



**BRIDGEWAY**  
SPECIALIZED FOSTER CARE

## **#YourVoice: Bridgeway is Listening**

Authors:

Kathryn Carter, B.Sc. (Hons)

Laura Fess, MSW, RSW

Patricia Aitchison, MSW, RSW

### Key Findings

- Provincially, young people in care report having difficult, lonely, and transient lives. This motivated Bridgeway Family Homes to investigate the lived experiences of youth in their care in this two-part study.
- Survey results indicate that Bridgeway youth overwhelmingly reported feeling safe and well cared for in addition to feeling that their individuality is encouraged and accepted.
- Youth also positively indicated that they feel heard, respected, and included in their foster families' lives.
- Interview results indicate that key ways Bridgeway is supporting these needs are through:
  - Strong relationships with foster parents who are supportive and loving.
  - Sustaining and promoting long-term placements through customized support services for foster families and young people.
  - Empowering youth to participate and make decisions in their own lives, however findings do indicate some room for improvement.
- Interviews further indicate that youth present ongoing emotional needs which will need to be addressed at multiple levels within Bridgeway Family Homes.
- The present study is a rare investigation of foster youth themselves, putting their voices front and centre.
- Results are mostly positive and reveal that youth have benefitted from warm, attentive, and supportive foster parents, the gift of time to grow and adapt during long-term placements, feeling heard, and the sense of security from which youth can plan for and build their own futures.

## Executive Summary

### Background

The Ontario Child Advocate's (2016) report *Searching for Home: Reimagining Residential Care* found that youth in care overwhelmingly reported feeling lost within an institutional system and deprived of supportive relationships. Youth in care are an extremely vulnerable and marginalized population who are forced to trust that society will provide for them. Bridgeway Family Homes is one such provider available to them as an outside paid resource for child welfare agencies in Ontario and has offered specialized in-home foster care since 1988. They commissioned this research as part of their commitment to program development, self-evaluation, and respect for the dignity and growth of young people in care.

### Research Question

This two-part study asked the question: Is Bridgeway Family Homes meeting the needs of young people in care, as expressed by young people in care?

### Quantitative Findings

Twenty-nine youth completed a 10-item questionnaire about their relationships with their foster parents, their sense of control over their own lives, and their recognition as individuals with agency, preferences, and needs. The continuum of response options for these questions included "always", "often", "sometimes", "rarely", and "never".

- Youth endorsed almost always feeling safe and well cared for by their foster parents, feeling genuinely loved, feeling respected, and that their individuality was encouraged and accepted.
- Youth often reported that they had made long-lasting connections with their foster families.
- Youth also reported that they often felt informed about and included in decisions affecting their lives, that others listened to what they had to say, and that they felt in control of their own lives.
- Youth endorsed feeling ready for the future at a lower rate than the other items, but on average this remained quite high: the average endorsement of this item scored closer to "often" than "sometimes".

### Qualitative Findings

Six youth completed in-person; one-to-one interviews to further investigate their experiences with foster care at Bridgeway, their foster parents, their sense of control and permanency, their

thoughts about the future, and whether they felt that their needs were a priority while in care at Bridgeway. Several themes were produced from this data:

- Bridgeway has “good” foster parents
- Long-term placements make a world of difference
- Youth feel like they have a voice
- Youth feel hopeful for the future
- Youth blame themselves
- Inconsistent access to people and information is problematic

Bridgeway’s strengths are grounded in the high-quality relationships foster parents are nurturing with the youth in their care, long placements that provide a sense of connection and normalcy, and empowering youth voice by encouraging participation in their own lives, all which seem to contribute to youths’ self-expressed hope for the future.

Bridgeway would benefit from addressing certain emotional needs directly related to the experience of being a young person in care, in addition to working towards streamlining information-sharing on a case by case basis and in response to individual access needs. In particular:

- Participants expressed considerable feelings of self-blame and fear in their interviews relating to a latent sense of fragility or precariousness related to the nature of foster care in what they otherwise described as stable environments and relationships.
- Even youth who strongly identified as members of their foster families and expressed confidence in the longevity of these relationships voiced concern about unexpected moves and what amounts to an ongoing sense of remaining ‘separate’ from their (foster) families.
- The strength of these positive caregiving relationships may provide the best context for addressing these emotional needs and are an avenue Bridgeway may choose to examine further in order to provide youth, foster parents, and support workers the necessary training and support to achieve this.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, Bridgeway Family Homes’ commitment to delivering high-quality care and support is evident in the youths’ responses. Bridgeway’s priority of providing exceptional care, strong supports, and individualized services appear to be producing positive outcomes. Results convey Bridgeway’s youth-centred approach has led to young people experiencing respect, inclusion, and empowerment promoting feelings of value and worth among those entrusted to their care.

**Table of Contents**

Key Findings ..... 1

Executive Summary..... 2

Introduction ..... 5

Method ..... 6

    1) Design and sample ..... 6

        Table 1. Demographic information for interviewed participants as of the date of interview. .... 6

        Table 2. Typical placement information across groups. .... 7

    2) Procedure..... 7

    3) Ethics Approval ..... 8

    4) Analysis ..... 8

Findings and Discussion ..... 8

    1) Quantitative Survey ..... 9

        Table 3. #YourVoice quantitative survey results. .... 11

    2) Qualitative Interviews..... 11

        A. Bridgeway has good foster parents..... 11

        B. Long-term placements make a world of difference. .... 14

        C. Youth feel like they have a voice. .... 16

        D. Youth feel hopeful for the future..... 18

        E. Youth blame themselves..... 20

        F. Inconsistent access..... 22

Conclusion..... 25

Footnotes ..... 27

Acknowledgements..... 27

References ..... 27

Appendix A – Invitation to Participate ..... 30

Appendix B – Informed Consent ..... 30

Appendix C – Interview Guide ..... 32

Appendix D – Demographic Questionnaire ..... 33

Appendix E – #YourVoice Quantitative Survey: Categorical Response Breakdown ..... 33

Appendix F – #YourVoice Quantitative Survey: Bivariate Correlation Matrix ..... 35

## Introduction

In 2016, the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth (Ontario Child Advocate)<sup>1</sup> released a report entitled *Searching for Home: Reimagining Residential Care* based on interviews with hundreds of youth in a variety of out-of-home care settings across Ontario. It found that youth overwhelmingly felt like they had no roots, their individuality was lost, they had little control over their own lives or surroundings, and their needs were misunderstood. Staff at Bridgeway Family Homes (BFH), a private specialized foster care agency for children and youth in Ontario and an agency that has strived to provide exceptional care for over 30 years, were concerned by the provincial findings. Bridgeway decided to conduct their own research based on the experiences of youth in their care to find out whether or not their needs were being met. Thus began *#YourVoice: Bridgeway is Listening*.

Provincially, youth often reported wanting a sense of belonging, safety, stability, and respect in their lives; they desired long-lasting and real relationships with their caregivers, and they wanted to feel loved (Ontario Child Advocate, 2016). These expressions of what it means to receive quality care form the basis of the quantitative portion of Bridgeway's study and are explored more in-depth using qualitative interviews. As stated in *Searching for Home: Reimagining Residential Care* (Ontario Child Advocate, 2016):

Government says that it cannot legislate love. While this may be true, we believe that government can help create policies, standards, and practices through which services can be made more human and responsive to the physical, mental, and emotional needs of young people and that create the experience of belonging and connection, improve safety, and provide more stability for young people. (p. 13)

As a private agency, Bridgeway is meeting this call to action and ensuring that the training and services provided to both the young people and foster parents are responsive and helpful. By engaging with young people directly and collecting data about their experiences, Bridgeway can use this feedback to influence current policies, standards, and practices, and create positive change that go above and beyond what the government already legislates. It is in this spirit that *#YourVoice: Bridgeway is Listening* asks the following question:

Is Bridgeway Family Homes meeting the needs of young people in care, as expressed by young people in care?

Bridgeway Family Homes, founded in 1988, offers specialized foster care for children and youth with complex needs. Homes are located across eastern, central, and southwestern Ontario. As part of their mission to provide exceptional care, Bridgeway requires that foster parents participate in monthly

training on different matters such as behaviour management, trauma, crisis prevention and intervention, and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. Foster home supervisors are on-call 24/7 to provide support and assistance to foster parents, children, and youth. Bridgeway offers wraparound services including clinical resources, one-to-one staff support, academic support, relief homes, and summer camps. In order to evaluate and maintain the best available evidence-based practices, a placement student at Bridgeway followed by a contracted researcher, both graduate students, completed this study to report on the effectiveness of these practices from the perspectives of some adolescents in Bridgeway's care.

