



2023 IMPACT REPORT

Every young person
in and from foster care deserves
the opportunity to thrive

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Introduction

A letter from our leadership



Welcome to the StepStones Annual Impact Report for 2023! This has been a watershed year for us in so many ways thanks to your consistent support and steadfast belief in our mission to change the outcomes for young people involved in the child welfare system. Two years ago, we set out on our strategic direction with a focus on impact and influence, continuing to transform individual lives but also spreading the word about what is needed to reimagine the entire sector. With our valued supporters, and with Charity Intelligence's designation of StepStones as a Top 100 Charity in Canada, we are poised to revolutionize solutions for young people from foster care at the national level.

StepStones has become a thought leader in the child welfare and youth homelessness spaces through new connections with national sector champions who are committed to finding upstream solutions: A Way Home Canada and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness added Stepstones to their community of the 30 top leaders across the sector; we became the lead partner in the Peer-to-Peer Knowledge Exchange, founded by our dear friend and colleague Shuah Roskies, that connects over 500 individuals and organizations in traditionally siloed sectors to bridge gaps and share ideas; we consulted on the government's new Ready Set Go redesign strategy for the provincial child welfare system; and we participated in the first ever International Youth in Transitions Symposium in Richmond, B.C. that brought together Canadian and international experts to discuss effective programming and models.

On the ground, we celebrated Pride month and our 2SLGBTQ+ community at our annual Spring BBQ, hosted a community resource fair for navigating the child welfare system in collaboration with Delta Family Resource Centre, launched an online solution to remove barriers for youth seeking housing and mental health services and support, and expanded our front-line Connection Coordinator team and housing grants program. As we celebrate our 20th anniversary, StepStones has built a solid base and is entering a new stage of incredible growth and influence. None of this would have been possible without you. Thank you for your continued support and enjoy the read!



Heather O'Keefe
Executive Director



Diavin Miller
Board Chair

StepStones Overview

OUR VISION

A world where all young people thrive and have a sense of belonging with people who love and support them

OUR MISSION

We exist to support youth involved in child welfare and to drive at better systems and approaches for educational achievement, securing stable housing, and building long-lasting support networks



ABOUT US

StepStones for Youth creates transformative changes in the lives of youth aged 10-25 who are or have been involved, through no fault of their own, in child protection services across Canada. Our unique programming increases school engagement, employment opportunities, long-term housing, and mental and physical health.

We help young people develop strong circles of supportive adults, and our evidence-based reviews consistently demonstrate that positive outcomes are only achievable when they feel safe, supported, and empowered. We value interdependence and community and believe that long-term, sustainable change is preferable to, and more effective than, short-term intervention.

We seek to actively recognize and address the systemic inequities which cause greater harm to populations who have experienced oppression and trauma, particularly youth from Black, Indigenous, and 2SLGBTQ+ communities who are over-represented in the child welfare system. We work in solidarity with youth from foster care and engage with them to amplify their voices and to inform our programming.

StepStones is proud to have won a National Youth Homelessness Prevention Award through A Way Home Canada in 2022, and we are honoured to have received 5-Star and A+ ratings from Charity Intelligence Canada, as well as being named on their 2023 Top 100 Canadian Charities list.

StepStones Pillars

Finding and Developing Innovative Solutions

We identify gaps in services and we research interventions that drive positive and long-term outcomes for children and youth from foster and group home care.



Demonstrating Success through Program Delivery

We adapt, implement, and evaluate promising interventions to support youth in successfully transitioning to adulthood with a focus on stabilizing their housing, mental health, and education, and through building connections with individuals, community, and culture.



Driving at Systems Change through Education, Influence, and Awareness

We leverage our experience, research, and successful programming to raise awareness about youth from foster care; we amplify their voices, engage with key stakeholders and policymakers, run awareness campaigns, and participate in collective impact and collaborative forums and initiatives.



Outcomes

352 

Youth served

54 

Workshops and events held

265 

Housing subsidies facilitated for youth

274 

Emergency food and care packages provided

13,624 

Hours of supportive counselling and service navigation provided

230 

Volunteers making a difference in the lives of youth

Where Your Donation Goes

\$25 

Provides a workshop for a youth, teaching valuable skills like applying to school and financial literacy

\$100 

Gives 2 youth presents on their birthdays to let them know they're cared for

\$350 

Allows 10 youth to attend our annual holiday dinner at this special time of year

\$500 

Provides groceries for a youth for 2 months to reduce food insecurity and help them focus on education and career goals

\$800 

Gives a youth a 1 month housing subsidy so they avoid homelessness and have a place to call home

