2011/2012 Report to the Legislature

Provincial Advocate *for* Children & Youth

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for Children & Youth

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WHERE WE'RE GOING
2017
Mobilization of a movement working towards real change that sees all children, including established and newcomer children in Ontario, are free of barriers to success and opportunity.
2016
Be a leader in engaging the citizenry of Ontario, including children, youth and government, in the realization of the full implementation of the UNCRC.
2015
The creation of an innovative child participation strategy that matches the abilities of all children and ensures that article 31 of the UNCRC, the Right to Play, is a key part of the implementation of this strategy.
2014
The Office will increase its capacity to ensure that children and youth with disabilities are provided with barrier-free opportunities to speak up and out in order to have their needs, hopes and desires heard and met.
2013
Advocacy 2.0: The Office will be a leader pushing the boundaries of advocacy through the use of innovative and cutting edge communication tools, social media and the Internet.
WHERE
2012
WE ARE
2011
Inquest and Intake data bases launched, northern Office opens, information sharing protocol with Coroner's Office established, My REAL Life Book and UNCRC Alternative Report released. UNCRC country Rapporteur visits, youth presence continues to expand.
2010
Building a presence in the North, publication of, Our Dreams Matter Too. Historic, Youth Leaving Care Hearings, held at Legislature, inquest involvement continues and expanded youth presence.
2009
New office opens, focus on organizational development and infrastructure. Access to information protocol established with MCYS. Involved in three inquests, RMYC review begins, first youth Amplifiers hired.
2008
Irwin Elman appointed Ontario's first Independent Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth. Office negotiates first collective agreement and youth participation strategy formalized in Letter of Understanding with AMAPCEO.
2007
Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth Act, passes unanimously. Agnes Samler hired by MCYS as Interim Child and Youth Advocate. Process to disentangle from government begins.
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LETTER FROM THE PROVINCIAL ADVOCATE

"It is as though I am invisible" she says, "I don't exist. I am not seen and I am not heard. Until I am, I am not sure I am really a person at all. I want people to see me."

I remember listening to the young woman in one of the countless meetings I have had this year with children and youth, thinking to myself, she is one of so many in our Province — young people in the mandate of my Office whom I have the privilege to serve and walk and work alongside. I thought, "we need to ensure that this child is afforded her right to participate in all decisions that affect her life, and thereby the right to participate in all decisions that affect her world." However, it has yet to become a standard of practice and offered to all children and youth. We must live and breathe the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in our practice if we are to improve the lives of young people. I was not in my position long before I recognized the enormity of the work that must be done to realize this vision.

By establishing the Office for the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth (Advocate's Office) in 2007, the Legislature created a vehicle through which Ontario's children can find their voice. The Advocate's Office provides a vehicle through which young peoples' lived experience, wisdom, hopes and dreams are legitimized and affirmed. By naming their world and experiences, and sharing them with the world around them, our Province's most marginalized children start to become grounded and begin to feel whole.

Four years ago, the Office had no space to call its own. There was a Collective Agreement to negotiate, a budget to set and a vision to create. There was also a 'disentanglement' to complete, the process of shifting an organization from being part of the Public Service to independence. We had no road map to use to establish this new Office of the Legislature, yet we forged ahead. Now here we are in 2012, capping off our work to build a defined organizational infrastructure, implement a new data base and begin introducing quality assurance mechanisms.

Our establishing legislation, the *Provincial Advocate For Children And Youth Act, 2007*, gave us some reference points. We had to interpret the Legislation and exercise our authority and mandate. At times we needed to test our understanding of the *Act* in the face of conflicting interpretations from a variety of Ministries and service providers. For example, in our quest to access the information we need to elevate the voices of children within our mandate who have died, or advocate for students in Ontario's schools for the deaf and blind and Provincial demonstration schools, we discovered deficits in the legislation. It soon became evident that our *Act* needed amendments to give us the authority we needed to safeguard young people's rights.

We did the heavy lifting that comes with building a new Office, all the while remembering the children and young people who both need us and have high expectations of us. We held in our minds the children who feel invisible and unheard. We worked hard to fulfill the definition of 'advocacy' in our *Act*, "partnering with children and youth to bring issues forward" and we took seriously the instruction to strive to be an "exemplar in child and youth participation."

We began with a promise to the children and youth we serve that they would be involved in everything we did from building an Office, to working with them when they called seeking support and assistance. We know that sometimes it makes sense for us to take the lead. We know that more often it will be our Office that will support and follow. We know there will be times we will move forward together. This Annual Report reflects that promise and marks the progress we have made in keeping it. Young people who work with us — using their skills, talents and the wisdom of their lived experience — have written sections of this Annual Report describing the work in which they are involved. Their work often engages their peers across the Province in exciting and groundbreaking initiatives. There is the beginning of a movement being created. Hundreds, if not thousands, are already involved in lifting every voice. Young people have helped create an Office that is as unique as its guiding legislation and as full of exciting potential as the children and youth themselves.

"WHEN YOU FEEL LIKE YOU HAVE NO CONTROL OVER YOUR LIFE, WHY BOTHER MAKING A PLAN?"

— 16 YEAR OLD YOUTH

We strive to bring people together around the children and youth we serve. We believe in the goodwill that children engender. The release of the, *My REAL Life Book*, Report this year has only strengthened this belief. Stemming from the award winning *Youth Leaving Care Hearings*, which were described in the

media as "unprecedented," the Report challenged the Province to listen to "our children" — those young people who were brought into care of the state and to whom the Province has an obligation to nurture, care for and support to help them achieve to their full potential. Written by young people in and from care, the report passionately speaks to six themes; we are vulnerable, we are left out of our own lives, we are isolated, no one is really there for us, care is unpredictable, care ends and we struggle. These themes, so very important to children in care, are applicable to virtually every child in our mandate from First Nations children living under a legacy of colonialism and in abject poverty, to young people in the youth justice and child welfare systems, children living with special needs in families feeling cast adrift from the services they require with no lifeboat in sight, to young people oppressed by the stigma that is associated with mental illness.

"We can get this right," said one of the youth who wrote, *My REAL Life Book*, "What we need from you, who are the adults who make decisions about us, all of the MPP's in Government and in Opposition and Ministries and service providers of all stripes, is for you to sit down with us together as if you are at the kitchen table. It needs to be safe. We do not want to hear you arguing with each other about us. We want, we need, you to talk with us about how we can make what we all want to be, so."

The Minister of Children and Youth Services, side by side with Opposition Critics from the Progressive Conservative and New Democratic parties, accepted theReport in this spirit in front of senior public servants, service providers, child advocates, young people with direct experience in the system and youth representing youth-led or youth-serving organizations. It represented an opportunity for the Government to lead in creating a new way to make a difference, a way in which the entire, whole of government, with the support of entire sectors in the broader community can create fundamental change. We are optimistic that they will make the most of this leadership opportunity. As one Member of the Legislature said, "We have to do more of this;" to that our Office says, "We are and we will!"

Another example of how we want to bring young people more directly into the policy-making processes that affect their lives is the youth-named, *Feathers of Hope* forum. In partnership with First Nations organizations, young people in our newly established office in Thunder Bay are working with staff to organize the forum which will take place in 2013. The event will bring together First Nations children and youth representing all communities above the French River together with decision-makers who affect their lives — First Nations leadership, the Ontario Legislature and Provincial and Federal Ministries — in an attempt to move forward on the ground by listening to children. This initiative reflects our commitment to find ways to have the voices of children from all parts of the Province heard where it matters. Wherever there is a need we will work to establish partnerships with young people. We are also proud of the Memorandum of Understanding we have signed with the Métis Nation of Ontario to work together to provide healing to another long neglected group of children. By establishing an office and hiring staff, we are demonstrating our commitment to children and their communities in the North.

> YOU NEED SOMEONE. SOMEONE WHO YOU CAN TURN TO NO MATTER WHAT. IT DOES NOT HAVE TO BE A PARENT OR A PARENT FIGURE. IT HAS TO BE SOMEONE WHO IS THERE FOR US.
>
> — 17 YEAR OLD YOUTH IN CARE

In every corner of the province there are many Ontarians working diligently to ensure children's voices are heard and valued. In my extensive travels in 2012, I was impressed by the number of these 'natural advocates'. The Advocate's Office will continue to reach out to these allies of children in our work. From those who struggle to ensure children and youth living with Fetal Alcohol

Spectrum Disorder (FASD) are acknowledged and supported through the provision of appropriate and needed levels of service, to those working to maintain or create safe spaces for young people in Kenora, Thunder Bay, Toronto or Ingersoll, we are grateful to have fellow travelers. For example, grassroots advocates working to save the lives of children in our inner cities, where poverty and systemic racism create hopelessness in young people; and partners we have worked alongside in post secondary institutions to create, in new youth service professionals, awareness of the importance of including children's rights and creating rights-based cultures in the systems that serve our children — we sincerely value our collaborations with you.

While we work to bring people together, we will stand fearlessly with children and young people at every turn. Our touchstone is their voice. When they die we seek to honour their memory by learning from their lives. We have called for and participated in inquests into child deaths and battled intransigence in the system that keeps us from learning more about the life and death of young people like Ashley Smith. We have created an Inquest Recommendations Data Base to help make visible those children whose lives were lost, and the recommendations from inquests designed to prevent similar tragedies from recurring. We have sought standing at Court when necessary, particularly when the voices of children in our mandate are being silenced, as with the the Federal Governments attempt to quash the Human Rights Tribunal examining equity in child welfare services to First Nations children and their families. We were there ensuring the voices of young people were heard. We have supported the voices of Ontario youth at the United Nations in their deliberations on Canada's adherence to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. We have stood together with the thousands of children and their allies who called our Office to struggle for the rights that come so easily to other children and toe to toe with Ministries and the services they fund. Children and young people can count on us to stand with and for them.

In everything we have done this year I have come to the conclusion that the changes needed for our children can be found by being courageous enough to ask, "What needs to be done?" and then by asking, "What must be true for what needs to be done to occur?" In the end our willingness to ask and honestly answer these questions will answer the following question, "Are we willing to do what is necessary for each and every child in our Province to have a meaningful life?"

IRWIN ELMAN
PROVINCIAL ADVOCATE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

ABOUT THE PROVINCIAL ADVOCATE'S OFFICE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

The Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth (the Advocate's Office) is an independent Office of the Legislature of Ontario. We partner with children and youth and advocate on their behalf when they ask for our support or assistance. We are guided in our work by principles contained in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)* and the *Child and Family Services Act (CFSA)*. The Office elevates the voice of the Province's most marginalized, 'invisible,' children and youth. The Advocate's Office was established by the *Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth Act, 2007.* This legislation mandates the Advocate's Office to:

- Provide an independent voice for children and youth by partnering with them to bring issues forward;
- Encourage communication and understanding between children and families and those who provide them with services; and
- Educate children, youth and their caregivers regarding the rights of children.

A major principle of the Office is to be an exemplar of meaningful participation of children and youth in all aspects of our work.

The Advocate's Office serves children and youth in provincial care or at the margins of care. Six groups of children and youth are included in our mandate: young people connected to the child welfare, children's mental health or youth justice systems; children and youth with special needs; young people requiring the services of Provincial and Demonstration Schools; and First Nations children and youth.

The work of the Office to support and assist Ontario's children and youth can take many forms, for example: providing individual rights advice and responding to requests for information at our toll free number, 1-800-263-2841; the formation of working alliances

and partnerships with young people around an issue of local or broader societal concern; rights awareness workshops; the preparation of resource documents and position papers; the development of forums where young people can join with decision-makers to discuss how to create change in Ontario's systems of care; listening to young peoples' concerns through the Provincial Advocate's travels; community development initiatives; systemic advocacy; outreach to young peoples' local 'natural advocates' and mentoring young people to become their own advocates.

The work of the Office is positioned across three areas, each undertaking activities tied to child and youth advocacy. These areas are: Individual Rights Advocacy, Systemic Advocacy and Community Development. The work undertaken by the Advocate's Office overlaps to inform and, where possible, integrate the efforts of the three areas to strengthen advocacy efforts for young people.

Advocacy

Children and youth living in the care of child welfare, youth justice or residential settings are, by definition, the province's children and responsibility. The province, by bringing them into care, has made a commitment to act as their parent on behalf of all Ontarians. Often coming from difficult circumstances and lacking stable families, these young people need society's care and attention more than most. However, because of their circumstances they are often made to feel invisible and their concerns go unheard.

The *Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth Act* and the *Child and Family Services Act* grant young people in Ontario's systems of care a legal right to speak to an Advocate from the Office about the services they receive. Service providers must provide young people with the Office's contact information upon admission to any placement and on a quarterly basis. Posters providing this information must also be visible in all child welfare residences, youth justice facilities and children's mental health residences.

Calls received by the Advocate's Office can be about a range of issues. For example, young peoples' calls could be about being mistreated in a facility, being denied visits with their family, services not being received, wanting to live somewhere else or wanting to learn more about their religion or culture. Each call or email from a young person, no matter what the concern, is important to us. We know it may be the first time a child or youth feels listened to and we understand the power that this act of joining in partnership can have on a young person. The young person works to create an advocacy plan with the assistance of an Individual Rights Advocate. The plan sets out who is to be contacted and how. In every case, the young person ultimately directs the course the advocacy plan will take.

When someone other than a young person contacts the Advocate's Office on behalf of a child or youth, an Individual Rights Advocate will, wherever possible, first communicate with the young person directly. Office staff must obtain the young person's consent to move forward and, where possible, develop an advocacy plan together. The Advocate's Office receives many calls or emails on behalf of the young people in its mandate and recognizes the vital role these third party supporters play in getting young people the services they need. These 'natural advocates' often come from the community in which the child lives and include, but are not limited to, service providers, social workers, counselors, child and youth workers, caregivers, teachers, clergy, friends, family members, coaches or neighbours. Natural advocates are an increasingly important source of support and referrals for children and youth in care. Once a young person puts down the phone they can feel, or often are, alone. Natural advocates can help fill this void.

