



AND NOW ...

# WE ARE HERE

A DECLARATION  
BY YOUNG PARENTS

PRESENTED TO MAYOR DAVID MILLER  
MARCH 29, 2007  
TORONTO

## BACKGROUND

“I WAS HERE” is a media workshop that puts digital cameras and photoblogging websites into the hands of young parents. Seven women, all pregnant or parenting, have been documenting their lives in Toronto through their own eyes. All have had experience with homelessness. An exhibit of selected large format prints accompanied by text from their blogs has toured several venues within the city of Toronto.

The artists of “I WAS HERE” hosted a youth speak out event at the National Film Board of Canada on February 15, 2007. Young parents voiced their concerns and offered possible solutions to the many challenges they face. The session was audiotaped with permission. The audiotapes were transcribed and reviewed by the “I WAS HERE” photobloggers. The Declaration by Young Parents was then created based on these discussions. Highlighted throughout are excerpts from individual stories young parents who attended this event shared with each other. To protect the privacy of the participants, the stories speak loudly, but remain anonymous.

This initiative was made possible through the NFB Filmmaker-in-Residence project and the Young Parents No Fixed Address Network. Special thanks to St. Michael’s Hospital.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

For more information on “I WAS HERE” visit: [www.nfb.ca/iwashere](http://www.nfb.ca/iwashere)

For the **behind-the-scenes** story visit: [www.nfb.ca/filmmakerinresidence](http://www.nfb.ca/filmmakerinresidence)

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To sign an **on-line petition** prepared by third year nursing students at Ryerson University in support of WE ARE HERE, “A Declaration by Young Parents” please visit: [www.petitiononline.com/ssyp/petition.html](http://www.petitiononline.com/ssyp/petition.html)

For further information on **St. Michael’s Hospital Young Parents No Fixed Address** collaborative network please contact:

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## **WE ARE HERE**

### **A Declaration by Young Parents**

We are young, pregnant and parenting youth who have experience with homelessness. For the first time ever, we are speaking out together.

- We need safe and affordable housing
- We need shelter spaces for families
- We need more full and part-time subsidized daycare spaces
- We need Ontario Works, healthcare and service providers to be sensitive to our issues

We came together at the “We Are Here” Speak Out at the National Film Board of Canada on February 15, 2007. The Speak Out was hosted by Adrienne, Jess, Meghan and Keneisha from the “I Was Here” photography exhibit and moderated by Amanda Cain, the editor of Yo Mama, a magazine by young parents for young parents.

Each year, approximately 300 babies are born in Toronto to parents with no fixed address. The four major issues that we face are: a need for safe and affordable housing, access to affordable daycare, Ontario Works, and the shelter system. We also have concerns about health care, transportation, the justice system, the education system, and the need for more projects in the city like I WAS HERE. Our goal is to raise these issues to all levels of government.

We would like to be included in the process, and we would like to discuss with you today, Mr. Mayor, how we can offer you assistance in the following ways:

- 1) To concretely address the need for more housing for young parents.
- 2) To involve young parents’ voices consistently and regularly in the discussions about housing and other relevant issues in our city - not only on the Youth Council, but also in other standing committees such as
  - The Affordable Housing Committee
  - The Employee and Labour Relations Committee
  - The Community Development and Recreation Committee
  - And involve us in The Campaign To Make Housing Happen.
- 3) To incorporate the I WAS HERE photo exhibit and utilize the resources of the Young Parents No Fixed Address network in sensitivity training for city workers, Ontario Works, health-care professionals and other service providers.
- 4) To help support the city in raising awareness of our issues at the provincial and federal levels, with this declaration and other events, meetings, and awareness building campaigns.

We challenge the stereotypes of young pregnant and parenting youth. We know about the resources available to us and we share this knowledge with each other. We have life skills and experience. We want to be involved in sensitivity training for everyone who works with young pregnant and parenting youth. We request that our voices be included in the policies that affect our daily lives.