## Method

### 1) Design and sample

This study used a mixed methods approach, collecting quantitative data through an online survey and qualitative data through face-to-face individual interviews. Participants for the online survey were recruited through foster parents and foster home supervisors. Non-probability purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for the face-to-face interviews. Participants were contacted via telephone or email and invited to participate in the study (see Appendix A). Eligibility included: any individual over the age of 13 who resides fulltime, or resided fulltime, in a Bridgeway foster home for at least two years. Six youth from four Bridgeway agreed to participate and six qualitative interviews were conducted. The demographic characteristics of these youth are presented in Table 1. To demonstrate typical placement characteristics at BFH, Table 2 provides demographic information regarding placement lengths for both groups of youth participating in this study in addition to the wider clientele of BFH in the same age group. Four interviews were conducted by graduate students LDF and two were conducted by KC. The study was supervised by Bridgeway's Clinical Consultant, PA.

Table 1. Demographic information for interviewed participants as of the date of interview.

	"James"	"Jack"	"Harley"	"Doug"	"Jenny"	"Annabelle"	Mean
<b>Age</b>	22	19	16	17	13	17	17.3
<b>Gender</b>	Male	Male	Female	Male	Female	Female	
<b>Longest amount of time in one Bridgeway home (years)</b>	6.1	5.3	9.2	9.0	6.2	6.0	7.0
<b>Number of Bridgeway homes lived in</b>	1	1	1	1	1	2	1.2

Table 2. Typical placement information across groups.

	Youth surveyed <sup>a</sup> N = 29	Youth interviewed <sup>b</sup> N = 6	All youth >13 years <sup>c</sup> N = 84*
Age (mean years, standard deviation)	18.3 (2.4)	17.3 (3.0)	16.3 (2.7)
Average placement length while in care at Bridgeway (mean years, standard deviation)	5.4 (3.9)	6.4 (2.5)	4.4 (3.9)
Longest amount of time in one Bridgeway home (mean years, standard deviation)	8.1 (6.1)	7.0 (1.7)	5.6 (5.2)
Number of Bridgeway homes lived in (mean, standard deviation)	1.7 (0.8)	1.2 (0.4)	1.5 (0.7)

\* Number of youth who spent more than 30 days in care and turned or were older than 13 years between the dates of September 1, 2016, and September 1, 2018, i.e., the timeframe of this study.

<sup>a</sup> Means calculated using youths' ages on date of survey completion.

<sup>b</sup> Means calculated using youths' ages on date of interview.

<sup>c</sup> Means calculated using youths' ages on date of discharge or, if still in care, the date of study completion, September 1, 2018.

Note: Provincially, the average placement length in foster care for youth aged 10-17 is 3.8 years, according to data collected in 2016 as part of mandatory CAS reporting. Youth have 4.2 changes in caregivers, on average (Miller, 2017).

## 2) Procedure

**Quantitative survey.** An exploratory online survey consisting of 10 items measuring youths' experiences in foster care using a five-point scale, where 1 = *never* and 5 = *always*. See Table 2 for items and mean response scores. This survey, completed by 29 youth, was designed to assess whether youth felt their needs were being met while in care at BFH. The questions were derived from key findings of the Ontario Child Advocate's (2016) report pertaining to factors identified by youth themselves as to what they considered important to receiving high quality out-of-home care.

**Qualitative interviews.** Interviews were designed to supplement the survey data with more detailed information. Informed consent was obtained by youth and their foster parents if the youth was not of age (see Appendix B). One-to-one semi-structured qualitative interviews were completed with eligible participants in a private room in their homes, out of earshot from other family members (see Appendix C for interview protocol; see Appendix D for the demographic questionnaire completed by participants at the start of their interview). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Interviews were 20.48 minutes in length, on average (range = 6.97 to 34.37 minutes). Complete information on study procedures is available upon request.

### 3) Ethics Approval

All documentation was reviewed and approved by Bridgeway Family Homes' Executive Director. Since BFH is a private agency that does not receive funding directly from government sources, they are not required to apply to a formal Ethics Review Board for approval. However, since BFH considers children in their care to be part of a vulnerable population, due diligence was undertaken by BFH leadership to ensure minimal harm to research participants and adherence to the voluntary and confidential nature of this research project.

### 4) Analysis

**Quantitative survey.** Survey response data were analyzed using SPSS 25. Scores for each item could range from 1 = *rarely* to 5 = *always*. Descriptive statistics for each item were calculated, including mean score, standard deviation, range, minimum, and maximum (see Table 3). Correlations were then computed, *post hoc*, to determine whether certain items grouped together as common experiences. Correlations were interpreted following Losh's (2004) guidelines (as cited in Reinard, 2006).

**Qualitative interviews.** Interviews were transcribed from the audio recordings and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is an organized method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns of interest within a body of data while retaining a high level of detail about participants' expressed experiences and realities. Analysts (LDF and KC) looked for indications that youths' needs were or were not being met (both self-identified needs and those identified *a priori* by the Ontario Child Advocate [2016]). A list of themes to reflect this was developed in accordance with the research question. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines, analysts familiarized themselves with the data, generated initial codes, searched for and reviewed themes, and then refined themes for presentation. Codes initially represented interesting features of the data and were built into the present themes through an iterative process of re-reading transcripts, grouping similar codes into potential themes, inter-analyst comparison, and refining the differentiation between themes. This was done by LDF for the first four interviews and KC for the final six. Themes were reviewed by PA for coherence, fairness in representation, and integrity of analysis. Participants declined to review their transcripts for accuracy prior to analysis.

## Findings and Discussion

This research project, entitled #YourVoice: Bridgeway is Listening, was undertaken in an attempt to hear the voices of young people in care with Bridgeway Family Homes (BFH). Inspired by the Ontario Child Advocate for Children and Youth's report, *Searching for home: Reimagining residential care* (2016),

quantitative and qualitative questions were designed to assess whether or not BFH was meeting the needs of young people in care, as expressed by young people in care. The results are presented below.

### 1) Quantitative Survey

Of interest was whether needs identified by the Ontario Child Advocate (2016) as well as by BFH, through their 30 years of experience in providing care, were endorsed by youth as being met. Twenty-nine youth completed the online survey about their experiences in care with BFH, who ranged in age from 14.23 to 23.15 years, with an average age of 17.83 years. Scores could range from 1 = *never* to 5 = *always*. As seen in Table 2, scores were overwhelmingly positive with eight of 10 items receiving an average response in the range of “often” (4). Two items’ average responses fell closer to the “always” (5) endorsement: “I feel/felt safe and well cared for” (4.76), and “I feel/felt that my individuality is/was encouraged and accepted” (4.66). Feeling safe had the least variability of any item, with 83% of participants ( $n = 24$ ) endorsing “always” (5). Further, 76% of participants ( $n = 22$ ) endorsed “always” (5) feeling genuinely loved in their Bridgeway home (4.59). See Appendix E for detailed response breakdowns for each item.

Youth responded that they “often” felt like others listened to what they had to say (4.38), felt included in decisions that impacted their lives (4.41), and were kept informed about what was going on (4.41). Youth indicated that they felt respected (4.52) and that they had made lasting connections with their foster families (4.31). Two lowest-scoring items fell at or just under a score of 4, with the lowest still interpreted as “often” (4) rather than “sometimes” (3). These were: “I feel/felt in control of my life” (4.00) and “I am/was ready for the future” (3.79).

A bivariate correlation matrix was analyzed to investigate these findings further, especially the two items receiving the lowest mean scores (see Appendix F for full table of correlations). It is interesting to note that the item “I am/was ready for the future” did not significantly correlate with any other items, suggesting that participants’ feelings of relative but slight ill-preparation were unrelated to how loved, respected, or cared for they felt. The item “I feel/felt in control of my life” was significantly correlated to several items, but at weaker levels compared to the correlations found between other items which had strong relationships with one another. To elaborate, feeling in control was positively and strongly correlated with feeling informed ( $r = .63$ ) and feeling listened to ( $r = .55$ ), while positively and moderately correlated to feeling respected ( $r = .49$ ), feeling accepted as an individual ( $r = .47$ ), feeling genuinely loved ( $r = .43$ ), having formed long-lasting relationships ( $r = .45$ ), and feeling safe and cared for ( $r = .37$ ). This means that when youth indicated feeling in control of their own lives, they were more likely to also indicate feeling informed about what was going on, listened to, respected, etc., as

well. Each of these items were endorsed at higher rates than feeling in control was, suggesting factors unrelated to the foster family may be associated with the slight decrease in this score. Correlational data does not permit conclusions about which factors lead to or cause other factors but instead describes their rate of co-occurrence.

