

FACTORS THAT PROMOTE OR HINDER A YOUTH IN CARE NETWORK: A REPORT FROM THE FIELD

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Abstract: This report describes the evolution of an independent youth-led organization for youth in and from care in Quebec. The emergence of CARE Jeunesse is presented and compared with two other networks in Canada. Factors that promoted and hindered its development are discussed particularly as they apply to issues outlined in the youth engagement literature. The board of CARE Jeunesse, comprising former youth in care, wrote this article with the participation of a university professor who is an adult ally to the alumni of care movement in Quebec. This report is the first publication that provides an account of the processes associated with developing a youth in care network in Canada.

Keywords: participatory action research, youth in care, alumni of care, care-leavers

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Evidence from North American studies over the last three decades demonstrates that care leavers are at a much higher risk of a multiplicity of challenges when compared to youth in the general population. They have higher rates of homelessness, undereducation, unemployment or underemployment, poverty, mental health issues and post-traumatic stress, substance abuse, and early pregnancy or parenthood (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Day et al., 2011; Koegel et al., 1995; Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth [Ontario], 2012; Pecora et al., 2003; Rutman et al., 2007; Tessier et al., 2014). International research in other Western countries such as the United Kingdom (e.g., Stein, 2004, 2005, 2006), Scotland (e.g., Stein & Dixon, 2006), France (e.g., Stein & Dumaret, 2011) and Australia (e.g., Cashmore & Paxman, 2006; Mendes et al., 2014; Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2004, 2006) reflect similar outcomes as those found in the North American context. The literature suggests that these deleterious outcomes are a symptom of the inherent weaknesses of corporate parenting systems, in which bureaucratic organizations provide substitute care, and decision-making is top-down (Havlicek et al., 2016). Youth in care typically have little say about what happens to them (Havlicek et al., 2016) and have historically been one of the most stigmatized and powerless groups of service recipients (Mendes, 1998).

The 1970s and 1980s saw increased organizing and advocacy in the self-help and consumer movement in social services (Mendes, 1998). The consumer movement helped to increase the recognition of the inherent value of consumer participation in shaping the delivery of their own services. This, in turn, helped to promote awareness of youth participation's crucial role in ensuring accountability for agencies mandated to provide substitute care and youth protection. Some authors describe what happened at this time as the beginning of a social movement, one that was intent on eliminating the disempowerment and abuse of young people in care who had, up until that time, "been demeaned and even objectified.... leaving them vulnerable, unprotected and exploited" (Evans, 2013, p. 60). This grassroots movement resulted in the establishment of organizations where young people in and from care came together. With the support of adult allies, individuals from government care, and the very agencies in which they had been placed, they set up their own organizations (Evans, 2013).

The purpose of this article is to document the development of the newest organization led by alumni of care in Canada, Centre Amitié, Ressources et Entraide pour la Jeunesse [Friendship, Resources and Mutual Aid Center for Youth], or C.A.R.E. Jeunesse (CARE). CARE Jeunesse's journey in Quebec reflects the processes associated with the establishment of a youth-led consumer advocacy group in child welfare. Despite evidence pointing to the vital role youth in care networks play in the lives of their members and in the evolution of services and policies, there is limited academic documentation about how these organizations develop. It is particularly important to document how local contexts hinder and promote the creation of structures that encourage youth participation and advocacy in child welfare. The alumni of care who constituted the founding board of CARE Jeunesse wrote this article in collaboration with a university researcher who has served as an adult ally to the group since its inception.

What is a Youth in Care Network?

Organizations led by youth from care are referred to by different names in different parts of the world; for instance, they are termed youth advisory boards in the United States (Havlicek et al., 2016), care leavers associations in Europe, and youth in care networks in Canada (Raychaba, 1998). In Australia, youth in care networks are lumped in more broadly with consumer advocacy groups (Mendes, 1998).