2011—2012 STATISTICS

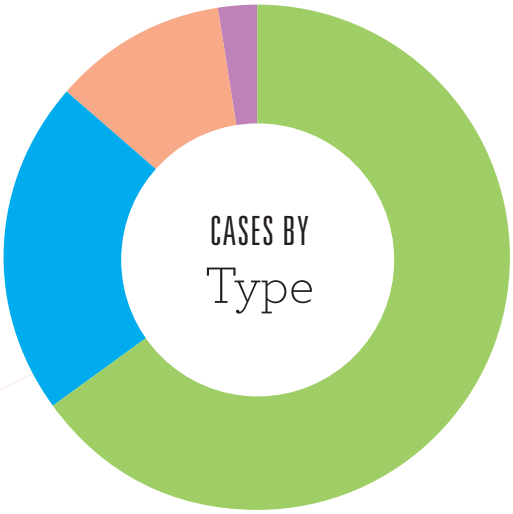
In the reporting period, October 2011 – September 2012, the Office received over 3,474 calls for assistance to our switchboard. This number of calls is consistent with our year over year historical total.

During the reporting period, the Office migrated to a new Case Records Management (CRM) data system. Our new Case Records Management system will help us gather more detailed information about the kinds of concerns with which young people, 'natural advocates' or others need assistance and improve our ability to track patterns and trends in these calls for further exploration at a systemic level. The changeover to the CRM meant making alterations to our data gathering categories and the introduction of new data tracking information areas. As a result, the data from our 'old' and 'new' systems could not be 'aggregated' for most case categories. Beginning next year, the Office will be able to provide a more detailed picture and in depth analysis of our caseload.

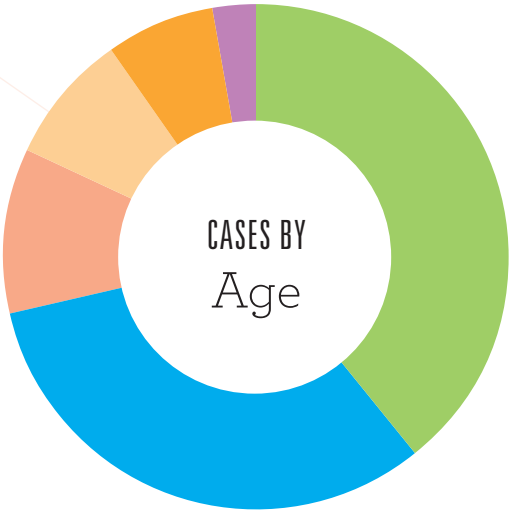
FROM OCTOBER 2011

3474 calls

TO SEPTEMBER 2012



Complex Case Situations	2.4
Consultation	21.5
Dispute Resolution	65.1
Rights Advice*	11.0



00 – 06	7.2
07 – 11	8.2
12 – 15	39.2
16 – 17	32.2
18 – 19	10.56
20+	2.5

* Rights-specific questions VS issue-based questions

SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE IN PLACEMENT REVIEWS

"I DID WHAT THEY SAID AND IT HASN'T HELPED ME AT ALL. I HAVEN'T BEEN OUTSIDE IN 16 DAYS AND FOR WHAT? THEY KEEP CHANGING THE RULES."

Under various pieces of legislation, including the *Child and Family Services Act*, young people have a number of formal and informal complaint mechanisms available when they have concerns about their care or other issues affecting their lives, including: the Ontario Disability Support Program; the Social Benefits Tribunal; the Child and Family Services Review Board; the Office of the Independent Police Review Director; the Consent and Capacity Board; a Residential Placement Advisory Committee; Ontario Works; and the Custody Review Board. The role of the Advocate is not to make decisions for young people, but to help them understand the choices available, and to provide support completing any applications and attending meetings or hearings with the youth. Our job is to ensure that the voices of young people are heard throughout the entire process and that their rights are being afforded to them. Advocates sometimes need to remind adults involved in formal or informal review processes to listen to the young peoples' ideas and feelings and keep them in mind when making decisions or reviewing their complaints.

Case Example

A young person was exhibiting confused and confrontational behavior that caused great concern to their parents, school and child welfare provider. The young person was admitted to a secure mental health treatment centre on an "emergency placement" for 30 days. As is required by the ***Child and Family Services Act***, an Individual Rights Advocate met with the young person after their admission to explain their right to a review of their admission. In this meeting the young person did not seek representation as they were, in their own words, "Willing to give it a try."

The youth called back two weeks later with a complaint that they were allegedly being "pressured" to stay in the facility past the mandatory 30 days of treatment and continue onto another unit afterwards. They indicated to the Individual Rights Advocate that their requests for other options were not being respected or discussed. They requested that an Advocate attend their weekly case conference in order to support them.

During the case conference the youth was advised that they could not, as was their wish, return home after their placement and continue treatment in the community. The adult stakeholders had decided they needed more in-patient care. In fact, the youth was advised that should they refuse to remain at this treatment centre they would lose the possibility of ever returning to live with their parents. The youth said, "I did what they said and it hasn't helped me at all. I haven't been outside in 16 days and for what? They keep changing the rules."

The Office of the Provincial Advocate is very concerned about mental health placements for children and youth in Ontario. It is important that voluntary treatment be truly voluntary and not coercive, both for the purpose of granting the child's legal rights and to create the conditions for a positive treatment outcome. It is also important that treatment be youth-centred and include the wishes and preferences of the young person. In this case, the Advocate worked to support this youth in speaking up, being heard and ensuring that their perspective was included in the treatment planning and decision-making process.

ESTABLISHING A PRESENCE IN THE COMMUNITY

"THEY WANT US TO HAVE MANNERS AND LEARN HOW TO BEHAVE ON THE OUTSIDE. WELL, THEY SHOULD TREAT US THE SAME WAY."

The Advocate's Office strives to build rights-based cultures in all places where young people receive care. In situations where their rights are denied, young people contact us for assistance. When the Office receives repeated calls from young people living in a particular residence, group home, youth justice or treatment facility, Advocates may respond in a variety of ways. In cases where young people are denied access to the Advocate's Office, an Advocate will invariably travel out to the residence. Once there, they will inform the operator of his or her legal responsibility to allow young people to call the Advocate's Office if they wish to do so — privately, and without delay. Other options include: conducting a 'review' — a part of our rights 'watchdog' function where Advocates interview all young people in a particular home and provide a report to the government and the operator of the home; a 'rights advice' presentation; or a meeting with an individual youth. Sometimes, the Advocate will use a strategy of maintaining a 'presence' at the home, residence or facility by making regular visits and conveying a message that respecting young peoples' rights is not optional.

Case Example

A young person contacted the Office with a complaint about 'quiet rooms' and staff-youth relations at a community-based youth justice residence. The 'quiet rooms' appeared to this young person to be more like 'isolation rooms.' The young person noted that sometimes young people were kept in the 'quiet room' for 8 hours straight. "There's no furniture, nothing but a cold cement floor to sit on and grossness all over the walls. It's horrible and it's not right. This must be some kind of rights violation." The young person had a number of complaints that could generally be grouped under the category of 'staff-youth relations.' "They expect us not to swear or yell. They want us to have manners and learn how to behave on the outside. Well, they should treat us the same way."

An Individual Rights Advocate visited the youth and toured the facility and the 'quiet rooms.' They worked with the young person to access the internal complaints process and submitted a written complaint to senior management to draw attention to the concerns. As a result of the young person's complaint the agency reviewed their use of 'quiet rooms' and began to use them differently. Shortly thereafter, the residence closed the 'quiet rooms' altogether.

Strategic Development

Strategic Development consists of five activity areas: Community Development, Information Technology and Systems, Research and Quality Assurance, Northern Development and the Youth Amplifiers. The team operates out of our Offices in both Toronto and Thunder Bay.

The work of Strategic Development includes research and report writing, the development and dissemination of rights education and advocacy workshops, the design of quality assurance practices for the Advocate's Office, the development of special projects to increase awareness of emerging issues affecting young people in the Office's mandate areas and expansion of the Office's services to northern and remote First Nations communities. The team is also responsible for the work of the 'Amplifiers', a group of young people hired by the Office to promote rights awareness and spread the word about the services of the Advocate's Office to other youth.

In 2012, Strategic Development staff continued to build capacity to deliver rights awareness curriculum to public schools, colleges and universities. Our working partnerships with youth and leadership in First Nations and Métis communities expanded significantly and progress was made in furthering the Office's northern development strategy with the opening of a new Office in Thunder Bay. Young people continue to be integral to the work of Strategic Development as leads, planners and developers of innovative youth rights education and advocacy projects.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE NORTHERN OFFICE

ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND YOUTH

In our work to build and strengthen partnerships, the Office has worked extensively with First Nations and Métis youth and communities across northern Ontario. Looking back, there was early recognition by the Office that many issues facing young people in the north were unique when compared to youth living in the south of the province, especially for First Nations and Métis children and youth. It was evident to the Office that the needs and rights of this group of youth have not been addressed or respected. Inequities in the allocation of resources, supports and services are long-standing. Children and youth from isolated and remote communities must travel great distances to access education, medical services, adequate housing and other services.

Isolation, geography and diversity among First Nations and Métis communities, in terms of local customs, traditions and cultural practices, posed challenges to extending the reach of the Office into the north of Ontario. Undeterred, we moved forward with our vision to engage and amplify the voices of First Nations youth. We realized that by establishing a presence in the north we would be communicating a message to First Nations children and their communities that they are entitled to the same rights and advocacy support enjoyed by most young people in other parts of the province.

MÉTIS

In 2012, the Advocate's Office and the Métis Nation of Ontario (MNO) moved forward to develop an outreach strategy for children and youth in the Métis community. We are energized by the interest the Métis community has expressed in strengthening the knowledge their young people have about youth advocacy, children's rights and the work of the Advocate's Office. Discussions took place to develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to facilitate a closer working partnership between the Office and the MNO. The MOU was signed during the Métis Nation of Ontario's Annual General Assembly, held in Sault Ste. Marie on August 27, 2012. The signing was witnessed and welcomed by over 400 members of the Métis Community.

Discussions with the MNO will continue in 2013 to move forward and formalize an advocacy framework with and on behalf of Métis children and youth. For three years, Strategic Development has been working to establish a branch of our Office in northern Ontario to meet the needs of children and youth from First Nations, Métis and northern communities. In June 2012, the Advocate's Office opened its doors at Wequedong Lodge in Thunder Bay, Ontario. Following is a timeline that traces the journey.

CHRONOLOGY OF NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT

2008

The Office commits to finding ways to respond more effectively to the advocacy needs of children and youth in northern Ontario.

2009

A Director of Strategic Development is hired and begins the process of meeting with northern communities, agencies and First Nations remote and fly-in communities to learn how the Advocate's Office can more effectively address the child and youth advocacy issues that exist with respect to service issues and needs. Initial discussions are limited to agency representatives, the Association of Native Child and Family Services Organizations of Ontario and local Chiefs and Councils.

2010

The Office meets with the Chiefs of Ontario (COO) to talk about our commitment to strengthen advocacy efforts on behalf of First Nations and northern youth. The first phase of this work involves seeking the support of COO to bring together young people from reserve and treaty communities in order to understand what the Advocate's Office can do to address the needs of northern and First Nations children and youth.

In the fall of 2010, the first of two First Nations youth forums is held. The first forum takes place at the Advocate's Office in Toronto and is attended by twenty-two First Nations youth, the Amplifiers, elders, the Grand Chief of Chiefs of Ontario, the Provincial Advocate and staff of the Strategic Development Team.

2011

A second youth forum is held in Thunder Bay and is attended by twenty-four First Nations youth. Young people speak about a range of issues including their need for increased services, resources and opportunities to contribute to their home communities. The Advocate's Office commits to following up on the issues raised over the course of the two-day forum.

At the request of Ontario's Office of the Chief Coroner, the Advocate's Office writes a report for inclusion in, *The Office of the Chief Coroner's Death Review of the Youth Suicides at the Pikangikum First Nation 2006-2009*. The Office hires two of five staff to work in northern Ontario.

2012

The Provincial Advocate opens its office in Thunder Bay and moves to strengthen advocacy efforts on behalf of and with northern First Nations youth by partnering with the Inter-Governmental Network, federal and provincial levels of government, and the Nishnawbe-Aski-Nation to host the *Feathers of Hope Youth Forum* in March 2013 in Thunder Bay. The forum will be open to young people in all northern First Nations communities including Treaty #3, Robinson Superior, Independent Nations and Association of Iroquois and Allied Indians (AIAI).

The Advocate's Office draws from its significant knowledge and expertise in the areas of child welfare, First Nations children and youth and children's rights to file a motion for Leave to Intervene with the Federal Court of Appeal in the matter between the Attorney General of Canada and the Canadian Human Rights Commission, First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, Assembly of First Nations, Chiefs of Ontario and Amnesty International. The appeal will determine whether the underlying complaint of discrimination on federal child welfare funding for First Nations children is within the jurisdiction of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal. The appeal will determine whether First Nations children have the right to make complaints to the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal when they receive public services that are unequal to those that other Canadians receive. In seeking Leave to Appeal the Advocate's Office fulfills its mandate to partner with young people and bring a fresh perspective centered on the rights and best interests of the children and youth affected.

The Office meets with Former Supreme Court of Canada Justice the Honorable Frank Iacobucci to discuss his inquiry into the jury selection process. As an outcome of the discussion, the Office provides Justice Iacobucci with recommendations to involve Aboriginal youth in the jury education process and discussions about systemic change.

GROWING OUR INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY CAPACITY

In 2012, the Advocate's Office made remarkable advances with the development and implementation of our Case Records Management and Inquest Recommendations data bases. Both projects have expanded and transformed the Office's information management systems. The data bases give the Office valuable tools to facilitate decision-making, improve our accountability mechanisms and better monitor the quality of the services we provide young people. The Case Records Management data base provides the Office with the ability to run seamlessly core business processes and track and analyze case information in real time. This feedback mechanism will help staff continue to provide a high level of service to children and youth and improve the ability of management to allocate precious human and financial resources and conduct Office business processes in a cost effective manner.

This year the Office began laying the foundation for 'Advocacy 2.0,' the integration of social media, information management and data systems, by hiring an I & IT Manager to lead the Office in realizing the critical role of the web and IT based needs of the Office. With a focus on being where young people are, the Advocate's Office will place increased focus on establishing an online presence that includes web-based engagement and communication strategies that strengthen our capacity to connect with young people. We will also focus on internet safety issues and the primacy of protecting the privacy and confidentiality of young people and others who connect with the Office via the web. As with all elements of our work, we will partner with young people to ensure 'Advocacy 2.0' strengthens the 'Resources,' 'Voice' and 'Connection' they have with the Office and each other.