## HOUSING

1. Provide more subsidized housing and co-op housing that is safe and appropriate for young parents.

“Where am I, a 17-year-old, going to get \$1,800 from? I’m sorry but that’s just ridiculous. Like I’m 17 years old, I probably have only worked for a year making eight dollars an hour. Where am I going to get \$1,800 to pay for first and last rent and all the stuff that I need for my child and me to live? For me, that’s virtually impossible.”

“They’re not going to fix up old buildings. No matter how much you fix them up, there’s still going to be cockroaches, there’s still going to be the people hanging around. You should tear it down and build whole new housing for just parents, because you know what? There’s some people who are on welfare forever. And there needs to be people that are referred that are going to school and be off in five years or so. So eventually they’re going to have their own job and they’re not going to be on welfare forever.”

“Support co-op housing. However, do not close shelters to open new co-ops.”

2. Give young parents priority status on shelter waiting lists and housing waiting lists.

“Well, me being 17 and having no place to go having a newborn baby and trying to apply for apartments and I’m too young and I don’t know what the hell I’m doing because obviously I got pregnant, I’m 16 and you know, I went to go to Humewood House and they say you know, if you come you can only stay for six months and what do I do after that? We need more places, and places for young people young teens who are fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen.”

3. Provide rent subsidies geared to income so that young parents can afford to rent apartments in neighbourhoods like everyone else. The subsidy goes with the family, not to a building.

“O.W. just gives you like \$970 and to get a place with market rent it’s like \$780. How are you supposed to live off \$200 for the month? And they deduct money from your child tax and everything.”

“Toronto Community Housing for me is not worth it, not worth the \$200 a month that I pay. I’d rather move out and pay \$600, \$800, something I can afford, which all of you experience I guess every day but it’s not easy.”

4. Hire trained workers specifically designated to work with young parents on finding housing.

“I applied for housing five years ago. I never got an answer, never got a phone call. So I always rent. I have a two-bedroom apartment and two little ones. It’s been always more than \$800. For me to rent, it’s impossible. I never had it listed in my name. I always had to find someone else to rent it for me, because they will not rent me a place even if I have the money to pay for it.”

“I didn’t realize in a maternity home you’re actually considered homeless. And this is one of the things that we’ve discussed. You might—as you get older, like I’m older now and I realize that I was homeless, I didn’t have a home. But back in the day I was like, I had a place to stay, I just didn’t have a house. So although it doesn’t feel good to say it, when you go to Housing Connections and you do your application, you have to say that you are homeless, because you will get priority.”

5. Ensure accountability so that subsidized housing is safe and repaired by qualified professionals.

“I myself have witnessed security assault people in the building and not to put them in custody, very disturbing things you don’t want security to be doing. They’re not securing the area and making you feel more comfortable.”

“I’ve been trying to fix my apartment. Time and time again I’ve put in work orders and stuff like that and it never gets done.”

“The reality of what really needs improvement is getting qualified employees, like actual plumbers, not just somebody in the building.”

6. Provide opportunities for young parents to learn about their legal rights as tenants.

“If my floor needs to be fixed, it’s up to me to do it. If my oven needs to be fixed, it’s up to me to do it. It’s not up to them, it’s up to me. Why? Because I rented the place the way it was and that’s how they feel.”

“It wasn’t [in subsidized] housing but I was in an \$800 apartment, and it was so horrible. I actually had an inspector come in. The minute I had that inspector come in it was a whole turnaround. They made sure everything was fixed.”

“Like I was mentioning before, I had an inspector come and he explained to me that there was no regulator in the [subsidized] building for the hot water, because I was burning myself on it. And he said there’s nothing we can do, like people have washers and dryers which, yeah, is illegal [in that building], so they don’t want to take the time to find out who has a washer and dryer to get it out so they can regulate the water so we don’t burn ourselves.”

## **CHILD CARE**

1. Provide more licensed subsidized full and part-time child care spots for young parents.

“I am in post-secondary education part-time. There should be licensed and subsidized part-time child care. If you want to work or go to school part-time, it should be an option. Daycare should be available to everyone, not just full-time students or full-time working parents.”

“We have a daycare in our school but the daycare is run by subsidy [government subsidized]... my daughter doesn’t go there because the waiting list was too long. I applied when she was two months and eight months later there’s still no spot for my daughter.”

