



COMMUNITY
SERVICES

see what's possible...

U-Link/River's Lake Specialized Youth Residential Services Annual Program Report Year 2025-2026

1. About Us

PLEA has a long history of providing specialized caregiver services to youth between the ages of 13–19 through a specialized family caregiver model with comprehensive, wraparound supports delivered within the community. The success of these services is grounded in our strong commitment to individualized, strengths-based care that reflects the unique abilities, needs, experiences, and circumstances of each youth we serve.

Strengths-based approaches are powerful in reshaping the lives of vulnerable youth. Rather than focusing on deficits, they emphasize the factors that promote resilience, wellbeing, and growth. This approach values each young person's capacity, skills, knowledge, relationships, and potential, and intentionally builds upon these assets to foster empowerment and positive development.

Our U-Link MCFD program provides five family care placements supporting up to ten youth who have experienced limited success in other placements and programs who face significant challenges in their lives. While the reasons for placement vary, every youth is offered a safe, nurturing, and healthy family environment, along with access to additional support, many of which are available in-house.

U-Link MCFD has been operating since 2015. In September 2019, program capacity increased from eight to ten beds, supported by five Family Caregivers, and has remained at this level. Placements may be planned or emergency-based and are typically 6–12 months in duration, with extensions considered when clinically appropriate. Each youth receives focused, individualized support, with an emphasis on stabilization and relationship-building as foundational elements for achieving strengths-based goals through intensive wraparound services.

Program homes are located in the Tri-Cities and Maple Ridge areas. Services Coordinators provide weekly in-home visits and, when needed, daily contact to ensure consistent support and connection. Youth Support Workers deliver intensive one-to-one support and are highly

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skilled at building positive, trusting relationships. The U-Link model integrates outreach and home-based services, maximizing direct engagement with youth while offering ongoing support to Family Caregivers.

In collaboration with the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) and other community service providers, we ensure services remain youth-centred, strategic, and inclusive. Comprehensive service plans are developed with each young person, reflecting their strengths, interests, ideas, cultural identity, and lived experiences. Every youth has an individualized safety plan to guide Caregivers and support proactive, strategy-based responses during times of uncertainty or crisis. We work closely with our contracted family Caregivers and deeply value the time, commitment, and care they provide in meeting the day-to-day needs of youth.

The Vancouver Aboriginal Child and Family Services Society (VACFSS) River's Lake program was launched two years ago as a two-bed stabilization model designed to mirror the success of U-Link MCFD. Due to the success and stabilization of one youth, it was decided to move it to a one bed resource to continue to support this youth to stabilize and prepare to be successful for a future second youth in the home.

2. Who we served...

Profile	2025-26	2024-25	2023-24	2022-23	2021-22
# of cases ¹	21	15	20	24	23
# of youth	21	15	20	22	21
% young women	57	67	55	50	35
% young men	29	27	30	29	56
% self-identified as transgender	14	7	15	21	9
% self-identified as Indigenous	38	40	35	33	13
Average age when cases were opened	15	15	15	15	15

3. How we did...service delivery

U-Link's service delivery during the 2025/26 fiscal year reflects strong and consistent program utilization, as well as continued responsiveness to youth with varying levels of need. The program maintained an average of 8.67 participants out of 10 available beds, demonstrating sustained demand and effective use of placements. With 17 referrals resulting in 11 intakes and 11 discharges, U-Link continues to balance timely access with meaningful transitions. The average length of stay of 198 days for discharged participants highlights the program's role in providing stable, relationship-based care that allows youth the time needed to build skills, strengthen connections, and prepare for less intensive living environments.

¹ # of cases is greater than the # of youth because some youth received multiple services or were re-referred

Looking at trends over the past three years, there has been a gradual decrease in overall incidents, from 136 in 2023/24 to 111 in 2025/26, suggesting improved stability and support within placements. While AWOL incidents remain the most frequent, they have begun to decline from a peak of 59 to 52 this year. At the same time, some areas—such as Aggressive/Unusual Behaviour, Substance Use, Self-Harm, and Suicide Ideation—continue to reflect the increasing complexity of the youth being served. Overall, these trends reinforce that while U-Link is supporting greater stability and engagement, youth continue to present with complex and high-level needs, underscoring the importance of its flexible, trauma-informed, and wrap-around service delivery approach.

