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Lessons Learned From MCFD Youth Housing Models: Using Appreciative Inquiry to Understand the Successes and Needs of Youth Transitioning out of Ministry Care

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Abstract

In Canada, young adults are one of the fastest growing homeless populations, with increased vulnerability to youth who have previously been or are currently in Ministry care. This increased risk is attributed to several identified barriers that are unique to youth from care, such as a lack of social support system, lack of affordable housing, discrimination by landlords, lack of basic life skills and more. To support youth in finding housing as they transition out of Ministry care, MCFD has developed partnerships with agencies such as BC Housing, Community Living British Columbia (CLBC), and other non-government organizations in order to provide safe housing for youth leaving Ministry care. This research project was completed by the Lead Investigator and a Student Research Team in a Graduate level course at the School of Social Work at The University of British Columbia, in collaboration with The Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD or the ministry). The research project utilized an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach to answer two main research questions: (1) what are the successful aspects of existing housing models in BC that transition young people from Ministry care into adult housing programs? and, (2) what recommendations are made to improve current housing models within MCFD jurisdictions? A qualitative research methodology was utilized to gather data. The research interview questions were created using Appreciative Inquiry's SOAR Analysis Matrix. Six interviews with MCFD frontline staff, supervisors and upper management were conducted, coded, and analyzed via thematic analysis. The research project examined MCFD strengths, opportunities, aspirations and results in providing successful housing models in British Columbia to facilitate the transition of youth out of Ministry care into independent living. Research participants were recruited from MCFD staff who currently work in supporting youth who are transitioning out of Ministry care. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire that provided information on aspects such as their role, number of years participants have been working with youth transitioning of care and their education level. Qualitative data was then collected through semi structured interviews. These interviews were conducted via Zoom. The interview questions were broken down to reflect the four quadrants of the SOAR analysis. The data was transcribed verbatim, underwent initial and axial coding and was analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, the four overarching themes being the four sections of the SOAR framework, with sub-themes identified under each theme that reflect patterns that emerged in the data. There were two identified sub-themes under the Strengths theme: (1)MCFD's partnerships with housing agencies and (2) MCFD social workers' individual passion and initiative. There were three identified sub-themes under the Opportunities theme: (1) Extend MCFD's mandate to youth beyond the age of 19, (2) Increase financial support to youth and housing projects, and (3) address barriers to sustainable housing. There were two identified- sub-themes under the Aspirations theme; (1) MCFD owned housing programs, and (2) incorporating life skills that reflect youth's needs. There were two identified sub-themes under the Results theme: (1) Long term housing and connection to community, and (2) incorporating youth feedback into housing programs. This research project had some limitations in relation to the small sample size, instrumentation and sample/selection bias. There were also four recommendations that were identified for future research, policy and practice. This research project aimed to answer the proposed research questions via the Appreciative Inquiry model by providing insight into the strengths of the current housing programs, defining areas of opportunity to leverage success, identifying aspirations for the future and examining results would indicate success in the future of youth housing for youth transitioning out of care.

Keywords: youth housing, children-in-care, youth transition, appreciative inquiry



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Introduction

Young adults are one of the fastest growing homeless populations in Canada (Barbic et al., 2017). Within this already marginalized group, people who have been, or currently are, in Ministry care make up a large percentage of those experiencing homelessness (British Columbia Non Profit Housing Association, 2020). This increased risk is attributed to several identified barriers that are unique to youth from care, such as a lack of social support system, lack of affordable housing, discrimination by landlords, lack of basic life skills and more. Children who are in government care experience greater negative physical, mental, social, developmental, and educational problems than the general population which can continue to impact their life into their youth and adulthood (Colin-Vézina et al., 2011). Twenty nine percent of young people who experienced homelessness report that they first experienced homelessness after transitioning out of care (Representative for Children and Youth, 2020). This highlights the specific form of marginalization that youth transitioning out of care into independent living face, and the impact this has on their ability to obtain safe, stable housing.

The aim of this research project is to examine the successful aspects of housing models in BC available to youth transitioning from Ministry care into adult housing programs and provide recommendations for future direction. The project had two primary research questions:

1. What are the successful aspects of existing housing models in BC that transition young people from Ministry care into adult housing programs?
2. What recommendations are made to improve current housing models within MCFD jurisdictions?

Literature Review

Homelessness in Canada: Background and Current Situation

Homelessness impacts Canadians of all age groups, including young adults (Barbic et al., 2017). Homelessness in Canada is said to have reached epidemic levels (Thulien, 2017) with an estimated

240,000 Canadians being affected per year (Kaltsidis, 2020). Indigenous People are over represented among those experiencing homelessness. In British Columbia, Indigenous People constitute 33% and are 13.2 times more susceptible to homelessness than non-Indigenous populations (BCNPHA, 2020). In Edmonton, Indigenous people are only 5% of the total population but constitute 60% of people experiencing homelessness (Salazar, 2020). Young adults are one of the fastest growing homeless populations in Canada (Barbic et al., 2018).

