



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Young People in Care Call for Fundamental Changes to Child Welfare System**  
*Youth Leaving Care Hearings Team to Deliver Report to Ontario Legislature Today*

TORONTO, Ontario (Monday, May 14, 2012) - Young people in and from care who held public hearings last November will deliver a report to the Ontario Legislature today that includes a strong call for fundamental change to the existing child welfare system. The report entitled, *My REAL Life Book*, stems from almost 200 submissions from young people and others across the province about how to improve outcomes for the Province's children. The report provides deeply personal insights into the care system, in the words and experiences of youth themselves.

"For the most part, being brought into care makes our lives safer, but not necessarily easier," says Wendy, a member of the Youth Leaving Care Hearings team and a former Crown Ward. "On the day we turn 18, or at the latest 21, care ends. There is no transition to independence. We immediately lose emotional and financial support and no longer have access to the people and the system we've come to know. Some of us are left with no place to call home and no one to call for help or support."

Last November, a team of youth, supported by the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, organized the landmark Youth Leaving Care Hearings at Queen's Park. These Hearings, organized and led by young people in and from the care system, were the first of their kind in Canada and examined the challenges that Crown Wards face when they begin to age out of care at 18. The youth team took what they heard at the Hearings and what they learned from the submissions and identified six key themes that make up the report. They have also outlined a series of goals that they want everyone to work together to achieve – from the moment they begin their journey in care to the moment they leave care.

"Some young people told us about good experiences in the system, but others – and the statistics – tell us a different story," says Shanna, a member of the Youth Leaving Care Hearings team and a former Crown Ward. "Through the report, we have created a vision for the change that we want to see. Rather than children and youth feeling vulnerable, isolated and left out of our lives; we want to feel protected, respected, supported and so much more."

The Youth Leaving Care Hearings report has one key recommendation: The Province of Ontario should recognize that the current system needs to fundamentally change to better prepare young people in care to succeed. The youth want the Province to work with young people in and from care and other stakeholders to create that change and are asking the Province to complete an action plan by November 2012.

The report contains additional recommendations for changes that could be implemented fairly quickly, including: raising the age for Extended Care and Maintenance, a support program offered to those who stay in school, from 21 to the age of 25; allowing youth to stay in foster care and group home care until they are prepared for independence; and, declaring a "Children and Youth in Care Day" to raise awareness and reduce stigma surrounding the care system and keep tabs on the changes needed to improve their lives.

The Ontario Advocate for Children and Youth praised the youth team's work and supported their call for inclusion in the decision-making process. "What I'm hearing from the youth is that they are asking us to do things differently and to find human solutions to human problems," says Irwin Elman, provincial advocate for children and youth. "Families are not a system or an institution – families are about people caring for one another. We can do better for these youth."

### **About the issue of youth leaving care in Ontario**

The Province of Ontario is the legal guardian of more than 8,300 children and youth who are connected to the child welfare system. These young people are Crown Wards who have been permanently removed from their families and homes. They live in foster homes, group homes, transitional housing programs or are in judicial custody. When these young people reach the age of 18, they are expected to become self-reliant and begin fending for themselves at an age at which most young people in Ontario are still living with and supported by family. Some limited support is provided to those who stay in school until age 21, but at that point all government support is withdrawn.

There is clear evidence that when Crown Wards leave the care system they do not do as well as other young adults. They are less likely to have a high school diploma, pursue higher education or earn a living wage. They are also more likely to experience economic hardships, be homeless, struggle with mental health challenges and become involved with the criminal justice system.

The Youth Leaving Care Hearings report, *My REAL Life Book*, is available on the Office of the Provincial Advocate's website at: <http://www.provincialadvocate.on.ca>. A video report is also available at: [www.youtube.com/provincialadvocate](http://www.youtube.com/provincialadvocate).

**For more information on the Our Voice Our Turn project and the Youth Leaving Care Hearings report**, please visit our website: [www.provincialadvocate.on.ca/main/en/hearings/pages/home.html](http://www.provincialadvocate.on.ca/main/en/hearings/pages/home.html); or connect with us through social media: [www.facebook.com/ourvoiceourturn](http://www.facebook.com/ourvoiceourturn); [www.twitter.com/ourvoiceourturn](https://twitter.com/ourvoiceourturn) #myreallifebook and [www.youtube.com/provincialadvocate](http://www.youtube.com/provincialadvocate).

### **About The Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth**

The Office of the Provincial Advocate reports directly to the Legislature and provides an independent voice for children and youth, including children with special needs and First Nations children. The Provincial Advocate receives and responds to concerns from children, youth and families who are seeking or receiving services under the Child and Family Services Act and the Education Act (Provincial and Demonstration Schools). The Provincial Advocate identifies systemic problems involving children, conducts reviews and provides education and advice on the issue of advocacy and the rights of children. The Office is guided by the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and has a strong commitment to youth involvement.

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**To arrange an interview with one of the Youth Leaving Care Hearings team members, or the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, please contact:**

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