4. How we did...against the goals we set ourselves

1. Incorporate PLEA's Knowledge Keeper, Charles Lafferty, for more culturally directed programming within our Family Caregiving homes. The focus will be in 3 areas: Caregiver, Youth and Circle Care Team. Charles will be invited to attend a U-Link team meeting once a month and this will be tracked through team meeting minutes, will be invited to attend ICM meetings with youth on his caseload and this will be track via CAMS documentation as well as meeting minutes.

Progress / Outcome: *The goal was **successfully achieved**. While Charles was only able to attend one U-Link team meeting due to his duties with the U-Turn NWT team, he was actively involved in U-Link MCFD/River's Lake VACFSS youth cases throughout the year, providing guidance, cultural consultation, and support to staff, Caregivers, and youth. His contributions informed care planning, ICM meetings, and individualized service strategies, resulting in strengthened culturally informed practice across the program.*

2. A U-Link Team Philanthropy Day with youth and U-Link team members will be organized before September 2025. U-Link youth will be supported in making hygiene kits (toothbrush, toothpaste, bottled water and socks) and packed lunches (sandwich, juice box and cookie) for the homeless in Maple Ridge or Downtown Vancouver Eastside. This will be documented in CAMS and team meeting minutes.

Outcome: *The goal was **not achieved**. Despite efforts to organize the event, youth were unwilling to participate collectively and attempts to engage two individual participants were declined.*

3. The U-Link team will organize and arrange five cultural celebrations for the youth in the U-Link program as well as inviting other youth teams to join them, in order for the youth to feel valued, respected and heard. It will also be ongoing opportunities for the youth to make lasting friendships and meet other youth.

Outcome: *The goal was **achieved**. All five planned cultural celebrations took place, with participation from U-Link youth and, in some cases, youth from other teams. The events (St. Patrick's Day, Black Lives Matter, NIPD, BBQ for Youth in Care Week and a Winter Holiday Party) provided opportunities for youth to engage with peers and participate in culturally informed activities. Participation and outcomes were documented in CAMS and team meeting minutes.*

4. To follow U-Link MCFD/River's Lake VACFSS Theory of Change and Measurement Plan. U-Link and River's Lake will follow the outcomes and impact measurement (effectiveness) and

be able to report on the target/goal expectancy related to the objectives set forth by the work that PLEA has done with Warren Helfrich.

Outcome: *The goal was **achieved**. Both programs successfully implemented the Theory of Change and Measurement Plan, tracked outcomes, and reported on target/goal expectancy for all objectives. This work has established a strong foundation for next year's goals, supporting data-informed planning, continuous quality improvement, and evidence-based program development.*

5. Selected accomplishments...

Youth Achievements

1. Youth successfully completed a voluntary 3-month treatment program and is on track to graduate high school in 2026. Goals include obtaining a full-time job, a driver's license, securing a youth agreement prior to turning 19 and finding affordable housing.
2. Achieved the lowest number of incident reports in U-Link's history during the third quarter of this year.
3. Past PLEA participant reached out to share their successes of graduating high school, entering college to become an Educational Assistant, has been sober for 3 years, is running a weekly youth ministry, teaching Sunday school, running marathons and has been learning to rock climb!
4. Past participant reached out to let staff know that they recently got married.
5. All youth were registered and attending school.
6. Transitioned three youth into Independent Living Agreements.

Staff & Program Achievements

7. Successful transition of a Services Coordinator from U-Turn to U-Link to cover maternity leave.
8. Recruitment and hiring of a new Youth Support Worker (YSW) to support maternity leave coverage.
9. Caregiver training on First Contact as well as Truth and Reconciliation, enhancing Caregiver competency and cultural awareness.
10. Smooth transition of Resource Liaison and Team Leader roles within MCFD.
11. Maintained strong staff retention and implemented internal succession planning and training to ensure continuity and internal coverage across the program.
12. Recruited a new Caregiver to the program