Projects and Initiatives

The *Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth Act, 2007*, instructs the Advocate's Office to conduct 'systemic advocacy.' This involves the review of facilities, systems or agencies and their services and operational processes. Reviews are undertaken as a result of cumulative or serious concerns raised by young people and verified by the Office through meetings with groups of children and youth. Reviews are comprehensive and reflect the concerns about a particular service or agency based on the feedback and insight gained from young people using the service or agency. Systemic advocacy is advanced through the development and dissemination of position papers, internal briefing documents, broad consultation activities and issue specific project work.

This form of advocacy involves and engages young people in a manner that moves beyond the simple provision of information and seeks their insight into finding solutions to systemic problems. The insight of young people in care or at the widest boundaries of our mandate is rooted in knowing what does not work for them and what needs to be changed.

Systemic advocacy often involves building partnerships with 'natural advocates' and allies across the service sector and with government, including public servants, political appointees and elected officials.

Much was accomplished in the area of Systemic Advocacy this year. The, *Our Voice Our Turn*, Project won the Trailblazer Award in Human Rights in recognition of the groundbreaking work of the *Youth Leaving Care Hearings*, held in 2011. The, *My REAL Life Book*, a report based on the *Youth Leaving Care Hearings*, was released this year and was called "unprecedented" by the Toronto Star.

We continue to partner with young people, which is the hallmark of the work of the Office. The ways we partner are as varied as the number of initiatives we undertook this year. Our work has attracted global attention from Bolivia to Japan, from the US Congress to the UNCRC. Others are beginning to look at our approach to working with young people as a model.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

The work of the Office can be seen through a child rights lens. The Office is guided by the principles of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)* and takes this responsibility seriously. This past year was significant for Canada with respect to children's rights and an exciting year for the Advocate's Office in regards to its work with and on behalf of children's rights. As noted in the *Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth Act*, the Office is required to conduct its work in line with the principles of the UNCRC, to which Ontario and Canada are signatories. In addition to trying to be an exemplar for youth participation in our Office, we continue to affirm our commitment to the rights of children and youth. As part of this commitment, over the last 18 months we have worked with young people in Ontario and across the country to accomplish numerous milestones, including:

January 2011

The Advocate's Office enters into a partnership with the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada (FNCFCSC) to honour the commitment First Nations youth made to prepare their own alternate report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child regarding inequities in funding for the education of First Nations children and youth.

June 2011

Our Dreams Matter Too: First Nations Children's Rights, Lives, and Education, an alternate report is created with First Nations children and youth from across Canada and submitted to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on the occasion of Canada's 3rd and 4th periodic reviews and is widely read in Ontario, across Canada and internationally.

October 2011

The Advocate's Office begins working with the FNCFCSC to send a delegation of young people to Geneva to attend the CRC's Pre-Session on Canada prior to Canada's planned State review by the CRC in September 2012.

February 2012

The Provincial Advocate and young people attend Canada's Pre-Session in Geneva to speak about recommendations made in, Our Dreams Matter Too, and the Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocate's alternate report, Aboriginal Children Canada Must Do Better: Today and Tomorrow. Working with a number of partner organizations, the Advocate's Office assists with the costs to send 6 young people to join the delegation to Geneva and speak to the CRC.

February 2012

Within weeks of returning from Geneva, Advocate's Office staff travel to Ottawa with youth members of the UN delegation to witness the passing of the Shannen's Dream Motion. The motion declares that all First Nations children are entitled to the basic human right to high quality education.

February 2012

The CRC seeks supplementary information to add to its "List of issues concerning additional information related to the combined third and fourth periodic report of Canada". The Advocate's Office supports the efforts of the Coalition of Youth Led Agencies[1] (COYLA) and the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants[2] (OCASI) to provide supplementary information to address the issues raised in response to the Committee's list of issues on the occasion of Canada's State Review.

May 2012

The Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates (CCCYA) invites the 'Country Rapporteur' from the CRC to visit Canada. The purpose of the visit is to provide the Rapporteur with an opportunity to meet with young people to obtain a better understanding of how children and youth across Canada understand how their province or territory and country has honoured their commitments to protect young peoples' rights.

September 2012

Advocate's Office staff attend the CRC's State Review of Canada by the United Nations in Geneva. Staff meet separately with delegates of the CRC to bring increased focus to issues affecting First Nations children, youth justice, immigration, children with disabilities and child welfare in Ontario and across Canada.

October 2012

The Advocate's Office submits a brief to the United Nations on the occasion of Canada's Universal Periodic Review (UPR). The 4 key areas of concern raised by the Advocate's Office include: 1) improved support to First Nations children; 2) the links between poverty and children seeking advocacy resources; 3) a call for focused attention on the needs of children with disabilities; and 4) greater attention on the needs of immigrant children.

October 2012

The Advocate's Office moves forward with planning for the impending visit of the Country Rapporteur in December 2012 on behalf of the Council of Child and Youth Advocates.

The Office is committed to working with and through the United Nations processes and committees. Throughout our work, Office staff have partnered with young people and key stakeholders, both provincially and nationally, to engage in discussions that link the realities of young people's lives with children's rights articulated in the UNCRC.

1. Nehal El-Hadi, *Supplementary Information in Response to the Committee's List of Issues on the Occasion of Canada's State Review* (Toronto: Coalition of Youth Led Agencies, 2012).

2. Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, *Supplementary Information in Response to the Committee's List of Issues on the Occasion of Canada's State Review.* (Toronto: Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, 2012).

A WHOLE OF GOVERNMENT APPROACH

As part of our Office's efforts to advocate for improved outcomes for young people in care we recognize that a 'whole government' approach to change is necessary. The reasoning behind this view is that fundamental change is needed in the way care is provided because individual ministries and institutions, like Children's Aid Societies, typically make small incremental changes and often in the same unhelpful direction. We believe that creating fundamental change requires intervention from outside the system and a different process for decision-making.

To advance this approach to systemic change, staff from the Advocate's Office met with Deputy Ministers and the Deputy Minister's Council in 2011 and 2012. Our message was threefold:

1. 'Wards,' or children in care of a Children's Aid Society, are the Province's children, not Wards of the Children's Aid Society or the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS). They are Wards of the Crown. They are the Province's children and all Ontarians and Ministries of the Ontario government are responsible for their safety, nurturance and positive development;

2. 'Our children' are not doing well. For example, only 44% of youth in care are expected to graduate from high school compared to the 81% high school graduation rate for all Ontario students .[1] Over 40% of people living on our streets have been touched by a child welfare experience.[2] Crown Wards have more mental health needs than their peers;[3] and

3. We can do better.

The Advocate's Office asked each Ministry to examine their programs, policies and initiatives to find ways that, even with little in the way of new funding, they could support better outcomes for children in care. We were heartened by the response. The Ministry of Health and Long Term Care, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and the Ministry of Government Services deserve particular recognition for their willingness to respond, as does the Ministry of Natural Resources (which created a pilot program), lasting until 2013 that will offer summer employment to youth in and from care. The Ministry of Natural Resources, after meeting with the Advocate's Office, worked with Children's Aid Societies in Tweed, Kawartha, Haliburton, Kingston and Thunder Bay to provide employment experience for youth in care. This initiative — which we hope to see expanded — is a great example of how an unexpected ally can, with the political will and using little or no new funds, step up and help improve the outcomes of the 'Province's children.'

Organizations such as the Ontario Association of Family Physicians, the Canadian Association of University Women, Police Unions, Children's Mental Health Ontario and Youth Justice Ontario have pledged to find ways to better support young people in care. The report, *My REAL Life Book*, produced through the Office's youth-led *Youth Leaving Care Hearings*, offers many suggestions to Ministries and organizations willing to step forward and create fundamental change to improve the lives of Crown Wards. The road map is there.

WE BELIEVE THAT CREATING FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE REQUIRES INTERVENTION FROM OUTSIDE THE SYSTEM AND A DIFFERENT PROCESS FOR DECISION-MAKING.

1. Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, "An Agenda for Youth Pre-Budget Consultation — 2011", (OACAS, 2010), 3, in Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, *25 is the new 21: The Costs and Benefits of Providing Extended Care Maintenance to Ontario Youth in Care Until Age 25* (Toronto: OPACY, 2012), 23.
2. Raising the Roof Foundation, Youth Homelessness in Canada: the Road to Solutions, (2009), in "Homefree Nonprofit Foundation, "Helping Youth Leave Child Welfare Care Succeed: Housing Needs and Solutions, (Toronto: HNF, 2009), in Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, *25 is the new 21: The Costs and Benefits of Providing Extended Care Maintenance to Ontario Youth in Care Until Age 25* (Toronto: OPACY, 2012), 20.
3. Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, "The Ontario Perspective: Child Welfare Report", (OACAS, 2011), 8, in Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, *25 is the new 21: The Costs and Benefits of Providing Extended Care Maintenance to Ontario Youth in Care Until Age 25* (Toronto: OPACY, 2012), 21.

SAFE SPACE

"Safe space" can mean many things to the children and young people we serve. It is a community in which they live where they find connections and supports to allow them to feel included. It is a home where they feel loved and nurtured. It is a place where they may come together, express and be themselves. Safe space is about creating environments, communities, services, homes, where children and youth can thrive and achieve to their full potential.

"WE ALWAYS COME TOGETHER TO SOLVE A PROBLEM WHEN THERE IS A 'CRISIS' AND IT SEEMS OUT OF CONTROL. THIS IS FRUSTRATING TO US. WE NEED LIKE ALL HUMAN BEINGS LOVE AND PLACES TO CONNECT TO. ARE YOU WILLING TO DO WHAT IT TAKES TO SAVE OUR LIVES"

— YOUTH AT COMMUNITY MEETING IN TORONTO

This year, the Office worked with young people to open a dialogue about creating more safe spaces in communities. Through the development of initiatives like the, *You Are Not Alone*, project, and meeting with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Intersex, Queer, Questioning, 2-Spirited and Allies (LGBTTIQQ2SA) youth, we are working with young people to create more inclusive services and communities. We endeavour to create a safe space for youth within our office. Youth groups within our mandate have been welcomed into our space. Within communities from Toronto to Kenora, from Ingersol to Thunder Bay, we have worked to reverse the erosion of these vital spaces for youth and, in fact, joined the call to increase safe space for young people provincially.

The creation of safe spaces was a key recommendation in the 2007, *Roots of Youth Violence Report*, and an important way to maintain safe, violence-free communities. This past summer many of the questions underpinning the report were brought to light after a violent shooting that took place during a community BBQ in Toronto. The Ministry of Children and Youth Services is once again partnering with Dr. Alvin Curling, who was a co-author of the, *Roots of Youth Violence Report*, to explore the issue of safety in communities as part of its Youth Action Plan. The Advocate's Office will continue to monitor Ontario's efforts around the Youth Action Program and support advocacy efforts to ensure priority is given to creating 'safe spaces' for young people at the individual community level, an important and needed policy focus in light of the demise of the Youth Challenge Fund this year.

MY REAL LIFE BOOK RELEASE

My REAL Life Book, provides a vivid account of the child welfare system as experienced by youth who live in it every day. The report was written in 2012 by seven young people with support from the Advocate's Office. The report is based on 183 submissions and personal testimony provided at the youth-led *Youth Leaving Care Hearings*[1] held in November 2011 at the Legislature. With the guidance of a research advisor, information from the submissions and testimony of youth in care was organized into themes and summarized in the report, *My REAL Life Book*. The themes were: we are vulnerable; we are isolated; we are left out of our lives; no one is really there for us; care is unpredictable and; care ends and we struggle. The choice of a 'life book' metaphor reflects the intensity of the stories told by young people in the report and represents the comprehensiveness and magnitude of the fundamental change young people want to see in the child welfare system. 'Life Books' are supposed to be created and given to children and youth in care to help them know their stories and mark significant events in their lives. Some of these books are beautifully prepared and detailed. Some youth don't know they even exist. Others have told the Advocate's Office they were simply handed a plain file folder or that they couldn't have their book.

To tie the release of the report to the original hearings the Advocate's Office went back to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario, or as young people involved in the project called it, "our house." It is their house because the province is their parent. It is their house because they were able to invite people to come and share their experiences in care and it is their house because through it they were able to bring together people committed to creating long term change. The release of, *My REAL Life Book*, was a daylong event focused on making change happen through the work undertaken by the Office in partnership with young people. More than a hundred youth and stakeholders were in attendance including the Minister of Children and Youth Services and critics from Ontario's Progressive Conservative Party and the NDP. It was a proud moment for all in attendance when the Minister announced that he was, "Pleased to accept, *My REAL Life Book*,

Youth Perspective

"I AM HERE TODAY BECAUSE I WANT TO TELL YOU THAT I HAVE A FUTURE . . . I HAVEN'T BEEN GETTING THE HELP THAT I NEED AND WANT, AND I FEEL VERY ISOLATED"

— 16 YEAR OLD YOUTH IN CARE

on behalf of the Government of Ontario." *My REAL Life Book*, has been distributed province-wide and is available online on the Advocate's Office's web site.

The response the Advocate's Office received to, *My REAL Life Book*, has been overwhelming. Media reports called the report "ground breaking." Sector after sector, organization after organization, expressed their belief that fundamental change needs to occur in the child welfare system and many expressed their willingness to assist with the process. The Advocate's Office received countless calls and letters of support from organizations and individuals including Ontario's physicians, child and youth workers, social workers, police, thousands of young people and adults who had an "in-care" experience and members of the general public.

My REAL Life Book, was a difficult and emotional writing project. It can be challenging for a young person to work on a report that raises and discusses issues that are having a real and immediate personal impact on their life. It stops being about a 'project' when you're writing, re-writing and editing a document about the challenges posed by 'aging out of the system' while you're actually losing those financial and emotional supports. It makes you more than just "aware" of the problem; it is your real life, your real loss, your real lived urgent experience and not something a report is going to be able to fix in a few days time.

However, working on the report also gave young people an experience of their resilience and an opportunity to make a difference for other youth in the child welfare system. Preparing the report also gave some young people a direction for their lives — to be a voice for children in the child welfare system. *My REAL Life Book*, plays a vital role in showing young people in care how far they have come, along with a realization that their thoughts, feelings and experiences matter and that together they can create change in the child welfare system. *My REAL Life Book*, is a milestone event in the Office's advocating for the rights of youth in care. It shows just how far the Advocate's Office has come, working alongside young people, to make needed change in the child welfare system. When the Ontario Minister responsible for children and youth held up a copy of, *My REAL Life Book*, and dedicated himself to the report's first recommendation to work with young people to forge an action plan to create fundamental change for youth in care, everyone who worked on the project felt they had made a difference as individuals, as a community and as a family.The report and the response of government gave youth in care a sense of hope that things will get better and that they are not alone. The Advocate's Office, along with the hard work of youth involved with the project, helped show that there are people in Ontario who take to heart the needs and rights of young people in care. Everyone involved in the *Youth Leaving Care Hearings* also understands that there is still much more to do and that "We are not stopping here."