Youth in Care and Homelessness

“Youth in care” is any youth who has been placed under the legal guardianship of the government in different institutions such as foster home, group home, or in an independent living agreement (BCNPHA, 2020). They formally transition out of care when they turn 19 years old (McCreary Centre Society, 2020) which is quite a young age. While young people constitute a large numbers of homeless persons (Barbic et al., 2018) youth with a history of government care are particularly more vulnerable and are exposed to potential risks of homelessness due to anxieties of adulthood and expectations of self-sufficiency, which can easily push them out into the streets (Barker, Kerr, Alfred et al., 2014; Kaltsidis, 2020; Smith et al., 2021). In the 2018 BC annual homeless count, of the 252 respondents, 125 (50%) of homeless youth under the age of 24 reported having previously been or currently are in foster care, a group home, or Youth Agreement (BCNPHA, 2020). These numbers were higher for Indigenous youth reported having been in government care (65%) compared to their non-Indigenous peers (38%) (BCNPHA, 2020).

Furthermore, in 2020, 32% of people in Metro Vancouver experiencing homelessness were or had been, in Ministry care, through foster care, youth homes or independent living agreements (BCNPHA, 2020). The percentage is continuing to rise among Indigenous respondents (53%) (BCNPHA, 2020). Additionally, Annual Homeless Count of Metro Vancouver in March 2020 reported 3,634 people experiencing homelessness in March and of this total, 43% of the respondents who were experiencing homelessness for the first time were under the age of

25 (BCNPHA, 2020). Therefore, the evidence of linkage between youth in government care and homelessness is well founded (Barker, Kerr, Dong et al., 2017; Fowler et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2021).

Barriers to Successful Youth Housing

Young people transitioning from the foster care system face challenges in obtaining housing and the requisite support and guidance needed for independent living (McCreary Centre Society, 2011). These barriers are presented in the social, financial and health fronts.

Lack of Social Support System. Youth who grow up in the care of their parents usually continue to receive some form of financial, emotional and/or material support from their parents after they turn 19 (Fostering Change, 2016). However, youth who grow up in care lose the support of the government once they transition out and do not have a familial support system to successfully get through the transition. Seventy-six percent of youth in transitional housing reported that they would benefit from having adult support to help them navigate housing searches and teach them what their rights as tenants are (TRRUST Collective Impact, 2020). Upon transitioning out of care, they are faced with the harsh realities and legalities of adult tailored housing services which are insensitive to the specific needs of young people (McCreary Centre Society, 2011). The uniformity of adult housing services places youth transitioning out of care at further risk, especially when coupled with lack of family and professional support that other youth outside of foster care usually have (Fostering Change, 2016).

Affordability of Housing. According to a June 2021 report from the popular rental platform PadMapper.ca, Canada's median price for a 1-bedroom rental was reported as \$1702, with Vancouver being the most expensive at \$1950 (Chen, 2021). Youth transitioning out of care or who are on Youth Agreements (YAG) or an Agreement with a Young Adult (AYA) have reported facing significant barriers to their path of independence and obtaining long-term, affordable housing (Adoptive Families Association of BC, 2014; Smith et al., 2021). A major barrier to obtaining housing that youth transitioning

out of care face is the shortage of affordable housing. This is impacted by the high cost of living in many areas and the youth's lack of financial stability (TRRUST Collective Impact, 2020).

Discrimination by Landlords. Youth face diverse challenges due to the strict adult behavioural requirements imposed by many housing programs (Cheng et al., 2013). Young people dealing with addiction, mental health and being unhoused often struggle with managing their behaviour, leading to behavioural outbursts, damaging of property and conflict (McCreary Centre Society, 2011). There are some housing programs/locations that are unsafe for LGBTQ2S+ youth (TRRUST Collective Impact, 2020). Young people may also face discrimination from landlords who do not want to rent to young people or people on social assistance (TRRUST Collective Impact, 2020). This discrimination is further perpetuated by young people's lack of knowledge of their rights as tenants and adult supports to assist them in navigating their legal rights (TRRUST Collective Impact, 2020). Additionally, having no savings, credit history and references of previous tenancy agreements makes the majority unable to easily access the private rental market (Kaltsidis, 2020).

Lack of Basic Informal Life Skills. While in foster homes, youth are not adequately exposed to informal life skills such as cooking, cleaning, budgeting, paying bills, selfcare and well-being, etc., which are critical life skills needed in adulthood (Sonja, 2018). Some of these youths are recovering from addictions, mental health, trauma disabilities and other problems, thus upon leaving foster homes, they risk falling out of professional support systems.

Successful Housing Programs for Youth Transitioning from Care: What Has Worked?

Due to these challenges and dynamics, successful youth housing models have been debated and developed by different organizations and provincial and federal governments in Canada. Transitional housing is one a key model which has been used to provide safe landing for youth from foster homes by provincial governments and NGOs in Canada and even the US (Kaltsidis, 2020; Sonja, 2018). This model has been used over decades (Sonja, 2018) to support the

increasing numbers of families, adults and young persons who were faced with residential instability and required immediate temporary housing to stabilize their situation (Novac et al., 2009; Sonja, 2018). Since then, the transitional housing model has emerged as a priority short-term housing model that offers supportive interphase between crisis shelters and permanent housing for homeless persons (Kaltsidis, 2020). Thus, youth transitioning out of care into independent living are key beneficiaries of the transitional housing programs offered by provincial governments and non-governmental institutions providing a combination of support services towards independent living in the outside society.

What Constitutes Successful Housing Models for Youth from Foster Care?