\$3,500 

Fully supports a youth in our program for a year, including a complete wrap-around case management approach to service

Program Highlights

Homelessness Prevention



Young people who are or have been involved in foster care face complex problems and experience high rates of homelessness and poverty. Primary traumas lead to apprehension from family homes, unstable living conditions in the foster care system, and a lack of consistent guardianship. Forced to exit their foster or group homes at age 18 without a family or network of support and, most often, a high school diploma, young people are faced with shelter and street involvement that quickly leads to untenable living situations and poverty. Nearly two-thirds of these youth experience homelessness within the first six months of their mandatory exit from the foster care system and youth experiencing homelessness across Ontario are 193 times more likely to have been involved in child welfare than their peers.

As evidenced in our own program, 98% of youth at StepStones intake rely on government financial assistance and live below the poverty line. Even when housed, these youth devote more than half of their monthly income to housing, leaving fewer resources and time to focus on their education, employment, and mental health.

58%

of homeless youth have had involvement with the child welfare system



89%

of youth are in stable housing after 6 months at StepStones

Young people in our program obtain stable, long-term housing through:

- Long-term, community-embedded housing solutions
- Supported kinship connections
- One-to-one mentorship
- Service navigation support
- Housing and mental health grants, including a newly developed online solution
- A peer-to-peer knowledge exchange for housing organizations and advocates
- Support from Connection Coordinators in locating, viewing, and securing housing options

Program Highlights

Education



Children and youth in foster care encounter a number of unique barriers that can negatively impact their success in school. Frequent moves between foster and group homes introduce lengthy school absences, and child protection-related meetings lead to missed classes and falling behind. At the age of 18, young people in foster care face the sudden loss of caregivers and housing and become responsible for managing their own finances, all of which negatively impact their ability to attend school, including high school and post-secondary programs.

Young people in our program improve their educational attainment through:

- Creating educational plans and pathways with Connection Coordinators and volunteer mentors
- Receiving ongoing educational counselling, advocacy for learning disabilities and mental health issues, and tutoring
- Assistance with applying to post-secondary programs, visiting schools, navigating the school system, and achieving success
- Celebrating milestones and accomplishments along their educational journeys

Only

48%

of youth from the child welfare system graduate high school

83%

of youth at StepStones are currently attending school or have graduated high school

Program Highlights

Belonging & Mental Health



With the temporary and isolating nature of foster care, youth at StepStones have had difficulty developing healthy relationships, self-esteem, and trust in adults and social systems. Due to these factors, these youth are at high risk of engaging in substance use and face an increased risk of suicide. Many youth are unable to access learning and mental health supports when they need it.

StepStones' mental health programming has proven results in changing outcomes for youth by combining a full case management approach with critical one-to-one support. We employ early intervention and preventative measures aimed at reducing the onset, development, and severity of chronic disease and mental illness.

Only

7%

of youth describe
having stable mental
health at intake to
StepStones

88%

of youth have
stabilized their
mental health and/or
are accessing mental
health supports

Our program helps youth improve their mental health in positive ways:

- Connection Coordinators are trained in and offer Dialectical Behaviour Therapy and suicide prevention counselling
- We offer access to permanency-based and trauma-informed psychotherapists and offer subsidies to cover costs associated with counselling sessions
- Youth are connected with physicians and counsellors and are supported locating culturally appropriate services
- Youth are supported in developing broad networks of caring, non-professional adults such as mentors and community allies that they can rely on for a myriad of supports
- Youth receive subsidized travel and meals during holidays to increase opportunities for spending time with family, friends, and their communities

Volunteers

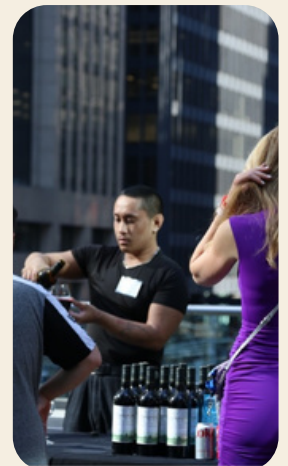
Our volunteers are the unsung heroes of StepStones. Without them, we would not be able to support youth the way we do. Each volunteer offers their own unique skills and perspectives, and every one brings a generosity of time and spirit that inspires us daily. We are so grateful for their dedication and the many ways they help.



