



Tools for Change

Introduction

The National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention recognizes that some young Canadians are at greater risk of victimization or of becoming involved in criminal activity. Factors such as family violence, neglect and abuse can put youth at risk. Young people in and leaving the child welfare system, foster homes or institutional care face particular challenges.

Life 'in care' is often characterized by a great deal of instability. When young people enter care, they sometimes can lose important ties to cultural traditions, including their first language. Many have suffered physical and/or sexual abuse and neglect, and feel stigmatized, isolated and distrustful. Some react aggressively, becoming involved in crime and violence, or turn to substance abuse in an attempt to cope.

Youth in care often experience little continuity in their relationships with those who provide care, and feel that they have little control

over their destinies. Sometimes, caregivers lack the training and resources to provide appropriate support to troubled young people and request to have them transferred. Some individuals can have numerous placements, making it difficult to form secure attachments to adult caregivers. When they reach the age limit for child welfare support, many of these young people end up alone to fend for themselves. Without family supports or job prospects, they are vulnerable to victimization or to involvement in criminal activity.

Through the National Youth in Care Network, increasing numbers of young people in and from care are linking with their peers to support each other, speak out and build better lives for themselves. With support from the Crime Prevention Partnership Program and other partners, the Network has developed a set of resources called 'Tools for Change.' These tools are helping youth in and from care bring about positive changes in their lives and in the child welfare system.

Empowerment and healing

The National Youth In Care Network is a nonprofit charitable organization run by and for young people (ages 14 to 24) who are currently or were formerly in the care of child welfare authorities. The Network was founded in 1986

This publication is part of the Caledon Institute's crime prevention series of community stories, produced in collaboration with the National Crime Prevention Centre. The series documents promising approaches to crime prevention through social development.

by a group of young people who were dedicated to the idea of youth empowerment. Its objective is to facilitate an empowering, constructive dialogue between young people in care and adult service providers – a dialogue in which youth are taken seriously and treated with respect, dignity and sensitivity.

The National Youth In Care Network supports the development of local youth-in-care networks by providing information, contacts and encouragement. The networks help youth gain confidence and develop important skills (such as communication, problem-solving, conflict resolution, personal and computer skills) that will help them thrive in their personal and professional lives. According to Lynda Manser, Executive Director of the National Youth In Care Network: “The networks are a conduit through which youth in care can support one another and effect positive changes in the child welfare system. They provide young people

with an opportunity to redirect abuse energies in order to help themselves and their peers to heal.”

The national network has helped to build local networks by sending a development officer to talk with young people in communities, but Lynda notes that there are limits to this approach. “While we are successful at inspiring and educating a small group,” she says, “that group is then left without the support and information it needs to keep up the momentum. ‘Tools for Change’ was our answer to this dilemma.”

The people and the passion

A key component of the Tools for Change kit is a video that was shot at the ‘Network Buffet,’ a skills-building and healing conference for youth in and from care that was held in 1998. *Coast 2 Coast: A Nation of Youth United* is a

National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention

The National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention aims to reduce crime and victimization by addressing their root causes through a social development approach. Social development is a long-term, proactive approach directed at removing personal, social and economic factors that lead some individuals to engage in criminal acts or to become victims of crime.

With an investment of \$32 million annually, the National Strategy enables the Government of Canada to help communities develop projects and partnerships that will prevent crime. The Strategy focusses particularly on children and youth, Aboriginal people and the personal security of women and girls. It includes the Safer Communities Initiative, a Promotion and Public Education Program and the National Crime Prevention Centre. The National Crime Prevention Centre is responsible for implementing the Strategy.

The Safer Communities Initiative is designed to help Canadians undertake crime prevention activities in their communities. It includes four funding components: the Community Mobilization Program, which helps communities develop approaches to crime prevention and undertake activities that deal with the root causes of crime; the Crime Prevention Investment Fund, which aims to establish reliable information on what works and what is promising in reducing the risk factors associated with crime and victimization; the Crime Prevention Partnership Program, which supports the involvement of organizations that can contribute to community crime prevention through the development of information, tools and resources; and the Business Action Program on Crime Prevention, which involves national and provincial/territorial business and professional associations in helping communities prevent crime, share information and encourage community mobilization.



During a break from a joint meeting in Saskatchewan of the National Youth in Care Network and the Saskatoon Youth in Care and Custody Network, youth from Atlantic Canada walked in a prairie field for the first time.

15-minute inspirational video about youth in and from care who are helping themselves, their peers and the child welfare system through networking. All but one of the 55 participants in the Network Buffet are featured in the film, which focusses particularly on six young people who are leaders in the networking movement. They talk about what networking means to them, how it affects lives and how a youth-in-care network provides a trusting environment in which young people can safely challenge themselves and their peers to achieve realistic goals.

The main target audience for the video is youth in and from care. However, the video also has been used successfully by a number of networks to raise awareness among adults about networking and about the youth who drive the movement. The video has helped funding agencies see the people and the passion at the heart of networking. According to Lynda Manser:

“Social workers and directors of child welfare agencies across Canada have been requesting *Coast 2 Coast* to strengthen their commitment to actively supporting youth participation and input.”

Another important part of the Tools for Change kit is *The Network Connection: A Network Development Manual*. A steering committee determined what this manual should cover, based on feedback from participants at the Network Buffet. The manual describes in detail how to establish and maintain a youth-in-care network. It covers topics like youth involvement, adult support, conflict management, advocacy and working with young offenders. It outlines how to create a newsletter and organize fundraising events, and provides tips on public speaking; dealing with the media, boards and committees; and hiring, training and evaluating staff.

Voices from *Coast 2 Coast*

“I’ve never really felt before that I was with my people, that they understood where I was coming from.”

“You meet your people – they’re your kin.”

“I know now that I can go anywhere across this country and I’ll have people that’ll look after me.”

“You have to get off your couch in your group home, your foster home or jail – wherever you are – and start taking control of your life.”

“It’s been life-changing for me – for lots of people.”

An accompanying booklet, *The Local Development Worker’s Survival Guide*, aims to provide new network development officers with “everything to expect in the first six months.” It deals with topics like the responsibilities of a development worker, what to expect, how to stay organized, travel tips, ethical issues and how to avoid burn-out. The kit also includes a diskette with forms and templates that can be used by groups as they organize.

All of the material in the manual and the survival guide was written by youth in or from care. The artwork and layout were done by young people. The process was lengthy, but this approach ensured that the content is relevant and useful. Demand for the manual has been strong: To date, more than 80 local groups or individuals have requested copies.

The National Youth In Care Network has been following up with local networks six

months after they receive the Tools for Change kit. Feedback to date has been very positive.

“There is immense expertise and knowledge among youth in and from care about networking and community development,” says Lynda Manser. “There is also a tremendous need for this information to be shared with other youth in care.” Tools for Change is providing a way to share this knowledge and empower young people across the country.

Ann Simpson

Ann Simpson works on the ‘community stories’ series for the Caledon Institute.

For more information on Tools for Change, contact Lynda Manser, Executive Director, National Youth In Care Network, (613) 230-8945 (e-mail: lynda@youthincare.ca).

For more information on the National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention, call (toll-free) 1-877-302-6272, or visit the website at www.crime-prevention.org.

Limited quantities of this publication are available in alternate formats (Braille, disk and audiotape).

Cette histoire communautaire est également disponible en français.

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