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Ontario unveils blueprint to reform troubled group and foster care

Provincial residential care reforms aim to give children and youth the right services at the right time as close to home as possible.



Michael Coteau, Ontario's Minister of Child and Youth Services, chats with Richard Marcano, 22, a former child in care and a youth amplifier with the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, after Coteau announced sweeping legislative reforms aimed at improving the lives of children in care in December 2016. On July 19, the minister released the blue print for reforming the system (JIM RANKIN / TORONTO STAR) | [ORDER THIS PHOTO](#)

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A long-awaited blueprint to reform Ontario's troubled group home and foster-care system vows to boost quality, increase oversight and ensure children and youth have a voice in helping to plan their care.

Youth are particularly pleased about the government's plan to increase unannounced inspections of group homes and ensure young people understand and exercise their rights while in care.

"It's a game-changer," said Amanda Owusu, 21, a former youth in care and a member of the residential services youth panel that advised the government on the blueprint.

"The system will not function properly unless the children and the youth are at the centre of it," she said.

But children's aid officials worry the multi-year scheme released by Children and Youth Services Minister Michael Coteau on Wednesday is silent on what will happen to children living in substandard homes forced to close due to beefed-up inspections.

And they are concerned the strategy offers no new funds to address the children's mental health crisis unfolding in remote northern communities. The vast number of Indigenous children and youth in the north are sent to residential care homes in the south due to mental health problems, not child protection matters, they say.

"It seems like it is a good first step for kids in care, but we need more steps to be taken for a mental health system," said Dr. Michael Kirlew, a physician in the Sioux Lookout region who regularly travels to northern First Nations such as Wapekeka First Nation, which has been struggling with a youth suicide pact since last summer.

"My concern is if we don't, additional youth suicides are not a possibility, they are an inevitability," he said in an interview.

Child protection agencies look forward to working with the government to "build a quality system where children and youth are at the centre, feel safe and have their voices heard," said Caroline Newton, a spokeswoman for the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, which represents the province's 48 privately run societies.

"We totally support more inspections and closing substandard homes," she said in an interview. "But these kids still need to be cared for, and they need somewhere to go."

The blueprint comes in the wake of a [damning 2016 expert panel report](#) on residential care that found a confusing system with little provincial oversight or tracking of child and youth well-being, no minimum qualifications for caregivers and a growing number of kids with complex special needs being placed in unlicensed programs.

Panel member Kiaras Gharabaghi, director of Ryerson University's school of child and youth care, said the blueprint addresses issues that have been raised for years by numerous reviews and need

to be implemented more quickly.

“The government wants all children and youth to be safe by 2025; this means that the government knows children and youth are not safe now and is prepared to wait eight years, which is two generations of youth in care, before committing to this being a safe way of growing up.” he said.

However he said the government’s willingness to tackle the “especially dire circumstances” of Black and Indigenous youth in residential care offers some hope.

“But we will all be watching to see action, not to hear more words,” he warned.

In addition to unannounced inspections, short-term measures in the blueprint include new quality of care standards, more use of serious occurrence reports to improve oversight and enhanced scrutiny to ensure all licensed settings meet fire code regulations.

A 14-year-old girl and her caregiver died after fire engulfed a foster home in the Lindsay area in February. [As reported by the Star](#), they were trapped in a room where a sliding glass door was bolted shut and the only window was too small for an adult to escape.

Over the longer-term, the government will explore setting minimum education requirements so that all children and youth are cared for by qualified, well-trained and responsive staff.

Ultimately, the goal is to ensure “the right services are available to children and youth at the right time and as close to their community as possible, particularly in northern Ontario,” according to the blueprint.

The blueprint “is not just our plan as a government, it is my commitment to young people across this province that we will listen to their ideas, we will put them at the centre of all decisions, and we will build safe places for them to call home,” said Coteau said in a statement.

Children and youth are placed in residential care due to parental abuse or neglect, conflict with the law or mental health needs. There are about 15,170 beds in licensed foster or group homes in Ontario.

With files from Tanya Talaga

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