Mandy Richard *was youth panel chair at the Office's Youth Leaving Care Hearings and a writer for the final report. She is also a youth member on the Ministry of Children and Youth Services Youth Leaving Care Working Group.*

1. *Our Voice Our Turn* — In 2011, the Ontario Legislature hosted 2 days of youth led hearings — a first in Canadian history. Young people worked with the Advocate's Office to organize their own legislative hearings, calling witnesses and reviewing public policy on what happens to youth after leaving the Provincial child welfare system.

MY REAL LIFE BOOK MCYS WORKING GROUP ESTABLISHED

Perhaps the biggest piece of learning from the, *Youth Leaving Care Hearings*, and, *My REAL Life Book*, is that if we and the province wish to change the life circumstances facing children once they leave care, our work as caregivers must begin the moment we meet them, whether at 5 or 15 years of age. The relationships we forge with and for them as early on as we can, the skills we teach them and the experiences we support them to have, are what will influence the kind of life they have when they are ready to leave our homes. Every caregiver knows this to be true. This is what fundamental change will mean. The Province needed the reminder.

My REAL Life Book, presents a summary of ideas and recommendations concerning how to create better outcomes for youth as they age out of care. The number one recommendation was to ask the government of Ontario to establish a 'working group' to create a blueprint for fundamental systemic change.

On July 12, 2012, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) established that 'working group.' It consists of service providers (many from child welfare) and 9 youth in and from care. It is important to note that young people intentionally outnumber adults on the working group. The purpose of the group is to begin looking at ways to create fundamental change in the child welfare system. The Advocate's Office continues to support the participation of young people in the working group. Like so many other organizations, stakeholders and the children and youth themselves that have gathered around this crucial issue, the Advocate's Office has high hopes for the fundamental change this working group has the opportunity to create.

OUR VOICE OUR TURN ROAD SHOWS

The report, *Our Voice Our Turn*, was released on May 14th, 2012. Eleven days later, the Advocate's Office staged the first in an ongoing series of 'road shows' to promote awareness of the document and the recommendations it contains for improving the lives of young people in and transitioning from care.

The hope is to continue to build the, *Our Voice Our Turn*, movement by seeking allies across the Province. The road shows have encouraged existing 'natural advocates' and created some new ones as well. The road show team of over 30 young people, supported by Office staff, has presented to audiences in Sudbury, Windsor, Sarnia, Cornwall and other communities. Community stakeholders such as Children's Aid Societies, foster parents, young people and interested community members have attended the presentations. Team members provide audiences with background information about the historic and youth-led, *Youth Leaving Care Hearings*, and the process of how the Office staged the two-day event.

To date, the road show team has presented in 34 communities across the province. The main message we want to convey in these presentations is that the hearings were not a one-off project and that, in short, "We're not stopping here!"

"25 IS THE NEW 21" REPORT

Youth Perspective

With the, *Our Voice Our Turn*, project, the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth initiated an open dialogue on the needs of youth transitioning from care and ways to transform the child welfare system to better meet the needs of these young people. In support of this project, the Advocate's Office commissioned a report, *25 is the new 21*, to provide an analysis of the costs and benefits of providing extended care and maintenance to Ontario youth in care until age 25.

The report reviews studies that provide a detailed picture of the inequities and hardships suffered by youth leaving care. It also provides a compelling economic case for transforming the current child welfare system that is both feasible and cost saving in the long term.

Raising the limit of Extended Care Maintenance (ECM) from age 21 to 25 and indexing ECM to inflation is critical because the financial stability it provides enables young people transitioning from care to find success in so many areas of their lives. Being forced to move out of their homes at age 21 or younger and losing crucial financial and emotional support has devastating consequences. For example, less than half of youth in care are able to graduate from high school or go on to post-secondary education. Many of them rely on social assistance or come into contact with the mental health and criminal justice systems. Sixty per cent of Canadian youth aged 20-24 live at home with their family, while the vast majority of youth leaving care are, over night, forced to fend for themselves when they turn 21.[1] Ontarians agree that it is important to support youth in care financially until they complete high school.[2] The benefit to young people and society is calculable. For example, if $103.5 million was spent on a cohort of 3,000 youth over the next four years, $232 million would be saved or earned over 40 years through a reduced need for support services, social assistance payments and tax revenue they would contribute through being employed.[3]

***Anna Ho** is a post-secondary student working at the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth and a lead on the Our Voice Our Turn project.*

1. Statistics Canada, "Back to School – September, 2007", in Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, *25 is the new 21: The Costs and Benefits of Providing Extended Care Maintenance to Ontario Youth in Care Until Age 25* (Toronto: OPACY, 2012), 9.
2. Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, "Children's Well-Being: The Ontarian Perspective, Child Welfare Report, 2011" in Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, *25 is the new 21: The Costs and Benefits of Providing Extended Care Maintenance to Ontario Youth in Care Until Age 25* (Toronto: OPACY, 2012), 10.
3. Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, *25 is the new 21: The Costs and Benefits of Providing Extended Care Maintenance to Ontario Youth in Care Until Age 25* (Toronto: OPACY, 2012), 57.

NEWCOMER CHILDREN AND YOUTH

The Advocate's Office regularly receives calls from young people who do not have legal status in Canada. Although immigration is not formally a part of the Office's work, more and more newcomer youth are finding themselves caught in child welfare, youth justice or other parts of Ontario's systems of care and thus fall under the Office's mandate. Even though some newcomers may not be in the country legally, the Office makes sure these youth callers receive recognition of their rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), to which Canada is a signatory, and timely and appropriate assistance to meet their needs.

In June 2012, changes to Canada's Immigration and Refugee Protection System through the enactment of *Bill C-31 — The Protecting Canada's Immigration System Act and Balanced Refugee Reform Act*, received royal assent. The impact of these changes includes protections to ensure the best interests of child refugees are considered in all immigration matters, including decisions associated with possible deportation. The changes to the *Act* came into effect, December 15, 2012.

As part of the Canadian Council of Refugees (CCR) spring consultations in Fredericton, New Brunswick, staff from the Advocate's Office participated on a panel discussion about the impact of the changes to the Immigration and Refugee Protection System on children and youth. During the event, Office staff had an opportunity to meet representatives from the National Youth Council of Refugees (NYCR) and link the Council with young people at our Office who have been involved with outreach to the Newcomer and Refugee community.

In August 2012, in Montreal, Office staff attended a consultation forum hosted by the NYCR. It provided an opportunity for one of our youth Amplifiers to share their experience of being a newcomer and to explore how immigration and advocacy intersect, especially where youth are concerned. The forum also allowed Office staff to meet newcomer youth, learn more about the challenges they face and build relationships and working alliances to improve the Office's capacity to provide advocacy support to these children and youth. Right from the start newcomer youth were involved in the planning and implementation of the three-day event. The forum provided a safe space where young people could speak with candour about their struggles, issues and concerns. It also gave them opportunities to connect with one another, service providers and build mutual support networks.

MORE AND MORE NEWCOMER YOUTH ARE FINDING THEMSELVES CAUGHT IN THE CHILD WELFARE AND YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEMS

The Office has long been concerned about the needs of Unaccompanied Children in Ontario, particularly those who encounter the child welfare system. Building on this concern and the success of the forum held in August with the CCR, the Office supported a Consultation on newcomer children and youth in November 2012.

An extension of the Office's work in this area is the opening of our doors to Horizons of Healing and Hope. Horizons youth leaders meet on a monthly basis at the Advocate's Office to discuss issues and concerns of immigrant and newcomer youth and, where possible, invite staff and volunteers from the Office to be part of their valuable leadership and educational work on behalf of immigrant and newcomer youth. The Advocate's Office continues to work with young people involved in the immigration and refugee system to better understand the advocacy needs that exist for children in or at risk of coming into Ontario's systems of care.

"IT WAS EVIDENT THAT THESE YOUNG NEWCOMERS HAD NO KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THEIR RIGHTS OR THE UN CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD"

Youth Perspective

Youth Leaders who work at the Advocate's Office in Toronto have opportunities to travel and meet other young people who are seeking and working to achieve a more just and equitable world. It is a privilege but also a big responsibility to be involved in doing this work. It is also very personal when the young people are themselves newcomers. One event attended by Office staff was a forum on immigration held in Montreal, where a youth Amplifier shared first person experience about arriving in a new country without supports and resources. The forum provided the Advocate's Office with an opportunity to position our role as advocates for young refugees.The forum provided immigrant youth with an opportunity to share their stories and experiences. It was evident that these young newcomers had no knowledge about their rights or the, *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)*. It brought to light the need for the Advocate's Office to get more involved in youth immigration issues because so many young newcomers end up in child welfare or other areas of care within the Office's mandate.

Newcomer youth need advocacy support and help raising their voices to ensure their unique needs are met in Ontario's systems of care. They often arrive in Canada alone, fearful and feeling vulnerable. The Advocate's Office recognizes newcomer youths' unique situation and intends to continue the work of supporting them whenever possible to ensure Ontario's systems of care hear their voices.

Bella Galina-Ingabire *is a post-secondary student working at the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth as an Amplifier.*

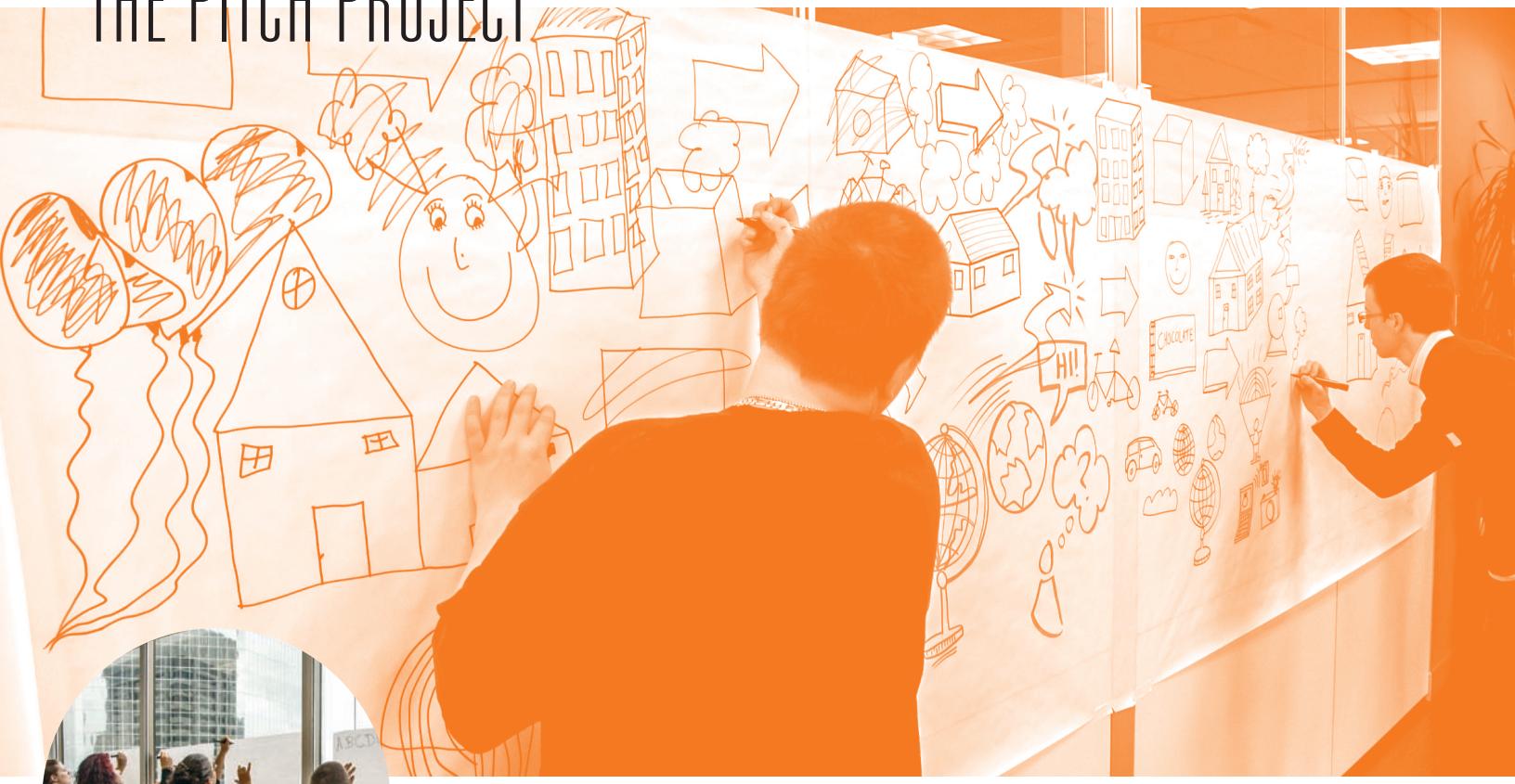
CHILDREN AND YOUTH LIVING IN POVERTY: SOCIAL ASSISTANCE REVIEW COMMITTEE

With a child poverty rate of 13.3%, Canada ranks 24th out of 35 industrialized nations, placing it behind the UK and Australia. Canada's child poverty rate is conservatively estimated to be nearly two percentage points higher than the country's overall poverty rate of 11.4%.[1] Living in poverty makes vulnerable children even more vulnerable to involvement in the criminal justice system. For example, 11% of Crown Wards in Ontario had charges laid against them through the Youth Criminal Justice Act.[2] In 2011, Canada's youth unemployment rate was 14.1%[3] placing young people at greater risk of social exclusion, emotional and physical health problems and the likelihood of sustained unemployment in adulthood.[4] Canada is the only first-world country that does not have a national affordable housing strategy.[5] Approximately 750,000 Canadian children live in substandard housing conditions.[6] The Advocate's Office is becoming increasingly aware of the impact and intersection of poverty with other 'risk' issues in the lives of young people in our mandate. In 2011 we began taking a closer look at this intersection by convening a meeting with young people from northern on-reserve and southern urban communities to discuss the impact of poverty and make a submission to the Social Assistance Review Committee. The young people spoke powerfully about the negative effects of living in a home where social assistance was the sole source of family income. They wanted regulations modified to permit young people to work part-time while receiving social assistance so they could cover basic living expenses. They asked for employment readiness supports, safe affordable housing, access to healthy nutritious food, help finding employment and assistance with returning to school. Most importantly, they wanted social assistance programs to be funded equitably and available to any youth who needed support regardless of where they lived in Ontario.

