homes.

"I feel like some of the placement changes were kind of due to me. I did act out a bit when I was younger," Danielle said.

Danielle doesn't think of her upbringing as unstable, though, and credits the Hamilton CCAS social worker who began tracking her at the age of nine or 10.

"My worker was really good. I had her personal cell phone. I could call at any time," she said. "There was always somebody I could talk to. (She was) honest, caring. When I say honest, I mean good or bad."

Danielle also recalls an environment in which faith was a priority.

"We always did prayers," she remembers. "I think it was a good thing. It helped me keep a sense of identity. My faith and my morals helped me with my decision-making."

More than anything, Danielle believes success depends on real, genuine relationships.

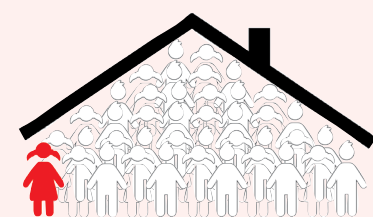
"The kids might feel like people don't actually care about them. They might feel like it's fake, or written somewhere. They need to feel like somebody is actually caring and watching. That's kind of what happened to me," she said.

She is also aware that her experience isn't necessarily typical.

"I've been in care with other people who have not made the right decision and it makes me sad," she said. "Because I know that they had the opportunity to do so."

*Next week: New opportunities and new fears for Catholics in the child welfare system.*

*'We have made decisions based on structures and processes as opposed to the child'*



One out of every 182 children in Ontario is in the care of one of 47 independent children's aid societies.

>  
**8,000**

There are more than 8,000 crown wards, children whose legal guardian is the Province of Ontario.



Four out of five children in care have special needs. Nearly half of these special needs children rely on psychotropic drugs.

**43%**

Approximately 43 per cent of homeless youth have been involved in the child welfare system.



Only 44 per cent of youth in care graduate from high school, compared to 81 per cent of the general population.

**22%**

Aboriginal kids make up 22 per cent of Ontario's crown wards, even though only two per cent of the population is aboriginal.



On average, it costs \$45,000 a year to keep a kid in foster care.