2. Provide young parents with more daycare options:
  - increase the hours of operation of subsidized daycare centers
  - make the schedules more flexible
  - provide more drop-in centres and parent respite programs.

“Maybe they should change their hours to 24 hours instead of 9 to 5 so that people who work the night shift can actually do their work.”

“I have subsidized daycare, but my daughter was very sick in the beginning of the year. Now they’re trying to take it away because I have had to stay home and take care of her. So they see my record for school and say, you know, you’ve been away for 19 days out of first semester. If you miss any more classes, we’re going to take this away from you. What am I supposed to do? It’s either I go to school and leave my baby at home, which nobody’s going to be able to watch her, or I take her to daycare sick. Then they’re going to call me out of school to come pick her up. There’s nothing really I can do, but now they’re threatening to take it away from me.”

3. Provide training and professional development programs for daycare staff.

“The staff are not well prepared to begin with. None of them are trained. My son is epileptic and I had to go and train the staff. They had given my child the wrong medicine to begin with. It’s a big deal.”

4. Provide priority status for young parents and reduce the cost of daycare.

“I’m paying \$15 a day. And it’s every day, whether the child goes or not. So that could be a solution, to pay when the child goes or reduce the payment.”

“Every daycare should have a subsidized program. That would be good. And pay at the end of the month. You pay for the amount of days your child is in a daycare, not for the whole month, because it is quite expensive.”

## ONTARIO WORKS

1. Provide sensitivity training for workers so they hear and respect our voices.

“When my case was switched to a different case worker and to a different office, I actually had to tell my worker that I was pregnant. She couldn’t review the case to notify herself that I was pregnant or how far along I was, or that I even needed an infant allowance.”

2. Assign trained workers specifically to work with young parents.

“I tried to apply for welfare when my daughter was first born. I told them my situation, and that I needed to move out right away, like this is an emergency. I told her how old I was and it was like I was nothing to them...I stayed on the line for an hour. And they’re like, “You know, you’re going to have to call, you have to do certain things and you’ve got to look for an apartment for yourself” and like this is an emergency. I have just so much days to get out of here and me and my daughter have nowhere to go. And it was just nothing to them. For me, it didn’t make any sense, because this was the important issue for me and my daughter to get somewhere. I needed money, and it was a really important emergency. And they said, “You’ve got to do this for yourself.” You know, “Call back when you’re somewhere and you have your own place.” And I’m like, how am I supposed to get my own place when I don’t have no money to get my own place and I’ve got a little baby?”

3. Mandate workers to educate young parents about all the benefits that they are eligible for and create a simple checklist or brochure for reference.

“I think that it should be the worker’s responsibility to inform the young women about all of the money they’re eligible for. I’m tired of mothers have to find out from other mothers, oh, you’re eligible for this, and eligible for that. Like I think it’s the workers’ responsibility, and that they need to tell them “you are entitled to this much money.” Instead of it being a big secret, like it’s coming out of their own pockets, I think they need to be able to give all of these lessons and information to these young moms up front. As opposed to waiting and hearing stories from their girlfriends. Like, “Oh, you know, I haven’t paid my rent, I’m not eligible for rent bank, like

what am I going to do? I'm getting evicted." It should be that worker to say, "you are eligible for shelter funds." As opposed to waiting until eviction and going through that process. And I really think that Jess's idea of having workers strictly assigned just to young mothers I think is a really good idea."

4. Change Ontario Works so that it is more flexible in terms of employment training and education.

"In April I'm starting a college prep program. They're not going to give me extra money, but I'm still going to be taking the bus there. I'm still going to need extra books and stuff. But, they're telling me that because you don't get credits you're not going to be—you know? And I want to upgrade my skills so I can go to college because I haven't been in school for a couple of years."

"I'm not asking welfare to pay for my schooling, I'm just asking them to allow me to do that on my own and still continue to receive support. Like they have no problem with me sitting and doing nothing, but me paying for an education, they have a problem with that, which is ridiculous. Once my son is in school, then I can actually have a good paying job with a good education but no. I can sit on my ass for four years until he goes to school but I can't go to school."