THE YOUNG PEOPLE SPOKE POWERFULLY ABOUT THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF LIVING IN A HOME WHERE SOCIAL ASSISTANCE WAS THE SOLE SOURCE OF FAMILY INCOME.

1. L. Monsebraaten, L., *Canada lags on fighting child poverty*, report finds. Toronto Star. (2012, May 29).
2. Ministry of Children and Youth Services Quality Assurance and Accountability Branch, (2007), 18, as quoted in, *25 is the new 21*. Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth. (2012), 24.
3. Statistics Canada, (2011, November 4). *Labour Force Survey*.
4. S. Scarpetta, A. Sonnet, and T. Manfredi, T., Social, Employment and Migration Papers - Rising Youth Unemployment During the Crisis: How to Prevent Negative Long-Term Consequences on a Generation? (OECD, 2010, April 14). Retrieved at http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/rising-youth-unemployment-during-the-crisis_5kmh79zb2mmv-en
5. Campaign 2000, *Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in Canada*. Revisiting Family Security in Insecure Times. (Campaign 2000: 2011).
6. Co-Operative Housing Federation of Canada, *The Dunning Report: Dimensions of Core Housing Need in Canada. CHF Canada* (August 2009). Retrieved at http://www.chfcanada.coop.

THE PITCH PROJECT



The goal of the Office's, *Policy Interventions to Improve Child Health Outcomes (PITCH),* project is to create an approach to advocacy that will help young people influence government and stakeholders to adopt new policies and practices to improve outcomes for children and youth. This approach to advocacy was developed through combining ideas from the literature on the Social Determinants of Health, Child Rights and Life Course theory of child and youth development.

In November 2012, five youth and three Advocates from the Office received training in graphic facilitation, a tool used in the PITCH program. They worked together to design and deliver a workshop in early December to a diverse group of 20 youth who were interested in housing issues. This youth-led process looked at the experience of housing insecurity and its impact on rights, health and well being and other long term implications in the lives of young people. The young people involved in the workshop were 'knowledge builders' involved in an action orientated advocacy process. The project that evolved from the workshop involved creating and sending out post cards to inform peers, policy makers, academics and the broader community about housing issues affecting youth.

The PITCH tool kit will be launched in 2013 and will include a discussion paper, a pod cast, templates, fact sheets and findings from 'Urban Scrawl,' a project currently operating with this methodology in Victoria, Winnipeg and Toronto.

INQUEST DATA BASE

Early in the mandate of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, concern was expressed about the deaths of children and youth who had some connection to Ontario's Children's Services System. Between the years 1995–2010, 26 Coroner's Inquests were held into the deaths of children. These young people were, for the most part, within the mandate areas of the Office: child welfare, youth justice, First Nations, special needs and children's mental health. The Office was determined to do whatever possible to elevate the voices of these children within the confining limitations of our *Act*. It seemed the inquest process was a useful way to accomplish this goal. The Office decided that in addition to attending every inquest involving the death of a child in our mandate, we would begin developing an Inquest Recommendations data base to support our advocacy work.

A Coroner's inquest provides a key advocacy tool for promoting youth-defined and youth-directed change in care systems. Inquests produce recommendations that can help prevent future deaths or injury to young people living in similar circumstances and are a critical safeguard for children and youth in care. In 2008–2009, the Office announced plans to create a plain language and easily accessible "Inquest Recommendations Data base" so that young people and stakeholders could track the progress of implementation of recommendations contained in inquest reports.

In August 2010, consultations were held directly with youth regarding the design and content of the data base. In December 2011, young people also came together for an evening of information sharing about the data base. The data base was launched publicly in November 2012. By increasing access to this type of information, the Advocate's Office hopes to improve the value of inquests and provide young people, the public and professionals with a better understanding of the process of how recommendations become implemented. The data base also provides the Office with a tool to help focus our public education and rights advocacy efforts.

ASHLEY SMITH INQUEST

Ashley Smith was a vulnerable 19-year-old youth who died while in federal custody. For the last 11 months of her life she was transferred 17 times to 9 different facilities in 5 provinces. She was incarcerated under inhumane conditions, in a secure isolation cell (nearly exclusively) for a minimum of 23 hours a day. She had very little human contact and few opportunities to participate in any purposeful activities. She spent long hours and days locked in a cell without stimulation, proper clothing, a mattress or even a blanket to keep warm.

The Advocate's Office was granted standing at the inquest into her death on January 31, 2010. The Office spent the next 17 months challenging numerous process decisions such as the narrow scope of the initial inquest, the right of the public/media to have access to inquest and video exhibits, the proposed witness list and the numerous delays in hearing motions. In the late spring of 2011, the presiding coroner to the inquest resigned abruptly.

The Office felt it was important to challenge the previous coroner's restrictions on information sharing and to ensure Ashley's whole story was told. A new Coroner was appointed in the fall of 2011 and ordered a broader scope for the inquest to allow exploration of the areas necessary to prevent a similar tragedy from occurring again. The new coroner heard motions to restrict this new scope but the Office and other parties argued strenuously against these motions in order to protect the transparency and validity of the inquest process and ensure Ashley's voice was heard. As a result of these interventions, motions to restrict the scope were dismissed and the inquest is scheduled to begin in January 2013.

> "ASHLEY SMITH WAS A VERY YOUNG WOMAN WHO SUFFERED TREMENDOUS, TREMENDOUS ADVERSE TREATMENT IN CUSTODY AND WE WANT ALL OF IT LOOKED AT. WE WANT IT LOOKED AT IN AN INTELLIGENT FASHION."
>
> — IRWIN ELMAN, PROVINCIAL ADVOCATE

ACCESS TO INFORMATION REMAINS A CHALLENGE

The Provincial Advocate continues to face roadblocks in accessing information about children and youth in our mandate who have died, and the results of investigations into allegations of abuse against young people in the youth justice system. As a result, the Office is limited in its ability to perform its duty as an advocate for children and youth. Though the Advocate's Office has been able to obtain important information through information sharing protocols with the Ministry of Children and Youth Services and the Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario, similar arrangements do not apply to agencies that operate independent of government, such as Children's Aid Societies.

However, though requests to the Ministry of Children and Youth Services for reports on child deaths are answered, the records we receive are heavily redacted. This contrasts sharply with Paediatric Death Review Reports we obtain through the protocol with the Coroner's Office, where names are removed to protect confidentiality, but details explaining the child's death are left intact. These details help the Office monitor patterns and trends in service delivery that could be used to prevent harm to young people connected to Ontario's children's service systems.

The Office is also denied information by the Ministry about young people who report assaults by staff in youth justice facilities. Without this information there is no way for the Provincial Advocate to confirm if assaults have been thoroughly investigated or if any action has been taken as a result. The Provincial Advocate has written to the Minister of Children and Youth Services and filed a court application seeking access to these investigation reports so the Office can exercise its mandate to advocate for these young people. At the time of the writing of this report, we await the decision of the court.

WITHOUT THIS INFORMATION THERE IS NO WAY FOR THE PROVINCIAL ADVOCATE TO CONFIRM IF ASSAULTS HAVE BEEN THOROUGHLY INVESTIGATED OR IF ANY ACTION HAS BEEN TAKEN AS A RESULT.

HEALTH RIGHTS PROJECT

Youth Perspective

Since the Office became independent, we have tracked calls from young people regarding their health rights. Many young people feel that personal and important decisions regarding their health are made by others, or that requests to play a greater role in decisions relating to their health care are not taken seriously. Some young people have said they felt forced into treatment, couldn't obtain treatment they wanted, had personal information improperly disclosed, were "over medicated" or were provided little or no information regarding their health care.

The Office decided to begin addressing these concerns raised by children and youth in the areas of our mandate. Two young people were hired to work with staff to create a multi-media tool to provide detailed and easy to understand information about health rights to young people and service providers. Their task involved facilitating interactive workshops with other young people and coordinating and training volunteers to take on lead roles in the development of content for the multi-media tool. Using an inclusive process, the project team worked closely to set agendas, develop work plans, review various pieces of legislation and conventions pertaining to the health rights of young people, set priorities for action and determine how to include more young people in the design of the project. They also encouraged and supported young people to join advisory groups as young leaders who will continue the work of advocating for the health rights of young people in their own communities. The project will make use of interactive groups and different on-line platforms to reach out to young people. The Office's intention is to work collaboratively with service systems to create awareness and facilitate change in how the health rights of young people are applied to the care of children and youth.

Cheyanne Ratnam *and* ***Euan Hwang*** *are Youth Leads of the Health Rights Project with the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth.*

CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

On June 22, 2011, the government announced *Open Minds, Healthy Minds*, a Comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Strategy which focuses on children and youth in the first three years. New investments started in 2011 and will grow to $93 million annually by 2013–14. Since our Office's mandate is to elevate the voices of children and youth, we decided to establish a process to speak directly with young people and learn what supports and services they wanted and needed to retain or regain their mental health. A total of 46 young people participated in 6 separate group consultations organized in the city of Peterborough. Information gathered in the group discussions was summarized and returned to the young people for their feedback.

The young people identified supports and services they wanted in the areas of education, play/recreation, community-based support and relationships. Additional themes found in the data were: a need to feel a sense of belonging, having safe spaces to hang out, adequate living situations, positive adult role models and a full spectrum of support services. Coincidently, as we often find, what young people want is what we have promised we would provide. These themes mirror rights outlined in the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* including: community space for children and youth, the principles of non-discrimination and best interests, adequate standard of living, freedom of expression and the right to play, and the right to health and health services.

Two key recommendations were made from the information provided by the youth: 1) The need for young people to be at the table for all discussions about mental health service planning; and 2) Schools and community centres should be the partners with, or gateways to, mental health services as young people already have established connections with these organizations.

ANTI-BULLYING

The Advocate's Office has long viewed bullying as a systemic community wellness matter. Our concern has only deepened with the recent suicides of bullied children and awareness generated by the, *It Gets Better*, campaign that highlighted bullying experienced by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Intersex, Queer, Questioning, 2-Spirited and Allies (LGBTTIQQ2SA) youth. Bullying impacts not only victims, but those who witness it and other members of the community.

Young people in the systems of care in the Office's mandate are often bullied. First Nations youth living on-reserve or in urban settings, children with special needs or mental health challenges, young people living in shelters, foster or group homes or on the street, and youth in the justice system are all vulnerable to this type of violence and aggression. Being bullied adds to the number of challenges they face as they struggle to reach their potential, achieve their education goals or live free of racism, marginalization and exclusion.

Because youth in our mandate may be both victims and perpetrators of bullying, we realized that they would be impacted by any proposed anti-bullying legislation. In 2012, Office staff joined with young people to prepare a submission regarding Bill 13, *An Act to Amend the Education Act with Respect to Bullying and other Matters*, and Bill 14, *An Act to Designate Bullying Awareness and Prevention Week in Schools*. Using previous reviews conducted by the Office about bullying and online surveys and focus groups with young people, the submission was prepared and presented to the Standing Committee on Social Policy at Queen's Park.

This project is a first step. We recognize that bullying is a complex issue and requires a sustained, province-wide effort involving young people, supportive adults, government, schools, service agencies, families and care providers to reduce the risk factors that leave young people vulnerable to becoming victims or perpetrators of bullying.

Youth Perspective

Bullying is common in schools and care providing settings within the Office's mandate. The Office wanted to provide an opportunity for young people to contribute their ideas to proposed anti-bullying legislation in order to help make it more effective.

Office staff reached out, formed a working group of young people and brought them together to explain the government of Ontario's proposed legislation in language everyone could understand. Staff supported the group members and involved them in the preparation of a submission to the Standing Committee on Social Policy at Queen's Park. The youth involved appreciated the opportunity to give back, contribute to the community and help change Ontario laws that would protect young people. They also appreciated the opportunity to raise their voices and learn how to participate in a political process to create positive change for youth.

Donovan O'Neil Allen *is a student who worked on the anti-bullying project for the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth.*

YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS OR DISABILITIES

The term 'special needs,' which has been used interchangeably with the term 'disabilities,' refers to a variety of conditions that may include physical, intellectual, emotional, developmental disabilities, and chronic, severe or terminal illness. In 2012, many Ontario families, and other primary caregivers to children who have developmental or physical challenges, find themselves stretched to their financial and emotional limits. Many are fighting to have their rights respected and addressed by government and the service system. Many are denied their right to proper care because the systems they depend on for support — educational, medical, child welfare, residential or therapeutic — cannot meet their needs.

ADVOCACY WITH AND FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

A significant proportion of calls the Office receives are related to children with special needs. More than 60% of these calls are about access to services in the home and community, including respite care, nursing, personal support, programming and intensive therapy. However, many of the programs for these children are underfunded, have long waiting lists or are inadequate for young persons with higher levels of need. Another 20% of calls received are about access to residential placement. This usually happens when a family or foster parents are no longer able to provide the financial, emotional or physical care for a child. Individual Rights Advocates support these children, youth, families and the professionals who work with them — their natural advocates — in making referrals to appropriate community supports and services, assisting them to access appeal and service resolution mechanisms, often highlighting cases at the Ministry level.

ALLIES IN ADVOCACY

The Advocate's Office Special Needs Committee consists of staff, young people and others who have lived experience within the disability/special needs community. The Committee routinely invites young people, parents, professionals and government representatives to attend meetings as guest speakers. These meetings assist Office staff in staying current on urgent and emerging issues for children and youth with differing abilities. The Committee allows Office staff an opportunity to work alongside young people, families, caregivers and government to identify priorities and create change in policy or programs to ensure children and youth with special needs receive the level of care and support they need. Recent projects have included: partnering with the Infant Mental Health Program at Sick Kids Hospital to reprint — for the Canadian context — a research document examining developmental screening for infants in child welfare; developing a position paper on behalf of children and youth in our mandate who are medically fragile or technology dependent; and initiating a project focused on the needs of children and youth with FASD (Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder).