Youth in care networks provide “a conduit or instrument through which young people can talk about their experiences of being in care, feel supported by peers and professionals and have their opinions taken into account in policy discussions and service delivery” (Evans, 2013, p. 63). Thus, these organizations serve a dual purpose: they provide opportunities for mutual support and they advocate to change practices and policies in local child welfare systems.

Recent research evidence documents the success with which youth in care networks have fulfilled both functions. One of the most potent strategies for managing stigma experienced by youth from care is establishing friendship networks with peers who have also experienced placement (Roger, 2016). Peer support can contribute dramatically to resilience in these young people from care (Snow et al., 2013), and create a sense of relational stability (Green, 2017). Accounts of youth-led advocacy groups in the United States emphasize that “the young people feel almost immediately connected ... as part of their family structure” (Green, 2017, p. 2).

Youth in care networks create a space where youth from care can voice their opinions and concerns and lobby for the rights of youth in placement, becoming powerful change agents on a systemic level. Research on youth from care mobilization in the United States by Havlicek and colleagues (2016) highlighted that “growing evidence suggests that the voices of several state youth advisory boards have been instrumental in turning state policymakers into champions of child welfare reform” (p. 1). Describing the impact of care leavers associations in the United Kingdom, Mendes (1998) noted that these organizations had made “substantial gains in raising the profile of cared for children and securing the attention of those who frame and implement the policy” (p. 64). This is consistent with emerging findings on the overall impact of youth-led organizations, which underscore the benefits to society when young people position themselves to advocate for change (Ho et al., 2015).

The History of Youth in Care Networks

The earliest documented youth in care networks began in 1957 in France, with the establishment of organizations for adoptees (Lacroix, 2016). However, it was not until much later that the alumni of care movement took hold in other countries. Care leavers’ associations were first established in Scotland in 1978, followed by Wales (1990), England (1992), and Northern Ireland (1996). The Australian Association of Young People in Care was established in 1993, and since the mid-1990s, the movement has expanded to Germany, the Netherlands, and many other countries in Europe. Even though these youth-led organizations are becoming increasingly

widespread, there have been only a small number of published peer-reviewed articles that describe these developments.

The alumni of care movement first began in North America in the 1980s. The earliest group to organize was the National Youth in Care Network in Canada, which was established in 1985. This organization grew out of a child and youth care conference, where youth delegates met and decided to come together to create a national advocacy group, which changed its name to Youth in Care Canada in 2010 (Youth in Care Canada, n.d.). This consortium is made up of representatives of provincial and community-led networks. Youth in Care Canada is the oldest youth-led organization in Canada. Its development inspired the first of many youth-run consumer groups in the United States. It also led to the formation of provincial youth in care networks across the country, most of which were in place well before the development of CARE in Quebec. There are currently 50 youth in care networks in Canada (Youth in Care Canada, 2018a) of varying sizes and mandates.

From Coast to Coast: Examples of Pre-Existing Provincial Initiatives in Canada

Youth in care networks in Canada provide direct support to alumni of care and have been responsible for lobbying by young people for changes to child welfare policies and practices. In Canada, both the legislation related to substitute care and the actual placement agencies are provincially mandated. While a complete history of all the networks in Canada is not available, what follows is a thumbnail sketch of two well-established networks in different parts of the country. As with all youth in care networks, these organizations grew out of the unique circumstances and opportunities in their home provinces, and illustrate different models for establishing a youth-led organization.

The Federation of British Columbia Youth in Care Networks¹, otherwise known as “the Fed”, was established in 1993 as the first provincial network in Canada. It came into existence after youth in care who met at a 1992 Northern Youth Reflection Conference decided to form a peer-led steering committee (Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks, 2016). A year later, the Fed secured its first office location as part of a local service organization and established itself as a youth-driven operation dedicated to improving the lives of youth in and from care in British Columbia between the ages of 14 and 24. It took several years before professionals began to recognize the Fed as a legitimate entity, but by 1996 the network became officially incorporated and independent, separating from its agency partner. By 1998, the Fed had developed its website and the first local network in British Columbia was formed in Kamloops a year later, comprising youth in and from care and their adult allies. In 2000, the Kamloops regional office was opened, with a local network in Vancouver starting a year later. In 2016, the Fed became a registered charitable organization and had gained enough legitimacy to present at the University of British

¹ <https://fbcyicn.ca/about>

Columbia's Janusz Korczak Lecture Series. Since it came into existence, the Fed has been very active, focusing on hands-on support and provincial advocacy.