5. Create income based incentives for certain contractual periods of time to encourage young parents to improve their skills.

"Instead of just planning to get a job and get off welfare, [they should help] you plan to educate yourself and get a career, not some job in Micky D's, or washing dishes, or so on. They should look at each case individually, not as in this person just wants to be on welfare. Or, this is my job so I'm just going to make sure that they do the mandatory, you know, and not try and help this person."

"If I do want to do something with my life, maybe the worker should look at that and say, "Well, I'm going to give her more money so she can be in a two-bedroom" because eventually she's going to be on her own anyway, you know? Like they need to look at each case separately."

6. They should make office appointments. They should be more clear about what they need from us.

“The [OW] office should allow appointments. I think, like, that’s ridiculous to walk in there and you could walk in there and you’re sitting for hours. They need to make appointments.”

“... And most of the time they say drop in, and you can go and even when you call to offer the documents that you need to take in, they do not take the documents. They make you go back and get more and get more and like in the meantime you’re missing classes any yeah, they don’t give you the right, like, service.”

7. Provide priority status to young parents in need and increase the amount paid to them.

“For the welfare situation, welfare doesn’t even give you enough—if you’re a mom with two kids, you only get enough for like basically a mom and one kid. You don’t get enough for your other kid to have a room.”

## **SHELTER SYSTEM**

1. Hire specific workers who are trained in dealing with young parents.

“I didn’t realize in a maternity home you’re actually considered homeless. And this is one of the things that we’ve discussed. You might—as you get older, like I’m older now and I realize that I was homeless, I didn’t have a home. But back in the day I was like, I had a place to stay, I just didn’t have a house. So although it doesn’t feel good to say it, when you go to Housing Connections and you do your application, you have to say that you are homeless, because you will get priority. I’ve waited ten years and never gotten housing because I never said I was homeless, but I was. So do that. Know your rights, that’s a right. And it’s just different terminology that we would use versus what our worker would use.”

“If you walk in there and tell someone you’re homeless it’s like putting your own self down to get somewhere else higher in life. It’s difficult.”

2. Provide shelters specifically for young parents and families. Provide priority status to young parents within the existing shelter system.

“The waiting lists for shelters are ridiculously long. Five or ten years, just to be on the waiting list. Why don’t they put in some money to make some new shelters? And not just young women with children. How about young women with children with families, with a boyfriend who wants to be involved with their child’s life? I went to a shelter and they told me, ‘it could only be you and your daughter, it can’t be your daughter’s father. He can’t come in, he can’t stay.’”

3. Connect young parents who have immigration issues with legal assistance.

“I know a couple of girls where I’m living now and they don’t have Canadian citizenship. They’re telling them, “since you don’t have your citizenship you have to be out in three months.” But those are the kind of people that need more of the help.”

4. Provide more comfortable surroundings for families.

“They don’t make it very home-like. They make it a shelter. Your bed sheets fall off your bed. Basically you’re sleeping on plastic. Your beds feel like rock. You might as well go to jail and sleep there for the night. And your kids, your kids look at it and call that home? It’s not a home, it’s a room.”

“Many shelters only allow clients to bring one suitcase or one duffel bag with them. This means that many women have to leave behind all of their belongings and start from zero. It’s very discouraging and depressing, especially when you’ve worked really hard to get the things you had. It’s another level of loss.”

5. Provide support for shelter workers.

“The people who work in the shelter system are completely burnt out and don’t give their clients full, 100% dedication. So I think the city of Toronto might want to look at that. Support for their workers. Counselling.”

6. Be non-judgemental and treat us with respect.

“Okay, I’ve been to four places, I’ve been to three maternity homes and one shelter. And the majority of the maternity homes were not – they were supportive in their own way but not supportive of what you wanted them to be supportive of. And they, if you were in there for a certain circumstance, they made it harder for you to be in there. And they, they judged you in their own way. You could see it, even though as much as they wanted to say they’re not judging you, they really are. It really makes it hard living there.”

