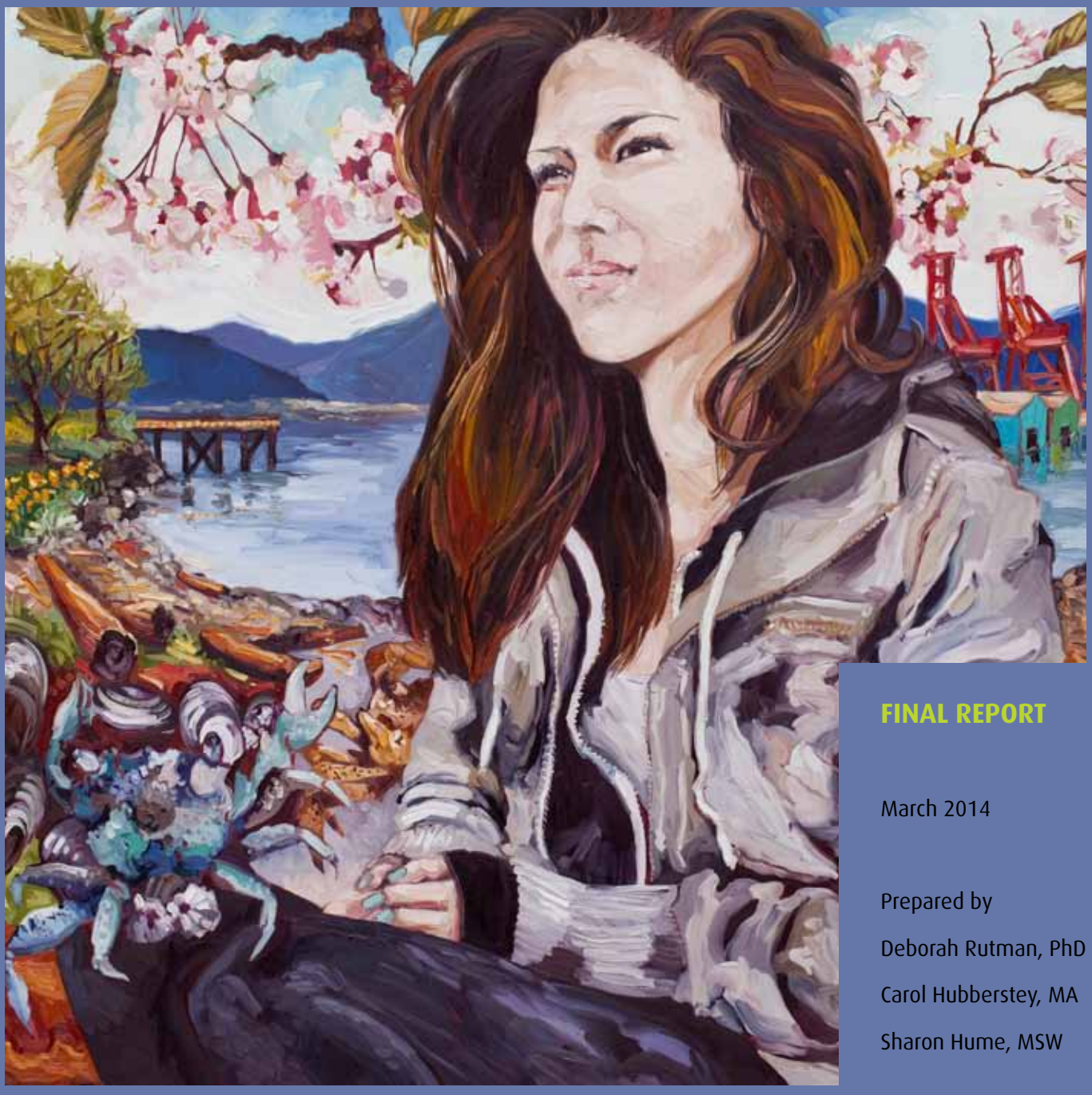
Avoiding the Precipice

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



FINAL REPORT

March 2014

Prepared by

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COVER (*The Things We Remember*) AND BACK COVER (*Toy Soldier*)
PAINTINGS BY CORI CREED

Cori Creed is a Vancouver-based artist. In June 2013, her 'A Sense of Place' art show explored the idea of home and place—the things and places that make people feel most at home and most comfortable—and included portraits of individuals who have spent their lives moving from foster home to foster home. Two of these young people are participants of the Link program.

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Research Initiatives for Social Change (RISC) is the research unit for the School of Social Work at the University of Victoria, Canada. The Research Initiatives for Social Change unit is committed to promoting social change through critical thinking and participatory processes.

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The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

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Executive Summary

For youth in the general population, the transition to adulthood is gradual and extended. For example, Statistics Canada reported in 2011 that more than 50% of young people age 20 to 24 lived with their parent(s) (Gaetz & Scott, 2012, 7), and the majority of BC young adults continue to receive parental support related to education and daily living (Vancouver Foundation, 2013). By contrast, youth who age out of government care have no safety net; they are abruptly cut off at the age of majority from the system that had provided care and support to them. Moreover, former foster youth living in the Lower Mainland must contend with housing costs that are among the highest in North America.

For the past 25 years, Aunt Leah's has been providing programs for youth in transition from foster care. The *Link* is one such program, offered for youth who have aged out of care after turning 19. The *Link* offers life skills workshops, drop-in, outreach, and one-to-one support tailored to addressing the particular issues identified by each youth. Between April 2012 and March 2013, the *Link* served 76 young adults and their 25 children.

The purpose of this evaluation study was to assess the *Link*'s effectiveness and to Identify promising approaches that support youth from foster care, in order to prevent or reduce homelessness amongst this highly vulnerable population of Canadian young people.

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

The socio-demographic and health profile of both groups of youth in this study was in keeping with that reported in the literature (BC Ministry of Health, 2006; Gaetz, 2014; Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2013; Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw & Brown, 2007)—i.e., the majority: had not graduated from high school; lived in deep poverty with food insecurity; were un- or under-employed; and struggled with mental health and addictions issues. Finding stable and affordable housing was a significant challenge. At the same time, the two groups of youth in this study also differed from each other in certain ways: more Comparison Group youth lived in some type of shelter, supportive housing, or subsidized housing for youth, and a larger percentage of *Link* informants were parents.

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

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

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

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

The evaluation study teased out evidence of promising approaches in supporting youth from care, and these practices dovetailed well with *Link* program strengths; these promising practices also are supported by studies of other programs aimed at helping disadvantaged youth. Promising approaches include:

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

In conclusion, the *Link* is a wide-ranging intervention with demonstrated impacts in relation to homelessness prevention for former foster youth; the program provides supports at low cost while providing positive outcomes for society and the youth served.

Introduction

HIGHLIGHTS

- For the past 25 years, Aunt Leah's has been providing programs for youth in transition from foster care.
- The Link is one of the Aunt Leah's programs offered for youth who have aged out of care. The Link offers life skills workshops, drop-in, outreach, and one-to-one support tailored to addressing the particular issues identified by each individual youth.
- Between April 2012 and March 2013, the Link served 76 young adults and their 25 children.
- The purpose of this study was to assess the Link's effectiveness and to Identify promising approaches that support youth from foster care, in order to prevent or reduce homelessness amongst this highly vulnerable population of Canadian youth.

For youth in the general population, the transition to adulthood is gradual and extended. In the most recent (2011) census, Statistics Canada reported that 42.3% of young adults age 20 to 29 "lived in the parental home, either because they never left it or because they returned home after living elsewhere" (Statistics Canada, 2012, cited in Gaetz & Scott, 2012, 7). Further, more than 50% of young Canadian men and women age 20 to 24 lived with their parent(s).

By contrast, youth who age out of government care have no safety net; they are cut off from the system that had provided care and support to them and cast adrift at the age of majority by the 'state parent' (i.e., government). In British Columbia, approximately 700 youth turn 19 each year and "age out" of government care. Numerous studies have found that over 40% of homeless youth have been in care (Gaetz & Scott, 2012; Vancouver Foundation, 2013); and, one of the few longitudinal Canadian studies following youth after they aged out of care found that approximately 40% of the sample had experienced homelessness (Rutman, Hubberstey, Feduniw & Brown, 2007).

For the past 25 years, Aunt Leah's has offered a range of programs for youth and young mothers to support their transition to adulthood and independent living. In 1994, the *Support Link* program was developed: *Support Link* is a 'semi-independent' supported housing program for youth age 15 to 18 who are in foster care, offering safe housing, via 15 housing units in the Lower Mainland, with in-house support and pre-employment and life skills training. Another

important program, *Aunt Leah's House* offers supported housing to pregnant and parenting mothers under the age of 19 who are in care. The young mothers live in the House for up to six months after their baby is born during which time they receive such services as labour coaching with a doula, breastfeeding support, assistance purchasing baby equipment and supplies and support for transitioning to independence as well as access to other Aunt Leah's programs (e.g., Essential Skills Workshops, Mother and Baby Group).

The *Link* program began in 2006 as an unfunded "off the side of the desk" operation in reaction to a surge of young people returning to Aunt Leah's (their former care giver) in need of supports (particularly housing loss prevention services) after aging out. In 2010, building in part upon BC-based research that showed that youth who had aged out of foster care experienced significant difficulties compared with 'parented' youth in the areas of health, mental health, substance use, education, income, employment, victimization, and housing stability and homelessness (Rutman et al, 2007), Aunt Leah's developed the *Link* program with dedicated funding from the Vancouver Foundation.

The *Link* program is the only service delivery model in the Lower Mainland that guarantees support services for youth in foster care after they age out of care, provided by the same trusted people who supported them before they turned 19. The *Link* program offers life skills workshops, drop-in, outreach, and one-to-one support tailored to addressing the particular issues or needs identified by each individual youth. Food is included as well, typically as a component of other activities, for example, life skills workshops. In keeping with the design of the program, 81% of the youth participating in the *Link* during 2012/13 had received services or care through Aunt Leah's, e.g., through the *Support Link* and *Aunt Leah's House*, prior to leaving foster care.

The majority of young people in North America leave home more than once and do not establish a permanent autonomous home until they are closer to 30 years old (Mann-Feder, Eades, Sobel & DeStafano, 2014, 3).

Another program at Aunt Leah's, the *Thresholds* program, is connected to and is considered a component of the *Link*. *Thresholds* is a supported housing program for recent mothers who are at risk of losing or have lost custody of their child(ren) to government care and are working to regain custody. Through the supported, safe housing, *Thresholds* participants have an opportunity to strengthen their skills in caring for their child(ren) and to create a healthy living situation for their child(ren) and themselves. All women from *Thresholds* are enrolled in the *Link* program, which provides employment-related support and assistance finding childcare and housing.

During the fiscal year April 2012 to March 2013, the *Link* program served a total of 76 young adults and their 25 children.

In spring 2012, Aunt Leah's staff approached the research team to partner in undertaking an evaluation of the *Link* that would assess the program's effectiveness in supporting former youth in care in relation to key areas in their life, including housing, life skills, and social support. A featured component of this evaluation would be the use of a quasi-experimental approach that compared life circumstances and outcomes for *Link* participants with those of former foster youth who did not receive this support.

In summer 2012, Aunt Leah's and the evaluation team received funding from the Homelessness Knowledge Development fund. The overall objectives of the evaluation study project have been to:

Even youth who stayed in care until age 21 have experienced periods of homelessness post-care, suggesting that long-term housing options—rather than transitional or emergency housing—may be the preferable model for creating stability and permanence for youth transitioning from care. (Pergamit, McDaniel & Hawkins, 2012).

