

Legislative
Assembly
of Ontario



Assemblée
législative
de l'Ontario

**Official Report
of Debates
(Hansard)**

SP-43

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

SP-43

**Standing Committee on
Social Policy**

Supporting Children's
Futures Act, 2024

1st Session
43rd Parliament

Tuesday 7 May 2024

**Comité permanent de
la politique sociale**

Loi de 2024 visant à soutenir
l'avenir des enfants

1^{re} session
43^e législature

Mardi 7 mai 2024

Chair: Steve Clark
Clerk: Lesley Flores

Président : Steve Clark
Greffière : Lesley Flores

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House Publications and Language Services
Room 500, West Wing, Legislative Building
111 Wellesley Street West, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Telephone 416-325-7400
Published by the Legislative Assembly of Ontario



Service linguistique et des publications parlementaires
Salle 500, aile ouest, Édifice du Parlement
111, rue Wellesley ouest, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Téléphone, 416-325-7400
Publié par l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario

ISSN 1710-9477

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
SOCIAL POLICY**

**COMITÉ PERMANENT DE
LA POLITIQUE SOCIALE**

Tuesday 7 May 2024

Mardi 7 mai 2024

The committee met at 1500 in committee room 2.

**SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S
FUTURES ACT, 2024
LOI DE 2024 VISANT À SOUTENIR
L'AVENIR DES ENFANTS**

Consideration of the following bill:

Bill 188, An Act to amend the Child, Youth and Family Services Act, 2017 and various other Acts / Projet de loi 188, Loi modifiant la Loi de 2017 sur les services à l'enfance, à la jeunesse et à la famille et diverses autres lois.

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): Good afternoon, everyone. I'll call the meeting of the Standing Committee on Social Policy to order.

We're meeting for public hearings on Bill 188, An Act to amend the Child, Youth and Family Services Act, 2017 and various other Acts. To ensure that everyone is heard and understood, it's important for all the participants to speak slowly and clearly. Please wait to be recognized by the Chair and please ensure that all your comments should go through the Chair.

As a reminder, each presenter will have seven minutes for their presentation. I will interrupt you briefly to indicate to you that you have one minute remaining, so I'll give you a one-minute-remaining time check. And then after we hear from all the presenters in the opening time slot, we will then move to members of the committee for questions. It's going to be 39 minutes for questions. The time will be divided into two rounds of seven and a half minutes for the government members, followed by two rounds of seven and a half minutes for the official opposition members and two rounds of four and a half minutes for the independent member.

**CHILD DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE
CHILDREN'S AID FOUNDATION
OF CANADA**

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): I'm now going to call on our first presenter. I know for our second group, we've got one online and we've got two that are going to make their way to the committee room.

So, Leena first, from the Child Development Institute. I'd ask you to please state your full name, your title and your organization. Your seven minutes begins now.

Dr. Leena Augimeri: Hi, I'm Dr. Leena Augimeri. I'm from an organization called the Child Development Institute. My title is director of program scaling and strategic partnerships, and I'm one of the co-founders of the SNAP model.

Good afternoon, esteemed members of the Standing Committee on Social Policy, distinguished guests and concerned citizens. Today I stand before you to address a critical issue that demands our urgent attention and decisive action: the need to protect and support children within care and the foster system. I speak as a scientist-practitioner with over 40 years' experience in Toronto at the Child Development Institute, CDI, and as a national and international subject matter expert in children and youth mental health, crime prevention and risk assessment. I was also appointed last year as the chair of the youth justice review and am currently undertaking that.

It is a moral imperative that we as a society ensure the safety, well-being and prospects of every child under our care, yet despite our best intentions, there are deficiencies in our current system that leave too many vulnerable children at risk of harm and neglect. No system is perfect; no society is completely just and fair, but progress is measured in steps, and this legislation, Bill 188, Supporting Children's Futures Act, 2024, is the next step towards creating a fairer and safer system for at-risk children and youth with few other options.

I have worked with children and youth involved in mental health, the criminal justice system; victims of physical, emotional and sexual abuse; and gang violence, many of whom have been in care. Over the years—I can assure you that the years have not made these experiences any easier. I have talked with youth as young as 12 who have committed murder.

What struck me more recently is I spoke to a 14-year-old girl I met with recently in one of our systems. It stuck with me because she could have been my daughter; she could be your daughter. She will die on our streets. And the worst part: She knew this, and she didn't care. Is this the Ontario we envision?

What I'm seeing I cannot unsee and what I'm hearing I can't unhear. Think of this example: a child failed by a system meant to protect her. Mia was the subject of the Ombudsman report released last week. Mia was a 16-year-old girl who wanted to feel protected and cared for. She wanted to finish high school. She endured sexual violence in a chaotic home environment. One of her siblings had

already been taken into care in 2015, and Mia was looking for care but instead received apathy from those whose careers were based on supporting children in need. Mia met all the criteria for foster home placement: a traumatized child, full of adverse childhood experiences, which we hear about. She reached out for help in 2019, and instead she was recommended to a shelter. Senior leadership was instructed to cut down on foster placement. By 2020, Mia was dead.

It is so easy for many of us to dissociate when we read about someone like Mia. It is a defence mechanism for people who feel they have no power to change the system. It is easier to think of someone like Mia as a concept rather than a person.

Ladies and gentlemen of this committee, you can change the system. Your roles as public representatives demand that you reject apathy, indifference and fear of failing to try to make something better. We are all here in this room because we want to make a difference.

A society is judged by its treatment of its most vulnerable members. When a child is raised in a hostile environment, that affects their maturation and their brain. A child raised through fear takes that fear and turns it into anger, which is often turned into violence—I know. Statistically, they are more likely to encounter law enforcement.

Please remember this statistic if you remember anything I say: seven years of warning, seven-year incubation period. Children who end up in court for committing a serious violent offence at 14, when you look back into their record, they started having issues by age seven. Kindergarten teachers will tell you who they can be, possibly. Think about how many adults may have passed through their lives during this critical developmental period.

Through my work with CDI SNAP—Stop Now and Plan program, an Ontario-made, evidence-based program—and associated research, an identified critical developmental phase is in ages six to 11. This is a key phase to provide support and ensure a child is well situated for life. The brain is malleable, still learning and has not yet taken in all the personality traits that will define them into adulthood. A child given a living environment and the tools to succeed returns the investment tenfold; an abused child who is ignored becomes, for lack of a better term, a liability for all of us, as they carry the scars they received as a child into adulthood. Seven years of warning, a seven-year incubation period.

It is imperative that we institute mechanisms to hold licensees accountable for their actions. Bill 188 is a fantastic piece of legislation regarding that matter and I hope it passes through the Legislature. By giving the ministry more power regarding the oversight of these facilities, we can ensure that we are working to reduce the number of abuse instances and are holding those responsible for allowing this to happen accountable. These amendments signal a commitment to improving outcomes for vulnerable youth by strengthening the ministry's oversight of foster care and group homes, enhancing privacy

protections and increasing the frequency of visits to at-risk children.

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): You have one minute remaining.

Dr. Leena Augimeri: I appreciate the work regarding privacy protections for children. Children should not have to live in fear of their intimate details being public. By ensuring privacy protections for children, they are better able to adjust into adulthood without fear of becoming a public record. Data is critical, though, in helping us learn and do better, so we need to think about how we can access data while at the same time ensuring privacy protections and provisions.

In conclusion, your decisions will impact thousands of children over the years. Kids in care are not a number; they're not a castoff of society. They are children with potential, dreams and hopes. When a child makes a support request, those responsible for delivering it must be held to the highest standard. As you go home tonight, think about your children in your life and what you want for them. Kids in care deserve the same consideration.

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): Thank you, Leena.

Our next presenters are the Children's Aid Foundation of Canada. We have with us Valerie McMurtry, president and chief executive officer, and Christina Loc, youth and lived expert engagement. We also have on the screen Jeffrey Schiffer, their chief impact officer. I'd ask the two of you to come forward, and as was the direction from the committee, we indicated that if there were more than two members in person, we would need the consent of the committee. Is there agreement that the two individuals can present? Agreed. Thank you.

I'll just ask you to introduce yourselves into the mike. You can decide who goes first, second and third. Your seven minutes begins now.

Ms. Valerie McMurtry: Thank you very much. I'll kick things off. Thank you, Chair, Vice-Chair and all the dedicated members of the standing committee for this opportunity to speak with you today. I'm Valerie McMurtry. I am in my 11th year now as president and CEO leading the Children's Aid Foundation of Canada. With me today I have my colleague Dr. Jeffrey Schiffer, our relatively new chief impact officer, and Christina Loc, who is our very cherished youth and lived expert engagement manager on our team.

Our foundation is Canada's leading charity dedicated to improving the lives of families, children and young people involved in our child welfare systems. We raise and grant money as our day job, and we are committed to developing and testing new models for getting to better outcomes in our long history of not-so-great outcomes of children growing up in government care.

We are working currently with over 100 child- and youth-serving organizations across the country, with 61 of those right here in this province, in Ontario. We had the pleasure over several years of being called upon by this government as a trusted partner and adviser to the work of the ministry. During the pandemic, we were asked by the Ontario government to distribute \$1 million of urgent

direct grants to former youth in care in the earliest days of the pandemic. Our foundation matched that million and we were able, in the first few short weeks of all the urgent madness of the pandemic, to reach thousands of youths with emergency grants, thanks to our work together—an example of things.

Additionally, we've contributed in recent consultations in Ontario on the development of the readiness indicators for aging out of care, a population of young people we're very committed to, and have had the chance to commit to a review of the Child, Youth and Family Services Act and the Ready, Set, Go Program.

I'd like to commend Minister Parsa and the government of Ontario for the important work laid out in this new bill, and, of course, everyone's interest in seeing an increase in safety for young people in out-of-home care settings. We believe that safety is the most important primary concern of all of ours for the care of children, and that ideally, children are able to stay safely in the care of their own families in their own communities. But we understand that when that's not possible, it's important—it's critical, really—that young people's safety is prioritized and that they have access to high-quality, trauma-informed, culturally relevant care.