The ultimate goal of housing for youth aging out of care is a smooth transition into adulthood with a continuum of care programs to prevent them from falling into homelessness. A certain level of prior planning is required in releasing a young person the day they reach 19 years rather than abruptly. Research conducted with street-involved youth in Vancouver indicates that this puts youth in a uniquely vulnerable high-risk position and thus it is critical to ensure continuity of care for youth leaving the child welfare system at the age of 19 (Barker, Kerr, Alfred et al., 2014). Comprehensive professional housing services must be combined with holistic support which goes beyond housing and extends into skills training, mental health support, linkage to employers and facilitating employment (Salazar, 2020). Housing programs should be built around supporting youth in their choices, facilitating connection to community, education, and employment in their transition to independence (Momoh et al., 2018). Other key life skills they need, as indicated through interviews with youth by the McCreary Centre Society, are hygiene management, communication skills to communicate with landlords and community agencies, time management and budgeting (McCreary Centre Society, 2011).

Youth Friendly Housing

Young people have social habits that might not be deemed favourable by adults. However, the services

provided to them must reflect their reality and must be tailored to the needs of the youth, ensuring a sense of community and creating trusting relationships among staff and youths. Tenants must feel safe and the house should provide stability of the building/calm atmosphere with limited incidents (BC Housing, 2021). It should also be easy in the provision of other services such as life skills training and privacy for counselling services, addictions support and services aimed at improving their social, medical and psychological health and addictions support service (Lenz-Rashid, 2018). Youth who may be using substances require housing with minimal risk of eviction based on substance use and flexibility in case of relapse. Respondents to research collected by the City of Vancouver indicated that youth would also benefit from housing programs that have invigorated addiction treatment to allow youth to maintain their housing while accessing treatment (City of Vancouver, 2020). Input from youth in care indicates that access to housing Advocates who understand the circumstances of youth in care should also be considered. These advocates can help the youth navigate legal issues and advocate for youth's rights (Child Welfare League of Canada, 2021).

Diversity and Multicultural Support

It is important to accommodate the unique cultural considerations Indigenous youth require (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2021; Momoh et al., 2018). Indigenous youth require a holistic framework, focusing on healing through a trauma-informed lens and offering culturally relevant services and opportunities for cultural reconnection (Momoh et al., 2018). Support towards religious and cultural differences need to be considered in choosing houses.

Overall, the literature reviewed for the purpose of this research project highlights a wide range of markers of successful youth housing programs and various barriers that youth aging out of care face in obtaining safe and stable housing as they transition to independence. The aim of the current research project is to build on the available literature and data, analyze the success and barriers as they relate to youth leaving the care of MCFD in British Columbia and identify any new areas of research that can be

explored further to contribute towards improving housing for youth aging out of Ministry care.

The aim of this research project is to examine successful aspects of housing models in BC available to youth transitioning from Ministry care into adult housing programs and provide recommendations for future direction. The project had two primary research questions:

1. What are the successful aspects of existing housing models in BC that transition young people from Ministry care into adult housing programs?
2. What recommendations are made to improve current housing models within MCFD jurisdictions?

Research Methods

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research study drew upon the approach of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). Founded by David L. Cooperrider with the support of his professor and Ph.D advisor, Suresh Srivastva, AI is a model that seeks to engage stakeholders in self-determined change (Cooperrider, 1986). According to Bushe (2013), AI revolutionized the field of organization development and was a precursor to the rise of positive organization studies and the strengths-based movement in change management. An organization might apply an AI approach to best practices, strategic planning, organizational culture, and to increase the momentum of initiatives (Banton, 2021). In the case of this study, the topic for consideration within this theoretical framework was the perceptions for successful housing models from MCFD frontline staff, middle management, and their leadership team.

Conceptual Framework

As a guiding conceptual framework, the Student Research Team implemented a SOAR analysis into the qualitative interviewing of MCFD frontline staff, middle management, and leadership team (see Figure 1). The interview questions (see Appendix A) were framed using the four quadrants of the SOAR Analysis Matrix (see Figure 1). The four quadrants included: 1) *Strengths* - Focusing on what the organization does well, along with key strengths, resources, capabilities, and accomplishments, 2) *Opportunities* - Framed as

unique circumstances/ opportunities that the team can leverage for success. 3) *Aspirations* - An expression of what to achieve in the future (ie. a vision of a future state to build on current strengths, provide inspiration, and challenge current circumstances) and 4) *Results* - Tangible outcomes and measures that demonstrate the achieved desired goals and aspirations (GroupMap, 2021).

Figure 1. SOAR Analysis Matrix



(Image retrieved from GroupMap, 2021)

Methodology

Sampling and Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

The study population of the research study consisted of MCFD frontline staff, supervisors, and leadership team members who have a direct or indirect impact on youth who are currently or soon-to-be transitioning out of care. The targeted MCFD staff representatives were drawn from both rural and urban geographic settings. The research focused on the procedures, successes, and barriers that teams faced in supporting youth in finding independent living arrangements via the various housing programs once they age out of Ministry care. There was minimal risk to interviewees who chose to participate in the research project. The criteria for inclusion was: MCFD frontline workers, supervisors and leadership team members currently working with youth transitioning out of Ministry care into transitional/ permanent housing arrangements.

The sample consisted of 6 participants (n = 6). The goal was to recruit a balanced representation of participants from both rural and urban settings to ensure the participants represent a mix of frontline staff and supervisory staff.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were contacted via an invitation letter. The Student Research Team provided the MCFD sponsor with the invitation letter. The MCFD sponsor distributed the invitation letter to the supervisors and front-line workers that met the criteria of inclusion. The invitation letter was sent to prospective research participants through an internal MCFD directory. Interested research participants were invited to contact the Student Research Team via the email address listed in the invitation letter.

