

UNICEF Canada Welcomes Groundbreaking Youth Led Hearings at Ontario Provincial Legislature

TORONTO, ON (Friday, November 18, 2011) - UNICEF Canada is pleased to participate in the groundbreaking youth-led *Youth Leaving Care Hearings* which mark an important step in realizing the rights of young people living in care across Ontario.

These unique hearings will examine the challenges young people living in care face when they turn 18 and are no longer eligible for support through the Provincial Child Welfare System.

“The Ontario Child Welfare System should be informed by a stronger child rights-based approach,” says UNICEF Canada’s Chief Advocacy Advisor, Marvin Bernstein. “Realizing the right of all children in care to a strong and well-integrated support and service system, and enabling them to achieve their full potential is not only the right thing to do, but is a legal obligation on the part of the Province of 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. Members of the Ontario Legislature, ministry staff, service providers and the public are expected to attend the hearings, listen and learn.

“Children living in care should be included and invited to participate, according to their age and maturity, at every stage of their case planning and discharge planning process,” says Bernstein. “Having a voice is critical to the development and empowerment of young people and contributes to them becoming responsible citizens.”

Bernstein will provide recommendations to ensure youth living in care have their rights realized in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child at the hearings on the morning of Friday November 18, 2011. Please see attached recommendations.

WHAT: Youth Leaving Care Hearings

WHEN: Friday, November 18th & Friday, November 25th, 2011, 9:00 AM – 4:30 PM

WHERE: Queen’s Park, Amethyst Room, West Entrance

About UNICEF

UNICEF is the world's leading child-focused humanitarian and development agency. Through innovative programs and advocacy work, we save children's lives and secure their rights in virtually every country. Our global reach, unparalleled influence on policymakers, and diverse partnerships make us an instrumental force in shaping a world in which no child dies of a preventable cause. UNICEF is entirely supported by voluntary donations and helps all children, regardless of race, religion or politics. For more information about UNICEF, please visit www.unicef.ca

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Youth Leaving Care: Ontario Can Do Better

For most children in Canada, the transition to adulthood is a process that starts from birth and continues well into their twenties. However, youth living in care are faced with an arbitrary age limit that propels them into independence and self-sufficiency very early in life. These young people are often more vulnerable to the challenges of independence than youth with family support.

UNICEF Canada Policy Recommendations:

1. Treat children in care as full rights-holders and give effect to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child when developing and implementing policy and legislation with respect to children's human rights, including when children are admitted to care, residing in care and leaving care.
2. Give particular attention to article 2 (non-discrimination); article 3 (best interests of the child); article 6 (life, survival and development); and article 12 (child participation) in the Convention on the Rights of the Child when developing and implementing policy and legislation with respect to children being admitted to care, residing in care and leaving care.
3. Begin using a standardized Child Rights Impact Assessment process before legislation, policy and practice are developed that may have significant impacts on children.
4. Develop policies and activities that plan for transition out of care at the earliest stages, and consistently build toward it throughout a child's experience in care (consistent with the United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children).

UNICEF Canada Recommendations for Amendments to Ontario's Child and Family Services Act

1. Incorporate the Convention on the Rights of the Child into the Declaration of Principles of Ontario's Child and Family Services Act.
2. Change Ontario's definition of "child" from age 16 to 18 to be in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, so that all children in Ontario can benefit from protection from abuse and neglect until age 18.
3. Expand extended care and maintenance to former children in care from age 21 up to the age of 25, in recognition that the transition to adulthood is a process that often occurs over a number of years and is likely to take longer for former youth in care.
4. Modernize parts of the Child and Family Services Act that contain archaic and stigmatizing language with respect to children entering, residing in, or leaving care, in consultation with children in care and former children in care.