In comparison to these lower-scoring items, feeling safe and cared for was very strongly associated with feeling genuinely loved ( $r = .90$ ) and feeling accepted as an individual ( $r = .77$ ), while strongly correlated with feeling respected ( $r = .54$ ) and listened to ( $r = .53$ ), and moderately correlated with making long-lasting relationships ( $r = .49$ ), and feeling in control ( $r = .37$ ). Further, feeling genuinely loved was very strongly associated with feeling safe and cared for, as just described, as well as having one's individuality accepted and encouraged ( $r = .83$ ), and strongly correlated with feeling respected ( $r = .69$ ), making long-lasting relationships with their foster family ( $r = .67$ ), and feeling listened to ( $r = .64$ ), while moderately correlated with feeling in control of their lives ( $r = .43$ ). While not providing information on the direction of causality, this finding suggests what elements are related to youths' experiences of feeling genuinely loved by their foster parents. This group of items was frequently correlated together and can be reviewed further in Appendix F.

Somewhat irregular findings were that the item "I am/was included in the decisions that impact/impacted me and my life" was only moderately related to one other item, "I feel/felt like others listen/listened to what I have/had to say" ( $r = .41$ ), while the item "I feel/felt informed about what is/was going on in my life" also correlated to only one other item but at a strong level: "I feel/felt in control of my life" ( $r = .63$ ). It may be that inclusion in decision-making is important to youth for reasons beyond feeling heard, suggesting that participation is potentially more varied than the present tool captures and that the reasons for youth "often" (4) feeling included in decisions (4.41) should be identified for each individual and intentionally encouraged to maintain this feeling of inclusion. Likewise, feeling informed about what is/was going on in their lives (4.45) was unrelated to the nature of their relationships directly but may be influenced indirectly by relationship factors specifically related to control, as previously described. This less-clear pattern of results suggests room for more work to be done regarding how youth experience participation in their own lives and care and perhaps warrants further research examining what facilitates and what hinders youth involvement and their associated feelings.

Table 3. #YourVoice quantitative survey results.

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Range	Minimum	Maximum
I have made long lasting relationships and connections with my Foster Family.	4.31	1.04	4	1	5
I feel/felt respected.	4.52	0.87	3	2	5
I feel/felt safe and well cared for.	4.76	0.58	2	3	5
I feel/felt like others listen/listened to what I have/had to say.	4.38	0.78	3	2	5
I feel/felt in control of my life.	4.00	1.00	3	2	5
I feel/felt genuinely loved.	4.59	0.91	4	1	5
I am/was included in the decisions that impact/impacted me and my life.	4.41	0.73	2	3	5
I am/was ready for the future.	3.79	0.94	3	2	5
I feel/felt that my individuality is/was encouraged and accepted.	4.66	0.61	2	3	5
I feel/felt informed about what is/was going on in my life.	4.45	0.60	2	3	5

*Note. N = 29. Minimum scores reflect the lowest response observed and maximum scores reflect the highest response observed. See Appendix E for categorical response breakdowns.*

## 2) Qualitative Interviews

Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with youth to expand upon elements of the quantitative survey and to assess in more detail whether Bridgeway is meeting the needs of young people in care, as expressed by young people in care. Six core themes were identified: four were resoundingly positive that BFH is meeting many of the needs of the young people in their care. These themes are: (a) Bridgeway has good foster parents, (b) Long-term placements make a world of difference, (c) Youth feel like they have a voice, and (d) Youth feel hopeful for the future. Two further themes suggest stressors to care and indicate areas for improvement: (e) Youth blame themselves, and (f) Inconsistent access to people and information.

### A. Bridgeway has good foster parents.

Youth overwhelmingly spoke about having “good” families and the quality of care and support they receive from their foster parents. Their foster parents are kind, patient, and attentive to their needs and well-being. That Bridgeway foster parents are “good” and supportive caregivers emerged as an obvious theme from the interview data. When asked about their time in foster care, youth responded that it has been positive overall and they have felt readily accepted and comfortable in their families. Reasons given for feeling comfortable in both their relationships and living arrangements included: open and honest communication, having clear and fair structure/rules, receiving individual

attention, and having the freedom to be oneself. These items were spontaneously generated by participants in response to open-ended questions about their experiences, contradicting some of the specific concerns raised by many of the youth interviewed for the Ontario Child Advocate's (2016) report. Provincially, youth frequently worried that their caregivers saw their role as more of a job than that of being a parent. This was not the case with participants in this Bridgeway study.

Participants further described feeling included as members of their foster families, often from the very beginning of their placement. They felt that their foster parents went out of their way to make them feel comfortable by decorating their rooms according to their preferences, buying them holiday gifts at the last minute upon hearing of their imminent arrival, and inviting the youth to call them "mom" and "dad" if and when they felt so inclined. Integration into the family unit extended beyond the foster parents as well. One youth explained that he is considered both a grandson and brother within his foster family, in addition to a son.

Doug explained that he uses his foster parents' first names even though they feel more like parents than his biological ones while other youth have chosen to use 'mom' and 'dad', such as Annabelle, who said: "It's sometimes hard to call people mom and dad because they're really not your mom and dad, right? But, like, it's comforting because you're gonna be living with them for a while so it's like, I'd rather call you mom and dad, right." For Annabelle, it seemed that she opted to use these family labels to feel settled and more 'normal'. A key part of Schofield's (2002) model for creating secure attachment in long-term foster care is nurturing a sense of belonging, and two ways this occurs are through family relationships and family identity. Family relationships are recognized through labels such as 'mom' and 'dad' (whether expressly used or implied) and further help to place a young person within the family identity. Identifying with a family is not just emotionally rewarding but also helps a young person locate themselves within a community at large. Belonging and a sense of connection provide context in the form of values, responsibilities, and aspirations, to name but a few, which all youth need for healthy development.

Entering new family homes can be daunting but almost all youth in this study talked about how their foster parents eased this transition. They overwhelmingly spoke about the warmth with which they were greeted by their new families and the effort they demonstrated in extending a sense of belonging to the youth. Harley described her memory of meeting her foster family: "Coming into this family, like when you first walk in it's kind of awkward. . . it was kind of overwhelming for me but my foster mom just hugged me. And it was like... 'oh... wow' and just off the bat it was good." Reflecting the general feeling of the group, Doug stated that he felt like "part of the family since day one", and James

articulated that “they [foster parents] take me as their own son”. This is not to say that full integration occurred quickly or easily; youth described it taking a couple of years sometimes to feel completely settled. But this length of time seems to reflect the internal process of learning to open up to new people, re-forming the psychological concept of family, and learning to trust new caregivers over time. This process appeared to be well-supported by these youths’ foster parents, who prioritized feelings of inclusion and belonging from the outset while also allowing them time to move forward at their own pace. Schofield (2002) suggests this approach from foster parents is empowering for children who have often come from families where they had limited power to make choices, and lays the foundation for diverting energy away from a focus on survival and towards exploration and activity that enables the development of self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Youth reported that their foster parents treat them as individuals and are attuned to their unique needs. This was something identified in the Ontario Child Advocate’s (2016) report as widely missing from the lives of youth in care and recognized among scholars and professionals as being critical for secure attachment and well-being (Schofield, 2002). For example, Annabelle reported that she felt comfortable bringing problems to her foster mom based on witnessing how she listened to problems of other youth in the home. Doug expressed that the attention his foster parents have given him has helped him avoid resorting to negative behaviours in order to get recognition. Jenny also talked about her foster mom’s responsiveness in their everyday activities, such as noticing if Jenny’s mood was low and asking her what’s wrong. In addition to providing critical opportunities to learn healthy coping skills, expand cognitive and emotional processing abilities, and gain insight from a more emotionally-experienced mentor (Steenbakkens, van der Steen, & Grietens, 2016), this attentiveness alerted Jenny’s foster mom that she was struggling and might benefit from counseling, something Jenny welcomed.

Feelings of strong emotional connection to their foster parents were plentiful in the interviews. Youth commonly described feeling like they could go to them for help or advice, feeling safe enough with them to express emotions like anger, and knowing that they were welcome in the home and in the family even after ageing out of care. Several youth mentioned having spent a great deal of time over the years talking with their foster parents about issues big and small, and how they felt understood and respected. Emotional closeness, good communication, and feeling understood by parents have been demonstrated to be important factors associated with better mental health for individuals both with and without histories of childhood maltreatment (Cheung et al., 2017). Bridgeway routinely provides ongoing training to help foster parents understand relationships and attachment principles which the youth interviewed affirm is working.

### **B. Long-term placements make a world of difference.**

Long-term placements are a clear advantage for youth in care at Bridgeway. The Ontario Child Advocate (2016) found that many youth live in up to 10 homes throughout their time in care and that frequent moves interrupt schooling and relationships. Youth in the provincial report discussed consequences of this instability such as fears about getting emotionally close to anyone and therefore treating relationships as disposable, not gaining conflict resolution skills especially if moved due to problems in the home, as well as losing opportunities to learn how to build and nurture positive connections with people. Participants of the present study, in contrast, indicated feeling a sense of permanence or stability in their home lives and that this continuity of care has allowed them the time they needed to make good connections with their families, schools, and communities.