The New Brunswick Youth in Care Network was established in 2010 through a 5-year funding agreement between the provincial government's Department of Social Development and an established youth-serving organization, Partners for Youth², based in the province's capital of Fredericton (Doucet & Cormier, 2015). The organization was tasked by the government to begin the development of a provincial youth in care network, and dedicated staff to this project. Throughout 2010 a small group of current and former youth in care were recruited through contacts and networking, and these young people formed the first leadership group for the network. In 2011, the New Brunswick network mounted its first major project, an arts-based workshop called Art Attack. This project was planned and facilitated across the province by network leadership members.

That same year, the network leadership group was asked by the provincial government to plan the first provincial Youth Engagement Summit in Fredericton. The original agency that created the network leadership group also received additional funding to organize the first Youth in Care Hearings in New Brunswick, where young people in care provided testimonials to the provincial legislature on their experiences in care. The agency and leadership group collaborated on a report in early 2013 entitled *A Long Road Home* (New Brunswick Youth In Care Network & Cormier, 2014), which covered both the outcomes of a 2012 consultation process and the recommendations made at the Youth in Care Hearings in November 2012. In May 2014, the Government of New Brunswick released a report entitled *Response to a Long Road Home* (Department of Social Development, 2014), in which it responded to all 14 recommendations from the youth in care network's report. In November 2014, the Government of New Brunswick declared November 29th, the anniversary of the Youth in Care Hearings, Children and Youth in Care Day.

The Unique Situation in the Province of Quebec: The History of CARE Jeunesse

Youth-led initiatives to improve the lives of youth in care are not new to Quebec. In 1985, the first national youth engagement project in Canada took place in Vancouver at a conference entitled Reflections of Being in Care, at which youth from Quebec participated. As previously discussed, the idea of creating a national youth in care network was a result of this conference. Since then, numerous alumni of care from Quebec have held positions as members of the governing board of Youth in Care Canada, thus making significant contributions to the alumni of care movement at a national level.

At the same time, Quebec has always had a different relationship with Youth in Care Canada than the other provinces have had. Youth in Care Canada has operated primarily in English and from an Anglophone perspective, which has limited its capacity to connect with Quebec, a

² <https://www.partnersforyouth.ca/en/>

predominantly French province. Quebec also has two parallel youth protection systems that provide substitute care in each official language. Thus, not only linguistic barriers to engaging with Youth in Care Canada initiatives, but also the requirement of dealing with two completely separate bureaucracies, made youth organizing in Quebec a complicated endeavour.

There have been previous efforts to create a youth in care network in Quebec through both the French and English systems of care. At one point, one administrative region of child welfare came forward to establish a Francophone network in the province; however, for reasons unknown, it never came to be. The English agency in Montreal did develop a relationship early on with Youth in Care Canada and participated in meetings over many years towards establishing a provincial network. However, without funding, concrete plans were never formulated. Eventually, the agency gave up on the idea of creating a network and instead created a youth empowerment program for youth in placement led by an alumnus of care. This program does not reach out to youth who have already left care, and the youth in the program do not have a role as decision-makers. Nevertheless, it offers youth an opportunity to engage with each other over their shared experiences and improve programming internal to English-speaking youth protection services.

CARE Jeunesse got its start in 2011. The founder and first president of CARE, Amanda Keller, had initially served on the board of directors of Youth in Care Canada. Keller met with provincial youth protection officials on various occasions spanning several years while on the board of Youth in Care Canada. During a conference held in Winnipeg in October 2010 she was introduced to a director of a young offenders' program from the French sector of youth protection in Montreal. This meeting marked a critical moment in the development of the organization as this director from the care system became a key ally for CARE, going on to facilitate meetings with various youth protection directors between 2011 and 2013. Five agencies did agree to support the development of a network in Quebec, and a coalition formed that sponsored an event that brought youth in care and alumni of care together to discuss their needs. Despite this high level of interest and engagement, none of the agencies funded the project as planned. The justification was that the province was in a recession and experiencing related budgetary cuts.