- Evaluate the effectiveness of the *Link* Program, as developed and delivered by Aunt Leah's in Vancouver, and
- Identify promising approaches and practices that support youth who are aging out of foster care, in order to prevent or reduce homelessness amongst this particularly vulnerable population of Canadian youth.

An Interim Report, which focused on presenting socio-demographic and health characteristics of the *Link* participants and the Comparison Group, program outcomes, and participant outcomes based on the first round of interview data (i.e., "Time 1" data), was completed in summer 2013.

This Final Evaluation Report is organized as follows: Section 2 provides the Methodology, including the evaluation's research questions, and Section 3 presents Formative Evaluation Findings, including description of the program's guiding principles, activities and approaches, participants' satisfaction, and program strengths and challenges. Section 4 presents Participant Outcomes, including outcomes related to housing and ways in which individual characteristics of the youth, such as age and being young parents, affected their experiences and outcomes. Section 5 provides the report's Discussion and Recommendations.

In addition to this Final Report, several short reports based on data and findings from this project are forthcoming. These will explore topics such as the types of support that youth from care have available and use, the perceived impacts of these supports, and what additional support youth from care would find most useful; and youths' education-related goals, successes, barriers and promising approaches.

Youths' vulnerability does not appear to diminish after they leave care. Young adults become more vulnerable due to housing instability and poverty. Added to this is a lack of a strong social network and in particular the presence of a stable, caring adult. (NCA Centre for Best Practices, 2007, cited in Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2013, 12).

2 Methodology

HIGHLIGHTS

A total of 53 people participated in interviews for the evaluation.

Interviews were conducted twice over a 14-month period with:

- **21 *Link* program participants;**
- **22 youth from care who had not accessed the *Link* program (Comparison Group);**
- **6 program staff; and**
- **4 support people (of the youths)**

At the first interview, 48% of the *Link* participants were age 19-20. By contrast,27% of the Comparison Group were age 19-20, and 68% were age 21-24.

Introduction

The evaluation included both a formative evaluation and a summative evaluation and was guided by a participatory approach. An Advisory Group, comprised of Aunt Leah's staff, community partners, former youth in care, and a *Link* program participant, provided initial guidance to key aspects of the study including recruiting participants and confirming data collection instruments. The project was subject to the ethical review guidelines of the University of Victoria.

Evaluation Research Questions

The primary formative and summative questions guiding the evaluation are as follows:

Formative Evaluation Questions

- What are the guiding principles and/or theoretical framework guiding the *Link* program, and what are its key program activities and approaches?
- What is the socio-demographic and health-related profile of youth from care accessing the *Link* (as well as that of the Comparison Group)?
- What are participants' perspectives on and satisfaction with the *Link*?
- What are the strengths of the *Link* program?
- What are challenges in implementing the *Link* program?
- What suggestions do participants and staff have for program improvement?

Summative Research Questions

- What difference does the *Link* program make to youth participants?
- How do *Link* participants fare over time, particularly in relation to housing?

Design & Data collection methods

The study employed a time-series with comparison group design. Face-to-face or phone interviews were conducted twice over a 14-month period with two samples of former youth in care:

- *Link* program participants; and
- Youth from care who had not accessed the *Link* program.

The Time 1 data collection period ran from November 2012–June 2013, and the Time 2 data collection period ran from October 2013–January 2014.

For *Link* participants, the interviews focussed on youths':

- reasons for and experiences of accessing the program;
- needs and circumstances in various aspects of life, including housing;
- supports accessed and needs for additional support since aging out of care;
- satisfaction with the *Link* (including perceived accessibility, what youth liked best and did not like about the program, and suggestions for improvements); and
- perceived outcomes of the program.

Comparison group participant interviews focused on the same areas, with the exception of questions pertaining to youths' experiences with and outcomes of the *Link*.

Interviews with youth were conducted at an office at Aunt Leah's or another youth-serving organization, or in a safe, private space of the informant's choice. All youth participants in the study were offered an honorarium for the interview, which lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Participants

A total of 53 people participated in interviews for the evaluation:

- 21 *Link* participants
- 22 Comparison Group participants
- 4 support people, i.e., individuals identified as a primary support person by youth participants (3 for *Link* participants, and 1 for Comparison Group youth)
- 6 *Link*/Aunt Leah's program staff and managers

Engaging Former Youth From Care in the Evaluation

Link participants were informed about the evaluation by Aunt Leah's/*Link* staff, either through face-to-face communication, or via social media announcements about the study, or through a poster about the evaluation posted at Aunt Leah's.

Comparison group participants were recruited via a variety of methods. The primary means envisioned in the project proposal was for Aunt Leah's staff to review their case files and invite former *Support Link* program participants who had not transitioned to the *Link* program to take part in an interview; approximately 25% of the Comparison Group were former *Support Link* participants. Given that this approach did not result in a large enough group, the evaluation team and Aunt Leah's staff then liaised with staff at youth-serving and/or child and family service organizations across the Lower Mainland and requested that they invite former youth from care to participate in an interview. These organizations included Covenant House, Inner City Youth Mental Health Program, Watari, Vancouver Aboriginal Child and Family Support Services, Broadway Youth Resource Centre, and the Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks, some of which provide shelter and/or supportive housing for youth, and/or intensive mental health and/or assertive outreach to homeless or street-involved youth. From February–June 2013, more than 10 organizations assisted in recruiting Comparison Group youth for the study.

Retention rate

The evaluation was able to re-engage the majority of both the *Link* participants and the Comparison Group. **Table 1** shows the number of *Link* and Comparison Group youth participants at Time 1 and Time 2, and the respective retention rates for the two groups.

TABLE 1 NUMBER OF LINK AND COMPARISON GROUP PARTICIPANTS AT TIME 1 AND TIME 2

	Link (n=21)	Comparison Group (n=22)
Time 1	21	22
Time 2	16	15
Retention rate	76%	68%

At Time 2, the evaluation team endeavoured to re-contact youth by phone, e-mail, text and Facebook; as well, Aunt Leah's staff assisted in re-contacting *Link* participants and/or facilitating the evaluation team making contact with these youth. For the Comparison Group, staff from the other youth-serving organizations assisted with contacting a number of youth whose contact information had changed since Time 1.

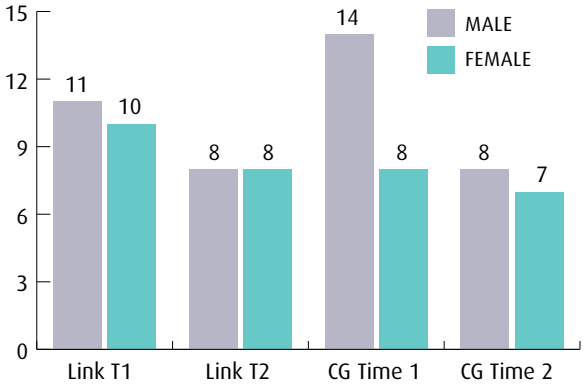
Of the five *Link* participants who did not participate at Time 2, two declined, one had moved out of province, one was not available due to participation in residential programming, and one could not be located.

Of the seven Comparison Group participants who did not take part at Time 2, one declined and the rest could not be located; five of the seven Comparison Group participants lost to attrition had been residing, at Time 1, in supported housing or a shelter in downtown Vancouver. While supported housing provides a measure of stability in terms of knowing where to begin to look for the youth for the Time 2 interview, there were particular challenges associated with re-contacting members of the Comparison Group; three had no contact information apart from the supported housing or other professional staff, and these staff could do no more than pass the request along providing they still had contact with the youth; one youth provided email contact information only and there was no way of knowing whether the email was being checked; and in two cases the cell phone number was no longer in service, which is not an uncommon experience when working with youth who are transient and/or have limited funds for things such as cell phones.

Participant Characteristics

At Time 1, 52% of the *Link* participants and 64% of the Comparison Group were male (**see Figure 1**). At Time 2, there were approximately equal numbers of males and females in both groups. Five of the seven participants lost to attrition in the Comparison Group were male.

FIGURE 1 GENDER AT TIME 1 AND TIME 2



Age

At Time 1, participants ranged in age from 19 to 26. The *Link* group had a higher percentage of younger participants (age 19-20—closer to having recently aged out of care) relative to the Comparison Group, as well as several participants over age 25, whereas most of the Comparison Group was age 21–24—i.e., a few years beyond aging out of care.

TABLE 2 LINK AND COMPARISON GROUP PARTICIPANTS' AGE AT TIME 1

Age	Link (n = 21)	Comparison Group (n = 22)
19-20	10 (48%)	6 (27%)
21-24	8 (38%)	15 (68%)
25	3 (14%)	1 (5%)

Ethnic Background

Both the *Link* and the Comparison group informants were diverse in terms of ethnic/cultural background, however the *Link* participant group had a higher percentage of (self-identified) Aboriginal participants (**see Table 3**).

TABLE 3 LINK AND COMPARISON GROUP SELF-IDENTIFIED ETHNICITY/CULTURAL GROUP

	Link (n = 21)	Comparison Group (n = 22)
European	8 (38%)	12 (55%)
Aboriginal (includes First Nations, Aboriginal-European, Métis, Inuit)	10 (48%)	6 (27%)
African (includes African-European, African-Western)	3 (14%)	3 (14%)
Asian, South Asian	0	1 (5%)

Challenges to the Evaluation

A major challenge for the evaluation was the length of time it took to assemble the two samples of youth participants, and in particular, the Comparison group. What had been anticipated as taking two to three months required, in reality, nearly eight months. In view of the need to keep within the overall timeframe of the project, the extra time required to assemble the participant groups meant that the interval between Time 1 and Time 2 data collection needed to be shortened relative to the original workplan (i.e., to approximately six months rather than nine months, as had been planned).

Moreover, after it became apparent that there would not be a sufficient number of young people who had accessed Aunt Leah's programs (e.g., the *Support Link*) to draw on to comprise the Comparison Group, recruitment strategies shifted and required considerable outreach on the part of numerous dedicated workers at youth-serving organizations across the Lower Mainland (as well as the sizeable efforts of *Link* staff). The challenges associated with creating a Comparison Group were that many of the youth who had aged out of care and *Support Link* either had become involved with the *Link* and therefore were not eligible for the Comparison Group, or were very difficult to identify, recruit and/or contact.

As noted previously in this section of the report, in the end, the majority of the Comparison Group were former youth in care who were accessing housing, mental health and support services from organizations that worked with homeless or street-involved youth and/or youth with serious mental health and substance use issues. A number of these youth were receiving short-term (shelter-based) or longer-term (6-24 months) supportive housing, along with one-to-one support focussing on life skills, communication skills, educational or employment-related support, and daily or weekly congregate meals. As well, several of the Comparison Group youth were involved with an intensive mental health program that offered weekly appointments with a psychiatrist and a one-to-one support worker, and was geared to providing wrap-around oriented supports.

Thus, a related challenge for the evaluation concerns the reality that the youth in the Comparison Group were not, overall, youth from foster care who had aged out without currently receiving support services; instead, the majority were youth from care who were extremely vulnerable/high-need and had been or were at very high risk of being homeless. The supports they were accessing during the timeframe of this evaluation were, arguably, more intensive (at

least in terms of housing and mental health care) than those offered by the *Link*, in keeping with these youths' needs (Note: While the *Link* offers supports at age 19 in areas such as homelessness prevention, grocery/housing/transit subsidies, and educational/vocational/financial planning, it does not offer this type of intensive wrap-around services.) In view of the disparities between the *Link* and the Comparison Group, which have been described more fully in the Interim Report, the presentation of the findings in this report has focussed less on comparative analyses and more on the *Link's* program and participant outcomes.