The experience of placement stability has been somewhat surprising for various youth who came to Bridgeway. Annabelle expressed this directly: “. . . I never thought I’d be there for more than 2 years. But then when the third and the fourth and the fifth year hit, I was like ‘okay, well I feel like this is a good home’. . . It felt good.” She also explained how the long placement helped her feel hopeful: “I knew that this was my home and, like, I go to school and I have friends that I have known for more than two years. And it’s like well, this is gonna be a great friendship and stuff.” Annabelle’s six-year placement helped her grow roots in a community and created a sense of predictability that enabled her to develop a sense of security at home and promote her social skills at school. This ‘felt security’ (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006) was noticeable in Annabelle’s hope for her future, discussed in Theme D.

Harley also expressed surprise that her placement was continuing for as long as it was, since she had previously lived in a foster home for only a few months before moving to a Bridgeway home and was expecting a similar experience: “Like when I came here it was just going to be for a few months or weeks... but then it turned out to be 9 years [laughs] so yeah.” Harley also exhibited signs of felt security in that over time, she went from being distrustful and scared to developing “really good” relationships with her foster family and feeling comfortable to speak and make choices for herself regarding both the present and future, knowing that in doing so she had the support of her foster parents. These indicators of having developed a secure base over the course of her nine-year placement are grounded in the description of her caregivers’ availability, sensitivity, acceptance, and collaborative approach, as well as developing a sense of family membership (Schofield & Beek, 2009).

This oft-reported sense of permanence has given the youth interviewed time to adjust and gradually build trust and comfort with their foster parents and allows them to achieve a sense of normalcy, as previously described. This did not come quickly after joining their families for some of the

youth and so extended placements allow the relationships to form naturally and on the youths' own schedule. When asked whether she felt part of the family from the beginning, Harley explained:

“No, not from day one... just cuz like, the first few years it was awkward – and like I pushed away, not them – so, like, I just felt on my own, but now I don't. . . Um, I think it just happened gradually over time cuz like for that first year I used to call my foster parents by their first names. But then they said, ‘you know, you're going to be here for a few years so you can call us by our first names or you can call us mom and dad.’ And I don't know, it took me a few months to get used to it, but then it was fine. But like my sister, [name], it took her like two years afterwards.”

James indicated that this did not occur for him right away, either: “Well first when I came to foster care, I didn't like it... but when I stayed a little bit longer, it was ok.” James talked about the privileges he acquired due to the trust he was able to build over time and as he got older: “Like when I asked my mom to go, like, for a sleepover... I couldn't. But now that I'm older I can stay longer.” It wasn't until this trust had developed between them that he began to like his foster care experience better because he was able to feel like he had freedom to be away from the house and had more independence. Jack noted a similar early adjustment in that “pretty much I hated foster care” because “I wanted to be with my mom”. It took time for Jack and his foster family to get to know each other and for him to adjust to the new expectations and routines.

Stable care has been associated with a variety of better outcomes for young people transitioning to adulthood. Cashmore and Paxman (2006) found that youth who had spent at least 75% of their time in care in one placement felt more positively about the experience, had more secure housing as young adults, and were more likely to have stayed in school for longer and to have made better progress academically. Perhaps most importantly, youth who had experienced long-term care were more likely to report having more social support four to five years after leaving care which is crucial for emotional and financial support during the transition towards independence. The Ontario Child Advocate (2016) noted that rootlessness seems to be a “lasting legacy of involvement with Ontario's residential care system” (p. 15) and a later report on outcomes for youth after leaving care notes that homelessness and insecure housing are one of the major risks associated with growing up in foster care (Kovarikova, 2017). Many Ontario youth feel that they are rootless and do not belong anywhere; Bridgeway, on the other hand, works hard at helping youth grow roots and build meaningful relationships through promoting placement longevity.

### **C. Youth feel like they have a voice.**

Youth need to feel like they are heard. This was indicated clearly by the Ontario Child Advocate's (2016) report where youth said they felt helpless and vulnerable, lacked opportunities to learn how to think and make decisions, had no voice, and wanted the right to participate in their own lives. The significance of this need is reflected in the title of this study: *#YourVoice: Bridgeway is Listening*. This theme is presented third, however, because in many ways having good parents and a stable home provide two critical conditions for a young person to find and then use their voice.

Participants in this study stated outright that they feel they have a voice. They felt that they could control their own lives to a large degree and that their opinions, preferences, and individuality mattered. For example, when asked if people listened to what he wanted, Jack responded affirmatively and gave an example of getting a job, something his foster parents and support workers asked about regularly. Jack had said no the previous year and felt his decision was respected; at a meeting this year, he said he was ready and with their support he was about to begin a new job around the time of his interview. This experience appeared to be typical across interviews: all youth said they felt like they have a voice and that what they say matters, and many youth also said their foster parents and workers check in with them often about choices ranging from day-to-day activities to those regarding care. This checking-in is both ethically responsible and developmentally helpful for children in care, and requires that those checking in have the skill and sensitivity to listen to the young person (Damiani-Taraba et al., 2018). BFH appears to be doing this successfully.

Participants described how foster parents and workers make the effort to support them in a variety of ways. For example, Harley's worker helped facilitate communication with her foster parents when her attempts were unsuccessful, and Harley's foster parents were also primary agents in making sure she had a voice, too, by directing questions from her workers to Harley herself. Jenny also described her foster mom as frequently checking in with her: "Yeah, usually my mom is like, 'do you wanna –', or she'll ask 'do you wanna do this' or 'do you not feel comfortable doing that'... she'll ask a lot of questions to make sure if I wanna actually do it or not do it. So I feel like yeah, I do get a lot of say in stuff." Annabelle described having difficulty speaking up in general and at times has felt like she did not have control over decisions, but said that her foster parents and workers frequently ask for her input and that she has opportunities to say she has changed her mind. While at times she shuns this responsibility in favour of being a "reckless person", she also explicitly stated "I feel like I have a voice, to be honest."

This is in stark contrast to findings from the Ontario Child Advocate's (2016) report of youth in residential care across Ontario who overwhelmingly said that they have no voice, do not know who to turn to for help, and when they do know who to go to, they are often held back by fear about being vulnerable, fear that nothing would change, or fear that any problems would cause them to be moved to a new placement. These findings were corroborated by youth in care through another agency in southern Ontario (Damiani-Taraba et al., 2018). At Bridgeway, however, the youth interviewed reported feeling respected and heard. Bridgeway's practices seem to reflect positive models of youth's participation in which the young person is free to exercise choice, has enough information to make autonomous choices, has control and voice in decision-making processes, and is supported in speaking up (Thomas, 2000, as cited in Polkki, Vornanen, Pusiainen, & Riikonen, 2012). Polkki et al. (2012) assert that for young people to choose to participate in decision-making, especially regarding their own care, they need "information about contexts and procedures to decide if they find the situation safe, meaningful, or otherwise worth participating in" (p. 109). They suggest that the responsibility for creating these openings and opportunities for youth participation falls to the adults with decision-making power. A significant way this participation develops is within secure, trusting relationships where young people are viewed as active participants in their own lives, are in a regulated enough state to process information, have insight into their own wants and needs, and have the self-esteem to assert themselves (Shanker, 2016; Bell, 2002). From participants' descriptions of their experiences at BFH, Bridgeway appears to make great efforts to prioritize youths' empowerment and active participation in their own lives.

At times, however, some participants did explain that they have not always had full control in decisions being made. For example, Jenny referred to having little say in "a few things that don't even really matter". When asked to explain what these were, she said they were mostly 'behind the scenes' but was quick to add that ". . . the main choices are always mine and not anybody else's cuz they wanna have my say to actually do it." These choices are usually "about decisions in foster care. But like sometimes [my foster mom will] ask me if I wanna do after school activities and stuff. Sometimes I might say no because I already go with [worker]. . . she'll take me out and stuff and I feel like that takes up a lot of my week, and sometimes I have to cancel plans because I have to go with her." In this instance, Jenny demonstrates voice in the sense that she is given the chance to agree to more activities and her input is sought, although in reality it is possible that her declining them may have more to do with feeling unable to get out of prior commitments with her support worker. Jenny did not explicitly express that she found this schedule to be a problem for her, however. Regarding Jenny's comment that she

does not always provide input about 'behind the scenes' decisions relating to her care, it should be noted that at the time of the interview she was 13 years old; as described in the next paragraph, this is around the age where care-related decision-making tends to increase.