1510

With the 10th anniversary of Children and Youth in Care Day one week from today, it's incumbent upon us to really reflect on and evaluate the progress we've made on improving the health and well-being of young people in and from care and, most importantly, to act on the first-voice recommendations to improve our child welfare system—which is why I'm really pleased to turn to my colleague for the next portion of our presentation: Christina Loc, who facilitates our youth ambassador network, which is a group of over 100 youth from care with lived experience. She manages directly our Young People's Advisory Council, affectionately known on our team as YPAC. I'm grateful to this group of leaders who have shared their lived experience, professional expertise and wisdom to guide us on how best to meet the needs of children and youth in this province. Over to you.

Ms. Christina Loc: Thank you, Valerie and committee members, for the chance to speak with you today. As both a staff member of the foundation and a lived expert with experience in the child welfare system, this is a welcome and very important moment for me.

As Valerie mentioned, we engage with youth from across the country, but with respect to Bill 188, we've consulted with our YPAC members, the youth advisory council, who have lived experience in Ontario's child welfare system, as well, and have shared their feedback on increased worker visits and long-term safety.

With respect to worker visits, while the young people we spoke with were supportive of increasing worker visits, they encouraged the government to think innovatively about this. Young people know that workers are already at capacity and are overloaded. The concern is reliability and accessibility of workers in general and at all.

This relates to issues of access and poor dissemination of information, such as knowing your rights and also how to contact the Ombudsman, as well as having connection and feeling valued. If there was a website or mechanism for digital communication where young people could be able to be put in a chat with a guaranteed connection to a worker, this would be very valuable.

Overwhelmingly, our young people highlighted that discussions on safety must include prioritized access to mental health for young people in and from care. This is something that they highlighted. Approximately 30% of children and youth living in foster care in Canada have reported a mental health condition, compared to only 5% of their peers in the total population. Children and youth in care have a history of being found with increased rates of suicide and attempted suicide, among other things.

This was the case for a beloved sibling of one of our YPAC members, who had died due to mental health concerns just two days after delivering this speech to their local CAS about their experience aging out of care. This was a vibrant young person, a Star Wars-loving fan and, most importantly, someone who loved and was loved. They said:

“There aren't many resources offered that help us connect with other youth who are in similar circumstances. There is also a significant need for mental health services that are accessible to all youth in care, as well as for those who are aging out. Despite not being provided therapy, we are expected to be able to function in a society that doesn't understand trauma or really care about our well-being. I urge those who are making decisions about youth to not make decisions for us—make them with us. We know what we need”—

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): You have about one minute remaining.

Ms. Christina Loc: —we just need you “to give us the opportunity to tell you.”

When we were reviewing the proposed changes to Bill 188, my peers and I from care were struck by the fact that despite living in different foster homes from across the province and country, we had extremely similar stories to tell. This points to the ongoing systemic challenges, including a lack of prioritized access to resources and mental health that are in line with our needs. In the words of one of our YPAC members, “Being a ward of the government, access to mental health care should be so much easier.”

Thank you. I'm passing it over to Jeffrey Schiffer for final remarks.

Dr. Jeffrey Schiffer: Thank you so much, Christina. Thank you, members of the committee. I'm going to truncate my comments a little bit to try to fall within the less than a minute that we have left.

I just want to say, it's really clear from what Christina has shared that youth in the system continue to struggle. It's so important that we keep their voices and experiences central as we continue to redesign the system.

We know that the government is listening. An example of this is the fundamental work that has been done to

change things like enhancing privacy protections for young people in and from care, a change that has actually been long called for by the Child Welfare Political Action Committee—

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): I'm so sorry. Your seven minutes are up, Jeffrey, so what we'll do is we'll move to questions. I'm sure one of the members will come back to you for your presentation.

We'll start with the government. This is a seven-and-a-half-minute round. We'll begin with MPP Smith.

Ms. Laura Smith: Through you, Chair, I will try and give Jeffrey—if we can call each other by a first-name basis—a chance to speak. But first of all, I want to thank everyone for being here, either virtually or in the present. I actually used to work under the child protection act, and this is a very near and dear issue to me, so I appreciate your integrity and what you bring to the table.

We're happy to hear that these are positive changes. Changes to protect and support children and youth and families across Ontario are obviously a very high priority for our government. I know that both Leena and Valerie and, I'm sure, Jeffrey was probably going to get into it—there's a lot of modifications and redesigns that are happening with this bill, and specifically involving systematic changes that have to do with oversight and inspections that happens at those locations.

I believe there's going to be 20 new inspectors to be brought in, and I'm wondering if I could ask you what kind of impact that modification will have for not only the people working within the system but, more obviously, the children? We'll start with Dr. Leena.

Dr. Leena Augimeri: Sure. Thank you. That's an excellent question.

One of the things that I really thought was imperative within the system is accountability. And oversight is critical. So what this would enable to happen is that, when their oversight is happening and inspections are happening, they'll be able to find out exactly what is going right, what's not going right. How do we improve this? The staff: Are they trained? Do they meet the criteria for being involved? Can they actually work with these children? And also to be putting in place accredited procedures, making sure that we are accountable—that the organization is accountable to the children and to our communities.

Ms. Laura Smith: And there's actually another aspect of it that has to do with compliance, because there are going to be ECEs that are going to be trained to recognize—and I think there's going to be a bit more compliance when it comes to the colleges and universities in identifying these issues when dealing with children who face violence.

I'm wondering if anybody has some insight on that and wanted to contribute. I'm wondering if Jeffrey Schiffer—I was just going to give him an opportunity to kind of speak on that specific issue.

Dr. Jeffrey Schiffer: On the specific issue of enhanced training for ECEs and other workers who are recognizing these challenges?

Ms. Laura Smith: Sorry, I can barely hear you.

Dr. Jeffrey Schiffer: I'm sorry. Is that better?

Ms. Laura Smith: Slightly.

I just wanted to talk a little more about the issue of oversight and working with the different professionals within the organizations so that we can get better outcomes, better care locations.

Dr. Jeffrey Schiffer: I think that as we're developing that training, one important thing—and I'm hoping that you can hear me—

Ms. Laura Smith: Just slightly.

Dr. Jeffrey Schiffer: Slightly? I'm sorry that my audio is not great.

I think it will be important to continue to ensure that we're focusing on culturally specific approaches, particularly when thinking about Indigenous and racialized folks as well, if you can hear that.

Ms. Laura Smith: I can just barely get that.

Dr. Leena Augimeri: Can I just add something to that? With regards to the accountability, the other thing I think is really important is we need to have a reporting system. There needs to be a reporting system not only for when you're looking at these sites, but how do the staff—do the staff have a reporting system where they could share when they feel things are not going well? These are very important pieces that I think need to be included.

Ms. Laura Smith: Now, Christina, you actually mentioned the Ombudsman as well, which is something that I think not all children in care are aware of. Could you talk a little bit about how that will modify the system and hopefully provide better options for children who feel they're in distress?

Ms. Christina Loc: Yes, definitely. Can you guys hear me okay? Okay, perfect.

So the Ombudsman's office is something that—yes, you're right, MPP Laura Smith. I believe that young people really don't have a lot of knowledge about the Ombudsman's office. To be very honest with you, a lot of them probably don't even know what the word “ombudsman” is or how to pronounce it.

1520

So when I think about that, I think, first off, of course it's a really great idea to have some sort of resource for young people to be able to go to that would be able to advocate for them in a sense or provide them with a legal understanding of what they can do and what their options are. Now, I understand that this isn't necessarily to replace an advocate. They're very clear in their messaging on their website and in their work that they are not necessarily an advocate, but they are there to help you with your rights and understanding that. But I would definitely encourage the government to consider looking into the accessibility of this and making it youth-friendly, making sure that it's an understood tool and working with young people to understand how they would be using this tool specifically, not necessarily just using the same things that adults were to use and assuming that young people would be able to know how to access it.

Ms. Laura Smith: These changes also aim to better protect the privacy of the children and youth within the care system, whether they're in care now or, in the future, are outside of care and want to be in a position to talk about this care.

I'm just wondering—and maybe I'll circle over to Valerie, if I can call you by your first name. If you wouldn't mind talking about children's privacy and this very delicate nature of what happens to a child in care and the accountability that is taking place.

Ms. Valerie McMurtry: I would really like to defer to Jeff, but here is my quick comment: I completely support the work behind ensuring privacy, especially after a youth has left care. I think that's essential and needed. I think—and Jeff can jump in on this—that there's a concern for us that, overall, we are guided by strong evidence and data that shows what's working and what needs to be changed or reviewed, and I'm not—

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): There's one minute remaining in this round.

Ms. Valerie McMurtry: My view is that we haven't had enough good data guiding all of our child welfare systems, not just in this province. And so, if by ensuring privacy we reduce access to aggregated data to guide our decision-making going forward, that would be a risk to us, I think. Is that fair, Jeff? I'm sorry; I used up your time again. You've got to give him a chance.

Ms. Laura Smith: It's all right. Thank you so much.

I'm going to circle back to one of my questions that I had asked earlier, and I'm sorry we were having technical problems. I began to talk about the professional colleges and involving them in this, as well. There are new ECEs who are coming through the system that are now trained in this area. I can see you're all shaking your heads. Maybe I'll go back to Dr. Leena and ask her if she wants to contribute to this.

Dr. Leena Augimeri: Absolutely. The CYCs or CYWs, child youth carers and child youth workers, are critical. These—

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): That includes the government's first seven-and-a-half-minute round.

We'll now move to MPP Taylor and the official opposition for your seven-and-a-half-minute round of questions.