6. Selected stories...

Meet Hudson

Hudson joined the U-Link program in late 2024 after the passing of a parent who was his primary parent. He was struggling with processing this immense loss compounded with his own mental health diagnosis and experiencing frequent thoughts of suicidal ideation. Hudson was placed with a U-Link Caregiver, who also happened to share a similar cultural background. Hudson and his Caregiver would regularly engage in cooking activities based around cultural food and he learned to make many dishes from scratch. Hudson was provided with connection to a community-based Counselor and Psychiatrist through BC Children's Hospital, PLEA Youth Support Workers, an Instructor via the U-Learn Program, engagement in his preferred sport activities and was enrolled in the local mainstream high school. Hudson expressed a passion for fitness and was provided with a membership to the local recreation centre; often attending to workout 3-5 times per week both independently and with his Youth Support Workers. Hudson began to build a community within his school system and was invited to hold a leadership role in his cultural student group at school and to act as a mentor to other students. Hudson has been attending full time school for the past year, joined his school's basketball team and has been working towards Independent Living as he nears adulthood. Hudson's resilience is one of his biggest strengths and his entire care team has voiced how proud they are of how he has flourished and navigated the challenges that he has experienced.

Meet Rose

Rose joined the PLEA U-Link Program a couple of years ago. Having lived most of her life within the care system, Rose had experienced multiple breakdowns of placements and lots of transition between cities and family members. Rose's parents had both been deceased for many years and all of her siblings were living in various homes in care. At intake, after a particularly volatile placement breakdown prior to coming to PLEA, Rose was withdrawn, combative and had significant concerns related to self harm and suicidal ideation. She had not been attending school for several years and was below grade level academically, struggled with processing her emotions and with her communication skills. Rose had numerous diagnosis, both developmental and physical, and shortly after intake completed an assessment to explore a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder. Rose's care team's primary focus was reintegration back to school, creating strong connections within the family care home and supporting her mental health. As Rose began to build relationships with her Caregivers and care team members, it became evident that her primary need was developing a found family system while still maintaining connections to her biological siblings. Rose slowly began to engage with professionals and supports and was connected with a community based counselor, PLEA U-Learn Instructor, PLEA Youth Support Workers and cultural programming such as CRUW at UBC. Rose's care team wanted to ensure that she remained connected to her Indigenous culture, and she regularly attended events such as local Pow Wow's, events related to her Nation and family visits. She also participated in making her own drum and with traditional beading activities hosted by a community Elder. Now, Rose is connected to a strong educational support system and is working towards a graduation path, attends regular counseling sessions, has developed a larger window of tolerance and adaptability and has continued to foster her cultural connections both in the care home and within her family system.

7. Biggest challenges...

1. Increasing Youth Complexity and Acuity

Youth entering caregiving homes in 2026 present with perceived higher levels of trauma, mental health needs, neurodiversity, substance use, and behavioural complexity than in previous years. Many have experienced multiple placement breakdowns, disrupted attachments, and system involvement across child welfare, mental health, justice, and education. Caregiving homes are being asked to stabilize youth with needs that increasingly resemble intensive residential or clinical settings, without corresponding increases in resources or clinical supports.

2. Recruitment, Retention, and Sustainability of Caregivers

Recruiting and retaining skilled family Caregivers continues to be one of the most significant challenges. Caregivers face emotional burnout, secondary trauma, safety concerns, and the strain of providing 24/7 care, often while navigating complex systems and documentation requirements. Rising costs of living, particularly in urban and suburban regions, further impact the sustainability of caregiving homes. Without continued competitive compensation, respite, and meaningful support, experienced Caregivers are at risk of leaving the sector.

3. Access to Timely and Specialized Supports

Caregiving homes frequently encounter long wait times for external services such as child and youth mental health, psychiatry, substance use treatment, educational supports, and cultural or Indigenous-specific services. Delays in accessing these supports can undermine stabilization efforts, place additional pressure on Caregivers, and increase the risk of placement disruption. The lack of integrated, coordinated services remains a critical barrier to effective care.