In 2023, volunteers:

- Committed long-term to being one-to-one mentors for youth
- Served up food and fun at engagement events like our spring barbecue and holiday dinner
- Stocked and sorted our food pantry with healthy options
- Supported youth with finding and moving into safe new homes
- Helped organize and staff Crafting Change, our first in-person fundraising event since 2019
- Renovated and decorated our offices and youth spaces
- Served on our Board of Directors

...and countless other meaningful and thoughtful contributions



Board of Directors

Diavin Miller – Chair
Tanya Sinha – Vice Chair
Brendan Cochrane – Treasurer
Katherine Brown – Secretary
Sharon Beers – Member
Lorna Freeman – Member
Tim Leonard – Member
Roman Lifshitz – Member
Erin Needra – Member
Steve MacMillan - Former Treasurer

A Volunteer's Story at StepStones



Amisha has given so much to StepStones as a committed and creative volunteer. Bilingual in French and English (and also a native speaker of Gujarati), she was matched as a mentor with Arline, a young person at StepStones, by Connection Coordinator Ebere. As Arline was born and raised in Congo and is French speaking, she is greatly benefitting from a caring mentor who also speaks French.

Amisha raves about Arline, a full-time student completing her first semester at university, who is “quite a superstar...optimistic, resilient and a joy to work with.” Amisha remarks of herself that while she doesn’t particularly enjoy motivating people, she is a “total support person” for those that want to change their lives for the better and will make herself available to help.

A trained facilitator, Amisha also volunteered to lead a mental health session wherein she shared her daughter’s personal story around depression. With her daughter’s permission, the story was first shared with colleagues and staff at her workplace for Bell Let’s Talk Day.

“
**We live in a system
where accessing
support for ‘invisible’
mental health issues
is hard.**”

She later repurposed the workshop for young people in our program to open the dialogue around depression, which is essential to identifying early signs of crises and seeking assistance. In the inclusive and welcoming space she created, youth were very responsive. “We still deal with stigma around mental health,” Amisha notes. “We live in a system where accessing support for ‘invisible’ mental health issues is hard.”

We are so grateful for her time and dedication to hosting this important workshop so we can keep the dialogue open. Merci Amisha, and all our incredible volunteers and mentors for the time and care you commit to helping young people like Arline thrive!

Thank You to Our Supporters

To put it simply, StepStones would not exist without our supporters. Thank you for believing in our youth and helping give them the chance to explore their boundless potential. Your generosity provides them with stability and a brighter future ahead.



Individuals Who Donated \$1,000+ in 2023

Alex Caridia
Andrew Grimes
Barbara Hooper
Bruce Mccallum
Darren Elliott
de Verteuil/Glover Family
Don and Lindsay Mclean
Don E. Langill
Frank Salmonds
Glen Silvestri
Heidi Gollert
Jane Carrick
Jessica O'Reilly and Brandon Ware
Jim Byrd and Carol
Joe and Barbara Luca
Judy and Craig Jarvis

Julia Sliskovic
Kate Wiley
Katherine Brown
Kathryn Balter
Lyssa Sequeira
Mary and Peter Lannan
Michelle and Marcus Bertagnolli
Mike Kloke
Nolan Jarvis
Rachel Barney
Sandra Dye
Sandy Walker
Susan and Graham Denton
Tanya and Awinash Sinha
Anonymous (21)

Thank You to Our Supporters

Corporate, Foundation, & Government Supporters

Diamond Supporters (\$125,000+)

- Government of Canada's Supports for Student Learning Program
- ScotiaRISE
- United Way Greater Toronto

Platinum Supporters (\$75,000+)

- Home Depot Canada Foundation
- Peter Gilgan Foundation
- TELUS Friendly Future Foundation
- The Four Oaks Foundation
- The Government of Canada under the Community Services Recovery Fund
- Unity Health Toronto

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 - Stir Consulting Inc.
 - TELUS
 - The Ward Canada Group
 - Toronto Secondary Unit OECTA
 - United Way Centraide
 - Zukerman Family Foundation
-

A Youth's Story at StepStones

Tristan was referred to StepStones in 2022 by a housing worker at the Pape Adolescent Resource Centre in Toronto. Estranged from his birth parents, he had been living in his grandparents' shed, a very cold accommodation in the winter months. Paired with a Connection Coordinator at intake, he was able to secure a housing grant so he could move into a place of his own.

A talented singer and multi-instrumentalist pursuing a music degree at George Brown College, Tristan found an apartment in Kensington Market, the vibrant arts community in the heart of Toronto, where he and his StepStones mentor watched some live music, and where Tristan played a few open mic nights himself.

In 2023 Tristan played a set for his peers and the public at StepStones' Stackt Market takeover (including one song in Japanese), and for StepStones youth, volunteers, and staff at the annual holiday dinner. He was also featured at a showcase concert for fourth-year students at George Brown and is set to graduate in April.