By 2013, it was clear that there was no political will to provide government funding for a provincial network. However, around the same time, Keller met Jennifer Dupuis, a fellow alumnus of care, who was also interested in establishing a network. After agreeing on the dire need for a youth-led network in Quebec, they began to work together as volunteers to officially launch a formal organization. A first meeting took place in the fall of 2013. They recruited a five-member committee, which would meet every three months to discuss the process of forming an organization. It proved challenging to schedule initial meetings because there was no money to cover transportation, meals, or rental space.

Nonetheless, over the following months, the CARE committee had its first meetings with Anglophone and Francophone child protection service agencies in Montreal and connected with other provincial networks for advice and guidance. In that first year of community organizing,

Keller was introduced to Varda Mann-Feder, a university professor whose program of research focused on aging out of care. She became an adult ally to the group and was able to secure a small grant for a participatory action project, which covered initial expenses of the network. She was also able to provide a central meeting space on campus.

In 2013 to 2014, CARE Jeunesse held its first training session for members of the new board of directors, which would prove to be a challenging experience. The training session, offered by a community organization, outlined a traditional business approach to establishing a board of directors. As an example, a key recommendation was that the board of directors comprise professionals such as lawyers, accountants, and executives. This training did not align with the skills or vision of the CARE board members, who wanted the majority of board members to be alumni of care. Finding young adults with care experience who had such specific professional titles seemed unrealistic, and the training discouraged further discussion of the issue. Subsequently, the CARE board took a significant break but ultimately decided to proceed against the recommendations of the trainers and act more in line with CARE's original vision.

CARE Jeunesse's next challenge was to decide whether to register as a community-based business or as a non-profit organization. Committee members debated this question for many months before settling on registering as a non-profit with the intention of becoming a charity several years into the functioning of the organization.

In 2015, CARE officially registered as a non-profit organization. Board members worked on the organization's values and vision and produced their first membership pamphlet. The organization began to participate in fundraising initiatives, the first of which was supported by local college students who had heard about the mission of CARE Jeunesse. The money from this fundraiser allowed the organization to create and register its first website.

In 2015 to 2016, CARE established a Facebook page, finalized by-laws, and began accepting membership applications in earnest. The organization also took on its first student intern, a step that proved invaluable in moving CARE forward, given the absence of an operating budget. Since that time, CARE has established a newsletter and organized two major fundraising events, both of which were covered by local media. The first holiday parties for youth in and from care were held in December of 2017 and 2018, giving young adults an opportunity to network and enjoy a traditional supper and gifts. Since its inception, CARE has also distributed donated luggage to youth leaving care in the Montreal area, and has recently sent luggage to a cohort of youth leaving care in Northern Quebec. With the help of a Volunteer Coordinator, CARE now has a team of enthusiastic helpers, consisting of former youth in care, retired staff from the care system, and concerned local citizens, who assist with events, fundraising, and social media.

CARE currently operates with a very modest budget and relies primarily on a working board of directors who serve on a voluntary basis. CARE has recently been able to hire its first staff person, a part-time coordinator. It is using this support to organize more events and activities

with its members in and from care. CARE Jeunesse continues to grow. While still dependent on donations to cover operating costs, the organization has become more visible over the last few years. CARE is gradually gaining legitimacy across the province through various engagement strategies, with the hope of eventually securing sustaining funding from the province.