4. System Pressures, Capacity, and Placement Matching

MCFD caregiving homes are under growing pressure to accept emergency placements or youth whose needs may exceed the home's original mandate. Limited placement options across the system can result in mismatched placements, increasing stress on Caregivers and youth alike. Balancing system demands with the need for thoughtful, trauma-informed matching and adequate preparation time is an ongoing challenge, particularly in a climate of limited resources and high demand.

8. Our team...personnel²



9. Our team...learning undertaken

Our team has been involved in the following learning activities:

- MANDT De-Escalation
- Positive Behaviour Support PBS
- Eating Disorder: From Image to Illness
- Medication Assistance Training
- Livingworks Suicide Prevention
- Naloxone Administration
- Addictions and Substance Use
- MCFD Privacy and Information Sharing
- Respectful workplace Module
- Cyber Security
- Preventing Communicable Diseases

² Number of staff and caregivers connected to the program, not full-time equivalents (FTEs)

- Caregiver Connections
- Time Management
- Let's Talk Overdose conference
- Reclaiming Youth at Risk Book Club with Managers, Services Coordinators and Caregivers
- Gender and pronoun Training
- Indigenous Culture Appreciation versus Appropriation with Len Pierre Consulting
- Starry Night Prom for LGBTQ+ youth and families
- Cultural and Diversity LGBTQ+ holiday and movie event
- NIPD
- Trauma Focused Caregiving
- Naka Festival
- Reclaiming Justice for Indigenous Youth

10. Our team... relationships

Our team is made up of a diverse and dedicated group: 2 Services Coordinators, 5 Youth Support Workers, 1 Program Manager, 1 Program Director, 1 Case Management Assistant, and 6 Caregivers. Together, we foster strong, supportive relationships, collaborating closely to ensure the best outcomes for the youth we serve. We emphasize learning and growing as a team, sharing knowledge, guidance, and encouragement so that every member feels empowered and connected.

11. Next year's goals...

1. Youth Stability and Attachment-Based Safety

By December 31, 2026, the program will increase youth stability and attachment-based safety by ensuring that:

- Youth are where they are expected to be (not AWOL) for at least 85% of total possible nights, tracked daily and calculated monthly;
- 90% of caregiving homes use no more than their assigned number of respite nights each month; and
- 95% or more of youth exits from the program are planned transitions.

Progress will be monitored through program tracking systems, CAMS Resident Calendars, and respite tracking forms, with oversight by Services Coordinators (SCs) and the CMA, and reviewed monthly to inform continuous quality improvement.

2. Youth Daily Living Skills and Independence

By December 31, 2026, 90% of youth participating in the program will demonstrate measurable improvement in daily living and independence skills, as assessed through a standardized program skills assessment tool.

Skills development will be measured monthly for all youth in the program, with progress tracked and reviewed by Services Coordinators (SCs) and the CMA to inform individualized support strategies and ongoing service planning.

3. Youth Connection to Community

By December 31, 2026, 90% of youth in the program will demonstrate an increase in the quantity and/or quality of positive community connections, as measured through a standardized Community Connection Checklist.

Progress will be assessed monthly for all youth, with connections defined as safe, supportive, and pro-social (e.g., cultural, recreational, educational, mentoring, or community-based supports). Outcomes will be monitored by Services Coordinators (SCs) and the CMA and used to guide individualized service planning.

4. Youth Support Network at Discharge

By December 31, 2026, 90% of youth exiting the program will identify at least one trusted person they can reach out to for help or support at the time of discharge, as measured through a youth exit survey item and/or a documented CAMS discharge item.

This information will be collected at program exit for all youth and reviewed by Services Coordinators (SCs) and the CMA to ensure intentional transition planning and continuity of supportive relationships.

5. Successful Transition to a Less Intensive, More Homelike Environment

By December 31, 2026, at least 85% of youth who exit the program through a planned discharge will transition successfully to a less intensive and more homelike living environment, as defined by a move to a family-based, kinship, supported independent living, or other community-based placement that meets the youth's assessed needs.

Successful transitions will be measured at the time of program exit using program tracking data and a documented CAMS discharge item, with oversight by Services Coordinators (SCs) and the CMA to ensure continuity of care and appropriate transition planning.

12. For more information...

Contact Dylan Falconer, Program Director at 604-306-1044 or email dfalconer@plea.bc.ca