Youth Perspective

SPECIAL NEEDS COMMITTEE

Mother Teresa of Calcutta once said that, "We can do no great things; only small things with great love." The Special Needs Committee at the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth focuses on children and youth with diverse abilities. The purpose of the Committee is to work alongside and raise the voices of young people with diverse abilities to ensure their needs and rights are respected by care providers. Life can be more challenging for young people with exceptionalities because they are repeatedly told from a young age that they need to be "fixed." Systems are instituted mechanisms that are often mandated and regulated by policies that only offer a compartmentalized perspective of the whole picture. It is crucial for people who work to affirm young peoples' rights, and look out for their best interests, to remember that even youth with special needs are first and foremost youth, and their special needs are simply another part of the package. Like all youth, they too seek that person or moment which gives them the reassurance and affirmation that they are good enough just as they are. May it serve as a reminder that it does not take a grandiose act to affect a child's life in a more positive manner. At the end of the day, it's your reassurance, the time you spend with them and the way you make a young person feel about themselves that truly leaves a lasting and positive impact.

***Crystal Chin** is a youth member of the Special Needs Advisory Group at the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth.*

FETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM DISORDER (FASD)

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) affects an estimated 9 of 1,000 babies born in Canada and is the leading cause of developmental disability among Canadian children (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2007).[1] Fuchs et al., (2005) found evidence of diagnosed or suspected FASD in 17% of children in care.[2] Hutson (2006) asserted that approximately 50% of children in care in Alberta had FASD.[3] It is also an issue that has a devastating impact on First Nations communities in Ontario. Though the number of FASD affected youth in our mandate areas is not known, data from other provinces suggest that it is an issue the Advocate's Office needs to explore.

The Provincial Advocate receives requests to take action to ensure that children and youth with FASD receive the necessary supports and services they need while in care and when aging out of the system. The calls the Office receives come from young people, natural advocates, caregivers and service providers.

The Office believes it is important to hear directly from young people in our mandate diagnosed/undiagnosed with FASD and join with them in taking action to ensure the care they receive meets their needs. In the spring of 2012, some FASD-affected youth were invited to the Office to share their experiences and challenges pertaining to FASD. The young people were pleased to learn the Office would be reaching out to other affected children and youth to learn more about their thoughts and experiences. Some of these young people are working with Office staff to develop questions to ask, as well as facilitate the discussions. The information obtained through these meetings will help guide the Office's approach to advocacy in this area.

> "(THE) SYSTEM NEEDS MORE YOUTH WHO HAVE BEEN IN THE SYSTEM TO TALK ABOUT ISSUES — YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND IF YOU HAVEN'T BEEN WHERE WE ARE — IT'S MORE THAT YOU CAN TRY TO UNDERSTAND."
>
> — YOUTH PARTICIPANT

1. Public Health Agency of Canada, *Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)* (Ottawa, PHAC, 2005), 8.
2. Don Fuchs, "Children with FASD-Related Disabilities Receiving Services from Child Welfare Agencies in Manitoba", *International Journal of Health and Addiction* 8 (2010): 232.
3. J. Hutson, "A Prenatal Perspective on the Cost of Substance Abuse in Canada", *Journal of FAS International*, 4 (2006), 1-4, as referenced in Don Fuchs, "Children with FASD-Related Disabilities Receiving Services from Child Welfare Agencies in Manitoba", *International Journal of Health and Addiction* 8 (2010): 232.

Youth Perspective

FETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM DISORDER PROJECT

The Office is planning to reach out in 2013 to young people with FASD to obtain a better understanding of their needs and priorities. A youth with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is helping the Office develop questions for our project to hear from children and youth with FASD. The young person felt that it was important to hear directly from FASD affected young people because they are the real 'experts' on what it is like to live with FASD.

While FASD may be a sensitive topic, the Office believes it is important to let young people speak out and share their experiences with one another and their caregivers. Even for young people who have FASD, there is still much to learn by listening to others' stories and experiences. Everyone has their own way of coping and a different experience of how FASD impacts their lives. The same can be said for caregivers and professionals who provide care and support to youth with FASD. They learn too by staying open to new ideas, listening to young people and sharing their own knowledge and experience with others.

Once we hear from the young people, we are hoping to keep the conversation going with caregivers and experts so everyone can work together to improve Ontario's systems of care and ensure youth with FASD are better served.

Prepared by a youth working on the FASD project for the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE PROJECT (YANA)

Rather than run a local one day Pride event, the Advocate's Office decided to develop a project that could make a lasting difference in the daily lives of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Intersex, Queer, Questioning, 2-Spirited and Allies (LGBTTIQQ2SA) youth across Ontario in all our mandate areas. We also wanted the project to communicate a message to children and youth that we are here for them, that they have the right to feel safe and free from discrimination regardless of their sexual or gender identity, and that, *"You are not alone"* (YANA). The idea of using a video emerged in discussions because it could be viewed by young people on the Internet, or a DVD if they did not have access to a computer.

The project organizing committee invited young people to share their stories and to spread the word to other youth to participate in the video. They were encouraged to raise their voices, share their experiences and speak about their ideas for creating change. Participants' stories were recorded and compiled into a moving and inspiring video. The YANA video was distributed across the province and can be viewed on the Advocate Office's web site, *http://provincialadvocate.on.ca/youarenotalone.*

The video was launched during Toronto Pride Week on June 25th 2012 at an event attended by over 130 young people and adults. The Advocate's Office invited LGBTTIQQ2SA young people connected to the child welfare system, the children's mental health system, the youth justice system, children and youth with special needs or requiring the services of Provincial or Demonstration Schools and First Nations youth to attend the event. The video is intended as an invitation to submit stories, poems, photographs, videos, spoken word or other forms of expression that communicate young peoples' experience in care and their ideas for making these systems more supportive of LGBTTIQQ2SA youth.

Youth Perspective

Deaf youth in the care of the Children's Aid Society (CAS) feel very alone because there are few other deaf young people in these environments and few staff who are able to 'sign' American Sign Language (ASL). Also, without access to a sign language interpreter to help them communicate, they can feel left out of the system, isolated and alone. Deaf youth in care feel CAS staff do not understand deaf youth, their language, their culture or their specific needs. When you cannot talk or communicate with the people who provide your care it is easy to feel misunderstood and like the least important person in the world. Being a LGBTTIQQ2SA youth compounds this problem.

Working with the Advocate's Office on the, *Youth Leaving Care,* and, *You Are Not Alone*, projects provided unique learning opportunities for the deaf youth involved. They got to learn about the stories of other young people in care and realize they weren't alone. The Office provided encouragement and a great opportunity for deaf youth to raise their voices and express their feelings and concerns about Ontario's systems of care. Deaf youth also learned that 'hearing' young people in CAS care have barriers of their own to overcome. The theme of, *You Are Not Alone*, is powerful because it captures the feeling shared by many young people that they are the only ones struggling to cope in 'the system'. Having an opportunity to speak out and participate in the YANA video is important to deaf or any other disabled youth that feel invisible and that their needs are overlooked or misunderstood by the care system. The Office's YANA video will help bring attention to the needs of deaf youth and provide an advocacy model for other youth living with disabilities to follow.

Eric Savage *was formerly a student a Provincial School for the Deaf in Milton, Ontario and a youth lead on the Office's, Youth Leaving Care Hearings, and, You Are Not Alone (YANA), Projects.*

PROVINCIAL AND DEMONSTRATION SCHOOLS

Advocates visit the provincially run residential schools for the Deaf, Blind, Deaf-Blind and severely learning disabled on a monthly basis. In addition to handling individual cases, Advocate's Office staff work at Provincial and Demonstration Schools to identify and address systemic issues affecting young peoples' rights or impeding services to meet their needs. One of the issues raised by students at a number of the schools related to their inability to communicate with family members over the Internet either because of policy or systems problems at the schools. This is a problem particularly for Deaf students who are unable to rely on the telephone as the primary means of communication with their families. In 2012, the Advocate's Office presented information to school administration on behalf of the students and also helped to facilitate the participation of students in the Provincial Schools Branch Review of Information Technology Resources for Students in Residence. We were pleased that students' voices were heard in this review and that significantly greater access was achieved.

The Office has run into obstacles that interfere with our work on behalf of young people at Provincial and Demonstration schools. For example, the Provincial Schools Branch has taken the position that the Advocate's Office is not permitted to advocate on behalf of any student who is over the age of 18, engage in anything other than 'informal advocacy' or undertake a review of the schools, even though a review has been requested by students attending some of the schools. We are disappointed by the decision of the Ministry not to partner with our Office to improve the advocacy resources available to students. We disagree with the Ministry of Education and will be employing the resources at our disposal to safeguard the rights of students attending Provincial and Demonstration Schools.

GROUP HOME REVIEWS

The *Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth Act, 2007*, gives the Office the authority to conduct reviews at group homes and to provide advocacy for children and youth living in these homes. Reviews are initiated so that young people can learn about our services and their right to contact the Office whenever they have questions or concerns about their rights. Although, by law, children in care may call the Advocate's Office at any time and speak with an advocate in private and without delay, many children and youth do not call. Our visits remind children and youth of their right to access our service.

To ensure our review process is relevant and meaningful, this year the Office brought together a group of young people who had previous experience living in group homes. They provided advice and direction concerning what questions Office staff should ask when conducting reviews. The resulting questionnaire provided the Office with an improved and valuable tool for Advocates to obtain a more detailed assessment of young peoples' day-to-day lives in group home environments.

Using the Office's refined questionnaire, three group homes were reviewed in 2012. The reviews allowed Advocates to document the experiences of young people living in each setting and gather information to share with home operators to improve their knowledge regarding rights to which the youth are entitled. The reviews also gave Advocates an opportunity to pilot the new questionnaire and make any needed refinements.

Youth Perspective

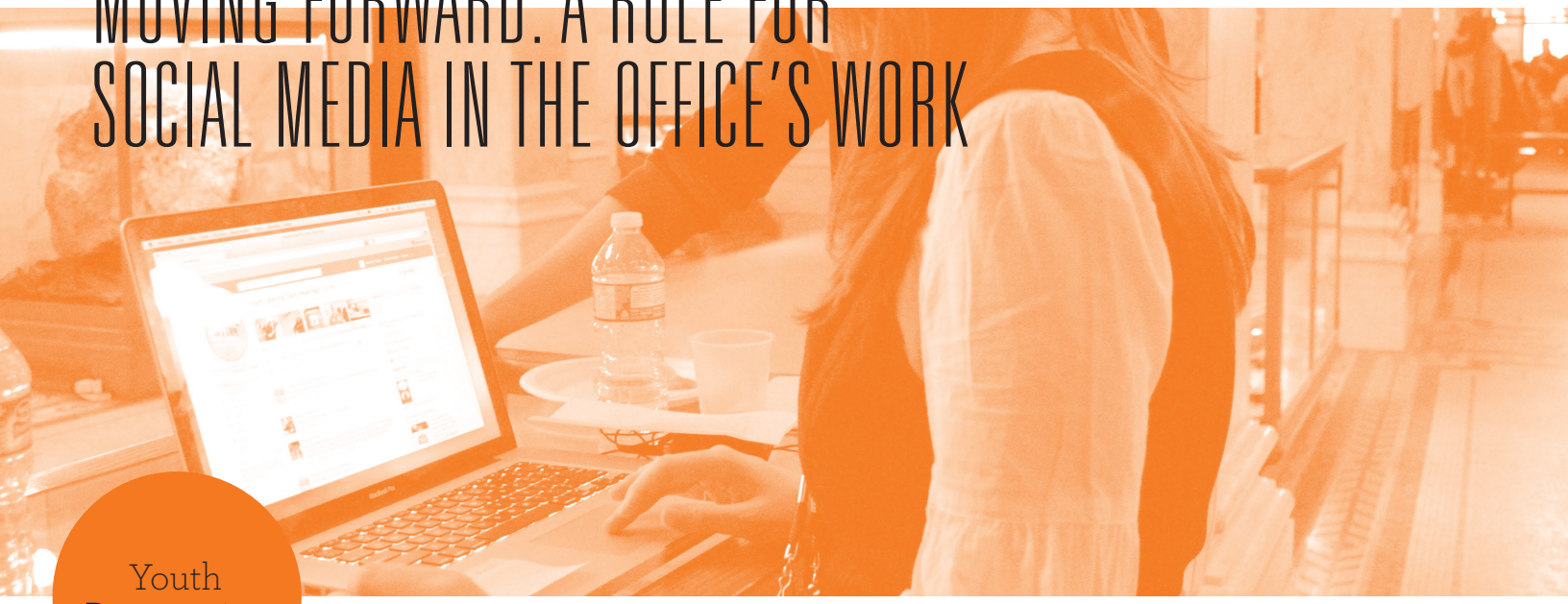
The Group Home Review Project is a collaboration between the Office and young people to help improve the accountability of group care providers to children and youth. Young people often feel that the systems designed to provide them with care fail and ignore their rights. Youth have reported being denied timely access to the Advocate's Office or being forced to live in unsatisfactory conditions that do not meet the government's own standards.

"YOUNG PEOPLE OFTEN FEEL THAT THE SYSTEMS DESIGNED TO PROVIDE THEM WITH CARE FAIL AND IGNORE THEIR RIGHTS."

The Group Home Review Project provided young people with a way to increase accountability on the part of service providers. By working with the Advocate's Office, the young people were able to help Advocates understand what questions to ask and what to look for when they conduct reviews of group home facilities. Youth volunteers feel that this project will help elevate the voices of youth, help young people have their rights met in a timely manner and improve their quality of life in group care. The involvement of youth in this process helps ensure that changes made in the system as a result of conducting reviews, are relevant, appropriate and meet their real needs.

Michele Farrugia *is a youth volunteer with the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth working on the Group Home Review Project. He is also a youth member of the Ministry of Children and Youth Services' Youth Leaving Care Working Group.*

MOVING FORWARD: A ROLE FOR SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE OFFICE'S WORK



Youth Perspective

The Advocate's Office remains cautious about the use of social media in projects involving young people. Use of this technology raised concerns for the Office about privacy and the control of content and security of information sent or posted online. After careful consideration, young people involved in several Office projects were offered training in the use of social media and were coached to apply their new skills with care.