Reflections on CARE's Trajectory

Like the Fed and the New Brunswick Youth in Care Network, CARE Jeunesse has rallied youth from care and registered as a non-profit organization. As with other networks, this experience could be characterized as a “roller coaster ride” (Youth in Care Canada, 2018a, p. 3), both in terms of the establishment of processes and procedures, and the search for legitimacy in the larger system. However, unlike either the British Columbia or New Brunswick network, CARE began as a grassroots organization initiated by young people. The British Columbia and New Brunswick networks, alternatively, relied heavily on “adult actors” in the start-up phase (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018). This is referred to as “youth organizing” rather than “youth-led organizing” and is dependent on the actions of non-youth to promote youth participation (Ho et al., 2015). The advantages of building a network through youth organizing are clear: when effective youth–adult partnerships are established, those youth benefit from consistent mentoring and financial support. However, in this model, adult organizers control the nature of young people’s participation and determine the degree to which they are empowered. At worst, this can threaten the independence of the youth in care network and result in tokenism (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018). Due to the hierarchical nature of child welfare organizations in Quebec (Dupuis & Mann-Feder, 2013), early initiatives by local authorities to organize a network never produced concrete results.

Eventually, CARE Jeunesse was set up by youth from care themselves, with no adult initiation, start-up funding, or agency sponsorship. As a result, it has developed relatively slowly. It took five years for the organization to be in a position to hire a staff person, and it was only possible to upgrade the website and promotional materials relatively recently, even though upgrades were needed to increase the capacity of CARE to reach out to alumni of care. This is similar to what happened in British Columbia, where, although they started with an agency partner, it took five years to establish a website and 23 years to register as a charitable organization. This contrasts with the relatively faster evolution of the network in New Brunswick, which started from the beginning with considerable government support. CARE’s inability to secure sustaining funding to date is another factor that has limited the organization’s capacity and speed of growth. It is attributable, in part, to the commitment of the founders to create an autonomous youth-led organization.

What Has Facilitated the Formation of CARE Jeunesse?

Many factors contributed to the initial development of CARE Jeunesse; in hindsight, these appear to be essential to the creation of a youth in care network. For instance, the opportunity to attend youth in care alumni conferences with peers from other parts of the country stimulated the motivation to create a network in Quebec. These conferences inspired youth in and from care in

Quebec and helped them to recognize that self-organizing could bring the power to influence change. These events also provided opportunities for youth to network with others affiliated with alumni networks across North America as well as with supportive professionals in Quebec. They fuelled the drive to mobilize in the early stages of building CARE. Youth conferences do much to promote a youth voice in child welfare, as they expose young people from care to experiences that encourage peer leadership and outreach. However, they also require significant support from local agencies and government on both a provincial and a national level.

The stated interest of various government organizations to support youth from care to start a provincial network also helped to solidify the movement in Quebec, even though funding was not forthcoming as it has been in British Columbia and New Brunswick. The support of an agency director was invaluable. Youth in care networks need the financial support of the provincial government in order to thrive; however, supportive individuals can do much to foster the emergence of these youth-led organizations even when financial support is not forthcoming.

The involvement of a post-secondary educational institution was a critical element in CARE's initial formation and had the advantage of providing resources from outside the care system. The initial funding from a university helped CARE defray expenses for the first two years of operation. While the grant was small, it helped to stabilize the organization as an autonomous entity. It offset the initial expenses related to marketing and communications materials and covered administrative and registration fees, parking and transportation, refreshments, and other costs associated with outreach. The board of directors grew and established a stable base of operation at the university. When government funding is not available, it is essential to explore other sources of support such as the academic community engaged in research with care leaving.

Attracting motivated and talented board members who are alumni of care can be a significant challenge for a new youth in care network. CARE was extremely fortunate to have found many highly skilled alumni of care who were interested in contributing to the cause of youth in care. The current board consists entirely of youth from care; most board members also have careers and young children. Their commitment to the process has been considerable. As CARE's visibility and credibility has grown, there have been new opportunities for collaboration with local agencies and an increase in the number of highly skilled volunteers.

What Has Impeded CARE Jeunesse's Progress?