Tristan has remarked on several occasions how grateful he is to have a place to call home, and to be able to live safely and securely thanks to the support and stability he found through StepStones.



Testimonials

StepStones is an effective, bold initiative that wisely places a focus on the foundation upon which young people can build their lives - reliable "family" in all its varied forms and personal agency. With an entrepreneurial will to do whatever is necessary, StepStones is a model of service that will ripple into the future as it transforms the lives of those involved today.

Irwin Elman
Officer of the Order of Canada
President, Defence For Children International
Canada

StepStones for Youth is a leader in working with young people from the foster care system. They are innovators, continuing to deliver services for young people that increases their access to the resources they themselves identify they need most. StepStones never loses focus on the importance of building lifelong connections and strengthening networks of people for youth to have into the future. This is what helps and this is what we need more of throughout our province!

Aviva Zukerman Schure
Supporter

Young people who transition from care face many challenges. StepStones is an amazing program designed to... enhance their housing stability, to increase their attachment to education, and to receive mental health supports on their terms. Key to the success of StepStones is their Building Connections program which focuses on building stronger relations between young people, their families and other meaningful adults in their lives. This is an evidence-based endeavour - StepStones has strong outcomes data to demonstrate the effectiveness of their approach. This is innovation in action!

Stephen Gaetz
Professor and York Research Chair in
Homelessness and Research Impact

I do not have a lot of money but as someone who aged out of foster care at 16 with nowhere to go and no family to fall back on, I am beyond happy that there is some kind of safety net for foster kids today. I think, actually I know, that my life would have taken a very different path if a program or organization like this existed then. So thank you for all that you do and the difference you are making.

Anonymous Donor

"My life would have taken a very different path if a program or organization like this existed then."

StepStones for Youth demonstrates exceptional dedication and compassion in their ongoing efforts to prevent homelessness, poverty, and intergenerational dependency among vulnerable young people from the child welfare system. Their steadfast commitment to this cause is evident in every aspect of their work, from providing essential resources and support to offering vital guidance and mentorship. In 2022, we had the honour of recognizing their transformative efforts by presenting StepStones with one of our prestigious Making the Shift Youth Homelessness Prevention Awards. Since then, we have collaborated with StepStones for Youth through our National Learning Community on Youth Homelessness, engaging in discussions on policy solutions and contributing to recommendations for the updated Reaching Home Directives. StepStones' youth-centred approach and commitment to family & natural supports work serves as a beacon of hope, and sets an example for other youth serving organizations and systems in Canada, and elsewhere. We look forward to continuing to work with them in the years ahead!

Melanie Redman
Co-Founder, President & CEO
A Way Home: Working Together to End Youth Homelessness

In Memory of Shuah Roskies

In 2023 StepStones lost a friend and a colleague, and a fierce advocate for children and youth



Shuah Roskies took a leave from the Ontario Children's Lawyer to join StepStones because she shared our belief that every child deserves the chance to grow into who they are and become the best version of themselves.

Shuah was a force – of nature and for good. She lived with a strong sense of what is fair and right and just, and saw each person's inherent worth. She knew that every young person is worthy of love and attention and fought for that daily, even when the burden of inequality in the world weighed heavily.

Endlessly curious, Shuah also believed that everyone had something to teach her and she was always willing to listen and learn. She remembered little details about people, making them feel important and heard, and when she recognized similarities, she was quick to introduce and connect people. That's why the Peer-to-Peer Knowledge Exchange she started grew by leaps and bounds in such a short time.

This network gathered to remember Shuah, one of many outpourings of grief and celebrations of her life that showed what a deep and lasting impact she had on people personally, and on the child welfare sector in Ontario and beyond. The tributes were raw and genuine and came from far and wide.

StepStones was very lucky to have her in our organization and office, if only for a short time. She left an indelible mark with her advice and inspiration, her keen intellect and vast pool of knowledge, and her sharp wit and sly sense of humour.

In conjunction with Shuah's long-time colleagues at the Ontario Children's Lawyer, StepStones will be establishing a fund in Shuah's name in 2024 to help prevent youth homelessness. It will be just one of the many ways she will continue to improve the lives of the most vulnerable among us. She helped countless people in her life and that will not end.

We promise to honour Shuah's legacy at StepStones by bringing the same diligence, passion, and integrity that she came to work with every day, and to follow her example and live with abundant and relentless love.

**Rest in peace, Shuah.
You are dearly missed.**



“Thank you for everything this year. Truly, I’m grateful to have StepStones in my life!”

Jay, youth at StepStones

StepStones for Youth

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Charity Registration #: 85355 0077 RR0001

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