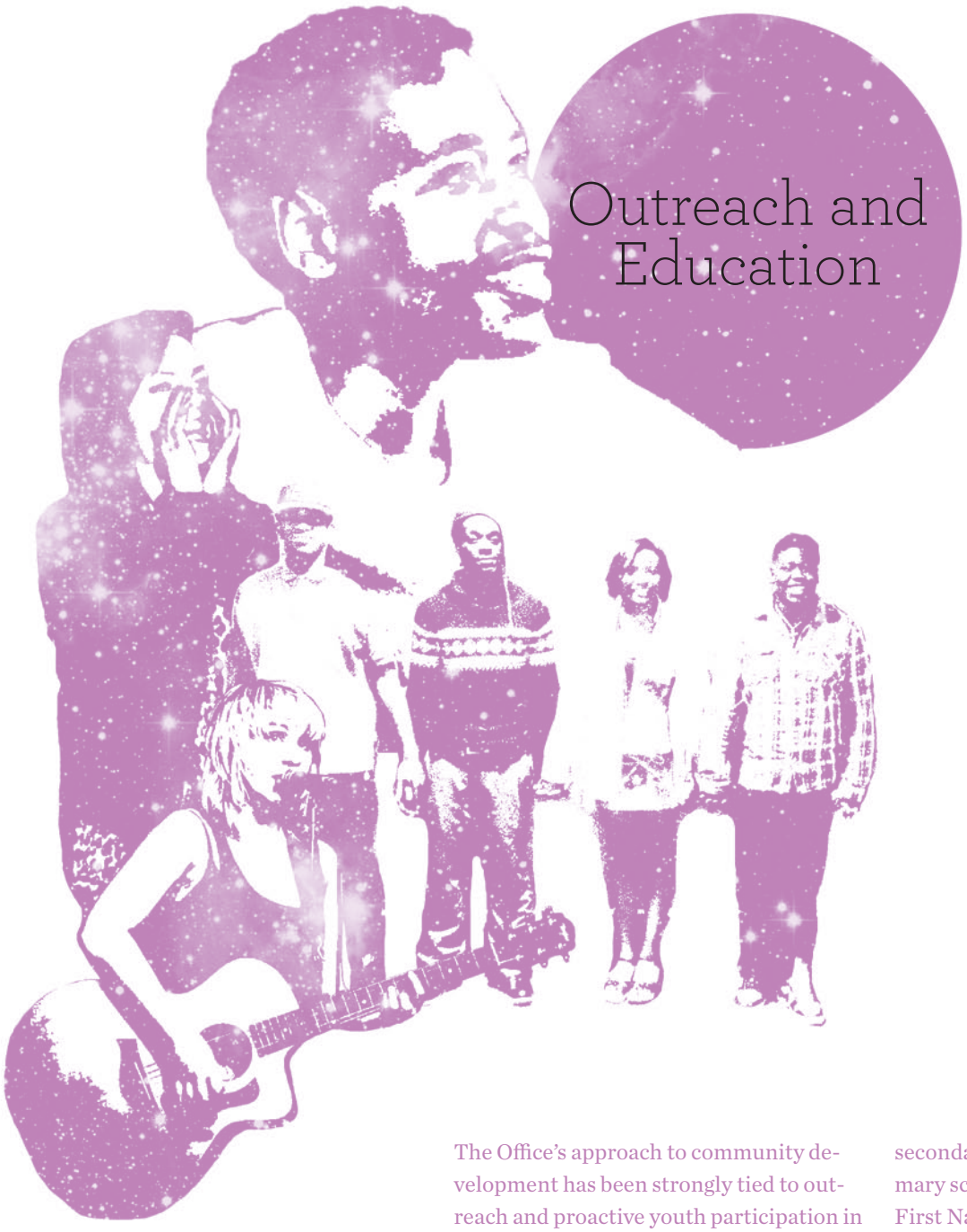
Social media became an important part of our outreach to young people in a number of projects this year. Using popular social networking sites, the Office was able to communicate written information in detailed or brief formats, provide video clips of events and send project updates to young people, community partners and stakeholders, particularly for the, *Our Voice Our Turn*, and, *You Are Not Alone*, projects. It proved to be an effective way to engage young people and others who are not able to participate directly in Office events or projects. Social media provided a valuable mechanism for promoting the work of the Office and helped achieve our mandate to ensure the voices of young people were heard.

The use of social media as a tool for connecting young people to the Office and to each other was invaluable and significantly increased our capacity to communicate to others the thoughts and ideas of youth. It extended the reach of these projects that are very precious to the hearts of the young people involved, especially youth who are LGBTTIQQ2SA or have direct experience with the child welfare system.

Working on these projects was humbling. The experience some youth had of starting as a volunteer then becoming a lead on a project was invaluable and helped young people grow in maturity and understand what it means to speak out for themselves or others who are in need. It opened young peoples' eyes to a different way to view the world and expanded their vision of what is possible. *Our Voice Our Turn*, is helping to bring both awareness and fundamental change to Ontario's child welfare system. *You Are Not Alone*, promotes understanding and awareness of the needs of LGBTTIQQ2SA youth for young people, the public, teachers, politicians, caseworkers or other adults in systems that provide their care. These projects are helping to pose questions to the right 'people' in order to create change with respect to the lives, rights and needs of young people in Ontario. Social media played an important role in helping get the message out.

***Wendy Hayes** was the social media lead for the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth's Our Voice Our Turn project.*

***Jacob Fraboni** is a student at the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth and the lead for social media on the Office's Our Voice Our Turn and You Are Not Alone Projects.*



Outreach and Education

The Office's approach to community development has been strongly tied to outreach and proactive youth participation in advocacy work and rights education. Our Community Development Advisors have facilitated young people coming together to talk about the issues that they want to address within their local communities and with varying levels of government. In the last year, partnership building at the community level has been a priority. We work with a range of partners including Child and Youth Worker programs, post-secondary students and faculty and primary school classes in remote northern First Nations communities, the United Nations, federal, provincial and First Nations governments, provincial and national immigration and refugee bodies and the culturally diverse communities that comprise Ontario. The focus of community development is to strengthen the community-based knowledge of our work, advocacy and legislation that safeguards the rights of children and youth.

THE AMPLIFIERS

The most powerful voice for children and youth is their own voice. That is why the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth continually seeks out opportunities to partner with young people across the province in advocacy work it does on their behalf. Four years ago, a decision was made to bring together a group of youth who could join with Community Development Advisors to plan and share in the work of community development. The original youth members came up with the name 'Amplifiers' to describe the work they do to raise the voices of youth. The Amplifiers work with the Community Development Advisors to conduct outreach on behalf of the Office to other youth, support Office initiatives and develop activities on their own to provide rights awareness and education.

Currently, there are four Amplifiers based in Toronto. Through their speaking engagements they help other young people learn about the work of the Advocate's Office. They also bring important life experiences and insights into all the project work, special events and written reports in which they are involved.

The Amplifiers are involved in a number of projects including *Hairstory*, the *Feathers of Hope Youth Forum* and the Amplifier-created *Rights Education Day* which is the beginning of a vision to implement rights education curriculum for young people in all Ontario schools. They have also completed the, *Amplifier Magazine*, a writing forum created to give young people a place to share their stories or concerns and speak about their rights.

POEM

Let us grow like fields in
the middle of spring. Let us
dance to the rhythm of joy it
won't cost you a thing!
Please listen to me and do
not reject
We do not want much but
we do have rights
And respect for them is our
daily fight.

— **"B"**

POEM

Choose to be you
Choose
Choose to have a choice
With
Using your voice
Such a power
In
Our land of Freedom

— **"K"**

POEM

Each of us on our own time
We all are not perfect and
All need to be cared
For in different ways
So don't go thinking
All flowers are the same
Like a flower
We all need these three
things
Freedom, Love, Peace
Without them don't expect
our full potential

— **"N"**

HAIRSTORY

Hairstory is a youth outreach and engagement initiative that was launched by the Advocate's Office during Black History Month in 2012. The Office worked with young people to create this project in response to comments from reviews, meetings with Black youth, service organizations in the community and numerous calls the Office receives from Black young people in Ontario's systems of care. Young people also wanted an initiative that extended beyond Black History Month and that would ensure ongoing focus on the rights, advocacy, culture and service issues affecting the provision of care to Black youth in Ontario's child welfare, youth justice, children's mental health, shelter and other systems.

Hairstory was designed to elevate the voice of Black youth in our systems of care. It was planned in a manner that would also enrich the cultural knowledge of Black youth, instil pride and cultivate positive feelings about Black identity. It encouraged young people to become involved in helping change and improve Ontario's systems of care.

By asking, "If my hair could talk, what would it say?," Black youth with experience in care were provided with an opportunity to open a discussion about their needs. Through dialogue and discussion with peers and stakeholders, the young people were encouraged to offer recommendations to create change in the system to ensure their needs are met.

Young people were involved in the planning and implementation of the first *Hairstory* event that occurred in October 2012. The roles they assumed were varied. Some went out and met with various organizations to spread the word about the project, while others were a resource and support to youth who wanted to submit their stories through film or other media. The project is still ongoing and will continue into 2013. When completed, the *Hairstory* project will yield a report that will document young peoples' recommendations regarding how to improve care for Black youth in all their diversity.

Youth Perspectives

Honest, open conversations can provide new insights about the struggles Black youth in care face. But if action and real change does not follow from sharing their stories, what incentive is there for them to trust the institutions that are supposed to be providing their care? Young people aren't always asking for things that cost more money. Much can change, and many of their needs can be met, through simple adjustments in the way care is provided. For example, new professionals coming into the field need to be trained to recognize how cultural background can determine young peoples' needs.

Hairstory was intended as a way to begin this conversation. The project provided an opportunity for Black youth to connect with one another and enter into a dialogue with community and grassroots organizations, government, institutional and community officials and youth leaders and advocates.

The event was designed so that youth who have experienced various forms of discrimination could share their experiences and their ideas for overcoming the hurdles that leave them feeling vulnerable in the very environments that are supposed to provide them with support and care.

There is still much to accomplish through the *Hairstory* project. Black youth need to learn more about their rights, find strength and pride in their cultural identity and obtain the supports and skills they require when it is time for them to transition from care.

***Kiwayne Jones** is an Amplifier at the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth and a youth leader with Hairstory.*

Hairstory is more than a project to support young people in the Black community. It provides an opportunity for Black youth working on the event to engage in teamwork, learn and practice communication skills and build strong, positive and effective working relationships with one another. It feels like a family.

For many of the youth leaders on the project, working at the Advocate's Office is a new type of work experience. Everyone is learning how to work professionally, run public consultation groups, speak up in public about issues affecting young people in the Black community and build working partnerships with other youth in the community. Listening to the stories of other youth, helping and giving back to the community is inspiring and makes everyone on the team feel important.

Until *Hairstory*, most of the young people who worked on the project didn't realize the story that could be told simply through the topic of caring for Black hair. It is important for Black youth in care to have a voice and share their experiences. There are so many barriers that must be removed so that Black youth can feel that people who work in Ontario's various systems of care respect their rights and know how to meet their real life needs. There is still much to do. Young Black men and women have different needs. We also have to acknowledge that the Black community itself is diverse. *Hairstory* was a great beginning, but there is still more of the story to tell.

***Noterlee Johnson** is an Amplifier at the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth and a youth leader with Hairstory.*

Youth Perspectives

Hairstory was put together by staff and youth leaders at the Advocate's Office to help start a conversation about the experiences of Afro-Canadian youth in the justice, child welfare, children's mental health and other systems. The topic of hair was used as a starting point for exploring how systems of care fall short when it comes to meeting the needs of Black youth and fail to provide the skills, awareness and strong sense of identity they need to make positive choices in their lives.

Youth leaders working on this project got an opportunity to see how much more needs to be done in the system to properly support Black youth. For example, it is important for young people to see Black staff in management and care-giving roles. It is also important to see members of the Black community succeed and to have access to positive role models that can provide an example of how to use one's talents and brilliance to achieve one's dreams.

Hairstory is the beginning of a movement aimed at empowering Black youth to create change by learning to be their own advocates. The most important message of *Hairstory* is to build connections, bring more voices together and let the legislature know that Black youth in care need well informed helpers and sustained support and assistance from caregivers in order to thrive and succeed.

"HAIRSTORY IS THE BEGINNING OF A MOVEMENT AIMED AT EMPOWERING BLACK YOUTH TO CREATE CHANGE BY LEARNING TO BE THEIR OWN ADVOCATES."

***Danian Walker** is a Co-Founder of the Amplifier working group and has been working with the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth since 2010. He has been adamant on promoting rights education throughout the province.*

"WORKING AS A YOUTH LEADER IS EYE-OPENING AND REWARDING AND TEACHES YOUNG PEOPLE THE SKILLS THEY NEED TO HELP AMPLIFY THE VOICES OF YOUTH IN CARE."

Hairstory is unique in terms of how the event helped bring to light issues Black youth face in Ontario's systems of care. Everyone involved with the project worked with commitment and passion.

Working on a project like *Hairstory* gives young people an opportunity to discover much about themselves and others. Connecting with youth in care from across Ontario and sharing stories and ideas about rights, gaps in supports and services and coping in 'the system' opens your eyes, heart and mind. Discussions were rich and full of experiences both good and bad. Some stories were overwhelming to hear and filled listeners with strong emotions. It is the telling and hearing of these stories that reinforces why the work of the Advocate's Office, to walk beside and support young people, is so important.

Working as a Youth Leader is eye-opening and rewarding and teaches young people the skills they need to help amplify the voices of youth in care. We are only at the beginning of telling the story of Black young peoples' experiences in 'the system.' However, with each step the youth involved will learn the skills they need to become their own advocates and work toward change from the 'inside' to ensure their needs are properly met.

***Jamal Abukar** is an Amplifier working at the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth and a youth leader with Hairstory.*

BASODEE: THE GROUNDING OF SELF

Basodee, was conceived originally as a project to celebrate Black History Month. Written by and for youth, it is an anthology containing poems, essays and stories that explore the experience of being a Black youth in Canada. The voices of the contributors represent different ethnicities, social backgrounds and religions.

The title for the anthology, *Basodee*, is a Trinidadian *creole* word that means 'half-conscious' or 'disoriented.' It speaks to the experience many Black youth have of feeling excluded and ungrounded. Stories capture the memories of cultures and countries left behind and the struggle to find a sense of connection and belonging in a new land. Different parts of the book touch on the impact of the absence of Black history in schools, discrimination, marginalization and the struggle for identity; common experiences for Black youth in the Office's mandate areas.

