

# BEYOND BARRIERS

## SPECIAL REPORT SUMMARY: YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN THE CHILD INTERVENTION AND YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEMS

This report explored issues with the services and supports being provided to children and youth with disabilities in Alberta. Consultations informed recommendations aimed at improving services and supports for these young people and their families.

Young people  
consulted **52**

Stakeholders  
consulted **125**

Recommendations  
made **8**

Young people and stakeholders emphasized the need for more inclusive, consistent, and individualized supports, stronger assistance for families, and continued services into adulthood.

### DEFINING DISABILITY

Asking young people and stakeholders about the word disability brought mixed reactions. Some found the word offensive because it focused on lacking abilities rather than highlighting strengths. Others felt the word was appropriate if it was used respectfully and with the purpose of being supportive. While the term can and has had stigma attached to it, some young people are using the word with dignity.

**“I think it’s how you say it. It shouldn’t be used negatively or mean.”**

**– Young Person**

We used the definition of disability from the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) which conveys a wide spectrum of conditions:

*Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.*

# Understand us

We spoke with young people who had a range of disabilities. Many expressed that they want to be understood and given opportunities. They wanted us to know that each young person's experience with their disability is unique.

**“Young people with disabilities need more help,  
and we don't always get it at the right time.”**  
– Young Person

# Include us and meet our needs

Some young people with disabilities are not receiving services and supports when they need them (e.g., a wheelchair, speech therapy, medication, or mental health care). It is essential that child-serving systems provide timely and individualized supports that meet young people's needs.

It is vital for professionals to understand the specific needs of individual children and youth with disabilities and consistently provide them the right supports without undue delays.

## PARTICIPATION IN DECISIONS

It is important for young people to participate in decisions made about them. Many expressed that their views were often ignored by professionals and shared that they feel cared for and respected when people find ways to involve them in planning and decision-making. This includes taking the time to build relationships with them, explaining things in ways they can understand, giving them choices, and listening to their perspectives.

**“Know me, see me, understand me, and empower me.”**  
– Young Person

# Help us by supporting our families

Families, including biological, adoptive, foster, and kinship, play an essential role in providing this support, but they often struggle to access the necessary resources.

## **Families raised the following concerns:**

- hard to know where to find support
- must fight for services
- have to repeatedly explain their child's needs to different service providers
- toll of providing care is exhausting and strains other family relationships
- not all families can take time off work to access services and supports
- families with fewer resources have a harder time getting the help they need

**“There was never enough help for my adoptive mom and sometimes I wonder if that’s why my birth mom couldn’t keep me.”**

**- Young Person**

# Support us as we become adults

As young people in government care transition to adulthood they require support, and those with disabilities even more so. They may face an increased risk of negative outcomes, such as poor mental health, stemming from negative attitudes toward disability and inequitable access to resources. Young people with disabilities face challenges receiving services and supports as they become adults.

We heard that when young people are not sufficiently supported at home or in a placement that can meet their needs, they may be more likely to become involved with youth justice.

**“Getting a job and finishing school is hard for kids like me. There doesn’t seem to be a lot of help for that once you get older.”**

**- Young Person**



# Moving Forward

To improve services and supports for young people with disabilities in Alberta, the Child and Youth Advocate made eight recommendations:

## **RECOMMENDATION 1**

The Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services should publicly release their plan to address the challenges that were identified by families in the 2021 report on the Family Support for Children with Disabilities program review engagement.

## **RECOMMENDATION 2**

The Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services should provide families involved with the Family Support for Children with Disabilities program direct services when they require urgent supports, including access to a continuum of services from in-home support to emergency out-of-home living arrangements.

## **RECOMMENDATION 3**

The Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services should increase the availability of out-of-home living arrangements provided by the Family Support for Children with Disabilities program.

## **RECOMMENDATION 4**

The Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services should accept and action the Persons with Developmental Disabilities steering committee's 2021 recommendation about increasing eligibility.

## **RECOMMENDATION 5**

The Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services should accept and action the Persons with Developmental Disabilities steering committee's 2021 recommendations about alternative home living supports.

## **RECOMMENDATION 6**

The Ministry of Children and Family Services should partner with external disability experts and young people to review and identify actions to meet the needs of young people with disabilities in placements.

## **RECOMMENDATION 7**

The Ministry of Children and Family Services should partner with external disability experts and young people to complete a review and identify actions to meet the needs of young people with disabilities involved with the Supports for Permanency program.

## **RECOMMENDATION 8**

The Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Public Safety and Emergency Services should partner with external disability experts and young people to complete a review and identify actions to improve supports for young people with disabilities involved in the youth justice system

**Read the full report: [ocya.alberta.ca/reports](https://ocya.alberta.ca/reports)**