After receiving an email from potential research participants confirming their interest in participating in the research project, the Student Research Team responded to the participant via email confirming receipt of their interest. The Student Research Team attached a consent form to the email for the participant to sign electronically and return to the Student Research Team via email. The participant was provided with a period of at least 2 weeks to review, sign and return the consent form to the Student Research Team. On the date of the scheduled Zoom interviews with each participant, the Student Research Team will request the participants to complete a brief demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B). The Student Research Team conducted a 1-hour interview with the research participants using the interview questions (see Appendix A).

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim via Zoom transcription services. Five transcripts were transcribed by the research team and one transcript was transcribed by a professional transcriber. The transcribed interviews served as the data set that was analysed to establish identified themes.

Data Collection and Method of Analysis

The study utilized non-probability sampling (Tansey, 2007). The data collected from this project is not transferrable due to the small sample size within the context of the qualitative research design. The data collection was done through a qualitative design. Quantitative data was collected via the demographic survey. However, the demographic data collected did not contribute to the data basis or analysis process. The basis for the data collected was done via qualitative design, via the one-to-one interviews. The

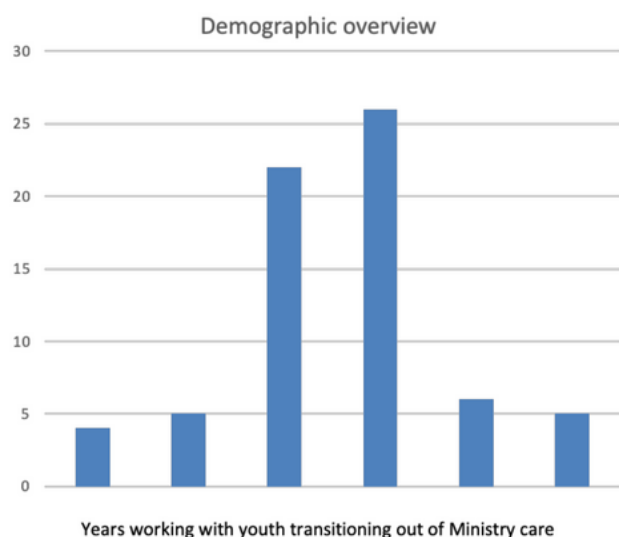
student researchers completed initial coding individually, then established intercoder agreement by comparing the individual codes and combining them into one list, from which themes were subsequently drawn. The Student Research Team analysed the data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using the thematic analysis method, the researchers examined the data to determine themes from the surveys and qualitative interviews. Based on the identified themes, the Student Research Team interpreted the data and drew conclusions that informed answers to the two research questions. The Student Research Team utilized a reflexive approach when analysing the data by identifying potential personal biases that can hinder the objectivity of their data analysis. This was done through collaboration and consultation with the Principal Investigator and the Student Research Team members.

Results

Participant Demographics

The 6 participants interviewed represented a mix of front-line staff, supervisors and management, all of whom worked on teams supporting youth who are transitioning out of Ministry care. Though the aim of the research project was to recruit participants that represent a mix of urban, suburban and rural areas, all the participants recruited reported that they work in urban areas. The length of time that participants have been working with youth transitioning out of care ranged between 4 years to 26 years (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Demographic survey: Years working with youth transitioning out of Ministry care



Thematic Analysis.

Four themes emerged from the analysis of data, which were further broken down into sub-themes: (1) Strengths, (2) Opportunities, (3) Aspirations, and (4) Results.

Strengths.

MCFD's partnerships and connections with housing agencies and communities to facilitate youth access housing. All the respondents described MCFD's partnership with other housing agencies as an advantage for successfully youth housing support. More specifically different agencies were mentioned as offering different opportunities. For instance, BC housing was cited as a good model and the most preferred model because of its flexibility in terms of youth age limit (up to 24 years), its two-tiered housing at different levels and more so since at its new modular building which has allocated spaces for youth from care. Additionally, BC housing's new joint initiative with Canadian Mental Health Association is another partnership where MCFD can tap into especially for youth with addictions. The advantage of BC housing and MCFD partnership was best summarized by one respondent who said, "I do think there should be more discussions happening with BC Housing I think... every community that's fortunate enough to get BC Housing is kind of creating their own model" (P01).

The MCFD partnership with Community Living BC (CLBC) was cited as another advantageous one because it gives exclusive quotas for youth from Ministry care, guarantees them longer stay and provides them support through its housing staff. MCFD social workers work with these youth for over a year in advance before transition in order to meet CLBC eligibility criteria because CLBC housing offers youth more stability and opportunity to create their own personalized spaces.

Other MCFD housing partnerships such as Three Native Housing, Directions, Kettle, 10K and Broadway Youth Resource Centre (BYRC) were also highlighted as a key Ministry strength by the respondents because they offer housing for more high-risk youth. These agencies have diverse resources to youth who turn 19 as indicated by one respondent "the nice thing about those resources is like when youth turn 19, they

(youth) are in their bed, they are in their apartment and like nothing really changes. So, I think... those models are quite well... I call them like, 90% independent,... you don't have like a curfew like you know you are an adult" (P03).