## HEALTH CARE

1. Provide sensitivity training for health care professionals.

“Going into labour, nurses treated me like shit because I was so young. I was, yeah, I was just treated like crap.”

“I was not diagnosed based on the fact of my previous medical history. I was diagnosed on the fact that the last person that was in there. Because they were a drug user and they had mono, that’s what I was. I had a throat infection and I get strep throat all the time, and they’re telling me, “Oh, you got it from somebody, you got it from somebody.” I’m the only person that I know that has a sore throat. So like I said, he said I was mono, asked how come I didn’t use crack. Like why not? Obvious reasons. And yes, I think that maybe when you go to see a doctor, they should ask you questions about your past medical history, or take your word for it. Like you know your body more than they know it, obviously, and that they need to judge you on you. Not the last person, not the person yesterday, not your age.”

2. Provide daycare support in emergency rooms.

“A single mother with two kids. If she’s on a hospital bed in emerg, they should have at least somewhere for the children to go. Because I was in the hospital a few weeks ago and my son was just lying there screaming his head off because I couldn’t take care of him, there was nobody there to take care of him.”

3. Provide drug benefits and drug information to young parents who require medication for themselves and their children.

“My daughter, since the day she was born, had eye infections, lung infections, and a bad cough. Where am I supposed to get the money for this, to pay for, you know, a \$200 epi-pen and I need to buy two medications for her. She gets medication like every couple of weeks. She sees specialists. I have to pay for that. And I’m not getting any help so I think that someone should make some kind of special program for young moms to pay for such medication.”

4. Provide a restricted diet allowance for children with special needs.

“Last year there used to be a restricted diet allowance, things for ADHD children. Now because of this year, I’m not receiving that anymore because they cut it out of the government, it’s not there anymore. There’s no special diet for ADHD kids anymore at all. How are mothers that have ADHD kids supposed to buy the special diet for them?”

## **TRANSPORTATION**

1. Transit needs to be improved. We need better, more accessible service for a lower cost.

“There are very few stations where you can go with your stroller. You always have to rely on people to help you.”

“Using the TTC reduces pollution and it’s cheaper. There should be a lower fare for welfare families. They have lower fares for students and seniors and even student discounts don’t apply to college or university students.”

## EDUCATION

We have issues both as parents and as students. As students, we want to see changes to OSAP so that we can improve our skills and reach our long term goals. As parents, we need more classes for children with special needs, and sensitivity training for the educators who are teaching our children.

1. Provide sensitivity training for teachers and support staff in the public school system.

“If the Mayor could talk to the Toronto District School Board about teen parents or former teen parents who now have children in the school system, it would help them understand that we have different issues. We might be going through college or trying to find a job and we don’t have a steady two-parent family. So, you know, they need to have some special adjustments or understanding for the kids and their families. Maybe sit down and get to know young parents when they’re brought into the school instead of just assuming they’re just like every other two-parent family.”

2. Provide more classes for children with special needs.

“My son is in school and I have so much trouble with him. The first year that he went to school I had to end up taking him out of school because the teacher wasn’t able to handle his behaviour. He wouldn’t sit on the floor for half an hour, or he wouldn’t wait for snack time. So they end up calling Children’s Aid have to take him out of school. Now this year he’s back to school and he goes once a week because the teacher complains every day. He spends about an hour in the office. So it makes no sense to go to the school when the school is three hours. I just don’t send him to school anymore. They do need more assistance in the schools. Like one teacher is not good enough. They have 25 five year olds in one classroom, like give me a break.”

3. Increase OSAP funding for young parents.

“When I went to apply for school and they tell you, “take the student loan, take it, take it.” They don’t tell you that there’s three parts to it and you have to pay back three parts and you’re only getting a certain amount of money coming in for the whole time you’re in school. Like even that is not enough for you and your children because

you've got to buy your school stuff, you've got to buy your groceries, buy your kids' clothing, and support all of them. It's not enough. I think that they should have a separate bank for mothers and their children."

"Yeah, trying to get your post-secondary education on OSAP with a kid is ridiculous. People who don't have children and do their education end up, you know, tens of thousands of dollars in debt, and I'm supposed to pay back \$100,000? Like I have to pay my rent, food, everything for my kid. Like that's ridiculous."