Three youth specifically commented on the difference in control they had at older versus younger ages, believing the control available to them at different points in their lives has been age-appropriate for the most part. For example, Doug said: "I mean as like a young child, you can't exactly have control because you're incapable of having control at eight years old... but I mean as soon as I was 12 to 13 I started being involved in my own plan-of-cares. So yeah, I'd say I was given a sense of control... as long as it was about decisions that someone at that age could make." These youth did, however, mention that in the past they were often denied information or clarification about things they did not understand and cited their young age as the reason for this. Harley recalled feeling "pretty scared" by the transition into foster care because she did not have a voice at the time: "Because I came so young, I was always kind of just told what was going to be happening." James also attributed his inability get clarification about what was happening around him to being "young at the time", and with regard to having a sense of control he said: "when I was younger, no, but now, yes." While younger children in foster care commonly have little participation or choice in matters related to their care, this does seem to improve as they get older and, as one study demonstrates, age 14 was a turning point for decision-making among their participants (Damiani-Taraba et al., 2018; Kriz & Roundtree-Swain, 2017). Issues of clarification and information will be revisited more deeply in Theme F.

#### **D. Youth feel hopeful for the future.**

The final theme of needs Bridgeway is meeting is that participants feel hopeful for their futures, a very positive sign that youth are receiving high-quality care that is helping them develop self-esteem, self-efficacy, and confidence (Schofield, 2002). Participants talked about getting post-secondary education as well as specific careers they have in mind, with Doug saying that being in foster care seemed like an advantage to him for the financial support he would receive to pursue these future goals. Harley identified that much of the anxiety she felt about the future was "regular teenage stress", something alluded to by other youth as well and a testament to the opportunity to have age-typical experiences that are not defined by their status as youth in care. This youth did identify added challenges of planning out her future while in foster care, however, lamenting that "there's just a lot more steps" when it comes to having education-related decisions approved.

Annabelle was particularly focused on positive personal growth. She said she has hope for being "successful and happy" in the future and that she viewed new beginnings as opportunities where "I

could be a better version of myself than I am and just, like, change some things that would help me for my future. . .” Jack said his foster family has supported him in learning new skills he was interested in and helped him find a related job. This set him up on the career path of his choice: “I want tiling and not painting. My brother, he wants painting, so I will have more experience because – I don’t actually want to work for him, like eventually I want to work for a main company, and when I do all my experience there I want to have my own business.” Jack further said he feels supported by his foster family in working towards this goal. With regard to the future, though, participants mostly talked about reassurance they receive on an ongoing basis that their foster parents will be there for them even after they turn 18. This is encouraging because both educational attainment and social capital (the relationships and connections to social networks that provide support) are consistently found to be related to employment status and wages, among other positive outcomes, among young adults who were formerly in foster care (Hook & Courtney, 2011).

James described not feeling afraid of being ‘kicked out’ at a certain age and that there is no deadline looming over him. Permanency is something he and his foster parents have openly discussed: “She [foster mom] said I can stay here as long as I want. . . like, I’m not going to live here forever, but she said when I’m older, I could go, but I could stay as long as I want.” Knowing that this living arrangement is open-ended made James feel “good”, and he said that even after he “eventually” moves out, he knows he can come back to visit. Harley and Doug expressed similar sentiments: “I know that whatever I decide to do with my future that my foster family will always be there to support me, so that’s really nice”; “Once I’m gone, it’s not like I can never come back because my spot or bunk has been taken by some other kid.” These youth indicated having built strong and enduring relationships with their foster families at BFH, something Bridgeway values and works to coach foster parents in developing through ongoing training and support. Strong relationships have been shown to be an especially important factor for youth ageing out of care because during the transition towards independence, youth still require support but will no longer have access to many of the formal services available to them during their time in care (Geenen & Powers, 2007). Maintaining close connections to caring and supportive adults is one of the best ways to ensure that youth who have aged out of care achieve stable housing and employment, higher educational attainment, and less involvement in the criminal justice system as young adults (Kovarikova, 2017).

Participants generally communicated optimism about their futures, something in glaring contrast to the Ontario Child Advocate’s (2016) report in which youth reported feeling numb, hopeless, and resigned to difficulties and isolation in the future. Participants in this study communicated a sense

of ambition and self-determination when talking about their goals, with three indicating that considerable planning has been done while the other three spoke more generally about pursuing interests and passions.

With the release of the Ontario Child Advocate's (2016) report *Searching for Home*, Bridgeway felt compelled to study whether youth in their care were similarly experiencing unmet needs related to having a sense of belonging, feeling cared for by people who listened to and understood them, retaining their individuality and humanity, feeling in control of their own lives, and feeling prepared for their futures by having a grounded and secure present. Based on the findings from both the quantitative survey and the in-depth interviews, it appears that Bridgeway is meeting these needs. However, it was clear from the interviews that many participants struggle with feelings of self-blame and being a burden on their parents, and that in some situations, youth are unable to obtain vital information, the absence of which impacts their construction of their life narrative.

#### **E. Youth blame themselves.**

The first of the two themes regarding participants' ongoing needs was that youth blame themselves: they fear they will be moved because of their behaviour and feel that they are burdens to their foster parents. Most youth interviewed mentioned on more than one occasion their perceived connection between their behaviour and placement disruptions, even if they have experienced long-term stability in their own placements. This fear and self-blame were common among youth interviewed by the Ontario Child Advocate (2016) and is documented in other literature as well where frequent moves are associated with many maladaptive consequences, such as difficulty adjusting to new surroundings, emotionally shutting down, feeling unwanted, and not getting close to people (Chambers et al., 2018).

For Jack, being on his best behaviour was important to him so that he could avoid moving from his foster home which was close to where his biological mom lived. Not wanting to move schools was another reason he gave for trying not to cause "trouble", the term most youth used when talking about behaviours they felt would inevitably lead to placement changes. When it came to the prospect of moving homes, youth variously expressed fear of the unknown and not knowing who they would "end up with", sadness about losing the connection to families who were well-liked and self-blame because youth believed that "making trouble" made it their fault if they moved. In the Ontario Child Advocate's (2016) investigation of *home*, they heard that youth overwhelmingly felt "torn out by the roots" (p. 15). This meant that youth felt isolated, disconnected, and unattached to the people and places around them. To have roots meant to have stability, frequent and positive contact with family, siblings, and

community, and trust that there is safety, flexibility, acceptance, and belonging in their home. While participants in the present study indicated that they did feel rooted in these ways, they shared a feeling of precariousness that seemed to loom large and they were quick to hold themselves responsible for both maintaining a sense of home and for losing it.

Beyond fearing that their behaviour may lead to placement instability, some youth interviewed carried excessive responsibility for their difficulties or life outcomes and expressed this self-blame often. One participant in particular was so explicit in identifying herself as a 'bad kid' who was to blame for topics that came up in discussion that the interviewer paused to ask about where these messages were coming from, whether her foster parents and workers made her feel that way or if this was internally generated. She responded: "It's kind of all to be honest. I get some input from my social workers and my [foster] parents but most of the time it's like okay, well, I know what goes through my mind and I know what I'm thinking and I know when I'm gonna burst." This particular youth admits to having difficulty controlling her anger and impulses. The manner in which she reflects on experiences, however, suggests that discussions and consequences around managing these behaviours have led her to internalize beliefs that she, as a person, is 'bad' for not being able to better control her emotion-driven behaviour even though in such a dysregulated state, self-control is often impossible (Shanker, 2016). She says at various times: "it's my fault", "Personally I think I'm just one of those people that don't deal with [things] correctly", and "I know all the things that I do are wrong and [so] I talk to myself about it". On one hand, this youth is proactive in accepting responsibility so that she may work on acting differently; on the other, she talked about living with the "weight" of feeling like she has hurt people for acting out her own feelings of hurt, and she seemed to have integrated this guilt into her core self-concept.

Another youth described his own experience of relative "autonomy" from the Children's Aid Society and Bridgeway as being due to his choice to behave in ways that do not require intervention. This was driven by fear and a feeling of "debt" to his foster family. He explains: "I mean, I didn't really make too much trouble and if I did, I was more scared of the fact that I knew what I did was wrong and that it was sort of a breach of the rules... and if someone is giving you such a nice environment, why would you go out of your way to do that to them?" He talked about behaviour he witnessed from another foster youth in his home and seemed dismayed that somebody would cause "issues" when their foster parents were "very nice" and tried very hard to provide an accepting and loving home.

Likewise, participants indicated that they worried about being financial burdens on their foster parents and this is a main reason that both youth who talked about the possibility of adoption were against it. Jenny, whose biological family lives quite far from her, said the financial burden of visits with

her natural family – and the subsequent decrease in number that would need to occur – was her primary reason for not wanting an adoption. Doug also rejected adoption to avoid having his foster parents take on the financial responsibility of his care and future education. He described how this impacted the way he viewed himself: “I knew that if I was to be adopted that it would have to be by the wealthy family friend – and that made me think of myself in terms of material – which isn’t a good way to think of myself”. Doug also indicated that the main reason post-secondary education seemed accessible to him was because of funding support he would receive as a former recipient of extended society care, as such costs are a “pressure” he did not want to put on his foster parents.