Lastly, while the evaluation was successful in recruiting and interviewing the targeted number of *Link* and Comparison Group youth as set out in the project's proposal, the sample sizes of both groups are nonetheless relatively small, especially given participant attrition by Time 2. The small sample size precluded performance of inferential statistics when comparing the two groups.

Graphic recording produced as part of McCreary Centre Society's (2013) Aunt Leah's Link Program Evaluation Report. Vancouver: McCreary Centre Society.

3 Formative Evaluation Findings

HIGHLIGHTS

The *Link's* guiding principles and key program activities

- The *Link's* guiding principles included being relationship-based, flexible, outreach-based and wholistic.
- The *Link's* most frequently utilized activities were: one-to-one support; weekly drop-in; life skills workshops; moms and babies group; job search; and emergency food.

Profile of the *Link* and Comparison Group evaluation informants

- More than half of *Link* participants were parents.
- 71% of the Link participants reported having less than a Grade 12 education.
- At least half of both groups of youth struggled with mental health issues.
- More Comparison Group youth lived in some type of shelter, supportive housing, or subsidized housing for youth, relative to the *Link* participants.

What Youth like best about the Link included:

- Their connections with staff, described as non-judgemental, caring, helpful, and supportive;
- The practical and emotional support provided by the program; and
- Not having an age limit for accessing the program.

3.1 Guiding principles and key activities of the Link program

Guiding principles

A program's guiding principles shape program activities and approaches to working with its participants. A key step in evaluating a program is to identify and articulate the underlying principles and theoretical framework and to understand how they influence outcomes and participant satisfaction. While the guiding principles for the *Link* program are not often explicitly stated as such, implicitly they emerged over and over again, particularly when staff or youth talked about the strengths of the program. In the words of one staff member, the program strengths that illustrate the underlying guiding principles were:

> Great outreach and support for youth. Meet them where they are at. No judgement. Offer lots of options for reducing barriers in order

for them to attend programs, engage with supports.

Elaboration of the guiding principles and theoretical approaches follows:

- **YOUTH-DIRECTED/CLIENT-FOCUSED** – starting where youth are at, accepting them where they are at, and having them direct what they need in terms of services and support.
- **RELATIONSHIP-BASED** – emphasizing respectful, non-judgemental, safe, trusting relationships. The graphic recording completed as part of the McCreary Centre Society (2013) evaluation of the *Link* captured the *Link* youths' words and clearly articulated important aspects of the relationship-based approach at the *Link* (see image page 8):

  Trust, respect, confidentiality, caring, gentle, loving, acceptance, forgiveness, polite.

- **WHOLISTIC** – exploring all aspects of the youth's life with the youth and developing a coordinated and integrated approach, building a circle of support people in their lives. Youth accessing the *Link* face challenges in many interrelated areas of their lives, especially those related to the social determinants of heath, e.g., housing, education, employment, income, social and family relationships, mental health and so on.
- **DEVELOPMENTAL LENS** – recognizing important developmental milestones in the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Effective programs and practices to support healthy development and mental health for youth would attend to building relationships; teaching and modeling about intimacy and relationships; exploring education, work and career opportunities; and supporting youth to work toward goals (Gaetz, 2014).
- **OUTREACH-BASED** – improving access to and utilization of services, particularly amongst those who typically are reluctant to access or who are under-served by office-based programs. Outreach-based approaches seek to remove barriers to accessing services e.g., problematic physical location, poor transportation links and requirement for pre-scheduled appointments. Outreach-based approaches focus on having the service provider meet and work with the participant where she is at both literally and figuratively.
- **HARM REDUCTION** – helping youth reduce harms (associated with substance use, exploitative and/or violent social relationships) and make plans to create safety for themselves and their children.

Key activities of the Link program

- **Intake and individual service planning**
- **One to one support related to housing, stable income, education and employment, emotional support**
- **Weekly Mom and Baby group**
- **Weekly life skills workshops**
- **Outreach**
- **Referrals**
- **Provision of emergency food and money**
- **Educational outings to learn about resources, e.g., Works BC, community supports food banks, farmers' markets**

Intake and service planning

When youth are referred to the program, they participate in an intake meeting in which they learn about the program and talk about what they would like to achieve. Participants then work with the *Link* staff to assess their areas of strength and abilities in order to develop goals for their Individual Service Agreement (ISA). One aim of the planning process is to limit or minimize crises in the youths' lives, e.g., not being able to pay rent because they don't understand budgeting or haven't addressed substance use issues. Every three months, each youth and staff review the progress toward achieving the youth's goals, but the youth can change or add to their ISA at any time.

Participants are encouraged to work on a minimum of three goals related to a wide range of topics such as housing, employment, life skills, education, and social relationships.

According to staff interviews, this aspect of the program has improved since Time 1. At Time 2, staff stated that they were much more consistent with the ISAs than at Time 1.

For youths who are transitioning from the *Support Link* to the *Link* program, a transition meeting is held prior to aging out, which includes the *Support Link* support worker, the youth, the youth's social worker and *Link* staff members, plus any other support people or service providers who have been involved with the youth. Nevertheless, there is much more planning for leaving care that has occurred prior to this final transition meeting with the *Link* program staff. At the transition meeting, the youth's *Support Link* Service Plan is reviewed and the youth's achievements to date are acknowledged by those present; their goals emerge from this process. Youths' goals for the *Link* Service Plan are established at this time. Sixty-two youths (81% of total *Link* participants for 2012/13) had transitioned from the *Support Link* and Aunt Leah's House programs to the *Link* and took part in these meetings.

Service planning for youth referred by other service providers or by friends takes longer to achieve. The staff spends a lot of time getting to know these youths and their backgrounds and interests to ensure the planning fits the youths' needs and concerns. As well, where appropriate, the *Link* support staff will seek consent from youths to contact the other programs and services that they are involved in so that the staff can receive and share vital information regarding their circumstances.

One-to-one support

Link participants can access one-to-one support through multiple means—by scheduling an appointment with a *Link* staff member, by attending scheduled drop-in times, through phone calls, and through Facebook and texting. The youth-directed one-to-one support is intended to help participants work on their ISA goals or address immediate concerns. Support can include:

- providing emotional support
- helping to secure safe housing and with moving
- helping with resumes and job searches
- providing accompaniment to appointments and transportation
- providing food from the emergency food cupboard
- helping to access income support and providing emergency funding
- providing parenting and child care advice
- helping to access other services, e.g., mental health, substance use, health care
- providing guidance related to relationships with friends and family
- celebrating achievements to date

According to staff, emotional support and help with housing are the two primary reasons that *Link* participants ask for one-to-one support. One staff member reported, "Often the support youth receive helps with day-to-day or small incremental changes, such as ensuring the youth has enough food for the month."

One-to-one support is provided by two *Link* staff with assistance from social work practicum students, who are available five days a week to meet with participants. Outside of the drop-in times, which occur on two days a week at the New Westminster office, the staff prefer that the youth schedule an appointment. Nevertheless, they communicate and/or drop by at any time during office hours (as well as evenings and weekends) and the staff responds as time permits. The flexibility of the access means that the participation in the drop-in sessions is highly variable from week to week.

During the drop-in times, computers are available for housing and job searches, completing applications for education or services or other

searches requiring a computer. Participants are able to connect to *Link* staff and other Aunt Leah's staff and receive help with any issues they might be experiencing. There are snacks and drinks available, and many people use the time to socialize with other youth in this safe environment.

Moms and Baby/Fresh Food evening group

The weekly Moms and Baby group takes place Monday evenings. This group is open to all female *Link* participants with infants and children. Access to fresh food, information on parenting, childcare, community resources and building social relationships with peers are the focus of these evening sessions.

Life skills workshops

Essential Skills Program is another weekly group for *Link* participants. It offers workshops on topics such as mental health, drug and alcohol awareness, health and well-being, and cultural awareness. The information may be provided through guest speakers, films and/or group discussions. As well, certification workshops and training are offered so that *Link* and other Aunt Leah's participants can obtain certification help build their résumés, e.g., food safe, first aid, World Host Customer Service Training. In addition, a meal is provided to the youth and time is made available for important peer support and socializing.

Essential Skills
AUNT LEAH'S *place*

Outreach

In order to improve access for youths in the Vancouver area, an outreach office has been established in partnership with another youth-serving organization. The *Link* Support Worker attends this office two days a week to provide one-to-one support to youth for whom travel to the New Westminster office is onerous. This outreach office or "hot desk" also strengthens the worker's relationships with other service providers in the area, which in turn contributes to youth feeling more comfortable when referred to these agencies. Approximately one quarter of *Link* participants live in the City of Vancouver.

Referrals

Sometimes, in order to help program participants feel comfortable with the referrals to other organizations and develop relationships with these service providers, *Link* staff accompany youths to appointments. Referrals are made to counsellors, work programs, social workers, childcare resources and other community based programs.

Provision of emergency food and money

The *Link* has emergency food and funds that it provides to youths to tide them over in emergencies. In addition, the Housing and Education *Link* Subsidy Program (HELPS) provides a housing subsidy allowance that enables youths to continue their education in housing that is safe and conveniently located to their school.

Outings or field trips

Field trips are intended to familiarize young people with community resources related to employment, education, housing, food security, and so forth. Outings include sites such as Works BC, Quest—a low-income grocery store, the food bank, the farmers' market, and local events at the Heritage Village and museum.

Most utilized components of the *Link* program

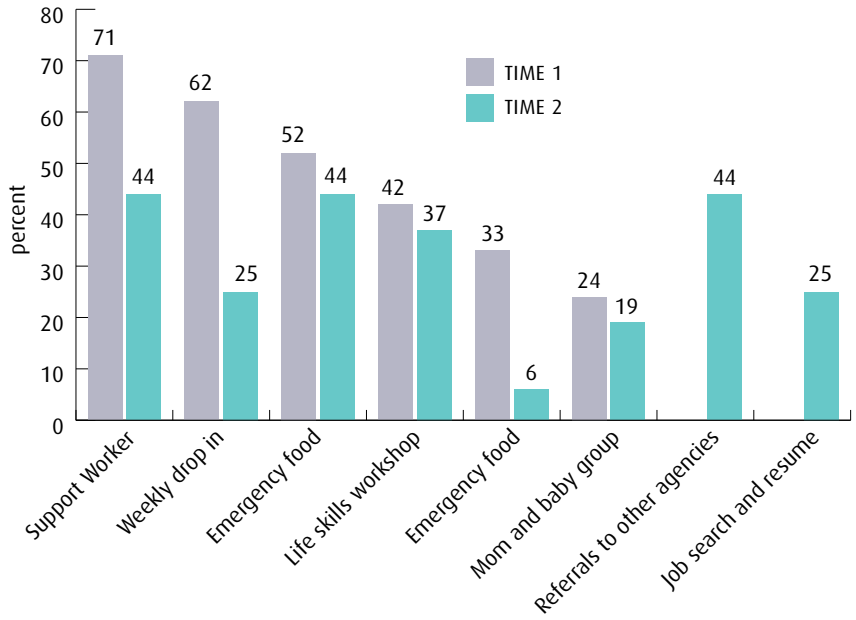
Link participants were asked, **"What components of the *Link* program are you currently taking part in?".** Participants were also asked how much time they spent with the program.

At Time 1, the majority of participants (71%) reported spending one hour or more per week with their support worker, whereas at Time 2, 63% reported spending one hour or less at the program. Five youths said they spent four hours or more per week at both Time 1 and Time 2.

Five of the 16 *Link* participants reported that they were no longer involved with the program at Time 2. Nevertheless, even when the youths said they were no longer involved in the program, often because they were working or were at school, they stopped by or "checked in" from time to time. As an example, one youth reported that he was "working a lot" and that when he didn't have work, he went to the *Link* program to visit.

Figure 2 illustrates participants' involvement in different components of the program, both at Time 1 and Time 2.

FIGURE 2 PERCENTAGE OF YOUTH ACCESSING COMPONENTS OF THE LINK AT TIME 1 AND TIME 2



3.2 Socio-demographic and health-related profile

Age

Based on the age range and distribution of the participants in this study, the *Link* program clearly is attracting young adults who range in age from19 to 30.

Nearly half of the *Link* participants in this study were age 19-20 at the time of the first interview, i.e. less than 24 months post-aging out of care. Many were involved with Aunt Leah's *Support Link* program while they were still in care and they then transferred or transitioned fluidly from the *Support Link* to the *Link* program. Seven had also had prior involvement in Aunt Leah's Housing (i.e., supported housing for pregnant and parenting teen moms under age of 19, who are in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development.)

At the same time, three of the 21 *Link* participants were over age 25, suggesting that youth are continuing to remain engaged with the program—or are returning to the program—well into their 20s. Importantly, this is the age at which other youth-serving programs cut off service to young adults.

Number of years in care

The length of time that evaluation participants spent in care varied from a few months to as long as 19 years. On average, the *Link* participants had spent 9 years in care, relative to the Comparison Group's average of 6 years in care.

Parenting status

More than half (52%) of the *Link* participants in this study were parents: at the time of the first interview, eight participants (two of whom were partners) had one child, and three had two children. In addition, two *Link* participants (10%) were pregnant. This high percentage of participants with children likely reflects the fact that Aunt Leah's provides housing and other supports to young parents in/from care through the *Thresholds* Residential program and through Aunt Leah's House, and 24% of the *Link* participants previously had accessed *Thresholds* and 33% had accessed Aunt Leah's House.

By contrast, only two people (9%) in the Comparison Group (both female) had a child.

Level of Education

Nearly three-quarters of the *Link* participants in this study (71%) reported having less than a Grade 12 education; only 29% reported having graduated from high school. Further, only one (5%) of the 21 *Link* participants said they had more than a high school education. By contrast, a larger percentage of the Comparison Group (36%) reported having graduated from high school, and 23% had more than a high school education.

Nevertheless, the high school completion rates of both groups of youth in this study is substantially lower than the graduation rate of BC youth overall, which is approximately 80% (Foster, Keller, McKee & Ostry, 2011).

Income

Nearly all of the young people who participated in this study—both *Link* participants and also Comparison Group youth—lived in significant poverty. At the time of the first interview, the majority of *Link* participants (57%) had an income of less than $1,000 per month. As well, an even greater majority of the youth in the Comparison Group (82%) had an income of less than $1,000 a month —indeed, 36% of these youth reported having an income of less than $500 per month. However, it should be noted that this likely represented only the living portion of income assistance, as the shelter portion would have been paid directly to the supported housing program.

14% of Link evaluation informants were 25 years of age or older, suggesting that youth are continuing to remain engaged with the program—or are returning to the program—well into their 20s. Importantly, this is the age at which other youth-serving programs cut off service to young adults.

Further, as shown in **Table 4**, only 24% of the *Link* participants and 10% of the Comparison Group reported having an income of more than $1,500 a month (an amount that corresponds approximately to what is viewed as the Low Income Cut Off level for a single person living in Vancouver (Citizens for Public Justice, 2013)).

TABLE 4 INCOME AT TIME 1

	Link (n = 21)	Comparison Group (n = 22)
<$500 month	1 (5%)	8 (36%)
$500 - $999/month	11 (52%)	10 (45%)
$1000-$1,499 (month)	4 (19%)	2 (9%)
$1,500 - $1,999/month	2 (10%)	1 (5%)
>$2000/month	3 (14%)	1 (5%)

Participants were asked to name all sources of income. For the *Link* participants at Time 1, nearly 40% said they were employed either full-time or part-time, which was the most frequently reported source of income, followed by People With Disability Assistance (PWD) (35%), Income Assistance (25%) and "Other" (25%). For Comparison Group participants, the most frequently reported categories were: Income Assistance (40%); PWD (32%); and Employment (23%).

In other words, the percentage of *Link* participants who were employed at Time 1 was nearly double that of the Comparison Group.

Mental Health

According to the *Link* program data collected for all program participants by the *Link* staff, approximately 50% of all *Link* participants (i.e. not just those who were part of this study) have a formal mental health or neurodevelopmental diagnosis including ADHD, anxiety, bi-polar disorder, brain injury, cognitive delays, depression, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or schizophrenia. As well, according

Nearly three–quarters of the Link participants in this study (71%) reported having less than a Grade 12 education – i.e. had not graduated from high school. By contrast, the graduation rate of BC youth overall, is approximately 80% (Foster, Keller, McKee & Ostry, 2011).

to staff reports, approximately 31% of all *Link* participants habitually use marijuana, 36% use alcohol, and almost all the youth with a diagnosed mental health disorder also were regular users of alcohol and/or drugs.

Similarly, yet based on information from the evaluation interviews, 59% of the Comparison Group participants reported having mental health issues and/or were accessing mental health services on a regular basis. Mental health problems included depression, anxiety, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, eating disorders, and anti-social behaviours. Several of these youth also reported having substance use issues. Indeed, many of the Comparison Group youth were recruited from programs designed specifically for youth with mental health and/or substance use concerns.

As well, several youth from both the *Link* and the Comparison groups reported that their mental health issue(s) were the cause of their challenges with employment/ PWD status.

Housing

During the first interview for the study, participants were asked about their living/housing situation both when they first turned 19 and also at the present time. They were asked about their housing again at the Time 2 interview. Findings relating to their housing at age 19 and at Time 1 are presented below; findings relating to housing at Time 2 are presented in Section 4.

Link participants

As shown in **Table 5**, the majority of the *Link* participants (76%) reported that, at age 19, they were living in some type of market housing accommodation, that is, a basement suite, an apartment (either on their own or shared) or a (shared) house. Three youths reported living in supportive housing at age 19, and two people reported being homeless or couch-surfing when they turned 19; one was living on the streets and one was couch—surfing while working as an escort.

TABLE 5 TYPE OF HOUSING–LINK PARTICIPANTS AT AGE 19 AND TIME 1

Category	Where living at age 19 (n = 21)	Where living at Time 1 (n = 21)
Market priced apt – alone	1	1
Market priced apt – shared	3	0
Basement suite – alone	1	4
Market price house – shared	7	3
Supportive Housing (e.g. AL's, Thresholds, 2nd stage shelter, Safe House)	3	3
Subsidized Housing – Singles, Couples, Families	0	2
Single Room Occupancy	0	2

When asked about their current housing during the Time 1 interview, most *Link* participants reported (still) living in market housing, mainly in some type of shared arrangement. At the same time, there was an increase—relative to when they first turned 19—in the number of people who were living in subsidized housing for families. None of the participants said they were homeless or in shelter housing at Time 1.

That said, housing type—in itself—did not speak to the youths' experiences and feelings about where they lived; basement suites, for example, were of variable quality. As one youth described the apartment he lived in when he first turned 19:

"The basement suite was a hole in the ground. (It was) old and run-down, and crack-heads lived across the hall from us."

In response to the question, "With whom were you living at 19 (when you first aged out of care)?" the most frequently reported response category for the *Link* participants was "with a family member"; eight of the 21 *Link* youth (38%) were living with family. This response category was broad and included immediate and extended family, such as siblings, parents, aunts or uncles, as well as a friend's family and a foster family. Only three of the 21 *Link* participants indicated that they lived alone upon aging out of care at age 19.

However, as the following comments illustrate, youths' experiences and their views in relation to living with family varied; moreover, for many, the situation was stressful and often resulted in a housing breakdown.

"I moved in with my mom; she was doing Meth and using my money from welfare. I also have couch-surfed."

"Just before aging out of care I was at Support Link; they helped me to negotiate living with my mom, and I moved in with her for about three weeks. But then I had to leave."

At the time of the Time 1 interview, the youths' living circumstances had changed and there was more variation in terms of with whom they were living. Fewer were living with family, and more said they were living on their own or with their child.

Comparison Group

For the Comparison Group youth, while most (64%) lived in some sort of market housing accommodation at age 19, overall, more were living in some type of shelter, supportive housing, or subsidized housing for youth, relative to the *Link* participants (**Table 6**). This pattern was more evident at Time 1 than at age 19, and it continued throughout this study. As well, seven Comparison Group participants (32%)—a substantially higher percentage than the 10% of the Link participant group—said they had experienced some form of homelessness between aging out of foster care and the Time 1 interview.

TABLE 6 TYPE OF HOUSING–COMPARISON GROUP PARTICIPANTS AT AGE 19 AND AT TIME 1

Category	Where living at age 19 (n = 22)	Where living at Time 1 (n = 22)
Market priced apt – alone	2	1
Market priced apt – shared	3	5
Basement suite – alone	1	0
Market price house – shared	9	3
Shelter	0	2
Supportive Housing (e.g. Covenant, House, St. Helen's Hotel)	4	6
Subsidized Housing – Youth	0	2
Single Room Occupancy	0	1
Other*	2	1

*Other = Supported communal living society and Hospital (at age 19), and Supported communal living society (at Time 1)

Not unlike the participants from Aunt Leah's, seven of the 22 Comparison Group youth (32%) reported living with family members at age 19, including one youth who lived with a former foster family. As well, several youth said they were sharing a room with others while living at a shelter or supported housing such as Covenant House. Several others said they were living alone, yet they resided in supported housing where they had access to supports and services.

3.3 Participants' perspectives and satisfaction with the Link

What do youth like best about the Link?

Based on interviews at both Time 1 and Time 2, what youth liked best about the *Link* were: key qualities of the staff, the welcoming and safe environment, the multi-faceted support that the

program provided, and dimensions related to the program's accessibility, including the lack of age limit for service.

The strongest theme to emerge was that youth liked the *Link* because staff were non-judgemental, caring, helpful, supportive, and trustworthy. In youths' words:

> "The worker gets on a personal level. I can talk with her about anything. She shows that she cares. She is very open and warm. It isn't a business relationship."

An inter-related theme was that participants felt comfortable and a sense of belonging, and several participants spoke of the "family-like" environment.

> "I feel safe, like I can let some of my barriers down. I feel respected. I can be myself."

Other themes focused on the practical and emotional supports received – including nutritious food (which was noted for more participants in Time 2 than in Time 1), access to transportation, and someone to talk to and to help with interpersonal communication.

> "[I like] how they go above and beyond to get answers and find support for us. Practical too. The help me get my laundry done. They help me and my partner with our relationship."

> "I had no money for food. They gave us food and perishables. Plus at the Moms Group, we'd get given good food like eggs, cheese, broccoli."

Lastly, a number of informants focused on facets of the program that contribute to its accessibility, including not having age restrictions, communicating with staff via texting, and encouraging youth to determine how they want to be involved.

> "They don't age out kids. It's good to know you have some help after getting kicked out on your ass."

What, if anything, do youth not like about the Link?

At both Time 1 and Time 2, the most frequent response to this question was that there wasn't anything that participants didn't like about the program. Of those who identified something that they did not like, most answers concerned a criticism of the office location, space, hours of operation, or lack of parking. Criticisms regarding location and hours were voiced by more participants at Time 2 than Time 1, which may be attributable to a greater number of participants living farther from Aunt Leah's (e.g., in Surrey) at Time 2.

As well, at Time 2, several participants expressed some unhappiness regarding either having been asked to leave a component of the program (e.g., the *Thresholds* Residential program) due to their behaviour (most often consumption of drugs or alcohol in violation of the house rules) or having been told that they could not continue to have as much time with staff relative to what they had previously because they were not attending the program as regularly as in the past. Similarly, another participant noted that he "didn't get the encouragement " he was looking for, although he also noted that this likely was because program staff believed that he was able to work through the issue on his own.

What, if anything, has gotten in the way of youth participating in the Link?

Nearly half of the *Link* informants (10 out of 21) indicated at Time 1 that there were no barriers to accessing the program. By contrast, at Time 2, three participants said that there were no barriers that impeded their participation.

The most frequently identified barrier to participation (reported by 24% at Time 1 and 38% at Time 2) was Aunt Leah's location in New Westminster. As well, for a few youth there were twinned barriers of lacking childcare and having transportation issues, either because of lacking

money for transit or the inconvenience of transit given the distance. Employment was cited as a barrier by three youths at Time 2 and one youth at Time 1.

Would youth recommend the Link to others who are aging out of care?

At both Time 1 and Time 2, all *Link* evaluation informants said that they'd recommend the *Link* to other youth, and in fact, many youth said that they had recommended the program to youth who were aging out of care.

In elaborating on why they would recommend the *Link*, many youth stated that they knew that there were few other programs that were geared to youth leaving care, and youth needed and benefitted from the support that the *Link* provided. As this informant stated:

> "I don't want others to experience what I did when I first left care. I had no support. I was on my own. I didn't trust anyone and therefore turned away from people."

In a similar vein, several youth stated that they would recommend the *Link* because of its respectful and wholistic approach, because of the variety of areas of support provided through the program and/or staff's efforts to connect youth with other community resources, and/or because of the home-like environment at Aunt Leah's:

> "Yes, because Aunt Leah's is very helpful. They take the time to get to know you. They don't talk to you like you are a kid."

> "Yes, I suggested that [my friend] speak to [the worker] at the Link, because she is awesome at helping with everything—like finding housing, parenting courses, education, advocacy with MCFD, getting people into the food bank."

3.4 Strengths of the Link program

Passionate and committed staff, a caring, respectful and wholistic approach when working with youth, flexibility and accessibility, along with a desire to engage with community partners are among the *Link* program's strengths.

Passionate and committed staff

> "The staff. I know them, I feel comfortable with them. They treat us like family here."

The importance of caring and committed staff cannot be underestimated when working with youth, especially youth who can be notoriously difficult to engage and maintain over a longer term due to factors such as previous experiences of disrupted or severed relationships, transience, poverty, and/or past or current maltreatment or trauma. When asked at Time 2 what they like best about the program, 10 of the 16 youth spoke about the staff. The following quote captures youths' thoughts about the importance of staff.

> "[Link has] helpful supportive staff, willing to help, no matter what. The atmosphere is so different, welcoming—don't feel like it is a business and move you along. They are dedicated to supporting youth in whatever they need."

Former foster youth often have no one else to turn to for support. While they may have connections with family, often the family members may not be safe due to substance use, violence, or they may take advantage of youth financially (i.e., when on disability assistance). Thus, staff become an important source of emotional support.

Continuity of care

Because the *Link* is nested within a multi-service agency dedicated to supporting youth in and from foster care, *Link* participants can experience a seamless transition from *Support Link* and Aunt Leah's House (while they are in care) to the *Link* (after they reach age of majority). Moreover,

participants can benefit the other Aunt Leah's programs, such as the Mom and Baby/Fresh Food program. This continuity and continuum of care can provide youth with a profound sense of belonging. In the words of one staff member:

> "Many youth from care have experienced so many different workers, so when they leave care they are "dropped". But Aunt Leah's provides a safe haven for them—like family."

Another aspect of the continuity is that youth are not discharged from the program. While some youth are considered to be active participants, those who seek support infrequently or only attend annual functions or celebrations such as the Christmas dinner, are on inactive status. All the youth are welcome to continue to access the *Link* and they do as needed—there are no hurdles such as opening a new file in their way.

Supporting youth to find housing

Despite a difficult rental-housing environment in the Lower Mainland that is expensive, with demanding landlords, the *Link* program has been able to assist program participants to find longer term housing, which in turn has contributed to stability for youth such that they are able to attend school and hold down a job. As reported by one staff member:

> "We are able to help youth find housing, and more youth are connected to school. One young mother has been involved with Aunt Leah's since she was 16. She is now 19 and has finished high school and is enrolled in college."

Another staff shared an example of one youth who had been homeless due to bedbugs in his previous longer-term apartment; when he found a new apartment said: "Wow, now I can go back to work."

A more detailed discussion about housing is contained in Section 4 of this report.

The *Link's* strengths reflected its underlying principles and included the program's: staff; accessibility, including weekly drop-ins and group sessions; wholistic and youth-directed programming; and that the program helps youth find housing in a difficult and very expensive rental market.

Flexibility and accessibility

The *Link* offers youth a variety of program options, i.e., one-to-one support, groups, drop-in and ways to communicate with staff, so that youth can choose how and when they work with the *Link* staff. As well, the "hot desk" at Broadway Youth Resources Society and ability of staff to travel to meet with youth away from the office makes it easier for the youth to participate and get the support they need.

> "My Link worker would come out and visit me. I really appreciated that. It felt like someone who was willing to put in the effort to come to me and was really a great support."

The weekly group sessions and drop-in

The weekly Mom and Baby and Life Skills groups and drop-in sessions provide a safe, social and supportive environment for learning and acquiring new skills. To illustrate this point, one of the Support Workers shared an example of a youth who initially was very reluctant to participate with other youth in the program:

> "He felt there was a stigma attached to these youth. Now he has opened up more and is developing relationships with other youth and with all the staff. He comes to the group programs and is making friends.

> This has opened doors for him at school and when looking for a job (i.e., he is able to communicate with others)."

Youth-directed

Closely related to flexibility and accessibility is attention to what the youths are needing/wanting. In the words of one staff member:

> "Youth like the pace of relationship development—they can choose how and when to engage with staff. We gear our engagement efforts to the youth's readiness."

As an example of the staff's patience with relationship building, one youth who had a brain injury dropped into the program for about six months before he began to speak with staff. When he first started he was homeless and would spend all day at the *Link* using the computers and observing other youth. One day he arrived with a very thick file related to his past involvement with programs and services. He is now engaged with the staff; he is housed and speaks to staff by name. Recently he brought in his girlfriend so that she could get some support as well. His involvement has kept him off the streets, helped find him a home, provided a safe social environment and taught him skills in getting along with others.

Wholistic

The wholistic nature of the program is a key strength. Youth are able to get help with multiple aspects of their lives including social and relationship issues. In addition to housing, the program pays attention to income security and helps youth to access income support programs for which they are eligible, e.g., Income Assistance, Persons with Disability assistance, Community Living BC (for those with developmental disabilities). The availability of food and emergency funds also reflects the needs of youth who are struggling to make ends meet on very meagre incomes.

For some youth, reconnecting with positive people in their lives is important. *Link* staff will work with youth to facilitate these connections. For example the *Link* workers helped one youth connect to her grandparents who lived in the US. A donor provided air mile points to pay for the ticket for the youth.

Increased partnerships with other service providers in the community

The *Link* program has worked to create an increased awareness about the program. The number of youth who have not previously been involved with Aunt Leah's programs is increasing, as the program becomes more widely known. Early on, most of the referrals came through the *Support Link* and Aunt Leah's House, but now social workers and other service providers are referring youth. Furthermore, there are a number of youth who have been brought in or referred by *Link* participants. More recently, a number of homeless youth who have not been in care are coming to the program seeking help. The newsletter, website, networking and youth speaking out about their experiences have contributed to this increased awareness and thus the increase in referrals.

3.5 Challenges in implementing the Link program

A number of challenges in implementing the program were identified by staff during interviews at Time 1 and Time 2. Several of these challenges are the flip side of the strengths that have been presented in the previous section. However, some of the challenges identified by staff may be viewed as larger systemic issues related to current inadequacies of our existing child welfare system as well as insufficient safe, affordable housing for youth in transition to adulthood. These systemic issues put strain on the *Link's* operation but do not stem from problems or failings of the program itself.

More staff needed

With the growth in numbers of participants, it has become apparent that more staff is needed to serve the youth. Moreover, staff time gets consumed by addressing crises and youth who are doing well can get left behind. Another challenge related to staffing is the current inability to offer services outside of office hours. Youth have expressed that they would like to be able to access support after work hours and on weekends. Currently the *Link* program relies on social work practicum students to help meet staffing needs and program demands.

Facility

Both youth participants and staff identified Aunt Leah's current physical space as a challenge. The space for the youth drop-in was not youth-friendly and becomes crowded on drop-in days. In addition to the cramped quarters, staff identified the lack of confidential space to be an issue. Plans are underway for the agency to move to a more suitable location in June 2014. It is hoped that this new space will be able to remedy another concern about the current facility, which is the lack of kitchen space where hot meals can be prepared and served to program participants.

Location

Both staff and youth often identified location as a challenge, not only because of the distances some youth had to travel to get to New Westminster but also because of the cost of transportation. The program team has addressed this challenge for youth living in the Vancouver area by establishing a satellite service or "hot desk" at Broadway Youth Resource Centre. With an increasing number of *Link* participants seeking less expensive housing in Surrey, there is a desire to establish a similar type of service in that community. However, that plan requires the participation of a willing community partner and additional staffing/funding.

Absence of long-term planning for youth leaving care

According to staff reports, long-term planning is missing for youth leaving care:

> "When there is a plan it is often not in the best interests of the youth—the social workers don't pay attention to the practical things like getting a Social Insurance Number and card, there is no planning for RESPs, and youth are leaving care without adequate preparation and planning for independence."

As a result of inadequate long-term planning, youth come to the *Link* under considerable stress because they are unprepared for how to acquire basic tools for moving on to independence. A lot of time is spent on crisis intervention—for many participants, the immediate needs take priority over the longer term planning related to education and stable, long-term housing. Financial constraints are often at the root of the crisis when youths do not have enough money for food, clothes, rent, or utilities, which means they can't pay their rent, bills, buy food or present themselves adequately for job interviews.

Accessing housing and needed services

Staff spends an inordinate amount of time on housing, i.e., applying for qualifications under BC Housing and Community Living BC (CLBC), in addition to helping youth understand what it means to be a renter[1]. Furthermore, finding safe, affordable housing is another challenge. In addition

1 See Much More Than Paperwork (BC Representative for Children and Youth, 2013) https://www.rcybc.ca/Images/PDFs/Reports/RCY_CPOC-summary%20FINAL.pdf for a review on the number of children and youth in the BC care system who do not have a current and adequate Comprehensive Plan of Care, suggesting that planning to help prepare the youth for the transition out of care is episodic at best, which is why youth can arrive at services such as Aunt Leah's without already having applied to CLBC, BC Housing and so forth.

to the financial constraint, often the youths' social skills and/or invisible disabilities (e.g., FASD, mental health) contribute to their limited abilities to advocate for themselves. Staff reported feeling caught as to how much they should intervene and how much to advocate for youth.

Similarly, income assistance is difficult for youth to access—oftentimes Aunt Leah's provides funds to tide a youth over until s/he receives some money. Staff reported that the income assistance workers do not appreciate the youths' circumstances—that they might not have a permanent address or phone which makes it hard for the youth to meet the requirements for income assistance applications. The *Link* program staff would like to have an Income Assistance worker dedicated to work with youth leaving care. They have met with the local IA manager who did not feel there was sufficient need to warrant dedication of IA staff time to youths' needs.

3.6 Participants' and staff's suggestions for program improvement

Link staff and program participants had several suggestions for improvements or ways in which to address program challenges.

Ideally, staff would like to see the addition of Aunt Leah's-operated housing for *Link* participants. The organization has experience housing youth in their other programs, i.e., *Support Link*, Aunt Leah's House and *Thresholds* but currently lacks funding to offer comparable housing to the *Link* participants.

Staff would also like to enhance the program and augment their own knowledge and skills with dedicated service providers such as an income assistance worker, drug and alcohol counsellor and mental health worker working on-site. This would require creation of confidential office space for these community service partners to use when at Aunt Leah's.

Other staff suggested the need for a housing worker position similar to that at Broadway Youth Resource Centre. This person has more time to spend with each youth; they assist with housing search, preparation for interviews with landlords, budgeting, accompany youth to view housing, moving, provision of housing start up kits, advocacy, and applications for low income housing. A housing worker position would be of particular benefit to those youth who have literacy, developmental and mental health concerns and who require a more intensive and sustained level of support in finding and maintaining housing.

The *Link* staff are looking forward to the implementation of the Supporting Education For Foster Youth program (SEFFY), hoping that it will strengthen the education connection through the education liaison worker who will be able to work with youth and connect with schools regarding youths' education plans.

Youth and staff identified the need to create a youth-friendly space with its own kitchen and comfortable furniture, a resource room, laundry and shower facilities. They would also like to see a lunch program offered.

In order to improve access, both staff and some youth suggested the addition of a "hot desk" outreach program in Surrey in order to improve access for youth who are having to move further into the suburban areas to find affordable housing.

Youth added that they would like to see drop-in days extended to include all weekdays. They also suggested that the *Link's* hours of operation be staggered so that some days the workers were available in the evenings. Other participants expressed interest in having more "advanced topics" at the life skills workshops and more assistance with childcare. Another suggestion was to find more funding so that the fresh fruits and vegetables program available for the Mom and Baby's group could be offered to the *Link* youth.

4 Summative Evaluation Findings

HIGHLIGHTS

Many of the impacts of the *Link* program recounted by youth were dramatic and life-altering, including:

- Helps me find housing and/or with housing-related issues
- Provides social/emotional connection and support/guidance
- Helps me become more independent, stronger, more capable
- Helps me during pregnancy, with parenting and/or with child welfare authorities
- Helps me connect with health and community services
- Provides a sense of belonging and social connection
- Helps me gain self-confidence and sense of hope

4.1 What difference does the Link program make to youth participants?

In response to the question, **"What difference do you think participating in the *Link* program has made for you?"** all of the youth spoke of benefiting from the program in a variety of areas. Overall, their comments reflect the emotional and practical support they have received in the areas of housing, employment readiness including training and volunteering, budgeting, parenting, education, and life skills.

At Time 1, some of the impacts recounted by youth were dramatic and life-altering, for example:

> "The workers here are very open to things, they don't judge you."

> "I'd be homeless without them. I'd be in a homeless shelter not knowing what the heck to do with my life."

> "The Link/Aunt Leah's was willing to pay my rent for me. I was able to pay them back. Having a place to go to so I wasn't in jail or homeless, or on Hastings or on drugs. If I hadn't been connected [to Aunt Leah's], if I was just in foster care, now I'd be on drugs, jail or dead."

Even when the assistance that was offered had to do with food initially, the *Link* program still made a difference in relation to housing. Lower Mainland housing costs are well documented as being amongst the most expensive and youth struggled with this. As one youth who was also a parent said:

> "Without the Link we would not have any food. They also got us into supported housing. That really helped to cut our costs in half."

At Time 2, youths' comments indicated that they continued to experience wide-ranging benefits as

a result of the emotional and practical support they received from the *Link*. The following comments illustrate how interconnected these benefits were and why it is difficult to tease apart the various ways in which participants felt supported by the *Link*:

> "They give great reassurance that you are not alone during tough times, like when you're trying to figure out your life when getting out of foster home system. They give practical and emotional help, like time management and budgeting, which were two areas that I needed help with, and they have definitely improved. They helped me find housing but supported me to make independent decisions. . . . The support really helped build my self-confidence. They guide rather than direct you so you make own decisions, and when you have done it, it makes me feel confident and proud."

As well as the multi-faceted benefits, some youth spoke about the difference that the *Link* had made for them in relation to specific areas of their lives. A sample of these outcomes and youths' comments follows.

In relation to **housing**:

> "I'm definitely not on the streets because of the program, and even if I was, I had someplace to go during the day, looking for a place to live."

> "Helped me find housing—spent some time in the emergency-housing program. Then they helped me find more permanent housing."

One support person—a mother of a *Link* participant who was caring for her daughter's children while the young woman attended a residential treatment program—provided additional perspective on what difference the *Link* had made for her knowing that her daughter had safe housing:

> "Aunt Leah's has been so good for her. They were there for her, full force. I wasn't in a good place when she was in Thresholds/ Aunt Leah's House so knowing she was in a good place was a real relief."

For participants who were pregnant and/ or parenting, housing and the connection to community resources became especially important, particularly if the youths' intent was to keep the baby and not have child welfare authorities involved. For one young woman, the *Link* helped her to access the Maxine Wright Shelter, which offered her a safe place to stay for the short term, followed by second stage housing, which enabled her to be in stable housing at the time of the baby's birth. Following this, the *Link* staff continued to be an important source of support:

> "The Link helped me move to a safe home. . . . We text back and forth, so if she can't get to me during work hours, [the Link Support Worker] will call after work. This is important because I have no one to turn to.

As well, when things were not going well in youths' lives, such as losing their housing, they turned to the *Link* program for support.

In relation to **training and work**:

> "I participated in one of the training programs—landscaping, serving. Afterwards I got a job landscaping—so it helped. If I didn't have this certificate, then it would be harder to get a job. So an employer looks at the certificate and says 'this fellow knows how to work'."

> "They helped with completing school and motivated me to get a job."

In terms of access to counselling related to **substance use**:

During the Time 2 interview, one youth noted that the program had helped him to find housing and had connected him to needed **alcohol and drug**

counselling, which reduced his involvement in risk behaviours:

> "Helped me find housing; they gave me housing —I wasn't doing so good before the program but now I'm doing positive things and not doing drugs. It makes a big difference to have the drug and alcohol counsellor who comes to Aunt Leah's."

In relation to **parenting**:

> "When I found out I was pregnant, they were right ready to set me up to have a better life. They helped me when I had my daughter—the Link has made me a better person and a better mom."

> "I learned how to parent positively."

Nevertheless, there were times when program staff felt compelled to call the Ministry of Children and Family Development as a result of concerns for a child's safety. Thus, the relationship between the youth and the *Link* program could be complicated. Nonetheless, the program continued to be seen as a resource. In the words of one youth:

> "I used to come to the Link everyday, but then I lost my son (due to a call to MCFD) and was reluctant to come here for a while. But then I realized that I needed their help."

This same youth relied on *Link* support staff during her second pregnancy and at the Time 2 interview was in stable housing, had reduced risk behaviours associated with substance use, and was maintaining custody of her baby with the help of her mother, with whom she was living.

In terms of a **sense of belonging and social connection**:

For a number of *Link* participants, the program provided a sense of belonging—i.e., knowing that they have a place to go to and people they can turn to for support and friendship, when and as needed, and that they are not alone. This was an important impact of the program for youth, many of whom did not have stable or strong support networks that they could count on. Some youth even had important mail, such as their GST cheque, sent to Aunt Leah's because it was a reliable address for them.

One youth said:

> "There is always something cool going on during holidays; it's a place to go to like home, where you can relax."

And yet another youth said at Time 1:

> "If I didn't have the program I would be sitting at the library trying to find a job—that would be kind of lonely. The Link is a social connection—they are interested in me and my well-being and they help me out. They want me to be successful."

This same youth at Time 2 reiterated the importance of the sense of belonging and that the *Link* and by extension, Aunt Leah's, provides him with a "home":

> "[Aunt Leah's] gives me a sense of home. . . . it is somewhere familiar. I don't have family that I can talk to; my main source of relationships is my girlfriend and that is kind of up and down."

As well, some reflected that the support they received from the *Link* staff was helping them to **become more independent**. Related to this, several youths spoke of gaining **self-confidence** and a **sense of hope** about their own abilities; one person said:

> "It's helped me become more independent. That was very big for me. I was very terrified at the thought of living alone. I kept feeling like I'm not ready (to be on my own). But then later I thought, what was I so afraid of? This program helped me get to my independence."

At Time 2 this same youth reflected on how the *Link* had supported her over time to become more confident:

"The Link has helped me out in emergencies and to make contacts so I can get things done like doctors, dentists, schooling. I didn't have family who could help me with this. I'm learning to do this on my own now, that's a change. It feels good, a relief. I can take care of myself, be more independent."

Other *Link* participants said:

"They know what to say and how to encourage me. . . . It gives me a sense of hope."

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

TABLE 7 LINK AND COMPARISON GROUP PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES TO: "WHAT AREA(S) OF YOUR LIFE ARE GOING WELL RIGHT NOW?" AT TIME 2

	LINK PARTICIPANTS			COMPARISON GROUP		
	Going well	Going so-so	Not going well	Going well	Going so-so	Not going well
Housing	69%	25%	6%	67%	20%	13%
Money (making ends meet)	31%	50%	13%	27%	67%	7%
Health	93%	7%	0%	67%	33%	0%
Mental health, e.g., depression	75%	19%	6%	50%	50%	0%
Career planning & employment	64%	29%	7%	40%	27%	33%
Community connections	60%	33%	7%	71%	21%	7%
Connection with culture	58%	25%	17%	44%	33%	22%
Personal/Social relationships	88%	13%	0%	79%	14%	14%
Family relationships	44%	19%	38%	27%	47%	27%
Education	38%	54%	7%	50%	43%	7%
Daily living	81%	19%	0%	60%	40%	0%
Communication	63%	25%	13%	93%	7%	0%

4.2 How do Link participants fare over time?

Areas of life that are going well

At Time 2, both the *Link* participants and the Comparison Group youth were asked: **"What area(s) in your life are going well right now?"** and they were asked specifically about 12 life domains; this question involved a three-point Likert Scale rating format, with response options being "(this area of my life is) going well", "(this area of my life is) going so-so" or "(this area of my life is) not going well".

As can be seen in **Table 7**, a higher percentage of *Link* participants indicated that "things were going well" in more areas of their lives—eight of the 12 life domains—relative to the Comparison Group. While the small sample size precluded performing inferential statistical analyses to test for significant differences between groups, the pattern of findings suggested that more *Link* participants were doing well in and feeling good about a number of areas in their lives.

In addition, a number of the *Link*—and Comparison Group—youths' comments reflected the interconnections between having support from Aunt Leah's (or another youth-serving organization) and having an area in their life go well or better than it would have without support. As these *Link* participants' stated:

"I have been depressed, maybe post-partum. [The Link worker] will help with that, and connect me with a psychiatrist."

"I have a really hard time expressing myself—that's why I go to coffee with Aunt Leah's staff."

Link participants said that things were going well in 8 out of 12 life domains— housing, money, health, mental health, career planning, personal/social relationships, family relationships, and daily living.

Similarly, after indicating that 'education' was going well, one Comparison Group youth noted the value of youth-oriented supports:

> "I'm doing correspondence to finish high school. I'm getting tutoring for math at The Gathering Place."

Housing

At the Time 2 interview, evaluation participants were asked to provide an update on their housing.

Approximately two thirds of both the *Link* participants (69%) and the Comparison Group (67%) said that housing was going well for them. Safety, affordability, and stability were key characteristics that participants spoke about in their comments regarding why or ways in which their housing was going well:

> "My housing is safe and affordable."

> "I'm living with friend and that is working out well."

The high percentage of Comparison Group youth reporting that housing was going well likely was related to the high percentage (47%) who were living in supported housing at Time 2[2]. For example, one youth who was involved with the Inner City Youth Mental Health program and living initially in supported housing was able to transition through the program to subsidized housing in Vancouver.

Only two *Link* participants responded that they were in subsidized or supported housing (BC Housing and Thresholds) and therefore housing was "going well". At the same time, these findings—that many participants said that their housing was going well—may be viewed as a testament to the support provided by the *Link* program, since for the most part, *Link* participants were not as connected with supported housing as were the Comparison Group youths.

Link participants

As noted in Section 3.2, the majority of *Link* participants (67%) reported living in some type of (shared) market housing at Time 1; at Time 2 an even higher percentage lived in shared market accommodation (81%), relative to Time 1.

Nevertheless, the type of accommodation youth lived in belied their experience and feelings about where they lived; for example, while many youth were positive about their housing ("I have lived here for years and am happy here"), other *Link* youth expressed concern about the high cost of housing:

> "I wish I had subsidized housing. The rent is $600, which I split with my partner. It takes a lot of money from my cheque."

At Time 2, seven *Link* participants said they had experienced homelessness at some point since aging out of care; two youth had experienced more

That so many Link participants said that their housing was going well may be viewed as a testament to the support provided by the Link program, since for the most part, Link participants were not as connected with supported housing.

2 To illustrate, Covenant House, where some youth resided, offers a crisis shelter for youth ages 16 to 22; youth can stay in the shelter for as long as needed so long as they don't exceed the age limit. If they want, they can then apply to the Rights of Passage housing program, which offers 24/7 on-site support.

TABLE 8 TYPE OF HOUSING–LINK PARTICIPANTS AT AGE 19, TIME 1 AND TIME 2

Category	Where living at age 19 (n = 21)	Where living at Time 1 (n = 21)	Where living at Time 2 (n = 16)
Market priced apt – alone	1	1	1
Market priced apt – shared	3	0	0
Basement suite – alone	1	4	2
Market price house – shared	7	3	4
Supportive Housing (e.g. AL's, Thresholds, 2nd stage shelter, Safe House)	3	3	6
Subsidized Housing – Singles, Couples, Families	0	2	1
Single Room Occupancy	0	2	1

than one episode of homelessness, primarily couch surfing. Six *Link* participants reported experiencing some form of homelessness between the Time 1 and Time 2 interviews. Further, of these seven youth, one reported being homeless (couch surfing) at the Time 2 interview. In this case, the youth had been staying with a friend for three months and, with support from the *Link* program, had applied for and was hoping to get into Fraserside Society's supported housing[3]. The youth was spending upwards of 20 hours per week at the *Link* program accessing support while awaiting a response to his application:

> "I was in an apartment in September. It was a shit hole. I got bedbugs, so I gave up the apartment. I left the apartment by my own choice, but couldn't find a place (until now)."

At the same time, of the youth who reported some type of homelessness between Time 1 and Time 2, the homelessness was mostly for short periods of time. One youth lived in a shelter for seven days, three slept on couches for one month, and one person reported a combination of sleeping on couches and living in his car for a month, something he had done previously for six months.

Most of the *Link* participants experienced homelessness as a result of a relationship breakdown, e.g. with partner or roommate. For example, one young woman stated:

> "I was homeless for seven days; my boyfriend was living with me and I had to leave so my youth worker put me and my child in a shelter. I then decided I needed to go back to my own place. So told my boyfriend that he had to leave and he did. So I have my own place back."

Comparison Group

As described in Chapter 3, overall, more of the Comparison Group youth were living in some type of shelter, supportive housing, or subsidized housing relative to the *Link* participants, a pattern that continued throughout the study.

As well, although approximately the same percentage of youth in the Comparison Group said they had experienced some form of homelessness relative to the *Link* group, for the Comparison Group youth, homelessness was a more entrenched and longer lasting experience.

For example, one youth had been homeless for two years post-care. At the time of the Time 1 and Time 2 interviews, she was in a program that provided a housing subsidy; she found her own accommodation but the program provided $400 per month towards the rent. In addition, the youth also received support from the same agency for dealing with her substance use issues. The rent subsidy program is designed to help youth gain experience

3 Fraserside provides Mental Health Supported Housing Programs in a number of Lower Mainland communities for adults with barriers such as mental health issues.

TABLE 9 TYPE OF HOUSING–COMPARISON GROUP PARTICIPANTS AT AGE 19, TIME 1 AND TIME 2

Category	Where living at age 19 (n = 22)	Where living at Time 1 (n = 22)	Where living at Time 2 (n = 15)
Market priced apt – alone	2	1	0
Market priced apt – shared	3	5	4
Basement suite – alone	1	0	1
Basement suite – shared	0	1	2
Market price house – shared	9	3	1
Shelter	0	2	0
Supportive Housing (e.g. Covenant House, St. Helen's Hotel)	4	6	4
Subsidized Housing – Youth	0	2	2
Single Room Occupancy	1	1	0
Other*	2	1	1

*Other = Supported communal living society and Hospital (at age 19), and Supported communal living society (at Time 1 and Time 2)

learning how to live independently, while also helping to address the reasons for being homeless, such as drug/alcohol use. In this youth's words:

> "The [program] helps pay the rent; I'm in transition from being on the streets and not paying rent and [the program] helps me to be responsible for paying the rent. It gives me space to learn how to pay bills, how to budget for rent and food. Without this I would just go back to being homeless."

Another youth had started off living with his grandmother at age 19, but this lasted less than three months and he then lived in a shelter. During both the Time 1 and Time 2 interviews this youth was living at Covenant House, interspersed with a brief stint (two months) of sleeping on his sister's couch. Yet another youth reported being homeless and in and out of safe houses for two years after aging out of care, but as of the Time 1 and Time 2 interviews, was living in Pacific Coast Housing —supported housing for youth that also provided access to mental health support.

Parenting

As described in Section 3, many *Link* participants were parents. Being a parent, developing parenting-related skills and dealing with parenting-related issues including working to reduce risk behaviours so as to retain or regain custody, ensuring safe housing, adequate income and food security—was a focus for these youth and for the support they received from the *Link*.

Youths' lives as parents were often complicated by their substance use, minimal emotional and practical support, and the real possibility of having their child apprehended by child welfare authorities. Through advocacy, emotional and practical support, and connection to resources such as alcohol and drug counselling and housing, the *Link* program was making a difference for these youth. For example, almost all of parenting youth attended Aunt Leah's Mom and Baby/Fresh Food program; as a result, the young parents and their babies socialized in a positive environment, cooked together and accessed healthy food.

In terms of child welfare related outcomes, one young woman with two children stated that she appreciated the *Link* program and Aunt Leah's because of the assistance and advocacy she had received with respect to raising her children. In her words:

> "The Link program has helped me to get family back together. . . . If you are struggling to get your kids back and you don't have anyone with you, Aunt Leah's is the best place to be."

This young woman went on say that what she liked best about the *Link* program was:

> "How they don't judge you, they work with you even if the social worker has been an obstacle. Because I was in care, social

> workers automatically got involved. The Link has helped prove that I can raise my family on my own even though the social workers said no."

Similarly, other *Link* participants spoke of the assistance they received from the program in terms of custody issues. A sense of accomplishment for one youth was being able to keep her two-month-old baby, having given an older child up for adoption in 2009 due to alcohol and drug use and an inability to care for her.

Another young woman said in the first interview said that she sought support from the *Link* staff so as to avoid having her second child go into care:

> "I am hoping that [the Link worker] can help me to be better prepared for the birth of my second child so that MCFD doesn't remove it like they did with my first child."

At the Time 2 interview, the young woman was parenting her two-month-old baby.

Another participant returned to Aunt Leah's at age 22 because she was pregnant and had nowhere else to turn. Along with the housing support, she found practical and emotional support in terms of assistance with food, and in learning how to take care of herself while also caring for her son and occasionally her partner's children:

> "I'd say that Aunt Leah's helps me focus on me. Before, I only focused on my boyfriend and now my son. I still need help taking care of myself."

In a similar vein, another youth's support person —one of the *Link* program staff—described the broad range of emotional and practical support she provided, much of it within the context of the young woman as a mother:

> "The biggest support is emotional— just listening to her and being non-judgemental. The Link program helped with housing and childcare and I supported her in parenting (which helped her keep her child), including the importance of self care as a parent and teenager with a child. I helped her with her relationship with her new boyfriend—how she could plan to leave because she didn't feel safe. I developed safety plans for her."

Other ways in which young parents said the *Link* program helped them in their role as parent included: learning how to discipline positively; helping with applying for Community Living BC —which gave access to reliable income support; helping with completing taxes and applying for the child tax benefit; and assisting with finding child care. Lastly but importantly, two people noted that a staff person from *Support Link* acted as their doula (labour coach).

4.3 Social return on investment analysis

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

This report has practical policy-related value since the *Link* is a real-life experiment of the proposal

Youths' lives as parents were often complicated by their substance use, minimal emotional and practical support, and the real possibility of having their child apprehended by child welfare authorities. Through advocacy, emotional and practical support, and connection to resources such as alcohol and drug counselling and housing, the Link program was making a difference for these youth.

Sherlock and Culbert indicate a return of $1.11 for every dollar spent in BC on extending care, and an annual net benefit to taxpayers of $6.3 million.

for extending supports for foster youth past the age of majority—a policy that has already been implemented to various degrees in jurisdictions such as Ontario and multiple American states such as Washington, Florida, Hawaii, New York and Illinois.

Of utmost importance to decision-makers is a cost-benefit analysis of implementing such a policy change. Journalists Sherlock and Culbert (2014) of The Vancouver Sun note as part of their six-part series on youth aging out of care in BC, that "no public cost-benefit analysis has ever been done in BC to determine if there is a financial benefit to supporting foster children until later in life".

In response to this knowledge deficit, Sherlock and Culbert piggy-back upon a 2012 Ontario cost-benefit study[4] that explores whether that province should bump the age of support to 25 from the current cut-off point at 21. The Ontario report finds that for every $1 spent extending care, Ontario taxpayers would save or earn $1.36 over that person's lifetime due to former foster children being less dependent on welfare, going to jail less often, becoming better educated and earning more over their lifetimes—and therefore paying more income taxes.

The Vancouver Sun replicated the Ontario analysis by inserting BC numbers (where available) and using Ontario figures when BC numbers were not available. Sherlock and Culbert indicate a return of $1.11 for every dollar spent on extending care, and an annual net benefit to taxpayers of $6.3 million. The aforementioned reports "do not include the savings from expenses such as emergency room visits, legal system costs beyond incarceration, addiction expenses, pregnancy or parenting costs, or homelessness expenses that could be avoided by providing support for five additional years".

The *Link* program indicates that prevention is a worthy, compassionate and cost-efficient goal with regard to homelessness. For *Link* youth, staff-reported outcomes indicated that month-over-month an average of 86% of *Link* participants maintained safe, independent and primarily market housing in 2012-13. When compared to the aforementioned numerous studies, which found that over 40% of homeless youth have been in care (Gaetz & Scott, 2012; Vancouver Foundation, 2013), the *Link* suggests an improvement in homelessness outcomes for former foster youth.

The *Link* is a relatively low-intensity intervention and, therefore, suggests cost effectiveness. The project costs for fiscal year 2013 were $222,720.49. Dividing this by the total participants of 101 creates an outcome of $2,185.35 per participant per annum. Distributing this over twelve months creates an outcome of $182 per participant per month. Future research is required to determine whether such *Link* costs per participant are offset by future social savings in less dependence on welfare, less jail time and legal costs, increased personal earnings, fewer hospital visits, reduced addiction expenses, reduced pregnancy/parenting costs, and avoidable homelessness expenses. The Vancouver Sun research suggests that the *Link* investment is money well-spent as by extending care "from age

The Link is a relatively low-intensity intervention; the project costs for fiscal year 2013 were approximately $2,185.35 per participant per annum or $182 per participant per month.

4 http://provincialadvocate.on.ca/documents/en/25istheNew21.pdf

19 to 24, and estimated $91,778 could be saved or earned over that person's lifetime".

The comparative analysis of this evaluation also suggests other avenues for cost savings and opportunities for future cost-benefit analysis. First, the *Link's* guarantee of at least minimal supports after age 19 seems to lead to less costly housing outcomes. That is, while both the *Link* and the Comparison Group youth have similar homelessness levels at the end of this evaluation, the *Link* participants tend to avoid an increased period of homelessness directly following their 19th birthday.

It should be noted that *Link* participants 'self-select' into the program. That is, not all foster youth need the post-majority services offered by Aunt Leah's. But for those youth who do 'self-select' for extra post-majority supports, we know that they struggle with issues of mental health, addictions, learning disorders etc. at a level greater than the general population of foster youth. Therefore, the *Link* operates with the added efficiency of supporting youth who perhaps need the services most. In addition, there is no 'time lag' in society potentially reaping positive monetary outcomes.

In short, the *Link* provides evidence that wide-ranging low-intensity supports can be given to former foster youth after and as they transition out of care at low cost while providing positive outcomes for society and the youth served.

5 Discussion and Recommendations

This study has found that the *Link* participants fit the profile of youth leaving care that has emerged through numerous reports (Woolley, 2013; Gaetz, 2014; Rutman et al, 2007). Many had not graduated from high school, were un- or under-employed, were receiving disability income or income assistance and struggling with mental health and addictions. Nevertheless, with the support of the *Link* program and their own persistence, many youths were making gains to secure safe, stable housing, and to gain skills and knowledge that may help them return to school, get a job and/or connect with other community-based resources to address health, mental health and substance use issues. Importantly, participants had established strong ties to the *Link* program, in and of itself a stabilizing factor.

The *Link* is a continuation of the *Support Link*—an Aunt Leah's program designed for youth who are still in government care. Thus, the *Link* program is the only service delivery model in the Lower Mainland that guarantees support services for youth in foster care after they age out of care, provided by the same trusted people who supported them before they turned 19. Youth cannot 'age out' of the *Link* program in the same way that they age out of care or other youth serving programs (most youth serving programs have an upper age limit of 24-25 years). Hence, Aunt Leah's offers youth in/from care an experience that is more akin to that of their parented peers—i.e., continued relationships, assistance to acquire the skills needed for adulthood, advocacy, and help with the necessities of life—food, housing, money, connection to community and to community resources.

Evaluation findings demonstrated that the *Link* program is being implemented in ways that are very much in keeping with its implicit guiding principles. The service model is flexible, outreach oriented, and designed to provide intensive, individualized supports for youth, based on their needs and goals. As well, the program has created a positive "home-like" environment where youth feel welcome. Indeed, youth expressed that what they like best about the program was: their connections with staff, whom they described as non-judgemental, caring, helpful; the practical and emotional support they received from the program; and aspects of its accessibility including not having age limits.

The evaluation also showed that even though the majority of youth were living in some form of (shared) market housing, their housing was often precarious, and they regularly made use of the support offered through the *Link* to access or maintain adequate housing. Indeed, the formative and summative findings demonstrated that the *Link's* relatively low intensity services and supports can help former foster youth avoid homelessness and maintain market housing after losing their government support at age 19.

The evaluation also found that a high percentage of the *Link* participants were parenting and thus dealing with a host of related issues including

> **Child care, housing stability, and one-on-one relationships are the most salient needs of former foster youth who are also parenting. (Alves, Jourdain & Mejia, 2012, 5)**

needing to access safe, affordable housing, income and food security, child care, as well as navigating their involvement with child welfare/protection services. Recognizing that approximately half of *Link* participants are parents has important implications for program planning and staffing, and also partnership development.

Promising practices in providing support to youth from care

The evaluation study of the *Link* aimed to tease out evidence of best practices in supporting youth from care. The section on program strengths points us in the direction of what could be considered best practices—and is supported by studies of other programs aimed at helping disadvantaged youth. For example, one study of a youth program designed for street-entrenched youth—many of whom were formerly in foster care (Foster & Spencer, 2012)—concluded:

Offer floundering youth real support to stabilize their lives —housing they can afford, childcare if they need it, and income assistance—they argue, and they'll sort it out themselves, in time.

Discussion of a number of promising practices identified through this study follows.

Offer continuity of supports by the same organization pre- and post-age of majority

Organizing service delivery such that youth can be supported by the same organization – and even by the same staff – before age 19 and have that carry on after age 19 is very important. Similarly, having no age limits to service is an important element of promising practice, which fits with current research/knowledge about young adults' development and support needs (Gaetz, 2014).

Hire passionate and committed staff

Support Workers at the *Link* have had training, certification and previous experience in social service settings. Staff who can listen and take direction from youth or follow the youths' lead, while at the same time providing guidance and direction to safer options are key to keeping youth engaged, as are staff who believe the youth have strengths and can, with time and support, take care of themselves.

Pay attention to youths' housing needs

This paves the way to greater stability and capacity to contemplate entering or remaining in the workforce or to return/continue with their education. Assisting youth to find housing is time-consuming and requires a wealth of knowledge about not only the regional housing market but also about the range of challenges or obstacles youth face when seeking housing, e.g., budgeting, social skills to get along with and/or negotiate with landlords and room-mates, knowledge of their rights and responsibilities, and help with mental health and/or addiction issues.

Be youth-directed

Starting where the youth is at is both a guiding principle and a best practice in engaging youth. As Pieta Woolley pointed out in her series of articles about foster care and youth leaving care—if a program aims to "fix" a youth, "they'll disappear"; instead, what youth who have experienced trauma need is for staff to get "really close and supportive" (2013, p.49). The youth at the *Link* identified repeatedly that the staff's warmth, acceptance and support kept them coming back for assistance and following through with their goals.

Think and act wholistically

The interconnections between income, housing, health, relationships, education, employment, food security and substance use must be considered and acted on. The *Link* program recognized the multiple and overlapping issues youth need to address in order to move toward greater independence. No program can meet all needs, and so the *Link* is working to access additional support from other important service providers such as mental health and Income Assistance. Aunt Leah's soon will be offering the SEFFY program that will provide more targeted educational support to *Link* participants.

> **Youth want a connection to trusted and caring adults who they can turn to for advice and support as they transition to adulthood. They will find someone else such as a community mentor if parents or other adult relatives are unable to fulfill that role. (Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, 2013, 11).**

Create flexible and accessible programming

Youth leaving care come with a diverse range of strengths and abilities as well as histories of care that may include poverty and trauma and that leave many of them with unattended health, mental health and addiction issues. Hence, youth-serving programs need to create multiple ways in which the youth can connect, i.e., one-to-one support, groups, satellite offices to bring workers closer to where youth live, and current technologies and social media in communicating with youth.

Offer formal and informal means for youth to socialize with one another

Drop-in sessions, groups, and community celebrations, aside from being vehicles for youth to access information, develop new skills, and acquire certification, are modes of service delivery that also provide vital venues for learning social skills and making friends.

Increase partnerships with other service providers in the community

Not only does this create greater awareness of the needs of youth leaving care and how to serve them better, these partnerships improve access for youth and lead to more responsive services.

While the Strengths section of this report outlined important aspects of the *Link* program, several Comparison Group participants were also involved in youth-serving programs that shared some similar attributes to the *Link* program. Along these lines, the partnership between Covenant House, Inner City Youth Mental Health, the Gathering Place, and youth-serving organizations including recreation centres serving downtown Vancouver has led to creation/provision of a wholistic array of supports to (the most) vulnerable, street-involved youth from care. These resources individually and collectively are highly valued and are helping to prevent homelessness, hospitalizations and/or imprisonment.

Recommendations

Suggestions for program improvements are presented in Chapter 3. Overall recommendations stemming from this evaluation are as follows:

Recommendation 1

That funding continue for the *Link* program to enable it to keep serving youth leaving care, and ideally, that funding increase, so that the program can expand to better serve the increasing number of participants and in terms of its coverage (operating hours and geographic service area(s).

Recommendation 2

That Aunt Leah's explore and implement options to better serve its *Link* participants with satellite services in Surrey.

Recommendation 3

That Aunt Leah's continue to identify and put into place opportunities that will lead *Link* participants out of poverty, through, for example, educational and vocational programming such as SEFFY.

Recommendation 4

That Aunt Leah's seek out and gain funding to enable hiring of a housing worker position for the *Link*, similar to that at Broadway Youth Resource Centre.

Recommendation 5

That Aunt Leah's continue to develop and strengthen its partnerships with other organizations to enable youth to have on-site access to: health, mental health, education, and housing-related supports, as well as on-site linkages with (dedicated) income assistance worker and child welfare worker.

Recommendation 6

That Aunt Leah's continue to work with partners in the public and private sectors to increase and ensure the quality and tenure of the market housing that the youth experience after 'aging out'. Aunt Leah's has 20 years (since 1994) of experience of working with interested community members to act as 'friendly landlords' through the *Support Link* program. Aunt Leah's can use this expertise to improve this market-housing experience through partnerships with community members/landlords interested in working on this problem.

Recommendation 7

Finally, the results of this study support extending the age of government care-related supports to young people to age 24.

> **Youth who are moving out of state care require a number of important supports to aid in their successful transition to adulthood. Without these, they lack the proper tools and risk limited life chances. (Reid, 2007, 33)**

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Definition of Terms within a BC context

Shelter Housing

The BC Emergency Shelter Program provides funding to shelters and drop-in centres that help connect people who are homeless to housing and support services in addition to offering temporary shelter, food and other support services. Youth stabilize and recover in a shelter before moving into their own apartment with supports.

Single-room occupancy

Single room occupancy is a form of housing in which one or two people are housed in individual rooms (sometimes two rooms, or two rooms with a bathroom or half bathroom) within a multiple-tenant building. Although many are former hotels, they are primarily rented as a permanent residence. Single Room Occupancy hotels (SROs) provide short-term or long-term accommodation in single rooms, typically without private bathrooms or kitchens.

Subsidized housing

Subsidized housing encompasses all types of housing whereby the provincial government provides some type of subsidy or rent assistance, including public, non-profit and co-operative housing, as well as rent supplements for people living in private market housing. In relation to youth, there is the Youth Supportive Independent Living Program, which was created in February 2011 and allows for 10 rent subsidies in Vancouver. Another agreement was signed in March 2011 for six subsidies in Surrey. There are other subsidized housing programs for youth age 16-24 throughout the Lower Mainland.

Avoiding the Precipice

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

FINAL REPORT

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