4. Change OSAP regulations to allow young parents who receive Ontario Works to pursue post-secondary education.

"I'm on O.W. and I'm also trying to slowly finish my post-secondary education. I'm not allowed to do that on O.W. I'm not asking for them to pay for my schooling. I don't want to put my son into full-time daycare. All I do is take one or two classes at a time, in the evenings. All I'm asking is that they don't cut me off of welfare based on being in post-secondary education. It's alright for you to be in high school but you can't take classes at college or university, and that's ridiculous."

## **JUSTICE SYSTEM**

1. Provide a duty council for young parents.

"I don't know if any of you have taken your baby father to court outside of O.W. process but I found it very difficult and I actually stopped. And, you know, I'm owed a lot of money. The problem is that I just don't have the time to be down in the court trying to figure out how to fill out the forms and all this stuff, and pay for the court costs. And I think the solution to that would be to have a duty council, a family duty council designated for young people, or single parents in general, to help them with that process. Because legal aid, trying to get legal aid is just tedious. Trying to find a lawyer is just impossible. So that's my solution."

2. Provide sensitivity training for CAS workers.

“They need to know that there are mature mothers (18, 17 and 16 years old) that could live on their own. They don’t need to be in shelters. They really don’t need to be, and young mothers that are in shelters are just using up space that people in abusive situations really need. But because CAS says, “Oh, you’re a young mother and you’re 17 or you’re 18, you need to be in there because you’re young.”

3. Provide more workers within the justice system to help young parents.

“I think with court and Children’s Aid they need to have more people there to help you. When I first started going to court for my daughter I realized that they don’t help you. You don’t know what’s going on. They’re just going to court. You know, you have a lawyer, and sometimes your lawyer doesn’t tell you what’s going on. You don’t know the papers that need to be filed. You’re telling your lawyer you want one thing, but that doesn’t mean they’re necessarily doing it. And they don’t even care, like I don’t understand some of the things that they’re saying, you know? And then the next thing you know you’re coming back to court two months later and you’re like, “Well, I thought I was supposed to be doing this, this week, and now I have to wait two months to move on my own or something?” We need more help.”

4. Consider the effect on family life in youth sentencing.

“The father of my daughter is in jail right now. They need to realize that he has a child. They need programs for young men because he’s missed seven, almost seven months of her life, now, you know? He’s seen her off and on, you know? And it’s ridiculous. It’s unfair for her because she doesn’t have her father around. And it’s not like serious charges, like he was hurting anybody or doing anything like that. Like they need to take these things into, you know, consideration ‘cause now he’s missing his child’s life.”

5. Consider changes to child support regulations to create an education trust fund for children.

“You need to look at what the mother is doing with the money. My personal experience with my mother, if she had gotten the child support, it wouldn’t have helped me anyways. You know, like my dad didn’t pay because he knew it wasn’t going to me. He did lose his driver’s licence and went through all that process. But he was right. Even though he didn’t pay child support, I would have never got it. So we need to look at another way, like maybe they can put it into a trust fund. Because maybe I’d have money to go to college now.”

## YOUTH PROJECTS

1. Provide funding for more WE ARE HERE youth speak out events in different parts of the city so we can work together on solutions & actively contribute to meaningful policy changes.

“We started this program [I Was Here] and it was initially supposed to be six weeks. I think it would have been a shame if it would have ended there because we wouldn’t have been able to do practically anything that we’ve done.”

“[I Was Here] has opened doors and I mean all of us have more skills now. Not only with media, but with how to photograph, and so many other various different things.”

2. Provide more long term programs that give us the skills and provide child care.

“Sometimes the children are sick or we’re sick or whatnot, so programs that are short-lived maybe might not meet our needs. Our needs are more diverse, and we might need more time to get involved and grow with a project.”

3. Provide programs for parents whose children have been apprehended by CAS.

“Most parenting programs are for parents, for women who have their children. And the reality is some kids have been apprehended for whatever reason. Mothers that don’t have their child and are working toward it also need programs.”