

Evaluation Summary



Avoiding the Precipice

An Evaluation of Aunt Leah's *Link* Program
in Supporting Youth from Foster Care

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▶ WHAT IS THE LINK?

For 25 years, Aunt Leah's has been providing programs for youth in transition from foster care.

- The Link is a program for youth who have aged out of care after turning 19.
- The Link offers life skills workshops, drop-in, outreach, and one-to-one support tailored to addressing issues identified by each youth.
- Between April 2012 and March 2013, the Link served 76 young adults and their 25 children.

**"Leaving care is a messed up time of life for any youth, even if you have your life together. So having the *Link* really helped."
(*Link* participant)**

This summary report provides an overview of an evaluation study designed to assess the effectiveness of *The Link* program operated by Aunt Leah's Place, a registered charity located in New Westminster, British Columbia, Canada. It also describes a number of promising approaches to supporting youth from foster care that may help to prevent or reduce homelessness amongst this highly vulnerable population.

▶ WHAT WE DID

- The evaluation involved a quasi-experimental design. Individual interviews were conducted with a sample of Link participants (n=21) and a sample of youth from foster care who did not access the Link (Comparison Group, n=22). The youths were interviewed twice, about 9 months apart.
- Interviews were also conducted with Link and Aunt Leah's staff (n=6) and with support people identified by several of the youths (n=4).
- The study also included a brief analysis of the Link's social return on funders' investment – most specifically, with regard to homelessness outcomes.

One important strength of the *Link* is that youth cannot 'age out' of the program in the same way that they age out of care or other youth-serving programs.

▶ YOUTH IN THE LINK PROGRAM

The socio-demographic and health profile of both groups of youth in this study was in keeping with that reported in the literature – i.e., the majority: had not graduated from high school; lived in deep poverty with food insecurity; were un- or under-employed; and struggled with mental health and addictions issues. Finding stable and affordable housing was a significant challenge.

At the same time, the two groups of youth in this study differed from each other in certain ways: more Comparison Group youth lived in some type of shelter, supportive housing, or subsidized housing for youth, and a larger percentage of *Link* informants were parents.

**"I'd be homeless without them. I'd be in a homeless shelter not knowing what the heck to do with my life."
(*Link* participant)**

SOCIAL RETURN ON INVESTMENT ANALYSIS

- This study revealed that the Link is a relatively low-intensity intervention that yielded positive outcomes for youth, thus suggesting cost effectiveness.
- Future research is required to determine whether *Link* costs per participant are offset by future social savings in less dependence on welfare, less jail time, increased personal earnings, reduced health care expenses, reduced child welfare costs, and avoidable homelessness.

Transitions to Adulthood

For youth in the general population, the transition to adulthood is gradual and extended. For example, Statistics Canada reported in 2011 that more than 50% of young people age 20 to 24 lived with their parent(s) and the majority of BC young adults continue to receive parental support related to education and daily living. By contrast, youth who age out of government care have no safety net; they are abruptly cut off at the age of majority from the system that had provided care and support to them. Moreover, former foster youth living in the Lower Mainland must contend with housing costs that are among the highest in North America.

EVALUATION HIGHLIGHTS

▶▶▶ Service Model Principles

- Guiding principles underlying the Link's service model included being: relationship-based, emphasizing non-judgemental, caring relationships and a welcoming environment; youth-directed and flexible; outreach-based; and wholistic.
- There was a clear relationship between what youth liked best about the Link and these principles: youths' strong ties to the Link program and to staff enabled them to make gains in securing safe, stable housing and to obtain skills and knowledge that could help them return to school or get a job.

▶▶▶ Program Strengths

- One important strength of the Link is that youth cannot 'age out' of the program in the same way that they age out of care or other youth-serving programs (most youth serving programs have an upper age limit of 24-25 years).
- Thus, Aunt Leah's offers youth in/from care an experience that is akin to that of their parented peers.
- As well, the program has created a positive "home-like" environment where youth feel welcome.

▶▶▶ Housing Outcomes

- The majority of Link evaluation participants were living in some form of (shared) market housing, and at the Time 2 interview, an even higher percentage lived in shared market accommodation, relative to Time 1.
- Youths' housing was often precarious, and they regularly made use of the support offered through the Link to access or maintain adequate housing.
- Evaluation findings demonstrated that the Link's services and supports can help former foster youth avoid homelessness and maintain market housing after losing their government support at age 19.

PROMISING APPROACHES IN SUPPORTING YOUTH FROM CARE

This evaluation study found evidence for a number of promising practices. These promising practices also are supported by studies of other programs aimed at helping disadvantaged youth.

Promising approaches include:

- Offer continuity of supports by the same organization pre- and post-age of majority
- Hire passionate and committed staff
- Pay attention to youths' housing needs
- Be youth-directed
- Think and act wholistically
- Create flexible and accessible programming
- Offer formal and informal means for youth to socialize with one another
- Increase partnerships with other service providers in the community



“The Link helps you toward independence. When you leave care you don’t have a clue; they are there to guide you through the change.”

The evaluation of *The Link* program was a project undertaken in partnership with Aunt Leah’s Place and was funded by the Government of Canada’s Homelessness Partnering Strategy.

The full evaluation report can be downloaded from the University of Victoria website. For more information, please contact:

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