MCFD social workers' passion and individual initiative in facilitating youth to navigate and sustain their housing opportunities. The second key strength MCFD has is its social workers. During the study, MCFD social workers were found to be passionate, self-driven and they take individual initiative to support youth navigate and sustain the housing. They build strong personal relationships with housing agencies as articulated by one respondent "I think that the relationships that the individual social workers make with outside agencies that provide housing is key. But that's not necessarily consistent across the board" (P04).

Another advantage is when social workers use their personal connections to communities and youth hubs to facilitate, intervene and support youth in need including when they are in trouble with landlords. One respondent said "So, we've had to just use a lot of our like connections with other like youth hubs in order to get youth with like in places or get them like a subsidy" (P03). Finally, MCFD social workers' strength is apparent as they advocate for youth voices, issues and needs. One respondent said "MCFD and their social workers, that's a huge role that they play as they transition into adulthood is getting them connected to stable long-term housing post and CFP support" (P05).

Opportunities.

Extending MCFD mandate and legal obligation to youth beyond the age of 19. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, MCFD developed temporary support agreements to continue supporting youth past the age of 19. One participant stated that this decision was made due to "recognizing that it's going to be more difficult to secure income" during the pandemic (P01). Several participants indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic identified a need to support youth past the age of 19, that was already there prior to the pandemic. One participant stated that "really I think what's happened is it identified an already serious need to keep supporting youth who are not ready for

a program, are not ready to attend post-secondary, not ready to work full time” (P03). The participants identified the opportunity to continue supporting youth past the age of 19, and expressed that they hope the agreement becomes a standard practice even post pandemic.

More financial support for youth and affordable housing projects. Participants reported that though the monthly financial amount provided to youth in independent living does depend on the living standards of the geographical location the youth are in, the monthly amount does not adequately reflect the rising cost of living across the province. Participants identified an opportunity for MCFD to increase the monthly financial amount provided to youth in independent living to match the cost of living. One participant stated that given the “housing crisis right now, compensation financially for rent needs to be way higher than it is. Kids can’t find decent housing for the amount of money they get” (P04).

Participants also highlighted the need for MCFD to provide more financial support to the housing programs that youth access after they transition out of care. One participant stated that it would be beneficial to have “some kind of supported housing...that’s lower, but lower cost” (P04). Another participant talked about advocating with other organizations to secure space for youth who are leaving Ministry care in their programs, which the organizations agreed to, but the participant then had to go back to MCFD and to say “look we have them at the table...we need to get some dollars” (P05). Another participant stated that “MCFD does not do enough for housing for young people, 19 and above, because we just really don’t have housing” (P03). The data indicates that there is an opportunity for greater financial investment into below market housing programs so that more youth can access them.

Address barriers to accessible and sustainable housing faced by youth transitioning out of care. The participants discussed several barriers that youth leaving Ministry care face in finding housing. There was an identified opportunity for MCFD to examine these barriers and address them to make housing more accessible for youth. The barriers identified by participants include eligibility criteria for housing

programs, which exclude any youth who does not meet certain criteria from accessing affordable housing programs. Another barrier is the youths’ own behaviour struggles and potential conflict with landlords. One participant indicated that “it doesn’t matter how much money you can give a youth for rent. If they’re unstable, like in their life and their mental health and their behaviours like they’re going to get kicked out” (P02). These barriers are often intersecting with each other, creating difficulty for youth to access housing. This can result in the youth compromising their safety by living in places that may not be safe and secure. One participant indicated that if the youth can’t find affordable housing, “they’re just going to find crappy places and crappy places means unsuitability, instability” (P04).

Another factor that compromises the youths’ safety and creates a barrier to stable housing is substance use. As described by one participant, some youth “that are actively using, if they’re drug addicted, alcohol addictions that are so severe that we have nowhere to house them and it becomes really challenging because when they turn 19, there is nowhere for them to go” (P05).

Aspirations.

MCFD to have their own housing programs and affordable housing buildings/units that are MCFD-run and fully funded to meet youth’s needs. While many MCFD housing partnerships were reported as strengths, another theme emerged when participants were asked about their aspirations for youth housing models – one where MCFD would adopt their own affordable housing programs that were 100% MCFD-run. One participant suggested, “Buy like buying buildings up like can be devoted to MCFD youth and then have like support attached to it so people are still like checking on youth and can still like you know transition workers or whatever, like still work with them” (P02). When further asked about their aspirations or future vision in the interviews, one participant had trouble articulating their response to such a complex issue and noted the importance of consultation with the youth. This participant expressed, “You know what would be my perfect dream? Or the easiest? I don’t know. Is it an entire block of suites that we help pay for? And then is it free

for all? Is it tiered? How do we support the safest approach and how do we ensure we're actually consulting with the young people who are going to be living there?" (P06).

Integrated life skills & supportive housing programs. A common theme that was identified from all the participant interviews was the need for life skills programs to be integrated into MCFD supports before and after youth transition into supportive housing programs or independent living. While current programs exist within current MCFD partnerships (e.g., CLBC, Directions, the 10K Program), participants identified a more pro-active approach for youth living in supportive housing prior to leaving care. One participant recounts a specific model where "[youth] each have their own private space, bedroom, and then they have a communal kitchen, and then shared bathrooms, and they all take responsibility around cooking and cleaning, and such like that. And that way – and there's a house parent there, so it just helps these young people. They are under the age of 19 but it helps prepare them for independence, and then, you know, helping them in looking for housing when they turn 19 and transition out of care. I think we need more of those models" (P01).