Little research exists on the experience or origin of self-blame among young people in foster care, although its presence has been documented while examining other questions in this population (e.g., Samuels & Pryce, 2008; Chambers et al., 2018; Mitchell, 2016; Browne, 2002). Self-blame is known to be a typical coping strategy among youth with anxiety and depressive disorders (Legerstee, Garnefski, Verhulst, & Utens, 2011), and mental health issues are highly prevalent among youth in care – 46% of Ontario youth in care were taking psychotropic medication according to a 2012 figure (the most recent available; Kovarikova, 2017). However, the origins of the present study’s participants’ experiences of self-blame cannot be pinpointed at this time and thus offer no clear solution for addressing this need. What can be taken from these findings, however, is that self-blame appeared to be common. While participants often reported feeling responsible for their situations or difficulties, it should be noted that they also reported feeling very loved by their foster parents and supported in working towards a positive future, one that is not constrained by previous experiences. These positive relationships may provide a safe and supportive context in which youth work on challenging self-blaming beliefs.

#### **F. Inconsistent access**

The final theme is related to access to workers and family as well as to information. Participants reported diverse experiences with Bridgeway staff, with some reporting minimal contact and some reporting a lot. One youth, specifically, felt confused by the number of workers involved with her and said that so many people were checking in on her that she could not remember all their names. Annabelle expressed, “It’s just a lot. It’s kind of hard too, trying to live that kind of life though. You’re meeting so many people and it’s like, ‘I’m only 17, I don’t need that much people to see how I’m doing!’” Another youth mentioned that she sees a Bridgeway worker monthly and this is adequate.

With family, half the youth interviewed talked about maintaining contact with their biological family. Noticeably, frequency of contact was less satisfactory for the Indigenous youth interviewed and this was a function of distance. One non-Indigenous youth, Jack, mentioned that he was able to stay

close to where his birth mom lived and this provided him with great relief while another, Harley, spoke about having had frequent contact with her birth mom that did not appear to be difficult to arrange. For the Indigenous youth, on the other hand, their biological families lived such great distances away that visits were difficult and required significant resources for travel and accommodation. Bridgeway may wish to examine ways that these connections can be supported for Indigenous youth, who are particularly vulnerable to having connections to community, culture, friends, and family severed (Ontario Child Advocate, 2016).

Some youth further expressed that information about their care has been hard to access. Jenny said that her adoption process was thwarted by a rule prohibiting Indigenous children from her community being adopted by outside families and which she never came to understand: “like Native kids aren’t really allowed to get adopted for some reason. . . I actually really wanted an adoption but... just a lot of questions have come up. Like, will I be able to keep my last name, or will I still be able to see my family and stuff back at home.” Ultimately, Jenny was not adopted and a primary reason she gave was because it would make her lose most, if not all, of what little contact she had with her biological family. Whether the adoption could have gone through if this were not a deal-breaker is unclear, however, given her lack of information about the issue.

Harley talked about how frightening her experience entering foster care was and how the information she received during this time was overwhelming and confusing, especially for a child. She described feeling lost and indicated that what she needed most was a strong relationship with someone during the process so that she could feel secure:

“[C]oming into care, there is very little I remember about it... I just remember going to the building, but there were no memorable moments during that whole process... no helpful things that I still have in my mind today. So like tell the kids something, or like don’t make it a protocol with them – make it personable.”

When prompted for an example, she went on to explain:

“I just came from like a really rough family and I was just, like, scared... I grew up in kind of the bad part of [city] – from there to the foster building to the suburb, it was like a three-step jump to two places I had never heard of in my life so it was hard to wrap my head around it. So if someone had been there, more than just saying ‘it’s going to be ok’ – kind of just explained it – I mean, I guess they explained it, but really what I remember is me and my sister sitting in a room, and someone calling my mom. There’s nothing memorable about it.”

Harley was seven years old when this occurred. The interviewer summarized what Harley said by asking, “So you were told things were going to be ok, but weren’t sure ‘what’ would be ok?” to which Harley responded “Yeah, exactly.”

This story demonstrates the need for age-appropriate support during transitions. Harley acknowledged that she might have been provided with information about what was happening but was unable to understand it. This was likely due to both developmental and stress-related factors. Developmentally, children need skillful guidance from an adult to make sense of events and resolve uncertainty (Bell, 2002). Information surrounding apprehension is frequently withheld from children due to workers’ fear of further traumatization (Damiani-Taraba et al., 2018). More importantly, perhaps, is that Harley did not feel reassured during her stressful transition into care and remembers this experience as being unresponsive to her fear. Harley identified what she needed at the time: someone to connect with and provide a sense of security.

In another example about access to information, one youth worried that agencies were “picking sides” based on information they received from the individuals they represented. He witnessed a conflict where he described Bridgeway as supporting the foster parents and Children’s Aid as supporting the youth in ways that were antagonizing to one another, based on allegations coming from a young person in distress. This dispute, according to the participant, arose from another foster youth in his home making a “ludicrous” complaint to Children’s Aid that prompted both agencies to get involved. He emphasized that all agencies should be neutral and work together for the sake of the child, cautioning that sometimes it is important “to take what the kids say with a grain of salt, and to see that some of these issues, in the end, are just kind of petty issues.” He felt that sometimes youth are looking for attention or are unsure of more productive ways to express feelings and, as a result, the perceived inter-agency lack of collaboration and information-sharing provided room for the young person to “make them compete with each other” to the detriment of everyone involved. In contrast, James talked about a positive experience of two parties working together by sharing information: his worker and school staff collaborated in getting him connected with co-op employment which he found to be very beneficial in getting started with a career path of his choice. In this case, information-sharing was productive for the youth involved and contributed to the youth feeling heard and respected.

Issues of access cover a range of topics and presented a challenge to integrate under one theme. Access to family and to information are fairly different but represent a common struggle of the youth interviewed to be fully-informed of and to exercise agency in the circumstances they are faced with. While factors such as age, distance, or level of required services (e.g., necessary frequency of

contact/support) are outside of both the youths' and Bridgeway's control at times, this pattern of findings suggests that these are issues to be taken into consideration whenever possible so that the impact can be addressed as needed.

### Conclusion

The present study sought to examine the lived experiences of a sample of youth in foster care residing in Bridgeway Family Homes (BFH). In response to a disturbing provincial report on the unmet needs of this population, BFH was interested in whether youth in their care shared in these experiences – in the opinions of the youth themselves. Twenty-nine youth completed a 10-item survey focused on the core needs identified from the Ontario Child Advocate's (2016) report, congruent with BFH's decades of experience in providing specialized foster care, with satisfactory results: youth overwhelmingly reported feeling loved, accepted, included, and secure in their foster families. Follow-up one-to-one interviews with six youth provided more detail on these results, elaborating on what makes their BFH experience to be highly positive. This included having warm, attentive, and supportive foster parents, the gift of time to grow and adapt during long-term placements, the value placed upon their own voices, and the security of permanency from which youth could plan for and build their own futures. However, the six youth interviewed also indicated feeling considerable worry about this sense of stability and the burden they perceived themselves to be on their foster families, in addition to raising issues related to access to information and people in various capacities. While BFH is a strong provider of quality foster care, as evidenced by the quantitative and qualitative findings alike, these are inevitably areas for improvement in meeting youths' various needs.

The present study is a rare investigation of foster youth themselves, putting their voices front and centre. According to Nybell (2013), it is a moral imperative to rise above traditional scholarship whose approaches "too often deny children agency and subjecthood in their own lives by deeming them vulnerable and incompetent" (p. 1227) and which therefore perpetuates a high degree of scrutiny of a child's credibility depending on their age and maturity. She argues that it further makes practical sense to seek input from children whose lives are being decided – since children have the right to *participation* as much as protection. For the purpose of this research, youth voice was prioritized in the absence of triangulation with foster parents or workers in direct recognition of the strength and competence of youth in care to tell their experiences as they lived them, without judgment or undermining of their credibility. It would be in error to present these findings as voices that are truly "authentic and unproblematic" (p. 1228), however, since youth are accustomed to the power imbalances and

assumptions present in child welfare work and prepare themselves accordingly, knew that the interviewers were agents of the company providing their care, and as adolescents who had spent many years in foster care were likely skilled in the use of language and discourse appropriate for interacting in child welfare contexts (as opposed to among peers, at home, etc.). That said, in a field where the voices of youth themselves rarely get the opportunity to be heard at institutional levels, this is an appropriate early step in shifting attention to an under-represented group. While there are qualitative research methods suitable for analyzing discourse and contextual issues relevant to youth voice, thematic content analysis was employed to better suit the present research question and the immediate goals of Bridgeway Family Homes in assessing the quality of services delivered.

