

‘Throwaway kids’

Cassidy Franck stares into her cellphone camera, eyes exhausted, unblinking. The screams of an 11-year-old girl being **violently restrained** echo in the background of the video.

For months in early 2021, this was her life inside a group home for girls run by **Hatts Off** group home.

“We were all scared,” Franck said. “The girls felt that nobody cared.”

When a staff member at the group home offered her the chance to live with her in her downtown Hamilton apartment, Franck jumped at the opportunity.

“I wanted out, and this is my only way,” she said.

Weeks after moving, detectives with Hamilton Police Service’s human trafficking division would rescue her from the apartment, according to Franck. She described it as a drug den, with older men coming and going.

Workers reported seeing little food in the fridge and staff members who spent much of their time surfing on their phones, according to former workers.

Among the more heartbreaking allegations were those of a staff member holding a girl on the floor over pieces of broken glass and another spitting at a child's face as he was restrained.

At one home in the Hamilton area, an autistic boy was contained with such force that his head left an imprint in the drywall, according to two former staff members who say they witnessed the incident.

"These are throwaway kids that many people, in a general sense, just don't care about," said Grant Charles, an associate professor with the School of Social Work at the University of British Columbia. Ontario's child-welfare system, according to Charles, has moved "past the point of no repair."

On Manitoulin Island, living in the small community of Gore Bay, Franck is calm, poised. She is now 17.

Shoulder-length blond hair rests on her favourite grey sweatshirt, hands crossed on her knee.

"I think of it as a movie," Franck said, a nervous smile breaking through her quiet demeanour. "I can't find a way to make sense of it."

In May 2021, Franck had escaped the "toxic" group home and had just arrived at the ground-floor apartment that belonged to Shadia Yusuf, who was hired by Hatts Off without training, in downtown Hamilton.

Within minutes of arriving at Yusuf's home, Franck felt something was off. She alleged Yusuf demanded that she sell drugs.

“We show up at this random apartment, and this old dude comes out. (Yusuf) hands me this bag of white crystal stuff,” said Franck, who believes it was crack cocaine.

“She tells me to go sell it,” she recalled. “Go get my \$200.”

Later that same day, Franck said she watched as Yusuf was rushed to hospital after “tripping out” from ingesting too many magic mushrooms.

Franck said she had trusted Yusuf. After all, she was hired by a group home that the government licensed and that had been selected by her children’s aid worker.

“I got my hopes up so high,” she said, adding there was the promise of help finding a job working with cars and a permanent escape from group-home life.

Now alone in the apartment, Franck said things spiraled further out of control.

Strange men would visit the apartment, cook crack cocaine and warn her she could be sold for sex, she said.

“I was freaking out. I was like, ‘OK, like, what do I do?’” Franck recalled.

Two weeks after Franck moved into the apartment, she said undercover detectives with the Hamilton Police Service’s human-trafficking division knocked on the door.

“They gave me a card. It was for a (beauty) salon, but it had their number on it,” she said.

When she was alone, she made the call, Franck said.

Officers would later drive her seven hours back to her mother on Manitoulin Island, she said.

No charges were laid, police said.

Group homes targeted

Trafficking wasn't only a problem at the home where Franck was living, it was allegedly happening elsewhere. Staff said strangers would pick up girls in the middle of the night. Some of them were as young as 12, according to staff.

“Group homes and residential treatment centres are magnets for exploiters,” said Charles, who has closely studied the child-welfare system and at-risk youth.

Girls who've experienced sexual abuse or other trauma make easy targets, he said.

“There's a vulnerability there, a promise made to these young people often that life will get better,” Charles said. “The exploiter, the pimp will give them the love that they want and the connection that they want. Everything they want.”

Older girls would recruit others. They entice new girls to leave at night by promising money or an escape from the group home.

“She’s fresh off the streets.... That’s all it takes for the whole thing to come falling apart,” the worker said.

“When the girls come back with needle holes in their arms, that makes it even worse.”

Life inside the homes

Tisheena Burnette lived in a Hatts Off group home outside Brantford, Ont., when she was 12.

Twelve years later, she said she grapples with both emotional and physical scars from her time there.

She said the marks above her knee and on her arm are constant reminders of a restraint by workers, where she said she was pinned down on top of a broken mason jar for refusing to go to her room.

“It shattered and (staff) dropped me in the glass,” she said. “You can’t really breathe. You’re in hysterics.”

One girl said her bed was uncomfortable and her bedding was “disgusting,” so she got a new sheet by “dumpster diving” at another of the company’s group homes, according to the inspector’s report.

Back in Gore Bay on Manitoulin Island, Franck spends her time long-boarding next to the town's marina, where a cool wind blows in off Lake Huron's North Channel.

She is finishing high school and said she's planning to apply to college to become a personal support worker in long-term care, like her mother.

Despite her tranquil surroundings, Franck said she still has nightmares where she hears the piercing screams of the 11-year-old.

Asked about what she wanted the government to do about Hatts Off, she had three words: "Shut it down."

—*with files from Mikail Malik*