Multiple issues have impeded CARE's progress. Some of the obstacles were specific to the Quebec context, including budget cuts to the child welfare system and the need to function in both English and French in two parallel systems. Furthermore, on April 1, 2015, the Quebec Health and Social Services System underwent a significant restructuring process in order to cut costs (Collin-Vezina et al., 2015). These cuts limited CARE Jeunesse's opportunity to be funded by local agencies. Unexpectedly, it also created significant delays in furthering CARE's mandate, as several managers who had supported CARE Jeunesse or had served as essential contacts left their roles. It was a difficult time to develop partnerships with the government. Moreover, following the

reorganization and reassignment of positions, it was even more complicated for CARE to identify and connect with the appropriate staff members. Youth in care networks are subject to the instability inherent in public agencies; ideally, youth in care networks should remain separate while the management of child welfare agencies maintains a vested interest in continuing to work with youth organizations.

CARE Jeunesse must operate in two languages. Quebec is a province where the official language is French; however, it is a bilingual province with a significant Anglophone community. This situation, unusual in North America, requires twice the work: all communication must be executed in both languages. At the same time, it is relatively rare to recruit a fully bilingual volunteer. The translation of all documents, website copywriting, social media content, and promotional materials is time-consuming. It is challenging to operate as a fully bilingual organization with a limited budget for staff.

In addition to obstacles unique to Quebec, CARE also faced other problems that are characteristic of what most youth-led organizations face (Place, 2013). CARE began with a lack of training, little knowledge of how to start a non-profit organization, and a limited support network. These factors slowed down the organization's growth significantly. Early on, the board of directors encountered difficulties common to a newly formed organization. There was much time spent in circular conversations that produced little movement forward and frustrated most of the board members, who were all interested in bringing about concrete actions for CARE's membership. Fortunately, one of CARE's founding board members had significant training in project management and was able to use her skills to help the organization to advance. Her role was critical as she initiated strategic planning sessions that served in turn to keep board members accountable. CARE operated without a staff person for years and as a result CARE initially spent excessive time on what could have been simple tasks, such as scheduling meetings or deciding the allocation of tasks to specific board members. Eventually, project management processes were put in place to address such issues.

CARE Jeunesse registered initially as a non-profit without access to legal advice. This proved ill-advised: after CARE took a year to develop CARE's bylaws using Youth in Care Canada's document as a template, a lawyer informed the board that there were significant legal differences between provincial and federal bylaws. CARE's bylaws were thus not legally valid. Ultimately the bylaws had to be revised, and CARE'S registration had to be modified, both of which took months of work and discussion.

The board of directors for CARE Jeunesse initially comprised no more than six individuals at any time, all of them volunteers with school, work, and family commitments. It was not possible for six people to meet all the community requests and the legal obligations of a non-profit organization no matter how committed they were to the cause. It was essential to seek and accept the support of other groups or individuals to tackle the considerable workload associated with forming an organization.

Lessons Learned

The obstacles CARE Jeunesse faced in its first five years of operation taught us essential lessons related to planning and organization, the need for training, and how to effectively manage partnerships.

Planning and organization: Creating a strategic plan is critical. The starting points for CARE's operation needed to be the mission, the mandate, the policies, and then the government registration. Only after these were in place could we begin to seek out core funding. In hindsight this appears logical, but originally, before the adoption of a critical path, such tasks were not prioritized, and CARE's initial process was thus disorganized.

After a period of trial and error, CARE eventually found a shared online data storage drive and project management software platform. This was crucial to establishing and formalizing the organization's procedures.

It is especially important in a working board of directors that board members take on only what they can realistically handle. CARE Jeunesse found that slow and steady progress served the organization better than rapid growth. The slow pace of progress has been met with some criticism because the needs are significant, and there are minimal services for CARE's membership in Quebec. Yet over-eager volunteers frequently find themselves unable to see projects through to completion. The slow and steady approach helps to prevent burnout, a condition that has already resulted in turnover in the board of directors.