As found in the literature, youth in care often lack basic informal life skills such as cooking, cleaning, budgeting, paying bills, and self-care while some are even recovering from addictions, mental health, trauma, disabilities, and other challenges. All these factors put youth aging out of care at further risk of falling out of professional support systems. In an effort of prevention, a participant pointed out the need for on-going support, "Whether there's even an ongoing life skill program that's run every once a week or every month so that they know it's drop-in, you just show up and you might be having a really crappy month, you've lost your job, or, you know, your living arrangement with your boyfriend broke down. But having those built-in connections that are ongoing for these young adults" (P01).

Results.

Long-term stable housing and strong connections to the community. The results under the SOAR Analysis Matrix involve identifying tangible outcomes

and measures that demonstrate the achieved desired goals and aspirations. In all of the interviews with participants, none of them were able to identify current or proposed concrete measures to track the progress of their desired goal and/or aspirations, instead participants focused on what they wished to see for their youth once they aged out of care. Consequentially, the sub-theme that emerged was long-term stable housing and strong connections to the community. One participant stated: "I would hope that they live in a safe neighborhood. That they have the ability to make their rent... but also have their other cost of living covered through, whether it is... through employment or are they needing support, right? Because of their – is it through Persons with Disabilities and income assistance? You know. Is it disability? I don't know, but that they – yeah, that they live in a – most importantly that they live in a safe... That their home is safe" (P01).

Another participant emphasized youth safety and connection by saying, "I think success would be seeing those people are those young people – safe - and have somewhere to be safe. And, just like the again that second stage kind of thing of the wraparound supports" (P06).

Systematic and structured youth feedback for improved program results. During the interviews, participants highlighted that when youth feedback is incorporated into housing programs, it would be an indication of successful youth housing. Since MCFD's goal as well as its human and financial resource investment is to facilitate these young people access safe, secure, and stable housing, then their feedback is especially important to improve services. There are Youth Advisory Councils that get feedback from youth leaders. However, the Ministry's frontline staff and leadership require structured and institutionalized mechanisms for youth to feedback their experiences with housing support. One participant said, "MCFD doesn't do that, we don't track. There's no way to track anything besides like I guess like numbers. How many youths went on youth agreements ... like that kind of thing" (P02, research interview (P02)).

Discussion

The purpose of this research study was to examine

the successful aspects of and recommendations to improving youth housing for youth transitioning out of Ministry care. Under the theme of Strengths of the SOAR framework, MCFD's collaboration with housing agencies was identified. Through these partnerships, youth transitioning out of care can access low barrier housing, additional resources for youth and the support of housing staff. This theme reflects the identification of housing models that provide additional services to youth as a marker of successful housing models, which was highlighted in the review of the literature. These services can include life skills programs, mental health support and low barrier housing (Salazar, 2020). MCFD's already existing relationship with housing services is a valuable starting point. As such, the relationship between MCFD and housing programs being identified as a strength by the participants of this study supports the previous research as it is through these partnerships that additional supports are facilitated, creating a marker of success.

Previous research also identified the support of housing workers as a marker of success (McCreary Centre Society, 2011). This can also be related to the partnerships with housing agencies as a strength in the current research, since some of these housing agencies have housing workers in their programs. Though previous research indicates housing workers, not MCFD social workers, as a strength, this can nonetheless be linked to the identification of MCFD social workers as a strength in this current study. The participants talked about the advocacy individual social workers engage in with housing programs to obtain housing for youth transitioning out of Ministry care. In this sense, the MCFD social workers can be considered as taking on the role of housing workers, by navigating housing programs, making connections with other organizations and providing support to the youth.

Under the theme of Opportunities in the SOAR framework, three sub-themes to leverage success were identified in the current research. The first of which is the opportunity for MCFD to extend their mandate and legal obligation to youth beyond the age of 19. In previous research it was indicated that youth

feel they would benefit from a continuity of care from MCFD (Child Welfare League of Canada, 2021). Furthermore, youth identified the need for building a support system as they transition to independent living (TRRUST Collective Impact, 2020). The participants of this study were clear that the youth need support past the age of 19, and though the current agreement to support them past the age of 19 was a result of the impact of COVID-19 pandemic, the participants felt that the youth's need for support into adulthood was there even before the pandemic. This corroborates the findings of previous research around the youths' need for a support system and continued support from the Ministry into their adulthood. This need, as identified by the participant, is one that will remain even post-pandemic, and there is an opportunity that was created by the pandemic to make support past the age of 19 a permanent mandate of MCFD.

The opportunity to provide more financial support to youth and housing programs was a prominent sub-theme in this research study. This closely reflects findings in previous research that call for more financial support, given the barrier to housing created by lack of affordable housing (Adoptive Families Association of British Columbia, 2021), the high cost of living and the lack of financial stability of the youth (TRRUST Collective Impact, 2020). Participants in the current study reported that the financial amount provided to youth by the Ministry does not reflect the cost of living and cost of rent. This speaks to the continued state of high housing cost across the province, which is likely a contributing factor to the lack of financial stability youth leaving Ministry care face. Furthermore, the lack of affordable housing, as identified in previous research, is reflected in the answers of the research participants who identified a need for MCFD to provide more financial support to affordable housing projects. This opportunity to fund affordable housing is a practical way to address the shortage of affordable housing and can result in creating more financial stability for youth leaving care, as they do not have to spend a large portion of their income on rent.

