

Group foster homes panned

### **Don't cut off care at 18, study says**

Youth in the province's care shouldn't just be kicked out the door at 18 or 21. They should be able to leave the nest when they're individually ready, Ontario's child advocate says.

In a study released today, Judy Finlay calls on the government and children's aid societies to make sure Crown wards get the resources they need to get an education, find safe, affordable housing and develop caring relationships.

"Right now, there's no framework for agencies to follow," Finlay says.

"Some kids mature more quickly than others," Finlay says. "Some may not be ready at 18 or 21 to transition out of care."

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Children's advocate prefers 'family-like' system and more training on handling behavioural issues

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Staff Reporter

Institutional-style group homes across the province should be replaced with more family-oriented foster care, says a new report by the province's child advocate.

Judy Finlay, who leads the Office of Child and Family Service Advocacy, is recommending that the "family-like" system be expanded to replace the group homes, which have been operating for years with numerous complaints and no standards forcing them to give good care.

"We have to re-examine group care – it does not work," Finlay said in an interview.

The group home system in Ontario has had long-standing and well-documented problems. There have been reports of children in group homes being tied up or restrained for emotional outbursts, police being called to handle minor disputes, and an overall structure more institutional than family-oriented.

In order to put her plan to fix the system into effect, Finlay says there needs to be a "major recruiting campaign" for more foster parents. Those who are already caring for children are sometimes the best advertisement, she added.

"They know what the joys are."

The report also calls for foster parents to receive increased training on how to deal with children with behavioural issues. The prospective foster parents are sent for intensive training sessions and they are

taught how to deal with complex youth by psychologists, play therapists and social workers, among others. After those sessions, they would be able to manage children having angry outbursts and other behaviour problems.

Another major recommendation is that the group homes' use of restraints and other disciplinary matters be regulated, as well as standards set for activities.

Costs of the changes would have to be determined by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services. The Ontario government currently pays more than \$200 million for group home care. Finlay says the switch she's proposing would cost less, but did not give specifics.

Finlay and her staff interviewed 278 young people who have been removed from their homes by children's aid societies in Toronto, Peel and Thunder Bay.

By far, they gave negative ratings to the privately run group homes that are under contract by children's aid societies, both for profit and not-for profit.

The conditions were described in detail by the children: "... Kids screaming, always getting mad, way too much rules, I always had to stay in my own room," said one youth. Another said: "I don't know why they stick you in a home with so many girls, with so many problems. It will only mess you up more."

Currently there are 9,000 young people living in Ontario's foster care system. They have been taken from the homes of their biological families for abuse, neglect or other maltreatment, such as witnessing domestic abuse.

Of those, 2,200 are living in the private group homes. A group home consists of five or more children, often including some children with special needs. In the private group homes, Finlay said the staff are lower-paid and have less training. There is a higher use of restraints – holding kids down when they become upset or angry. Staff make "excessive" calls to police to solve disputes, which too often send the child into the court system, ultimately creating a downward spiral, the report says.

The solution for special needs kids, said Finlay, is the "therapeutic foster home." It is a true foster home, meaning it has a mother and father and no more than four foster children.

The parents are given specialized training and extra pay, along with ongoing help from youth workers and psychologists.

Finlay said most of the group home problems were with the privately operated homes. And not every group home experience is bad: some homes, such as those run by children's aid societies, operate like a family. And that, Finlay says, matters the most.

Youth quoted in the report speak glowingly of family-based foster homes. "I feel like I am loved," said one. "They make sure that we have clothes, that we have happiness," said another.

The report, entitled, "We Are Your Sons and Daughters," set out to examine the quality of care in the same three children's aid societies – Toronto, Peel and Thunder Bay – that Ontario's auditor general scrutinized last December.

After auditor Jim McCarter released his "value-for-money" report, criticizing those agencies for being slow to follow up on abuse investigations and for overspending, Finlay and her staff interviewed youth living in their care.

Jeanette Lewis, spokesperson for the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, said her organization has been pushing for similar change.

"Some of these group homes have been providing excellent care and some have not. It is pretty hard to

monitor," Lewis said yesterday.

Finlay will hold a news conference today to outline the details and costs of her recommendations.

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