Training: CARE Jeunesse's board of directors comprises mostly young professionals with limited family supports, many of whom are in school or have small children at home. Board members in this phase of life are limited in their capacity to engage proactively in training opportunities that could assist in the organization's progress. In hindsight, CARE Jeunesse would have benefited from skills training early on in areas such as the roles and responsibilities of a youth-led board of directors, website creation and maintenance, fundraising, grant writing, liaising with media, crisis intervention, policy writing, and political lobbying.

Managing partnerships: A range of local organizations interested in CARE Jeunesse's mission and mandate helped us grow when we sought their support. We received support from the Centre for Community Organizations (COCO), a local non-profit that supports grassroots organizations in Quebec. We also received support from Regroupement des organismes communautaires autonomes jeunesse du Québec [A gathering of Quebec youth-serving community organizations] (ROCAJQ), a non-profit that supports youth-serving organizations in Quebec. ROCAJQ charged a modest membership fee; initially, however, the benefits of this membership were unclear. Therefore, as a result of both budgetary constraints and a lack of understanding of how the organization might be able to support and guide us, CARE delayed signing up for membership until early 2017. In hindsight, it would have been beneficial to reach

out to systems of support earlier and ask for more precise communication about partnership benefits.

CARE Jeunesse also learned through trial and error that the organization had to establish boundaries and rules around forming partnerships. CARE Jeunesse regularly receives offers of exciting research and fundraising opportunities. However, many of these offers draw energy away from CARE's strategic plan and mission. It is imperative to be clear about expectations and set limits, so that time is not given to projects that do not advance current objectives.

Implications

CARE Jeunesse has come a long way in its first five years since registering as a non-profit entity in 2015. CARE has increased its membership base and intensified outreach to both French and English youth in care as they prepare to age out. CARE continues to gain recognition in the care system and is working steadily towards establishing itself as a visible and influential youth-led organization. CARE's next hurdles are attaining charitable status and securing a recurring operating budget. CARE has provided particularly empowering experiences for the young people who have participated directly in its development. The skills they have learned have been invaluable and have taught them that they can rise above difficulties to make changes for other people who have lived similar lives.

CARE Jeunesse, unlike some of the other youth in care networks in Canada and elsewhere, functioned from the beginning as an independent youth-led organization. While being youth-led is often seen as optimal for youth participation, empowerment (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018), and effective identification of youth issues (Ilkiw, 2010), this autonomy from the child welfare system and adult decision-makers may have come at a price. Youth leaders, while passionate about their mission, may not have all the knowledge, skill, and experience to launch an organization effectively. Not only is the road to legitimacy longer and more complex in these circumstances, but many youth-led organizations like CARE have difficulty securing consistent funding and therefore “operate on a very short shoestring” (Ilkiw, 2010). The Centre of Excellence in Youth Engagement (McCart & Khanna, n.d.) stresses the critical importance of both “initiating” and “sustaining” factors in the success of any youth-led initiative. For CARE, important initiating factors were opportunities to network with youth in care networks from outside Quebec, supportive adult allies, and visionary and committed youth leaders. At the same time, the circumstances have not been consistently favourable for sustaining a youth-led organization in child welfare. There have been sequential budget cuts, and successive reorganizations within hierarchical agencies that may not be open to sharing decision-making power with youth and former youth from care. While this raises the question of whether youth-led advocacy can ultimately succeed in our context, it also raises a more complicated and perhaps more important question: are youth-led organizations in child welfare a luxury or a necessity? Youth-led groups struggle for recognition (Ilkiw, 2010), but are uniquely positioned to create social change and multiple benefits for society (Ho et al., p. 53). Youth-led organizations hold institutions and systems accountable (Ilkiw, 2010). Youth-led

advocacy groups in child welfare in the United States have been at the forefront of changing legislation that defines entitlements for youth who have grown up in care (Green, 2017). Furthermore, there are significant growth and leadership opportunities for young people who are involved in network organizations.

Lastly, some would say that in keeping with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child, meaningful participation and power-sharing in child welfare is a right (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018). From this perspective, it is incumbent on both systems of care and provincial governments to actively support and sustain youth-led organizations that provide a safe space for alumni of care and advocate for effective policies and programs.

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