Miss Monique Taylor: Good afternoon. Thank you for joining us today. I have to say, I do agree that Bill 188 is a step in the right direction. We have definitely seen group homes fail young people throughout the years and fail them seriously, Mia being the last one. Thank you for bringing that up. I actually asked a question yesterday about Mia in the Legislature. I don't see in this bill where it would have protected Mia, and so that is a concern for me.

While bringing forward this very small piece—it's an important piece, but it's small in the scope of what we see within our entire child welfare system. I would have liked to see more, and I'm quite sure that all of you who have worked in this field for so many years and have seen children fall through the cracks would have liked to have seen more, too.

Maybe, Leena, we'll start with you, and possibly some other things that would have saved Mia and would have provided the opportunity for Mia to have a safe home, which is completely within her rights. She should have been taken care of and was failed.

Dr. Leena Augimeri: Great question. It's accountability. I don't think we have enough accountability measures in our system, and so we need to be placing accountability across the board, whether it's foster homes or in group homes. We need proper accountability measures, proper reporting measures and it then needs to be actionable. When something is not working and you know it's not working, you don't leave it broke; you fix it. Therefore, without those accountability measures and processes in place, it's just not going to get done.

Miss Monique Taylor: I want to dig in a bit, because "accountability" is a great word, but what does accountability look like, so that the members of the government can actually hear what those real means actually would look like in place? Like, what does accountability look like?

Dr. Leena Augimeri: So it doesn't matter what facility you go into, what group home you go to; they're using evidence-based practices. They're using standards that work. They're not just picking things out of the Internet to decide what they're doing today. There needs to be a menu of evidence-based practices that have been approved, and they're being used. That's a piece of accountability, for example, that I don't see happening.

Miss Monique Taylor: Right. Great. Thank you.

Dr. Leena Augimeri: You're welcome.

Miss Monique Taylor: Valerie, I wanted to switch over to you a bit. Last year, under this government, we've seen our Ontario children's aid societies have to be bailed out of a deficit of, I believe it was, \$15.9 million—billion—millions, billions; they fly like crazy around here—the shortfalls that we've seen in the system. And yet, we see these private, for-profit group homes, who are calling kids "cash cows" and "paycheques," just flourishing and receiving licences. They shouldn't be able to take care of dogs, some of them, and yet they're still in existence.

So we're seeing huge deficits. We see children's aid societies that are not funded correctly and we see group homes that can ask for as much as they want. Particularly for northern, Indigenous children, we're seeing double the money that they're getting for other children. Could you comment on some of that?

Ms. Valerie McMurtry: Thank you for the question. I have to just quickly make sure we're clear: We are not a front-line CAS or a representative of the CAS as an advocacy group in any way, so I don't really feel equipped to comment on the budget issues of a CAS per se.

But I have to say that we are following at the foundation the concerning data on the Canadian incidence study of reported child abuse and neglect. We know that 90% of the investigations conducted across Canada are for concerns that are related to chronic issues, not urgent issues, and that is an important concept to think about when we think

about how we fund our child protection system, because I don't believe our CAS system is necessarily doing a good job—sorry; it's doing a good job of responding to those urgent safety concerns. We're set up in an investigative model, and our legislation supports that very clearly, and the funding flows from that.

So an urgent issue, of course, would be immediate danger of sexual abuse or physical abuse of a child or a youth. A chronic issue points to a lot of other community-based challenges that families are experiencing, from mental health to addiction to poverty to domestic violence etc., and our system is expected to respond to these issues when they turn up at the front door of the CAS. We're not equipped, I don't think, in the funding formula to address those chronic issues.

A very good example—top of mind, I think, to many who are close to this—is that the current system in Ontario is dealing with a huge number of highly complex, chronic complex-needs children, who land in the system because it's kind of the point of last resort. And so, agencies are not necessarily funded to care for those children, which kind of leads into the group home issue. So it's complex. I don't think it's simple. But that's just my upfront comment on the deficit issues that are in the system right now.

I'm going to have to say with respect to group homes again, we accept that the private system is well entrenched now in the province, so fixing or understanding how to make them better is very important. We are not really in a position to comment on the model per se, because we're not directly involved as a foundation. I don't know if, Christina, you wanted to comment on the group homes piece.

Ms. Christina Loc: I think this really just goes back down to the oversight piece.

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): You've got about one minute remaining.

Ms. Christina Loc: The accountability piece is that oversight, right? I really liked your question of, "What does accountability look like? What does that really mean?" I think for young people in care—in the YPAC meeting, they talked a lot about having things like surprise visits from social workers and stuff like that, and they talked deeply about things that went under the rug. When they knew that workers were coming, certain things would happen, whether it was a group home or a foster home.

And so, just speaking from lived experience and commenting in that regard, I think it's definitely just different ways of figuring out how to have that oversight and also how to have those wraparound supports, because again, it's not just about looming over people and watching what they do and then giving them a bunch of money to do it. It's also about: How do we support people? How do we give money back into wages for the workers and people in this industry, to really instill and encourage the care for young people?

1530

Miss Monique Taylor: Thank you so very much for sharing those words. I appreciate it.

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): Thank you, MPP Taylor.

Now we move to the independent member's first round of four and a half minutes. MPP Clancy?

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Thank you so much. I really appreciate you making the time to come here today and sharing your expertise. It's great to hear your perspective on these matters.

I just wanted to bring it back to complex care. I was able to chat with our local CAS, and they say that a lot of referrals that are made to the agency are actually because of what you're saying: lack of access to mental health care, lack of access to supports for children with disability and complex needs. I wonder, perhaps, Dr. Leena—your new nickname—if you could speak to some of the gaps that are leading to kids being referred to child welfare.

The reason I'm talking about this is because we're working on the accountability of the system, but I think we also need to talk about the increased demands on the system as it fills the gap. It's like an ER room, where systemic barriers and gaps end up in a child welfare system because they never say no—they do, but whatever.

Dr. Leena Augimeri: Great question. We know about one in five children have mental health issues. When it comes to children in foster care, the complexity of their mental health and developmental needs, it's 80% to 90%, so we need to think about—great question—how do they even get there?

I think we need to speak about how really early intervention and prevention is critical. We hear that all the time. The work I've been doing is that we try to keep kids in their families, but there need to be better evidence-based programs that are offered through the system.

And then, as we heard, what I just mentioned before is that we need to be offering foster care, kids in care, evidence-based programs that work. That's our job, to make sure that they work, and we need to collect data to be able to determine what the impact is on those services, on those young people. Because they are coming into the system with extreme complex needs, and then they flip into the juvenile justice system and other issues.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: What I'm seeing in the community—and I think this is representative in care—is that because it's more expensive to pay folks with the qualifications to deal with complex needs, I do feel like there's a mismatch sometimes between different qualifications. It costs money to get somebody with that expertise, and I think that's something that—in community care, I know we are pushing people with those high qualifications and high expertise out of the system. So I think it's sometimes a bit of a set-up when we are cutting budgets and cutting things, in a way, setting up people coming to work in these spaces who don't have the same qualifications and background as a way of saving money.

Dr. Leena Augimeri: The young girl that I spoke about that, I believe—and I've never in my 40 years said that a child will die without having that hope. She was asking for mental health support, and they didn't have it in the facility she was in—which blew my mind, I'll be honest with you—because they couldn't afford a psychologist, or they

couldn't afford the social work in her community that she was in.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: And that's the gap that I see—

Dr. Leena Augimeri: Yes.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy:—that our not-for-profit sector has eroded and gotten rid of that rung on the ladder, so it's for-profit care for all those experts. I've seen it through many of my colleagues who have this expertise. They're pushed into a model like that.

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): One minute remaining.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: That's something you spoke of, Christina: that access to mental health care. Can you say what it would have meant to a lot of the folks on your committee?

Ms. Christina Loc: I honestly almost don't even have words for what that would have meant to my community. At least this is just my direct community in Ontario, in Toronto and the GTA, but every year, one to two to three more of my friends pass away.

Again, from the YPAC members that I work with at the foundation and consult with throughout the year: We talked about all these different changes to Bill 188, and the number one thing—over even oversight, over all of these other things that they brought up—was that we need support for mental health. We looked into the funding and the budgets of what's available to our young people when they age out of care, from 18 to 21 or 25, whatever it is. The budget is only \$500 for the year—

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): Thank you.

We'll move now to the government's second seven-and-a-half-minute round of questions.

Ms. Laura Smith: I'm not going to take up too much time; I just want to finish up what I started. I think, Dr. Leena, I'll possibly be asking the same thing.

We talked about a suite of enhancements that helps enforce and gives the people tools to enhance compliance in out-of-care, including the colleges. I think you had just begun discussing that, and I was hoping that you could continue that conversation.

Dr. Leena Augimeri: Yes. So CYCs and CYWs, interestingly enough, do not have an accredited college. First of all, that is important, and that needs to happen. We have the school of social work, we have psychologists, but we do not have a body and, if anything, government needs to pass that. Something has to happen in that direction.

CYCs and CYWs are trained. They are trained and they have hands-on experience of being able to learn how to work with youth or children who are in care or in specialized programs, for example.

So the issue with the training—training is critical, and when people are hired into these facilities, they need to make sure they do have the proper credentials.

Ms. Laura Smith: But I was actually getting down to—and perhaps this could better be answered by Christina—the sharing of information through the colleges when individuals are trained in a specific—like an ECE—and there are ramifications for their actions, and reporting those bad actors. That's kind of the question that I was asking about, and I believe this bill provides more trans-

parency, sharing of information, which is something which is key. Perhaps Valerie, if I can call you by your first name, can talk about the sharing of information and how that makes things more transparent.

Ms. Valerie McMurtry: I'm sorry, I just want to clarify: sharing of which information?

Ms. Laura Smith: Like, information—

Interjection.

Ms. Laura Smith: CAF, yes.

Ms. Valerie McMurtry: Listen, a through line in everything we think and stand for as a foundation is to enable first-voice leadership and act it. I sat with Christina as she facilitated the feedback from our young persons' advisory group. I was really teary that day listening to the challenges they felt about being heard in that exchange between the workers who have been running our group homes and, sometimes, a child and youth worker within the agency. Not having a clear and trusted way to share their experiences was the number one thing I took away from that night.

