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News / Vancouver

Vancouver youth-in-care leader gets national citizenship award nod

After spending much of his life in the child protection system, Dylan Cohen is fighting back

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COURTESY DYLAN COHEN

Dylan Cohen, 22, speaks at a protest about his youth-in-care advocacy. After aging out of the Manitoba foster system, he founded the group 25not21 and moved to Vancouver, where is a youth media fellow at Discourse Media.

By: **David P. Ball** Metro Published on Wed Nov 22 2017

Why are Canadian kids raised by the government expected to suddenly make it on their own after they "age out" of the foster system — when most other young adults get to lean on family for support?

That's a question posed by one Vancouver 22-year-old who was in foster care himself. Today, Dylan Cohen is a leading voice in a national movement led by former kids-in-care themselves in B.C. and across the country.

And on Wednesday, he was among nine young Canadians under 30 shortlisted for Samara Canada's national Everyday Political Citizen Award, to be announced Dec. 7 in Toronto.

"Most youth who are 20 to 29 still live with their parents in Canada," he told Metro in a phone interview via Skype. "Yet youth in care — who can often be extremely traumatized — have been held to a standard of independence far above what other youth experience. It's up to us to enter the world on the same level playing field as everyone else."

There were more than 60,000 children in care in the country in 2013, according to Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal — one in every nine of them in B.C. Each province runs its own system; at 18, Cohen aged out of the system in Manitoba, where he lived until recently, and by 21 saw all his supports end.

"It meant my only constant caregiver through my life was abandoning me," he recounted. He leapt into advocacy for other youth in his situation, founding the group 25not21 and recently becoming involved in Discourse Media's initiative to boost coverage of foster care issues.

"It's a really exciting time for us," he said, "to push forward the momentum so many

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other youth in care have built.

"Youth in care can often be an invisible population — even I'm surprised when I find out people randomly in my life who were in care. Direct action and community organizing puts youth in care on the public agenda. We're not just small group of people bad things happen to, but rather a large population that needs specific care and attention."

Samara Canada's executive director said this year's award finalists "highlight not only the incredible impact that ordinary Canadians are having in communities across the country," Jane Hilderman said in a statement, "but the importance of engaging in our political process in order to make a difference."

Meet B.C.'s other Everyday Political Citizen Award hopeful — Indigenous women's advocate Lorelei Williams, nominated in the over-30 category — in Friday's Metro, and the [full shortlist at Samara Canada's website](#). Information on Discourse Media, where Cohen is a youth media fellow, and its child welfare initiative [can be found at the media organization's website](#).

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