The Office was pleased to be able to support the project and its hopeful message. While the contents speak of struggle, it also provides strategies to help Black youth begin to find and orient themselves. It is an accessible work intended as a way to stimulate awareness and interest in Black history. Its purpose is to provide a voice where there is silence and act as an antidote to counter the stereotypes and negative portrayals of Black children and youth.

ITS PURPOSE IS TO PROVIDE A VOICE WHERE THERE IS SILENCE AND ACT AS AN ANTIDOTE TO COUNTER THE STEREOTYPES AND NEGATIVE PORTRAYALS OF BLACK CHILDREN AND YOUTH.

FEATHERS OF HOPE YOUTH FORUM

Youth Perspectives

Planning for the, *Feathers of Hope Youth Forum*, began in 2012 and the event will occur in 2013. The, *Feathers of Hope*, forum builds on ongoing efforts to address the issue of suicide and hopelessness that has for too long affected many children and youth in First Nations communities. The forum will offer a safe space for young people to share their stories and lived experiences with one another, community leaders, government officials and adult supporters. The, *Feathers of Hope*, forum will give young people a way to take ownership of the process of finding solutions to the problems that affect their communities. Five First Nations youth have been hired and are an integral part of the planning and development team for the forum. They will also be part of the writing team that pulls together a summary of young peoples' recommendations for action and change. Policy makers from all levels of government and First Nations leadership are being invited to participate in the, *Feathers of Hope*, forum and listen to the young delegates.

Like the, *Youth Leaving Care Hearings*, we will ensure young people are at the centre of discussions with decision-makers and leadership, as we have learned that the synergy that comes from this kind of collaboration is needed if we are to create lasting change.

Feathers of Hope, is centred on the lived experiences of young people and focused on addressing the complex issues First Nations youth face in their communities including health, education, culture, identity and suicide. Through its support, the Advocate's Office is providing young people involved in the development of the forum with valuable knowledge and the tools to create positive change for other children and youth in their communities.

Working on the project has given youth leaders insight into the realities faced by other First Nations youth and an opportunity to build rapport and work directly with young people in their home communities. These conversations have created awareness of the need to take immediate and concrete action to find solutions that will lead to positive change in First Nations young peoples' lives. The forum will play an important role in giving young people a voice and a way to share their experiences. By listening to their issues, knowledge and experiences, community leaders, service providers and government will be better able to develop more relevant and meaningful programs and supports to meet the needs of First Nations children and youth.

***Kathryn Morris** is an Amplifier at the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth in Thunder Bay and a youth leader on the Feathers of Hope forum.*

"THE, FEATHERS OF HOPE, FORUM WILL GIVE YOUNG PEOPLE A WAY TO TAKE OWNERSHIP OF THE PROCESS OF FINDING SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEMS THAT AFFECT THEIR COMMUNITIES."

"THE YOUNG PEOPLE WILL BE ABLE TO PLAY A ROLE IN TRANSFORMING THEIR COMMUNITIES AND MAKE THEM SAFER, STRONGER AND HEALTHIER PLACES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH."

The, *Feathers of Hope Youth Forum*, is a great example of how young people can work with other young people to raise the voices of children and youth and ensure they are heard by government, community leaders and others responsible for their care. By supporting this project, the Advocate's Office is providing a much needed opportunity for Aboriginal youth to speak in their own voice. First Nations youth are involved in the planning and development of every aspect of the event. The Office is providing the support and assistance Aboriginal youth need to tap into their thoughts, experiences and ideas about how to create an environment where it will be safe for them to share their experiences and concerns with one another.

The project is important because Aboriginal youth want to see change and have an opportunity to contribute to their communities. By sharing their thoughts and ideas about improving education, health, employment and recreational programs, the young people will be able to play a role in transforming their communities and make them safer, stronger and healthier places for children and youth. Adding ongoing support and regular follow up to the action plans that forum participants create will help ensure that young peoples' recommendations move forward and that they achieve their dreams for a better life.

Nicole Beardy-Meekis *is an Amplifier at the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth in Thunder Bay and a youth leader on the Feathers of Hope forum.*

Having the Advocate's Office in the North is important because it helps staff build working partnerships with young people and communities to improve the lives of First Nations youth. One example of this partnership is the, *Feathers of Hope*, forum. The forum is an Office-driven, youth-supported project that will give young people an opportunity to speak with one another, government, care providers and supportive adults about their needs and issues of concern. Two youth from each community in NAN (Nishnawbe Aski Nation), Treaty #3, Robinson-Superior and independent communities in northern Ontario will attend. The forum builds on the work started with, *Horizons of Hope*, an event held 17 years ago to address the hopelessness and youth suicide in NAN communities. The, *Feathers of Hope,* forum is intended to address the lack of timely and comprehensive action that followed the release of the, *Horizons of Hope,* report. Young people will come together to share experiences, discuss solutions and create action plans to create lasting and positive change. *Feathers of Hope*, is about teaching young people about their rights, encouraging them to unlock their potential, become leaders and create a movement to motivate other youth to join in the process of building stronger healthy communities.

Samantha Crowe *is an Amplifier at the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth in Thunder Bay and a youth leader on the Feathers of Hope forum.*

Youth Perspectives

Young people working on the, *Feathers of Hope*, forum are getting an opportunity to raise their awareness or deepen their understanding of the harsh realities involved in living on-reserve and the pervasive sense of hopelessness that has lingered in many communities for generations. However, they are also seeing that many First Nations youth want change and that there is a shared feeling of hope that things can improve. The forum is providing young people with a way to connect and share ideas that can be applied to produce real change in their communities.

The Advocate's Office, along with other project partners, are providing youth organizers interested in being catalysts of change in their communities with skills and tools to realize their vision. Youth leaders are able to contribute ideas and use their new found analytical, planning and communication skills to create the event, determine the evaluation process, organize the social media activities, produce external communications for the event and write the report.

"THE FORUM IS PROVIDING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH A WAY TO CONNECT AND SHARE IDEAS THAT CAN BE APPLIED TO PRODUCE REAL CHANGE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES."

The, *Feathers of Hope*, forum provides a framework that can be applied to the planning of future youth events to promote rights awareness among young people in Ontario. Once participants begin implementing their action plans to create change, it will be important for the Advocate's Office to follow-up with them on a regular basis. These young people need to know that they can rely on having strong working relationships with supportive adult and community partners to help them achieve their goals.

***Uko Abara** is an Amplifier at the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth in Thunder Bay and a youth leader on the Feathers of Hope forum.*

"BY WORKING TOGETHER WITH COMMITMENT, DEDICATION AND A SHARED VISION THE EVENT WILL SUCCEED AND SERVE NORTHERN YOUTH WELL."

Feathers of Hope, is the first project being conducted out of our new Northern Office. The forum is a continuation of the Office's engagement work with First Nations youth that started in 2010. It is the continuation of an important conversation among young people and between youth and First Nations leadership and government officials. *Feathers of Hope*, provides young people with a voice and an opportunity to describe their needs, develop action plans to resolve their concerns and bring healing to their families and communities.

Planning such a large event has meant encountering challenges. However, everyone understands that by working together with commitment, dedication and a shared vision the event will succeed and serve northern youth well. Young people living in isolated or far northern reserves often feel their concerns do not matter to adults in their communities. Consequently, many stop trusting that things will ever change. That is why with the, *Feathers of Hope*, forum is so important. It will provide First Nations youth with a chance to speak about what they feel, see and endure. Most importantly, it will give them a chance to take ownership of the search for solutions.

***Julaine Trudeau** is an Amplifier at the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth in Thunder Bay and a youth leader on the Feathers of Hope forum.*

THE PHILANTHROPIST

It is an undeniable truth that Canada's future rests in the hands of our children and youth. The care we demonstrate, the investments we make in their development and the connections we create for them to become civically engaged will have a great long-term impact on society and the common good. Our collective future well being depends, as it always has, on the creation of strong bonds between the generations. However, in the current climate of fiscal constraint there is a real risk that these bonds may weaken as governments make cuts to the services that contribute to the health, education, development and well being of children and youth.

In the past, the philanthropic sector might have been able to step in and fill gaps left by government policy and funding. However, this sector too is struggling to find resources. Not only that, but it is struggling to stay relevant to youth as conventional ways of thinking about philanthropy and civic engagement do not work for many young people. It is challenging for them to think about "giving" or "volunteering" when they are struggling to find a way to participate in the economy, pay for their education or establish independent lives.

OUR COLLECTIVE FUTURE WELL BEING DEPENDS, AS IT ALWAYS HAS, ON THE CREATION OF STRONG BONDS BETWEEN THE GENERATIONS.

In view of this situation, the Advocate's Office decided to partner which the publishers of the on-line journal, *The Philanthropist*, to provide a forum where young people and the philanthropy sector could engage in dialogue and explore new ways to build working alliances and share power and decision-making in the spirit of active citizenship. In the autumn of 2012, a call for papers was sent out. Selected papers by adult and youth writers that contain helpful suggestions to realize this vision will be published in a special issue of, *The Philanthropist*, in 2013.

STATEMENT OF EXPENDITURE

For the Year Ended March 31, 2012

		2012 For the period April 1, 2011 to March 31, 2012		2011 For the period April 1, 2010 to March 31, 2011
SALARIES & WAGES	$	3,031,304	$	2,537,480
EMPLOYEE BENEFITS (NOTE 4)		550,302		608,255
TRANSPORTATION & COMMUNICATION		693,816		532,569
SERVICES		2,280,667		1,457,372
SUPPLIES & EQUIPMENT		296,001		234,833
TOTAL	**$**	**6,852,090**	**$**	**5,370,509**

NOTES TO FINANCIAL STATEMENT

For the Year Ended March 31, 2012

1. BACKGROUND

The Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth (Office) serves children and youth in state care and the margins of state care through individual, systemic and policy advocacy. The Office is mandated to strive to be an exemplar in youth participation at all levels of its work. The Office is also mandated to take a special interest in children and youth with special needs, First Nations children and youth, children and youth in Ontario's schools for the deaf and blind and Ontario's Demonstration schools.

The *Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth Act, 2007* was enacted to provide an independent voice for children and youth.

2. SIGNIFICANT ACCOUNTING POLICIES

The Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth follows the basis of accounting adopted for the Office of the Assembly as required by the *Legislative Assembly Act* and accordingly uses a modified cash basis of accounting, which allows an additional 30 days to pay for expenditures incurred during the year just ended. This differs from Canadian generally accepted accounting principles in that, for example, liabilities incurred but unpaid within 30 days of the year just ended are not recorded until paid, and expenditures for assets such as computers and office furnishing are expensed in the year of acquisition rather than recorded as fixed assets and amortized over their useful lives.

Expenditures are reported net of recoverable sales tax which is recovered by the Office of the Assembly on the Office's behalf.

3. EXPENDITURES

Expenditures are paid out of monies appropriated by the Legislature of the Province of Ontario. Financial and Human Resources services are provided by the Office of the Assembly without charge.

4. EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

The Office's permanent employees (and non-permanent employees who elect to participate) participate in the Public Service Pension Fund (PSPF) which is a defined benefit pension for employees of the Province and many provincial agencies. The Province of Ontario, which is the sole sponsor of the PSPF, determines the Office's annual payments to the fund. As the sponsor is responsible for ensuring that the pension funds are financially viable, any surpluses or unfunded liabilities arising from statutory actuarial funding valuations are not assets or obligations of the Office. The Office's required annual payments of $217,042 (2011 — $185,024) are included in employee benefits.

The cost of unused vacation and earned legislated severance entitlements are recorded in the statement of Expenditure when paid.

The cost of post-retirement non-pension benefits are paid by the Province and is not included in the Statement of Expenditure.

5. COMMITMENTS

On February 26, 2009, the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth leased a new office space for a term of 5 years with 2 extension options, commencing on December 1, 2009 and ending November 30, 2014. The lease requires future minimum rental payments for each fiscal year as follows:

YEAR ENDED MARCH 31, 2013	$	192,209
2014		192,209
2015		128,139
TOTAL	**$**	**512,557**

A FINAL WORD TO THE CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN OUR MANDATE

There is still so much to be done. Together we have built an Office that is primed to move forward boldly. As we do we must not lose sight of our principled partnership with you. We will listen to you when and where we meet you or as you come forward with your concerns. If you are a newcomer to Ontario and struggling in or at the margins of our children's service system, we want you to know that we heard you this year. If you are a LGBTTIQQ2SA youth we heard you loud and clear this year too. We look forward to partnering with you to elevate your voices.

We will find ways to listen to and elevate the voices of children and youth who live with special needs or disabilities and help you communicate that you are entitled to all the rights every young person enjoys. We also will work with your caregivers and allies.

We will listen to young children and help elevate their voices because children of any age have something to say and something to contribute. We know full well that small children in our mandate must learn how to use their voice before they reach adolescence so they are prepared to ask of the service system what they need at every stage of their development. We will search the globe to find ways to help children communicate their concerns and be heard.

We will continue looking for new ways to partner with you and help express your voices. This year the, *Amplifier Magazine* (produced by youth sharing stories of hope and encouragement with other youth), the publication of, *Basodee* (an anthology of stories about finding identity written by Black youth), *Hairstory* (a unique project exploring the experiences and needs of Black youth in care) and our support of the production of, *Queens Park* (a web series produced by, *The Next Edition*) are all examples of what is to come.

We plan to explore the potential of creating 'Advocate's Office 2.0,' as one person coined it, a virtual Office that, in times of shrinking budgets, will allow us to reach children and youth across the Province through the use of a web site and social media. You have told us that we need to meet you where you are at and you have told us you will help us do it.

WE WILL LISTEN TO YOU WHEN AND WHERE WE MEET YOU OR AS YOU COME FORWARD WITH YOUR CONCERNS.

We will accomplish this because of our partnership with you. With each call, each meeting, each discussion and each word of support, you inspire us with your courage and hope. In many ways, together, we have begun a movement, perhaps still a kernel, but in the words of those of you who worked so hard to launch, *My REAL Life Book*, "We are not stopping here."

With respect,

IRWIN ELMAN
on behalf of all the youth and staff at the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth.

FOR A
BRIGHTER
FUTURE

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The Advocate's Office wishes to acknowledge all the young people, staff and photographers who contributed the artwork, poetry and photos used in the production of the 2011–2012 Annual Report. While not a complete list, we want to thank the following contributors: John Black, Andy Lee, Andrew Mindzenthy, Noterlee Johnson, Kiwayne Jones, Tess Girard, Catherine Howe and Joel Schecter.