Ms. Laura Smith: I'm just going to pass the torch over to MPP Pang.

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): MPP Pang.

Mr. Billy Pang: Thank you, Chair. Through you, first question for CDI. We talk about oversight, reporting system, accountability, things like that. So what do you think about the stricter rules around consistent police checks and attestations in between, important to providing safe services in child welfare?

Dr. Leena Augimeri: So, hands down, I think you should never hire anybody without a police check. And it doesn't mean you just do it once; you need to consistently do it. Like, in our policies and procedures, we have to do police checks every year or every two years at the minimum to ensure that all staff are covered,

And then the second question you had was oversight?

Mr. Billy Pang: Yes. It's about attestation in between.

Dr. Leena Augimeri: Yes. So that again has to do with—if I understand it correctly, if staff do commit and there is something that happens, they do have to admit and commit to it and the agency needs to follow through with it. Is that what you're asking?

Mr. Billy Pang: Yes. Okay. Thank you very much.

Do you think the new suite of enhanced enforcement tools proposed in this bill will improve enhanced compliance in out-of-home care?

Dr. Leena Augimeri: Absolutely. Absolutely. That was what I was talking about, the accountability piece. We need to ensure that we have specific criteria for accountability: what we expect every organization or every facility to be able to attest to when they run their operations or their programs.

Mr. Billy Pang: The same question for the Children's Aid Foundation: Could you expand on the impacts of greater information sharing that MPP Smith asked about earlier? Expand on that. What's the impact of the greater information sharing between CAF and other bodies on how children and youth in care are supported?

Ms. Valerie McMurtry: I'm going to say briefly, and reiterating Christina's comment about understanding what the Ombudsman's office is—I was saying to my colleagues earlier that when I was a little girl growing up in a small town in Niagara, I knew, as every child in my town knew, what a Neighbourhood Watch meant. If we were out and about in our town with a concern of safety, we knew that Neighbourhood Watch was a trusted avenue to be heard and protected.

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I don't believe that our children in care in Ontario necessarily know that they have somebody available to them all the time. That's my resounding comment in all of my experience in listening to young people from care. Improving that is something we are committed to. If we could play a role in ensuring and helping, across Ontario, to have connectivity for youth to understand their rights and understand who is a trusted source to bring them to safety, I think that's a really important concept.

Mr. Billy Pang: So you mean the availability of supports such as the Ombudsman or the Office of the Children's Lawyer is helpful.

Ms. Valerie McMurtry: Yes.

Mr. Billy Pang: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): MPP Pierre.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you all for coming here today to speak with us. My question is for Christina. During the previous rounds of questions, you talked about making the Ombudsman youth-friendly. I'm wondering if you can just expand on that a little bit more and tell us how we can do that.

Ms. Christina Loc: Yes, definitely. I think in terms of making it youth-friendly—

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): You've got one minute remaining.

Ms. Christina Loc: Again, it doesn't necessarily look like something that is for youth. I wouldn't say youth look at their page and their content like it's something youth-friendly. I think a lot of them have sometimes run-ins with the judicial system—things, again, that are systemic—and so we tend to feel afraid to report. So that type of psyche is something that I would recommend maybe we look into a little bit further, to really work with youth to develop something collaboratively, really exploring their experience with using these interfaces.

Another aspect to it is, again, understanding the simplicity of, "What exactly am I getting out of this? What does an Ombudsman mean?" Really, it's almost that simple, I feel.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): We'll now move to the second seven-and-a-half-minute round of questions. The official opposition: MPP Taylor.

Miss Monique Taylor: Christina, we used to have a child advocate in the province. It's unfortunate that we do not any longer, because the children recognized that advocate and knew that they had a safe voice that they could always go to, where they could be heard and seen and have a true advocate for them. Because you are right:

The Ombudsman is not an advocate, and they're only able to look at the matter, see where it went wrong and hopefully act on it. But as we see in Mia's story, they're acting too late, because Mia is gone, and there's nothing coming out of that that would save Mia. So I'm sorry that the advocate isn't there, because he should be—or they, whichever the office be.

Anyways, I want to go back to group homes again and talk about the predatory ways that we have seen them be, literally, calling Indigenous communities and telling them that they have space for four more children or whatever the story is, because they know that there's a higher rate of money that they get from those children. Do you see anything in this bill that would protect kids from those predatory actions, from really being those "cash cows" and those "paycheques" for these homes? Valerie, I guess that question is for you.

Ms. Valerie McMurtry: I'm not sure I really am equipped to answer it in a meaningful way. But I'm going to maybe ask Jeff, because he's—

Miss Monique Taylor: I was just going to say—Jeff, do you know?

Ms. Valerie McMurtry: Yes, Jeff would have a lot more front-line experience from his time serving in Native Child and Family Services.

Dr. Jeffrey Schiffer: Sure, yes. I think our hope would be that increased accountability contained within this bill is going to help ensure that kids are getting the services and supports they need, regardless of what type of out-of-home care placement they are in.

Not having been directly involved in providing services in that type of setting, I don't feel fully equipped to speak to it either. But I think the emphasis on accountability needs to be there. We've spoken a lot about that this afternoon. We're hoping that that will get us to where we need to be, yes.

Miss Monique Taylor: Thank you. I've also heard from a group home worker who is a trusted voice to me, and they were telling me that this 16-year-old young person had 20 minutes—the phone call came in, and 20 minutes: They said, "The funding is no longer there for you," packed up all of her bags and dropped her at a shelter. This is literally the world that we're living in right now in this province, where kids at the age of 16, when they're supposed to be protected, are being told, "The funding is no longer available for you, and we're dropping you at a shelter," with all of her worldly belongings, including her father's ashes that were barely stuffed in her pocket.

There is nothing in this bill to—we're looking at the licences and the behaviours of the group homes, but we're not looking at the system as a whole to ensure that those safety nets are there and that there's funding there.

Jeffrey, you have something to say. Please go ahead.

Dr. Jeffrey Schiffer: Well, I was just going to say—and you're exactly right. The bill is a good point of departure, but really, I think for us, this is a flag to go back to child welfare redesign and to go back to the re-examination of the Child, Youth and Family Services Act,

recognizing that that strategy really is about a whole-of-government approach. We need approaches that are bringing together child welfare with health and mental health, because these problems are too complex.

As Valerie already stated, the child welfare system is not resourced or equipped to deal with some of these challenges alone. We need a much more integrated and coordinated system so that kids aren't there in the first place. It's already been spoken about; we need evidence-based approaches that let us know how to get there from the impact side.

So this is a point of departure. We've got some work to do, but we're headed in the right direction.

Miss Monique Taylor: You're right, and thank you so much for that, because there is definitely no proactive work. Everything is reactive, from what we see. We don't have the mental health supports. We have kids with complex medical care needs that end up in care. We have kids with mental health challenges that end up in care. We have kids whose families are in poverty and they end up in care, which is completely not the place for them to be.

Christina, I'm going to ask you, if you had one wish today—you have the government to listen—what would the one thing be that you would ask for this government to make things better for kids in care?

Ms. Christina Loc: My one wish, I guess, or one thing that I would ask for is definitely to just continue to work with us. I think there's a lot of different people that get in the middle of us really being able to advocate for ourselves, and I think that gets in the way a lot of the time when it comes down to the true message of what's actually being needed. And it convolutes and it blurs what's actually needing to be done.

And so, I feel very grateful to be able to sit here today and represent all the young people that I get to speak to now across the country through the foundation and who I get to engage with on the front lines.

Again, I would say, what all my brothers and sisters in care have advocated for is those wraparound supports and the mental health supports and just realizing that—we keep using this term “in care,” “kids in care,” “foster care,” and I think that kind of label makes it seem like we're distant, that it's a separate group or a separate entity from the rest of the community. But it's not. These are literally your neighbours. This could be your own family. My family didn't know that I was put into foster care until I was 17 years old when I attended a family's funeral. They had no idea that I was put into foster care.

And so, it's really like, how do we really inspire community? And that really comes down to those supports—

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): One minute left.

Ms. Christina Loc: —of helping each other and really nourishing each other and putting those supports into each other and being able to fund that for both the staff that work in the community and therefore the mental health that is improved from that.

Miss Monique Taylor: Thank you.

I just want to tell you, my first experience in the Legislature almost 13 years ago was the kids-leaving-care

hearings. I had the opportunity to listen to so many young people. You inspire me, and I'm grateful that you're here today. I'm grateful for all the work that you do. Please keep it up. There are so many kids who would be lost without a voice like yours in the system, so just thank you for being awesome, and thank you for sharing your time here with us today.

Ms. Christina Loc: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): We will now move to the independent member, your final four-and-a-half-minute round of questions.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I just wanted to share a few words. Some of the other concerns, I think, were like how Dr. Jeffrey—we're just calling everybody by their first name—shared that this is a good starting point. I think we want to see legislation that curbs bad acting, but I think looking into the root causes and looking into prevention is really key.

The F&CS group from my riding shared that they're worried about red tape because they're already experiencing, they said, the lowest funding allocation they've had in the past 10 years. They said there's about a \$63-million gap to keep them at a functioning level. A lot of the legislation demands more workers to go and do these visits. And I know, just from the school social worker lens, that we had incredible caseloads.

Dr. Jeffrey—we're calling you—would you be able to speak to the caseload issues that CASs are facing? I think there's not only just visiting kids in care but also placements that are available. From my understanding there are kids living in motels, there are kids living in the buildings of CASs because there is a lack. Can you speak of those two constraints?

Dr. Jeffrey Schiffer: Sure. What I can say is that we've spoken a lot about how children's aid societies are taking on a lot of the work that they're not resourced to do, right? So I think things are going to continue to be challenging until we can really implement a whole-of-government approach. So the question of whether or not they need more resources or some of the work needs to be shifted to other sectors I think is still in question.