The qualitative focus of this report has largely been on the social and emotional needs of youth in care because this was largely the topic of the data collected. Needs relating to school or work, daily living, or other practical topics were raised at a far lower rate and usually only when part of a relational example to the question posed. While this was the intended focus of the quantitative questions, the interview questions were not specifically designed with this in mind and were meant to be less structured to elicit a broader range of information (see Appendix C), but the natural tendency towards topics of relationships and social-emotional qualities make sense in the context of the questions and as two of the more pressing developmental needs of adolescents (Ontario Child Advocate, 2016; Schofield & Beek, 2009). This focus is fitting for a research project of this size, however, and needs related to other domains such as leisure, school, and community are worthy of dedicated study to ensure proper attention.

The goal of the present study was to seek out and give platform to young people's voices within Bridgeway Family Homes. We feel that important feedback has been collected and communicated with this report that will be useful in ongoing program development at BFH. Future research should continue to examine both contexts and content of youth voice, as thoughtfully discussed by Nybell (2013), including not only what is shared verbally to child welfare authority figures but what may be avoided, omitted, or ignored during the process by both researchers and participants. This may require "resourcefully creating alternative contexts – or cracks – through which young people may speak" (p. 1231) and employing a range of research methodologies to ensure youth voice is adequately represented from multiple angles.

Youth at Bridgeway have been clear in stating where their needs are and are not largely being met. When the six youth were asked what they want Bridgeway to know as concluding thoughts to their

interviews, their responses come down to this: *We are scared. Give us a chance. Be patient. Ask questions. Listen to us. Build relationships with us.* And perhaps most importantly: *We are not bad kids.*

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Ontario government recently closed the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth on May 1, 2019. This occurred after the study concluded but before the manuscript was finalized. As of this date, formal complaints and investigations regarding the wellbeing of Ontario's children and youth in care fall under the mandate of the Children and Youth Unit at the Ontario Ombudsman, although it should be noted that this mandate does not include advocacy (Elman, n.d.). The Ontario Child Advocate's website (which was the source of the 2016 document *Searching for Home: Reimagining residential care* as well as many other crucial reports and research, once found at <http://www.provincialadvocate.on.ca>) now directs visitors to (1) the Ombudsman's website for contact information, <http://ombudsman.on.ca/what-we-do/topics/children-youth> and (2) a website with the archived reports, <https://ocaarchives.wordpress.com/>. This archive was created by the Ontario Child Advocate's office prior to closing and is believed to be maintained by the Ombudsman (I. Elman, personal communication, June 14, 2019). At the time of writing, it is unclear whether further changes will be made to this online archive and how this may affect future availability of these documents.

### Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Dr. Brenda Smith-Chant for her research and methodological advice and to Gayle Einarsson for her excellent contribution in creating the final product. Thanks to Amanda Rawn Alton for her creation of the #YourVoice survey questionnaire and proofreading. Thanks also to Jeremy Bell and Rhiannon Duxbury for reading and providing feedback on drafts. Their perspectives were much appreciated in developing this report.

### References

- Bell, M. (2002). Promoting children's rights through the use of relationship. *Child & Family Social Work, 7*(1), 1-11.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101.
- Browne, D. (2002). Coping alone: Examining the prospects of adolescent victims of child abuse placed in foster care. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 31*(1), 57-66.

- Cashmore, J., & Paxman, M. (2006). Predicting after-care outcomes: The importance of 'felt' security. *Child & Family Social Work, 11*(3), 232-241.
- Chambers, R. M., Crutchfield, R. M., Willis, T. Y., Cuza, H. A., Otero, A., Harper, S. G. G., & Carmichael, H. (2018). "It's just not right to move a kid that many times:" A qualitative study of how foster care alumni perceive placement moves. *Children and Youth Services Review, 86*, 76-83.
- Cheung, K., Taillieu, T., Turner, S., Fortier, J., Sareen, J., MacMillan, H. L., ... & Afifi, T. O. (2017). Relationship and community factors related to better mental health following child maltreatment among adolescents. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 70*, 377-387.
- Damiani-Taraba, G., Sky, I., Hegler, D., Woolridge, N., Anderson, B., & Koster, A. (2018). The listen to me project: Creating lasting changes in voice and participation for children in care through a youth-led project. *Child & Youth Services, 39*(1), 75-95.
- Elman, I. (n.d.). *Statement from Irwin Elman*. Retrieved from <https://ocaarchives.wordpress.com/moving-forward/>
- Geenen, S., & Powers, L. E. (2007). "Tomorrow is another problem": The experiences of youth in foster care during their transition into adulthood. *Children and Youth Services Review, 29*(8), 1085-1101.
- Hook, J. L., & Courtney, M. E. (2011). Employment outcomes of former foster youth as young adults: The importance of human, personal, and social capital. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33*(10), 1855-1865.
- Kovarikova, J. (2017). *Exploring youth outcomes after aging-out of care*. Toronto, Canada: Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth.
- Križ, K., & Roundtree-Swain, D. (2017). "We are merchandise on a conveyer belt": How young adults in the public child protection system perceive their participation in decisions about their care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 78*, 32-40.
- Legerstee, J. S., Garnefski, N., Verhulst, F. C., & Utens, E. M. (2011). Cognitive coping in anxiety-disordered adolescents. *Journal of Adolescence, 34*(2), 319-326.
- Miller, M. (2017). *Ontario Looking After Children (OnLAC) 2016 Provincial Report*. Retrieved from <http://www.oacas.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2016-OnLAC-Provincial-Report.pdf>
- Mitchell, M. B. (2016). The family dance: Ambiguous loss, meaning making, and the psychological family in foster care. *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 8*(3), 360-372.
- Ontario Child Advocate. (2016). *Searching for home: Reimagining residential care*. Retrieved from [https://www.provincialadvocate.on.ca/reports/advocacy-reports/english-reports/ResidentialCareReport\\_En.pdf](https://www.provincialadvocate.on.ca/reports/advocacy-reports/english-reports/ResidentialCareReport_En.pdf)

- Pölkki, P., Vornanen, R., Pursiainen, M., & Riikonen, M. (2012). Children's participation in child-protection processes as experienced by foster children and social workers. *Child Care in Practice, 18*(2), 107-125.
- Reinard, J. C. (2006). *Communication research statistics*. California, USA: Sage Publications.
- Samuels, G. M., & Pryce, J. M. (2008). "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger": Survivalist self-reliance as resilience and risk among young adults aging out of foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 30*(10), 1198-1210.
- Schofield, G. (2002). The significance of a secure base: A psychosocial model of long-term foster care. *Child & Family Social Work, 7*(4), 259-272.
- Schofield, G., & Beek, M. (2009). Growing up in foster care: Providing a secure base through adolescence. *Child & Family Social Work, 14*(3), 255-266.
- Shanker, S. (2016). *Self-Reg: How to help your child (and you) break the stress cycle and successfully engage with life*. Toronto, ON: Penguin Canada.
- Steenbakkens, A., van der Steen, S., & Grietens, H. (2016). 'To talk or not to talk?': Foster youth's experiences of sharing stories about their past and being in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 71*, 2-9.

## Appendices

### Appendix A – Invitation to Participate

Hello, my name is (Laura Durst-Fess) and I am currently a student in the (Masters of Social Work Program) at (York University), completing a placement with Bridgeway Family Homes. As part of my placement, and inline with the agencies desire for Best Practices, I am conducting research considering your experience with Bridgeway; specifically, looking to provide the agency with feedback from you, the service user.

I am looking to recruit participants who are over the age of 13 and who reside fulltime, or have resided fulltime, in a Bridgeway Family Home for at least 2 years.

As a participant in this study, you would participate in a 1-1.5 hour confidential semi-structured interview and complete a 10-question survey; both of which would be arranged to take place at your convenience. Please note that your participation in this study would be voluntary and completely confidential.

If you are interested in participating in this study, or have any questions please contact me via email ([info@laurafess.com](mailto:info@laurafess.com)) or telephone (705 796 8791) by \_\_\_\_\_ 2016.

Looking forward to partnering with you,  
(Laura Durst-Fess)

Cc: Patricia Aitchison  
[patricia@bridgeway.ca](mailto:patricia@bridgeway.ca)  
416-527-1180

### Appendix B – Informed Consent

#### INFORMATION AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

TITLE: #YourVoice: Bridgeway is Listening

RESEARCHER: Kathryn Carter, graduate student in the Masters of Educational Studies program at Trent University, is conducting this study under contract to Bridgeway and the supervision of Patricia Aitchison, Clinical Consultant at Bridgeway.

#### Principal Investigator:

Kathryn Carter  
M.Ed. Candidate, Researcher at Bridgeway Family Homes  
4044 45, Cobourg, ON K9A 4J9  
Tel: 705-772-9142. Email: [kathryncarter@trentu.ca](mailto:kathryncarter@trentu.ca)

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: The purpose of this study is to explore your experience in a Bridgeway Foster Home and to assess if Bridgeway Family Homes are meeting the needs of the young people in their care. Grounded theory will be used to guide semi-structured interviews; findings will be presented in a final report and shared with the staff, executives, and foster parents of Bridgeway Family Homes in addition

to outside practitioners via publication. All published findings will be stripped of identifying information. Only those directly involved with data collection for this study will have access to this information; see below for further details about confidentiality.