The identification of barriers that youth face

creates another opportunity to examine these barriers and how to address them in the creation of new housing models. The barriers identified in this research study reflect the findings of previous research. Eligibility criteria create a risk of eviction for youth (City of Vancouver, 2020). The youth's own behaviour can sometimes lead to conflict with landlords, creating another barrier (Cheng et al., 2013). This is made more complicated by strict behaviour requirements of housing programs (Cheng et al., 2013) and landlords' aversion to renting to youth (TRRUST Collective Impact, 2020). These identified barriers are well reflected in the answers of the participants in this study. This consistency is indicative of the urgent need to examine these intersecting barriers more closely and determine how to build housing programs that alleviate these barriers comprehensively.

Under the theme of Aspirations in the SOAR Analysis, a major sub-theme was the aspiration for MCFD to have their own housing programs. This was clearly stated by several participants as a vision for the future that would contribute to the success of housing for youth transitioning out of care. This theme is not one that has been clearly identified in previous research. Though previous research has identified ways to make youth housing for youth leaving Ministry care more successful, MCFD was not identified as the aspired leader of such programs. Participants spoke about a vision where MCFD creates housing programs that reflect the need of youth leaving Ministry care. These needs are still well aligned with what previous research identified as needs, including aspects such as affordability, support, and life skills (Salazar, 2020). The proposition that MCFD have their own program can be explained through the assumption that MCFD is best equipped to know what the needs of the youth are and thus have these needs met in their own housing programs rather than outsourcing to other agencies who may not have as comprehensive an understanding of the needs of youth transitioning out of care.

The second sub-theme in the aspirations theme is the incorporation of life skills and supportive programs that meet the varying levels of support

youth need. Participants spoke about how some youth need more support than others. As such, having programs that can provide more extensive life skills support for youth that need it would be beneficial. This aspiration is well aligned with what previous research identified as successful aspects of housing models. There are youth that may be using substances that need more support (Child Welfare League of Canada, 2021) or youth that may need support around employment and life skills (Salazar, 2020). Having housing programs that also provide these supports would make a housing program successful because it provides holistic supports in various aspects of the youth's life. This is well aligned with the aspiration identified by participants in this study as participants spoke about how providing these additional supports would allow the youth to access them as they need to ensure that their needs are met in a more holistic sense.

Under the theme of Results in the SOAR Analysis, the first sub-theme that participants identified as indicative of success in the future is the creation of long-term stable housing and strong connections to community. Participants indicated that long-term stability is a desired goal for youth in their future. Participants also identified the youth's ability to form community connections as a crucial marker of success. This relates to the facilitation of community connections as a successful aspect of a housing program, as identified by McCreary Centre Society (2011). When youth are able to sustain stable housing over a long period of time, they can form meaningful relationships with their neighbours and people in their community.

Lastly, the second sub-theme identified under the Results theme that would be indicative of success in the future is the incorporation of youth feedback to improve housing programs. Participants reported the varying levels of defining success and how success looks different for each youth depending on their circumstances. As such, the incorporation of a wide range of feedback from youth about their housing needs can help MCFD determine the level of success in their housing programs. The existence of youth feedback does not necessarily indicate success, unless

it is actually systemically incorporated into the housing policies and programs that MCFD has on its own, or in collaboration with other agencies. There is a need to determine how well MCFD is incorporating relevant research and feedback from youth into its housing programs, which will be expanded on below, in the section on recommendations for future directions.

Limitations

Even though the study gathered information that can inform MCFD's policy and programming, there were three main limitations that might affect the impact of the findings. The first two limitations are related to sample and selection bias. First a sample of six respondents is too few given the size of the Ministry staff and the importance of the foster care a program for MCFD and beneficiaries. Additionally, all the interviewees from the MCFD were from urban settings leaving out the sub-urban and rural community settings which further limits the scope of study findings. The second limitation was the risk of the sample bias because all interviewees were from the Ministry and there were other critical players who were not interviewed. The research did not cover representatives from housing agencies, youth themselves or communities making the data biased towards MCFD views. The third limitation was related to the study instrumentation, which refers to the tools utilized to collect data in a research study (Salkind, 2010). In this study, the SOAR Matrix and its questionnaires appeared repetitive to a few respondents. For example, questions on opportunities and strengths were often confused to be enquiring about the same issues. This might have affected some of the responses of the interviewees despite explanations by the researchers.

Recommendations for Future Directions

Recommendation 1: Further research on the specific housing needs of Indigenous youth transitioning out of care

The scope of this study was limited to qualitative interviews of MCFD staff working with youth who are transitioning out of Ministry care. This research study did not examine the specific housing needs of Indigenous youth. However, research indicates Indigenous youth are disproportionately impacted by

homelessness in comparison to the general population (British Columbia Non-Profit Housing Association, 2020). There are also more Indigenous children in the care of child welfare agencies today than there were at the height of the residential school system era (BCNPHA, 2020) making Indigenous youth more vulnerable to facing the brunt of the above combined discrimination factors around housing when they transition out of care. As such, it is recommended that further research is done in the future on the specific and unique needs of Indigenous youth transitioning out of ministry care.