What I can say is that I think we really need to move away from a duty to report towards a duty to support, if that makes sense. And so, what we need to do is start implementing these coordinated wraparound systems that bring child and family well-being agencies or children's aid societies together with community providers to be able to tackle these issues together. That's really going to help us with those resource challenges.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I think it's necessary. I'm glad that kids in care will get more access to a worker that can visit them and check in on them, but we're talking about ratios here, like we talk about in education. We talk about that in health care. So we have to make sure that folks don't burn out and they have enough actual social workers to do these things.

The other thing—I want to come back to these kids with complex needs. I really have seen this awful trend of kind of getting rid of the not-for-profit sector that deals with

complex needs. I have someone close to me that deals with sexual abuse perpetrators. They just shut the whole agency and offered them a job with \$10,000 less down the street. None of those professionals are going there. Her words were, “I don’t think that agency can handle the kids that are in my care,” and she says that half of her caseload is institutionalized young people. It’s just alarming that we are going to leave kids who sexually abuse without the care that they were actually receiving from the experts they have. So it’s just troubling for me and, I think, all of us, as we want to keep kids out of institutionalized care.

I just want to maybe—

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): One minute.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Sorry. I’m going to bring it to Valerie. I wonder if you can speak a little bit about this priority access. I know we were talking about how good it would be if workers could be able to and kids in care could access those services on a priority basis.

Ms. Valerie McMurtry: Are you talking mental health in particular, health care—

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Or developmental services. Maybe you could talk about developmental services.

Ms. Valerie McMurtry: Well, it honestly kind of astonishes me, since I came out of children’s health and childhood disability work into this space, that somehow our children who have experienced the greatest trauma and have complex, sometimes congenital issues in their lives aren’t automatically at the front of the line of any government service. This ministry is not the largest ministry, and we have a huge amount of attention going into areas like children’s mental health right now and a lot of money going behind it, which we’re totally excited to see, because we know the need is huge. But somehow there’s not enough connectivity.

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): I want to take the opportunity to thank all of the presenters that are here and also the good doctor, virtually. I really appreciate the opportunity for you to present.

Given the fact that we’re a couple of minutes early, we’ll just briefly recess until 4 so that we can our next group ready.

The committee recessed from 1557 to 1601.

MS. NADIA GEORGE

MS. AMELIA MERHAR

MR. DAVID MORNEAU JR.

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): We’ll reconvene with our next panel of presenters. Our first presenter who is listed is navigating the precinct, so with the committee’s concurrence we’ll move to the second presenter, Nadia George. You have seven minutes for your presentation. I’ll give you—as you’ve probably heard—a one-minute prompt. I would ask you to introduce yourself, and your seven minutes begins now.

Ms. Nadia George: Honourable members of the Ontario provincial Legislature, my name is Nadia George. I want to thank you for allowing me to share my experiences

with the child welfare system with you today and how this bill can best support youth outcomes after care. As a nationally recognized, award-winning public speaker, therapist and certified integration clinician with over a decade of professional experience in the social service sector, I feel that I bring a unique perspective to the discussion surrounding proposed changes outlined in Bill 188. My lived experiences, coupled with my professional expertise, fuel my advocacy for mental health awareness and environments where individuals can thrive.

Interaction with the child welfare system in my early years has helped me appreciate the necessity for solution-focused conversations like the one we are having here today, and I firmly believe that allyship and advocacy from the government can serve as an integral part of ensuring action.

My earliest experiences with the system involve memories of interrogation-like interviews that occurred after supervised visits and during school hours, leaving me feeling unsafe and unsupported both in my home and in spaces that were meant to nurture me. While reunification with my family eventually occurred, intervention with children’s aid workers remained consistent. The scars left by these experiences lingered, shaping my path into adulthood. Sometimes intervention is necessary for safety; however, keeping the experience of the child in the centre can help mitigate the effects of system involvement. We know that this does not always happen. This is why ensuring children are aware of their rights and the Ombudsman is so important.

As I transitioned into adulthood, the challenges persisted. Without stable support systems or guidance, I found myself navigating the complexities of homelessness and early motherhood with little to no support. Accessing education and employment opportunities proved to be daunting tasks, compounded by the shadows of my past interactions with the child welfare system. Reflecting on my own past experiences, I cannot help but see the potential for positive change this act represents.

My difficulty in my early journey does not belong to the child welfare system. I had to work doubly hard to arrive at a place in my life where I can even appear before you today. I should not live with the uncertainty that comes with knowing the child welfare system owns and controls my history; this is not what it means to have a child-centred system with the voice of the child being heard. By enhancing privacy rights and protections for individuals like myself who have endured the complexities of the child welfare system, we can pave the way for a brighter future for generations to come.

This perpetual accessibility implies that because I interacted with the child welfare system, through no fault of my own, I am somehow to be continuously viewed through the lens of suspicion and judgment, akin to a lifelong criminal. However, the child welfare system is not the youth justice system. I did not commit any crimes that led to my experience within the child welfare system, yet a written record of my most vulnerable moments is effectively treated as a corporate business record of

children's aid societies, to practically do with as they see fit, with limited accountability. There is no proactive auditing of inappropriate access to files. In fact, access under very liberal circumstances is deemed appropriate at this time, despite the fact it has been decades since I received services from the system. Not only should the files be sealed after service; they should also be stored outside of the system, just like we do for youth who are involved with the justice system, to ensure they have brighter futures.

Furthermore, even when the file is effectively open because the child is still receiving services, we must also safeguard their private information by ensuring through the audit process that unauthorized access cannot occur. The last CYFSA changes under Part X even introduced penalties for unauthorized access to files; this has no teeth without a means to affirm whether the rules are in fact being followed.

Bill 188 also addresses the experiences of youth in out-of-home care and recognizes the need for comprehensive oversight and support to ensure their well-being. As someone who witnessed first-hand the detrimental effects of such placements, specifically group care, I can attest to the profound impact it had on my family. My sibling, a vulnerable youth, was placed in a group home where they were treated with indifference and neglect, their cries for help falling on deaf ears. As a sister, I felt the weight of their absence and the injustice of a system that failed to prioritize my sibling's needs. Instead of investigating the circumstances surrounding my sibling's placement or considering the history of our family, the child welfare system took our parent's words at face value, neglecting to see my sibling as a child in need of love and support.

It's imperative that we address these systemic failures and strive to ensure that no child is ever subjected to such neglect and mistreatment again. Through the provisions outlined in this act, we have an opportunity to enact meaningful change and safeguard the well-being of vulnerable youth across our province. That is why I am so pleased to see that the proposed legislation is going to be creating stronger standards to ensure children and youth are informed about their rights under the Ombudsman's office.

Today, I stand before you as a testament to resilience and the unwavering human spirit. Despite the obstacles I faced, I persevered, driven by my desire to create a better life for myself and my family. However, I recognize that my story is just one among many; there are countless others who continue to struggle in silence, yearning for the support and protections this act seeks to provide.

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): One minute.

Ms. Nadia George: In conclusion, I urge each and every one of you to consider the profound impact of your decisions on the lives of those who have experienced the child welfare system first-hand. Let us stand together in support of this act, recognizing its potential to empower individuals, strengthen families and foster a brighter future for all.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): Thank you so much.

Amelia Merhar is here. Did you want to come up and begin your presentation? You'll have seven minutes, and I'll interrupt you just briefly when you have one minute remaining.

Ms. Amelia Merhar: I think it's about five.

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): Okay, perfect.

Ms. Amelia Merhar: Hello, and thank you for welcoming my participation in this process.

My name is Amelia Merhar. My mom's water broke when she was changing the locks to keep my dad out. I didn't have a chance for a normal life. I grew up in Bloor West Village with a single mother on welfare who had schizophrenia. As her illness progressed, her psychotic episodes intensified. When I was 11, my parents were finally divorcing and my dad threatened to kill us if my mom didn't sign the paperwork. My mother, terrified, pulled us out of school and wouldn't let us leave the house for four months. She was in psychosis those four months. The schools finally made the call to CAS, and eight cop cars ended up at our house, tackling our mom to get the key. Eventually, they found my brother and I hiding in the attic.

Out of the five foster and group homes I've lived in—in Bowmanville, Pickering, Scarborough and twice in Brampton—two should have been shut down and one was really great. For the next five years, I was in and out of foster and group homes and my grandparents' house, switching schools each time. I attended 13 schools by the time I graduated high school; never from expulsion or disciplinary issues, simply because of poverty and my interactions with the child welfare system.

I became emancipated at 16 and moved out on my own and went on student welfare. I ended up homeless at 19 after my first year of university. Some 60% of Canadian youth on the street have had interactions with the child welfare system. Children coming from the child welfare system are the most vulnerable youth in Canada, and Statistics Canada didn't even count them in the census until 2011.

These days, I'm an economic and health geographer, finishing my PhD at the University of Waterloo. I study the embodiment of transience, inspired by reconnecting with a foster sister on Facebook. From one basement of a foster home in Scarborough, as adults, I had landed in the Yukon, she was in Yellowknife, and the third foster girl in the home was in Calgary. I wondered about us all leaving Toronto and going so far away. How had all the foster home placements affected our ability to stay, to build a life, to be vulnerable over time in a community? I am still exploring these questions of how this repeated stressful travel and displacement affect us over time with various communities.

I've also worked as a child welfare policy analyst for the Council of Yukon First Nations, and I really felt like I was doing meaningful work.

From a policy perspective, I'd like to talk about two points of Bill 188.

Accountability for homes and care providers is crucial. There are many loving and kind foster parents. There are also people who see wounded children as an income stream. Having lived in a home like that, it just compounds the shame and guilt and confusion of being a foster kid. I chose to return to a hoarded, psychotic and abusive home over being a second-class foster kid constantly denigrated by the “real” family. At least I had my own room with my mother, not one shared with a home day care TV room and two other foster sisters.

Privacy: It’s abhorrent that the worst moments of my life are accessible to any CAS Toronto social worker to this day. I had more than 10 social workers in total because, every time, there’s a new intake worker, a new youth worker, a new family worker. Part of that’s due to turnover and burnout in front-line professions, but part of it was just going in and out of care. I fully support enhanced privacy legislation for youth who have aged out of the child welfare system.

My last point is about the importance of culture in foster care in general. Connecting to my Slavic identity has been very healing, since my immediate family is still broken, psychotic and cruel. We hear about the importance of culture for Indigenous children in care, which is important, necessary and meaningful, but when your family is a mess, what roots and connections does one draw strength and pride from?

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I’m not suggesting to legislate culture for foster kids but rather saying what has helped me move past a nightmare childhood in the hope that someone with relevant power, influence or need hears it. We are not just the fruits of our immediate family. Everyone and every child can reach back to an ancestral culture to find some strength, and I hope they find the love and support to do so. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): We have one presenter online, David M. Morneau Jr.

David, you can start your seven-minute speech now.

Mr. David Morneau Jr.: Good afternoon. My name is David Morneau Jr. I am a family lawyer, the principal of and creative evolution officer for Morneau Family Law and Legal Innovation, which is my law firm.

Since 1999, I have worked in the family justice system. While my practice has evolved to out-of-court only, between 1999 and 2019, I had many roles within the traditional justice system. For example, I was counsel for parents, I was counsel for the children’s aid society in a fee-for-service role, and I was also held as counsel for children and youth through the Office of the Children’s Lawyer.

Within family law, I have worked with children and youth both in and out of care and dedicated time and acquired knowledge of youth who were sex-trafficked. When I briefly stepped away from family law at the end of 2019, I also spent a year and a half as executive director of an organization dedicated to providing advocacy and support to children and youth who were witnesses to and/or survivors of crime and violence. Not surprisingly,

there was often intersection between these groups of children and youth.

I want to be clear that I’m not speaking on behalf of the children’s aid society, the OCL nor the advocacy organization I once led; I am speaking as a professional who has had the opportunity to observe, and my comments are based on the perspective gained from my professional experiences for over two decades.

Before I go on, I also want to acknowledge and honour the voices of children and youth and adults who have had the courage to speak up, sometimes in difficult circumstances, to ensure that their voices were heard, and for creating a path to change their own trajectory and also the trajectory of others. You are all unique, and you are all important.

We need to continue to listen to their experience and wisdom. We need to continue to give them all the support that they require. We need to continue to build on the principles expressed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, as the Child, Youth and Family Services Act intended.

One of the greatest honours I’ve had in my career is to be entrusted with children’s voices, their stories and their journey. You see, for me, this is about empowerment—empowerment to have control of their own identity and history, free from arbitrary interference of others; empowerment to have a say in and create their own present and future, free from censure and judgment; empowerment to speak about their own living conditions with the knowledge that they have voices they can turn to that can assist, and the security of knowing that anything less than the care they deserve will not be tolerated; empowerment to know that their lives matter, like every other child and youth.

For example, the measures proposed for licensing and oversight compliance and imposition of penalties against out-of-care homes is essential. Accountability and continuing to empower our children and youth to speak if something isn’t right will be necessary, so that our children know that they matter. Sadly, in my professional experience, I’ve experienced homes that did not provide our children with safety—ones that did not meet their needs; even circumstances where the presence of sex trafficking was prevalent. Yes, that has happened. Quite frankly, it likely happened more frequently than any of us ever knew. I want you to pause and think about that for a moment.

Empowering children through the clarification and obligation of providing information about the Office of the Ombudsman will only add to that. Our children will tell us what they need; we just need to listen and hear them. And when their voice is not heard, they’ll have an avenue they can pursue. But it doesn’t stop at having an Ombudsman fulfill this role; children and youth need to know that it exists and how to access them.

This also leads to the necessity in establishing practices that will support our vulnerable. None of us should ever have to imagine any of our children being entrusted to the

care of anyone who in any way falls short of the standards that any parent would expect.

Another example is the right of our children to control their own information and identity. The importance of the state not having control of their information is critical to this. We also have to be vigilant that this right does not get watered down in some amorphous and general subjective exception with no meaningful oversight. If information is to be accessed or shared—

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): One minute remaining.

Mr. David Morneau Jr.:—by anyone other than the person who it pertains to, it should be a court that decides whether it needs this exception. This concept, in general, should resonate with us all. We so fiercely protect our own right to privacy, yet so many former children in care have felt no control.

We have to remember that while the proposed changes are a step in the right direction, this is not a time to pat ourselves on the back and rest easy. This area of development continues to evolve, as do the voices of children and youth. We need to be there to listen and evolve as their needs evolve. This will require regular consultation with experts, children and youth, and other stakeholders. I'd like to see it as a point in the continuum of evolution, where vigilance rather than complacency is the norm. The end result is to empower our most vulnerable children and youth to a brighter future.

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): Thank you, Mr. Morneau.

We'll now move to the first of two rounds of questions by the committee members. We'll start with the official opposition for your first round of seven and a half minutes. MPP Taylor.

Miss Monique Taylor: Thank you so much to each and every one of you for joining us.

Amelia, Nadia, thank you for sharing your very personal stories, which I'm sure is not easy to do. Congratulations for making it to here today with such a hard journey that, of course, was no fault of your own. And yet, here you are again, standing up for yourselves when it comes to your privacy and your rights, but also for young people who will come behind you into the system. So thank you for that bravery, and thank you for stepping up on behalf of yourselves as well as other kids in the province.

I really have no problem with Bill 188. I think that the privacy stuff is something that the welfare PAC has been lobbying for for years under Jane Kovarikova and that group, to ensure that your privacy was secured. I think it's a long time coming—to ensure that those records are sealed. What that looks like, I'm curious to know also. Where that information will be stored and how it will be protected is not in the legislation; I guess that will come in regulation, and hopefully they'll do right by it and ensure that it is protected.

You both had the opportunity to live through the system, and it's probably not much different from the days that you were there. There are small changes coming. There are important changes coming. I don't want to take away from the importance of really strengthening up those group homes, but it's a very small piece of the pie.

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I would ask first you, Nadia, if there was something else that you could see in this bill today that would have made your experience better within the children's aid system. Do you have something that you would like to share with the government members today?

Ms. Nadia George: It's an interesting question, because when I think about what could have made it better, I essentially just think the fact that I'm even having to sit here to have this conversation to say what could have made it better is problematic. We talk about preventative care—we consistently talk about preventative care, whether it's this or it's other policies, and I question, do people really understand what preventative care is?

For me, it would really just be about continuing to do the good work that's already being done, looking at making amendments to the last bill that was happening. I understand that this is going to be a living, growing document. But for me, to really just ensure that evidence-based research is going to be done and that these changes are going to be seen and measured, and not just within this act but in everything that the act stands for, the people who are going to be accountable to it or responsible to it.

So, for me, when we talk about preventative care and we talk about research, just do it. I don't want to have to see another person at my age, where I'm at, sitting here again, having this conversation. Not only is it a waste of your time if we don't get it right; we're harming people, so let's just stop.

Miss Monique Taylor: Thank you.

Amelia?

Ms. Amelia Merhar: Well, that would go longer than seven minutes, all the things that could be improved—

Miss Monique Taylor: Well, we have to be brief, but we will have another round.

Experiences like—I heard about a young person not too long ago. She's living in a group home. She wants to go for a sleepover, but they required police checks from the kid's house that she's going to sleepover at. How would that have made you feel at that age?

Ms. Amelia Merhar: Well, it wasn't happening when I was in care, but lots of other things were.

I had involvement with the Office of the Children's Lawyer, but I just said whatever my mom said—whatever. I had the best summer of my life my first summer in foster care. I had an allowance; I had friends; I could have sleepovers every weekend. But my mom was really sad that I was gone, and so I went home to make her happy. And that was a terrible decision, because she stopped cooking for me because she was resentful that I wanted to stay in foster care. I was 12.

I do believe in the Ombudsman's office and child advocacy and Office of the Children's Lawyer. But how could they not see that I was just repeating what my mom said?

Miss Monique Taylor: So better wraparound supports to ensure that they were actually listening to you and had the ability to bring out what was necessary?

Ms. Amelia Merhar: I believe in working toward kinship care, family reunification, all those things. However, there are some families that are broken. My mom is homeless. My brother is on disability, having a psychotic episode right now. My family is worse than when I went into care. Making that hard call, and then the state being a better parent, because wards of the state—there are so many things. How many millennials still have their parents helping them out with bills right now? Think about foster kids.

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): There's about one minute in this round.

Ms. Amelia Merhar: I'm not saying that you're supposed to do that, but it's just like—the economic realities are crushing the weak. That includes especially people with experience in the child welfare system.

Miss Monique Taylor: Well, I'm really grateful for you and for you taking the time to be here today and to share your stories, because it is important that the government hears first-hand stories and why this legislation is good but also why it's not near enough, particularly when we have children's aid societies running—last year was a \$15.9-million deficit, and this year is forecasted at a \$50-million deficit.

So now we're adding 20 more inspectors, more children's aid workers to be able to do these inspections. Are the resources going to be there to ensure that we're capable of even coming close to keep up with what Bill 188 asks for?

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): We'll move to the independent member. MPP Clancy, your four-and-a-half-minute round of questions begins now.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I appreciate all the speakers for coming here today. I know it's a big effort, and it opens up wounds from the past, but I think it speaks to your character in making value and speaking up for kids who aren't here today and those who can't come and speak about the harm that happened in their past.

I hear you about prevention. Thank you so much for reminding us of this. We are trying to get rid of bad actors who are involved in care.

You talk about—I think it was you, Amelia, who said 60% of youth on the street have interactions with the child welfare system. Can you speak, either from your personal experience or your policy expertise—maybe Amelia could go first—about what needs to happen from our systems to protect youth from ending up unsheltered? I mean, that's at the end of a lot of other things that have gone wrong, right? Usually homelessness—all the wheels have fallen off at that moment, right?

Ms. Amelia Merhar: So Children's Aid Society of Toronto wanted to—right before I turned 16 they formally closed my file. They came to the house. I was no longer eligible for any services and supports for former youth in care. It was a bit of an accounting thing on their end. I just didn't want to deal with the system anymore, so I signed it. That meant I wasn't eligible for any of the supports of extended care. So I don't think that should be a thing. I

think the age—and the Ready, Set, Go program. There are things in place. Stop that.

I think just an understanding that with all the trauma that young people have experienced—and say they make it to a trades program, they make it to a college or university program. With the amount of drinking that tends to go on at universities, it's very likely that a lot of the trauma they've had is going to bubble up in their early twenties. They've been surviving, but people from the child welfare system often take a bit longer to become successful, if not decades longer. So, in these policies and programs and supports, understanding that they're working through so much. Even if they're not actively working through it, to expect a tumultuous twenties, early twenties as—to just expect that and not be coming down very harshly on these people who were never taught how to run a home, be in a healthy relationship, any of those things, and they're trying to do them—and so, I really think that understanding for some chaos in the twenties as trauma emerges.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Yes, it sounds like there's a lot of not only mental health support that could have helped through that but just with the changes of all the social workers you had involved and the placements you had kind of meant that you didn't have a wing that you were under, a landing space where you screwed up and you needed to go somewhere, right? That kind of got undermined.

Nadia, do you want to share a little bit about your idea about prevention, just echoing what Amelia is saying?

Ms. Nadia George: I'm actually going to echo what Amelia has said, because—

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): There's a minute remaining.

Ms. Nadia George: Sorry?

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): Just a minute remaining.

Ms. Nadia George: Okay.

I'm going to echo that, because when I think about prevention, it really is understanding what components we need to build strong pillars. When children are consistently moved in an unstable way and don't have stable homes and don't have trauma-informed foster parents and group home providers—at the age of 16 you're leaving, and you actually don't even just know how to be stable yourself. And what we do know about trauma, and most often developmental trauma and complex trauma, is these are organic brain injuries. We have to start looking at these youth; at myself, as a person who identifies having complex trauma—that, yes, it absolutely took me a lot longer to get there than a person who was consistently nurtured, and felt like I had a safe place to land. I think it's really about getting right down to it, and instead of going top to bottom, let's start going bottom to top.

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The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): We'll now move to the government for their first round of seven and a half minutes. MPP Kusendova-Bashta.

Ms. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Amelia and Nadia, thank you so much for sharing your stories. I know that's not easy, but your voices are very, very important, because you paint that picture of children in care. We should do better, and we must do better.

David, thank you for the work that you do. I don't think I could do that work. I can only imagine your personal, emotional involvement in these stories of these children, and to dedicate your life to helping them—I think it's really admirable. So thank you for doing that important work.

I did want to speak a little bit about the importance of sealing of those records. Nadia, I think you spoke to that a little bit. How important is it that after you leave the system those records are sealed and third parties and other people cannot just simply access your information?

Ms. Nadia George: It's incredibly important.

I'll take it from a personal perspective. If everybody in this room was to think about their childhood, think about the silly things we did, whether it was—I don't know; I didn't do these things—popping a tire, sticking gum in someone's hair, throwing a rock and breaking a window by accident. Imagine if every single one of you had a document floating out there with all your childhood stuff, knowing that it can be used against you later on in life—whether that be divorce court, whether that be if you happen to have a child and you are in a stable situation, but because you were a foster kid or you had lived experiences in care, all those things come back to haunt you. I don't even think I need to answer the question any other way. I think just feeling it and knowing it—it's just wrong.

Ms. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: It seems like an invasion of privacy.

Ms. Nadia George: Yes, 100%.

Ms. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Amelia, do you want to add to that?

Ms. Amelia Merhar: Yes. As somebody who interviews on the radio about my research and has worked in the child welfare policy space, the fact that my most vulnerable, horrific moments, me describing details of abuse, are just accessible to people—you know, I'm 38. People who I have never met, will never meet, have no business knowing any of that information. So I really think it just needs to be sealed when people leave care.

Ms. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: You spoke about evidence-based research. Can you tell us a little bit what that would look like?

Ms. Amelia Merhar: You can go.

Ms. Nadia George: Evidence-based research is really just measuring outcomes and looking at whether in a long-term state, with a proper randomized study of those who are going through the transition out of care—and looking at the outcomes which their life has brought. Where are they ending up? Are the policies and procedures that are even implemented in children's aid having a positive effect? I understand there are deficits, and I get that. At the same time, are we funding—and it's a question; I don't have the answer—procedures and policies that are not

having a positive impact? How do we know that if we're actually not connecting with youth transitioning out of care and giving space for their voices and counting it as important?

Ms. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Thank you.

David, you spoke about the need of children knowing that there is such a person as an Ombudsman and how to access them. Do you think increasing awareness of their right to contact the Ombudsman would help youth in out-of-home care?

Mr. David Morneau Jr.: First of all, I want to circle back to the comment that you made, because I think this underscores—I no longer do the OCL work. I actually—burnout is probably one way to put it. I had to step away from law completely, and part of that had to do with what I had experienced as a lawyer. Imagine a young person having to go through that. Here I am, representing them, I'm their voice and I burned out—and to have to carry that.

So to my fellow panellists: What they shared is something that—we can't quantify that. Not having been through child protection or the child welfare system, I can never feel what they felt.

To your point about the Ombudsman, yes, I think this is something that, for me—the word that I used a lot in my presentation was “empowerment.” This is about empowerment. The empowerment isn't just knowing who to call, when they need to call, but this empowerment starts at a more fundamental level so that when these young people do come out of care—and I've heard so many stories. I've talked to so many people. The trajectory coming out of care when young people age out is not a good one. And statistically, it's not good.

So, yes, this is part of the empowerment—them knowing, having that information, knowing what to use it for. It's not just having a phone number and knowing that person exists; it's, what are the circumstances under which they would utilize that information? The only thing I'm concerned about is the independence of how the information is presented to them. That worries me, because oftentimes, if you have someone who is running an out-of-care home or an in-care home, there's a motivation to not share that information for fear that there might be repercussions against those individuals. So I do worry about that. I put that question out—

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): There's one minute remaining.

MPP Smith

Ms. Laura Smith: Through you, Chair, I'll be very brief.

Thank you very much for your profound statements. I used to deal with OCL files. But Mr. Morneau, I wanted to talk about the significant tools that are available now when we're talking about bad actors: administrative monetary penalties and return of funds, which I think would be a great addition to the system. I wonder if you could talk further on that, really briefly.

Mr. David Morneau Jr.: Absolutely. But also, the transparency that comes with the proposed legislation, the need for compliance and making sure that people know—

that's also important too. Needless to say, across the course of my career, I've come across many bad—and we have two people who are articulating having stayed in some of these homes.

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): We'll now move to the second round of questions for the official opposition. MPP Taylor.

Miss Monique Taylor: Thank you, David, I haven't had a chance to chat with you yet. I'm very interested. You have a huge swath of information from representing families to representing the CAS to working with the OCL, and then your executive director advocacy.

And so we see Bill 188 in front of us today. Yes, it's good measures. Yes, there are punitive measures. There are better oversight mechanisms built into group homes; the privacy issues; the Ombudsman being there. But there's so much, right? There are so many things that are necessary to protect kids within the system, and I thought maybe you could just take a few minutes to say what would be your wish list to see changes in our child welfare sector that would truly have made a difference in some of the kids' lives who you came in contact with, and families' lives.

Mr. David Morneau Jr.: Well, that's quite a layered question, but I'll do my best.

In this circumstance, I think, from my perspective, with governance and oversight, there has to be a monitor and it has to be habitual. In the course of my career, it's only been recently that we saw changes to the Divorce Act, introducing the language around intimate partner violence and coercive control.

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One of the things that I would say needs to happen is—and it's to my point of being complacent: We have to be vigilant. We have to regularly monitor. To what my colleagues have said, fellow panellists have talked about the evidence base: We need to take what we learn and implement it, and not wait 10, 15, 20, 30 years to implement changes. We need to have law that's robust and law that changes along with the needs of kids. Because even if we get it right right now and the measures that we implement right now are right, evolution tells us that things will change. We need to look at them again, and we need to look at them frequently, not just once in a while.

How we do that—I leave that to the people who are getting paid like you to figure that out. But laws tend to remain static and, unfortunately, by the time change happens, it's because damage has been done. That can't happen. If we say that we value our children, then we value our children. We need to make it robust.

Miss Monique Taylor: Yes, I wholeheartedly agree. I wish I was the one to make the change, but I've been in opposition since I've been here. I've been constantly pushing both the Liberal government and the Conservative government to make these changes for kids in care, and they're slow. That's why it concerns me that we had an opportunity to bring a bill forward, and there were only a few measures that will, yes, do well, but will not save children like—did you hear about the Ombudsman's

report of young Mia, 16 years old? She needed housing, she wanted to go to school, and the system completely failed her. They sent her to a shelter.

I don't see the measures in this bill that will save kids like Mia. I don't see the enforcement of ensuring that there's mental health supports, that there's family supports, that there's financial supports, that there's all of these things built into a wraparound system that could truly save kids' lives and ensure that they're not in 15 different group homes and still struggling to figure it out, that there are measures in place to recognize the fact that, when they turn 20, there's a whole bunch of stuff that's going to come up that hasn't been dealt with. I guess that's the kind of stuff that I'm trying to pull out of the people who have so generously given us their time today.

You were going to say something?

Mr. David Morneau Jr.: Thank you. I was, because I think the voices of my fellow panellists, that's where the lived experience—I don't have lived experience other than what I've experienced in assisting young people.

Miss Monique Taylor: Yes, but you have system experience.

Mr. David Morneau Jr.: I have systemic experience, absolutely. But we have two individuals that are sitting on this panel with me that have lived experience and systemic experience, and what they have to say—granted, this is something that we do have to work on together, but to me, the lived experience matters a lot more because that's how we're going to implement change. That's the evidence that we need.

Miss Monique Taylor: For sure. Thank you. That's why I was asking them questions on the first round and I left you hanging. But I do appreciate your recognition of that, because it is so true. I was saying to the last panellist that my first experience, almost 13 years ago when I was first elected, was the Youth Leaving Care Hearings and the young voices that came to this building to share their story, and it came out with My Real Life Book, which was 89 recommendations to the government, which was the Liberals at the time. We still haven't been able to get through that.

That's why, every time I get an opportunity to be able to push and to talk about these young kids and what they need, I take full advantage of it and I try to glean out of folks like yourself, and out of Nadia and Amelia, to be able to really enforce on the government the need for real, critical change when it comes to our youth system and ensuring that we don't have kids like Mia who are 16 and fall through the cracks and die.

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): One minute remaining.

Miss Monique Taylor: Quickly, is there anything in this bill, the privacy or anything, that you see is missing or flawed or could be enhanced, as a lawyer?

Mr. David Morneau Jr.: I would say, from the start, no. But there will be. There will be gaps, and this is why we need it to be robust and be able to revisit it—

Miss Monique Taylor: A living document.

Mr. David Morneau Jr.: Yes, a very living document.

Miss Monique Taylor: Good. All right. Well, thank you so much for your time.

Amelia, Nadia, thank you for joining us today. Thank you for your bravery and just really taking the time to stand up for yourselves and for others who will come after you. Thank you. I'm so grateful.

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): We'll move now to the second round of questions. MPP Clancy, you've got four and a half minutes.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Yes, I wanted to ask Amelia and Nadia the same question: Do you see anything in the bill that you would tweak, or something you would add or something that doesn't fit? Amelia, could you start?

Ms. Amelia Merhar: I agree with the "living document," and then how certain things are going to be regulated, it's not quite clear yet. I really think that work needs to be done with care providers, because they have an entire system for how they track everything. If you're just writing the legislation without working with the people who are actually doing the work, it's not going to mesh. You have to be working with social workers and their entire intake process. It will mean that these policies will be able to run better, and so that kind of work is really necessary.

Personally, on the evidence-based research front, I think with any new child welfare policy, you're going to measure the outcome. Any new policy needs to come with a study that says, "Did it help? Did it make things worse?" Because what is the point? Obviously, we're trying to make things better. Everybody can agree on that. However, if you never measure it, and the kids have been struggling and getting addicted and been homeless for decades—just that built into new child welfare policy and legislation would be a study of measuring the impacts of it.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Nadia, do you have anything to add?

Ms. Nadia George: I honestly feel like Amelia said it, and I'll say it a second time: It really is about going from bottom to top. So often, myself, having worked with organizations, I, as a therapist or a counsellor, would get, "This is the new policy. This is what you're going to do." Sometimes I would fight back a little and say, "Well, that's interesting, because this policy doesn't fit A, B or C people, so please tell me how you've made an adjustment or exceptions for that."

But it's really just because we're not having those conversations with the people who are really doing that work or the people that are being affected by the work that's being done. For me, this idea of the deficit is really just like, that in itself should be showing that there's more need.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Yes, I think that's something that—from my understanding, the minister did kind of talk to the children's aid society, but what I'm hearing from you today is that there are other partners, and the young people themselves and their voices are the partners in this work. That's something that has resounded with me that maybe we could work into the bill: a way to ensure that collaboration and feedback and evidence-based research

are kind of intertwined and enmeshed in any change that we make, so that you can tweak it as you go along because of impacts. Thank you so much.

My last question is for David. You've been doing this work a long time. We know that the office of the child advocate was removed in 2018, and also COVID happened, so there have been lots of shifts. Could you speak briefly to the impacts that removing that office has made? Did you see any sign of that change? Did you see any change in outcomes?

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): You've got about a minute, David.

Mr. David Morneau Jr.: Okay. I didn't see any sign of the change. That said, I think I would have to do a deeper dive on the efficacy of the work that was being done. It's great that there's a title there, but I'd really need to analyze the impact that that office was having. That's information that I don't have, so I can't really comment on it but to say that it did come as a surprise. It wasn't something that I think a lot of people saw coming, but it's something that I would have to analyze a little more deeply.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I think the way I looked at that office in the past is that they would kind of bring to the public light a systemic issue like trafficking. I know that trafficking happens at group homes here and there, especially ones that are really poorly run and don't support the young people there, and with the lack of oversight. But I think it's maybe those that are working on the front lines who recognize the systemic issue, where I saw the office of the child advocate being the ones to kind of raise the alarms and raise the profile of those—

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The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): Thank you, MPP Clancy.

I will now move to the government's final seven-and-a-half-minute round. MPP Smith.

Ms. Laura Smith: Through you, Chair: I think we were in the middle of a conversation, David, and I'm wondering if we could continue.

We talked about proposing many items. We talked about transparency, improving compliance among licensed operators of out-of-home care, such as administrative monetary penalties and orders to return funds, which—we talked briefly about bad actors and I'm wondering if you could continue that conversation.

Mr. David Morneau Jr.: Well, you're asking me to remember where I was at that point.

Ms. Laura Smith: Yes, I am.

Mr. David Morneau Jr.: I think any measures that we take that cause these organizations to take their responsibilities seriously—and I think I was in the middle of a comment of what I saw. Bear in mind, I'm a professional that's often going there, so you would expect that the best behaviour would happen, and I didn't see that all the time.

What I heard from the young people that I was representing, to me, was not one-off. So I think anything to enforce, anything to cause the bad actors to either not apply at all or unify—have the level of care that's expected—I think absolutely is necessary.

Ms. Laura Smith: Yes. It's going to improve the quality-of-care experience for children.

I was going to go back to our two ladies, Nadia and Amelia. We talked about privacy issues, and you talked very transparently—and once again, I truly admire your bravery. But one of the issues of privacy also is not being in a position to even talk about your experience. That's one side of it. So I'm wondering if you want to talk about that, because that is an area of privacy that you're, technically speaking, not allowed to talk about.

Ms. Nadia George: Yes, I think, as a public speaker and an advocate who is consistently—apparently—breaking the law, identifying myself as a person with lived experience in care, is—I don't even know how to wrap my head around that. How can we hear the stories and hear the voices of people if we're not even allowed to just be ourselves and discuss our own experiences? To me, that further just protects perpetrators. It protects the people who we have been harmed by. It protects a system that failed myself and probably many others, and to me, that's just not child-centred, it's not solution-focused and it doesn't have any kind of positive merit, in my understanding.

I'll let Amelia also speak.

Ms. Amelia Merhar: I think people have the right to privacy. I know tenured professors with lived experience in care and nobody knows except other former youth in care. They work in the field; they have that right. I decided to speak up, but they have the right not to, and I respect that.

I think it's ridiculous that I'm in violation of something right now, and so, yes, I'm going to ignore it.

Ms. Laura Smith: In other words, this bill, if it is passed, will provide you with the ability to talk freely, which is a positive outcome for those in care and those who have graduated from care.

Ms. Amelia Merhar: Yes.

Ms. Nadia George: Yes, I would say so. I think, even as a public speaker—for me, as a child who was constantly feeling like I couldn't be honest about my experiences, whether that was because my mother would get upset or the worker, if I had an experience with the worker that was underhanded—I'm now being shushed as an adult too. So, for me, it's triggering. It's extremely triggering.

Ms. Laura Smith: I was going to pivot over to our lawyer David if he wanted to share what his thoughts were on this privacy issue.

Mr. David Morneau Jr.: With regard to what has just been discussed?

Ms. Laura Smith: Yes.

Mr. David Morneau Jr.: Can you imagine us not being able to share a significant part of our life with the public, being told that that's illegal? I can think of no other situation that exists which would censor me from being

able to talk about who I am transparently and authentically. I just can't. I tried to think of examples as I was preparing, and I've tried to think of examples as you were speaking, and I can't.

This is part of who people are, and we're telling them—what message is that sending to a young person, to say, “Well, I'm sorry. You can talk about everything else, but you can't talk about that”? It's their life. They are entitled to share—and again, as long as it's them making the conscious, informed choice to share that, not one of us sharing it on their behalf.

Ms. Laura Smith: Yes, and just pivoting back to the protections for personal information—we've talked about how important that is—that allow youth formerly in care to identify themselves, it can also support—how would you say it would help these individuals transition into adulthood? Once again, I'm going to ask both of our ladies if they have any thoughts on that.

Ms. Nadia George: I think when we talk about the evidence-based research—and this has just come to my head now—if this is the case, how are we then doing this research if we can't even talk about ourselves and our lives and give that information?

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): There's one minute remaining.

Ms. Amelia Merhar: That's a good point for delineating evidence-based research, to make sure that the part about privacy allows us to actually measure things and talk about them.

Ms. Laura Smith: Yes, absolutely.

Time?

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): You've got 40 seconds.

Ms. Laura Smith: All right. I'm going to actually reflect back to David on that specific question on how that's going to happen. With the Ready, Set, Go program, the transition can go into the age of 23. I'm just wondering if you have any reflections on how that's going to improve the lives of these children in care, being able to talk about this.

Mr. David Morneau Jr.: I'm not sure that I'm the one to answer that question. Can I envision that it would make things better? Could I envision that things extend beyond 23? Think about the trauma that has been suffered and what these young people have been through, and I totally—

Ms. Laura Smith: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Steve Clark): I want to thank all of our presenters for being here today and sharing with us your thoughts on the bill.

That concludes the committee's business today. We will stand in recess until 9 a.m. on Monday, May 13, 2024, when we will resume public hearings on Bill 188.

The committee adjourned at 1700.

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