**WHAT YOU WILL BE ASKED TO DO:** Service users over the age of 16 who reside in or have resided in a Bridgeway Family Home for a minimum of two years will be asked to participate in this study. Your involvement in this study will consist of filling out a demographic questionnaire and completing a 10-question survey. 8-10 participants will also be selected to participate in a one-to-one semi-structured interview with Kathryn Carter. The interview will be approximately 20-40 minutes. Each interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed word-for-word for thematic analysis. The interview will occur in a private location at a time convenient for you. The interviews will not occur in your place of employment.

**POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:** There is minimal risk of harm associated with participation in this project. You may experience uncomfortable feelings (e.g. stress, anxiety, etc.) while discussing your experiences in a Bridgeway Family Home. Should such feelings arise, Bridgeway Family Homes will support you in receiving support and/or counseling regarding your discomfort.

**POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR SOCIETY:** The benefits of your participation in this study are that you may have positive feelings by sharing your experiences and/or contributing to the development of knowledge regarding youth in care. Benefits to society include improved knowledge about the needs of youth in care. Your voice will be used to help determine agency policies and adjust agency protocols when working with young people who come into care.

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:** Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision to not participate will not influence the nature of your relationship with the researcher or Bridgeway Family Homes, now or in the future.

**WITHDRAWAL FROM THE STUDY:** You may stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. Your decision to stop participating or to refuse to answer particular questions will not affect your relationship with the researcher or Bridgeway Family Homes. In the event that you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be destroyed.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** All information you supply will be held in confidence. While conducting the research all identifying information collected by Kathryn will be stored in a locked cabinet in Kathryn's home office; all identifying information about participants will be stored on a separate demographic information sheet and not connected to their transcript. Furthermore, telephone calls with you will occur from a private location, such as the researcher's home office, where confidentiality can be assured. The interview will be held in a location where privacy can be assured.

The interview will be audio recorded and later transcribed by Kathryn. Transcriptions will be stored on a secure hard drive and/or in a locked cabinet for two years following the study. Audio recordings will be assigned and identified by a numeric code and will be stored on a secure hard drive until completion of the study, at which time the recordings will be destroyed.

A pseudonym will be assigned to each participant and used in the transcripts. All identifying information in the transcripts will be removed or altered so as to respect and protect the confidentiality of the participants and of the people, situations, or organizations you may describe. Excerpts or quotations of your words may be used in the final report. Your name will not appear in the final report; when using

direct quotations, all identifying information about you or about the people, situations, or organizations you describe will be altered or stripped so as to protect identities.

Confidentiality is strictly maintained by the researcher except as required by law to follow a court order or to notify police or the Children’s Aid Society of any child endangerment concerns, such as suspected abuse of a minor. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE RESEARCH? If you have questions about this process, your rights as a participant, the research in general, or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact the Principal Investigator (Kathryn Carter, above) or the Research Supervisor (Patricia Aitchison).

**Research Supervisor:**

Patricia Aitchison

Clinical Consultant, Bridgeway Family Homes

4044 45, Cobourg, ON K9A 4J9

Tel: 905-377-1600. Email: [patricia@bridgeway.ca](mailto:patricia@bridgeway.ca)

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have read the information provided for the study entitled “#YourVoice: Bridgeway is Listening” as described herein, to be conducted by Kathryn Carter. I have been given a copy of this form. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. My signature below indicates my consent.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Appendix C – Interview Guide**

**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. I would like you to think about the experiences, thoughts, and feelings you have had throughout your time in care, maybe even right back to when you first entered. You’ve probably had a whole range of experiences. Can you tell me about what it has been like for you in foster care?

2. Tell me about your relationship with your foster parents. How do you feel about them?

3. How would you describe your sense of control while in foster care?

- Do you feel that people listen to you? Do you have a say in what happens?

4. I’m interested in hearing about your sense of permanency or stability while in care. Would you say that “permanent” or “stable” describe your foster care experience? Can you tell me about an experience that demonstrates the presence or absence of stability?

- This refers to being able to stay in one place or having long-lasting relationships, for example, which is opposite to there being a lot of chaos or change.

5. What are your thoughts about the future? Do you have any goals or plans?

6. In what ways would you say that decisions being made about you are/are not in your best interest? This includes decisions relating to your activities, your placement, etc. Can you tell me about a time during your placement in a Bridgeway home where you felt that your needs were not being met, and what led that to change, if it did?

7. What feedback would you like to give Bridgeway about your experience in foster care? This includes their staff and foster parents. This could also be any final thoughts you have.

**Appendix D – Demographic Questionnaire**

**DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE**

1. First name: \_\_\_\_\_ Last name: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

3. Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Pronouns we should use: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Longest amount of time, in years, residing in one Bridgeway Family Home: \_\_\_\_\_

6. Number of Bridgeway Family Homes you have lived in: \_\_\_\_\_

7. Total length of time, in years, in foster care: \_\_\_\_\_

8. Please assign yourself a pseudonym (a fake name) to use throughout the remainder of this project:  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix E – #YourVoice Quantitative Survey: Categorical Response Breakdown**

Note: Question 1 had participants type in their name and Question 2 had them enter their birthdate.

**3. I have made long lasting relationships and connections with my foster family.**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Never (1)	1	3.4	3.4
Rarely (2)	1	3.4	6.9
Sometimes (3)	3	10.3	17.2
Often (4)	7	24.1	41.4
Always (5)	17	58.6	100.0
Total	29	100.0	

**4. I feel/felt respected.**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Rarely (2)	1	3.4	3.4
Sometimes (3)	4	13.8	17.2
Often (4)	3	10.3	27.6
Always (5)	21	72.4	100.0
Total	29	100.0	

**5. I feel/felt safe and well cared for.**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Sometimes (3)	2	6.9	6.9
Often (4)	3	10.3	17.2
Always (5)	24	82.8	100.0
Total	29	100.0	

**6. I feel/felt like others listen/listened to what I have/had to say.**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Rarely (2)	1	3.4	3.4
Sometimes (3)	2	6.9	10.3
Often (4)	11	37.9	48.3
Always (5)	15	51.7	100.0
Total	29	100.0	

**7. I feel/felt in control of my life.**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Rarely (2)	3	10.3	10.3
Sometimes (3)	5	17.2	27.6
Often (4)	10	34.5	62.1
Always (5)	11	37.9	100.0
Total	29	100.0	

**8. I feel/felt genuinely loved.**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Never (1)	1	3.4	3.4
Sometimes (3)	2	6.9	10.3
Often (4)	4	13.8	24.1
Always (5)	22	75.9	100.0
Total	29	100.0	

**9. I am/was included in the decisions that impact/impacted me and my life.**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Sometimes (3)	4	13.8	13.8
Often (4)	9	31.0	44.8
Always (5)	16	55.2	100.0
Total	29	100.0	

**10. I am/was ready for the future.**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Rarely (2)	2	6.9	6.9
Sometimes (3)	10	34.5	41.4
Often (4)	9	31.0	72.4
Always (5)	8	27.6	100.0
Total	29	100.0	

**11. I feel/felt that my individuality is/was encouraged and accepted.**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Sometimes (3)	2	6.9	6.9
Often (4)	6	20.7	27.6
Always (5)	21	72.4	100.0
Total	29	100.0	

**12. I feel/felt informed about what is/was going on in my life.**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Sometimes (3)		10.3	10.3
Often (4)	10	34.5	44.8
Always (5)	16	55.2	100.0
Total	29	100.0	

**Appendix F – #YourVoice Quantitative Survey: Bivariate Correlation Matrix**

*Correlations between items on the 10-item #YourVoice: Bridgeway is Listening survey. (N = 29)*

Variables	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
3. I have made long lasting relationships and connections with my Foster Family.	-								
4. I feel/felt respected.	.76**	-							
5. I feel/felt safe and well cared for.	.49**	.54**	-						
6. I feel/felt like others listen/listened to what I have/had to say.	.60**	.70**	.53**	-					
7. I feel/felt in control of my life.	.45*	.49*	.37*	.55**	-				
8. I feel/felt genuinely loved.	.67**	.69**	.90**	.64**	.43*	-			
9. I am/was included in the decisions that impact/impacted me and my life.	.06	.32	.24	.41*	.15	.27	-		
10. I am/was ready for the future.	-.15	-.17	.30	-.04	.11	.06	-.03	-	
11. I feel/felt that my individuality is/was encouraged and accepted.	.68**	.48*	.77**	.51**	.47*	.83**	.09	.18	-
12. I feel/felt informed about what is/was going on in my life.	.30	.26	.28	.34	.63**	.19	.26	.32	.30

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$