Recommendation 2: Research successful housing programs in other jurisdictions

While the scope of our research only included MCFD jurisdictions within the province of BC, the Student Research Team recommends further research on successful housing programs in other provinces and government-led jurisdictions. Future research from successful housing models in other jurisdictions would provide insight for MCFD to incorporate successful aspects that have been found helpful in other jurisdiction into its housing models to better support youths' transition from care.

Recommendation 3: Explore ways in which MCFD can build formal and informal support for youth before the time of transition

The importance of having formal and informal supports for youth was a key takeaway from the interviews. As youth in care often lack traditional family support systems, findings suggest MCFD build in formal and informal supports for youth leading up to their time of transition. As one participant shares, "And so, relationships can change so we usually try and make sure that they like you know have like a couple of unpaid people in their life that they can go to so it's not just having to be workers. That's like a big piece of transition" (P02). Having a Ministry-wide process for establishing these formal and informal support systems would provide a stronger safety net to prevent some of the challenges youth face once they leave Ministry care.

Recommendation 4: MCFD to review housing policies and to incorporate changes from relevant and current research findings

Based off the literature and the research findings, it

has become increasingly apparent that MCFD must start the process of reviewing their existing housing policies and begin to incorporate the relevant and current research findings into their practices when working with youth who are transitioning out of care. Many of the barriers and challenges for youth housing was present in both the results of this study and the review of the current literature. Some of the barriers to successful youth housing that were found both in the research and literature were: a lack of social support system, affordability of housing, discrimination by landlords, and a lack of basic informal life skills. By incorporating the research findings like developing MCFD-run affordable housing programs alongside life skills programs that meet the complex needs of youth, MCFD can begin the process of mitigating some of the housing barriers experienced by youth aging out of care.

Conclusion

In undertaking this research project which is aimed at exploring the lessons from successful housing models for youth transitioning out of Ministry care using an Appreciative Inquiry approach. Six MCFD respondents were interviewed. Four distinct themes emerged from the study findings and analysis of data which were further broken down into sub themes. These were: (1) Strengths, (2) Opportunities, (3) Aspirations, and (4) Results.

The research highlighted key strengths and results that can inform MCFD's current and future markers of success of youth housing. Furthermore, opportunities to leverage success and aspirations for the future can be utilized as recommendations to improve housing models for youth leaving Ministry care. More research that involves all key players in the sector such as partnership agencies, youth themselves and other key stakeholders for more wholistic support is recommended. MCFD would benefit more from investing in preparing youth to transition out of care gradually, comparing best practice in different regions and reviewing existing policies to reverse glaring housing challenges youth transitioning out of care are facing. In the long term, MCFD needs to undertake analysis of its expenditure on youth housing and make

more safe, stable, affordable, and permanent housing. The urgency of having housing programs that meet the needs of youth transitioning out of care can be summed by a quote from one of this study's participant, who stated "MCFD needs just to commit a substantial amount of money to transitional housing, whether that is in partnership with Community agencies or a development of our own, there is no denying the fact that our young people are lacking housing so sorely that they are ending up homeless and in shelters" (P06).

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Appendix A

Data Collection Instrument: Interview Questions (using SOAR Analysis)

Strengths: *What can we build on?*

1. What do the youth you support think about MCFD's role in connecting them well to housing programs during their transition out of care?
2. What key resources give MCFD an advantage when connecting youth transitioning from care into transitional or permanent housing?
3. With the previous questions in mind, what current strengths can be built upon?

Opportunities: *What are our best chances to leverage success?*

1. How do MCFD strengths in transitional/permanent housing programs align with youth needs?
2. How could MCFD develop transitional/permanent housing programs or services targeting these needs?
3. What community partnerships could lead to greater transitional/permanent housing success?
4. What are key areas of untapped potential for supporting youth transitioning out of care?

Aspirations: *What do we care deeply about?*

1. What should the future of youth housing look like for youth transitioning out of care?
2. What current strategies and actions support our vision for this future?
3. Based on your passions for the protection and well-being of the youth you work with, what can MCFD do to advance its plan for sustainable transitional/permanent housing?
4. What changes do you hope to see in youth transitional/permanent housing over the next five years?

Results: *How will we know we are succeeding?*

1. Considering the identified strengths, opportunities, and aspirations, how will you know MCFD is on track in achieving its goals?
2. How might MCFD track the impact or changes that have happened?
3. Imagine it's ten years in the future and you meet one of the youth you are currently working with or have worked with. What do you hope their housing status will be?
4. What have you as a worker, your team, and MCFD as an agency done to support that vision

Appendix B

Data Collection Instrument: Demographic Questionnaire

1. How many years have you been working as an MCFD staff member supporting youth who are transitioning out of care into independent living?

- Numerical field

2. What is your current role on your team?

- Frontline worker
- Supervisor
- Leadership

3. How many MCFD staff do you support, supervise, or report to you?

4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- High school diploma or equivalent
- Some college credit, no degree
- College certificate or diploma
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctorate degree
- Other, please specify: [Text]
- Prefer not to disclose

5. What geographical setting do you work in?

- Rural
- Urban
- Suburban

6. Approximately, how many youth are currently on your caseload?

7. How many connections/partnerships to transitional housing do you currently have available to you?

8. In your own words, and without divulging any case specific information, please elaborate on these connections/partnerships: