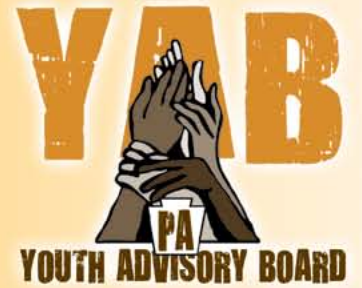
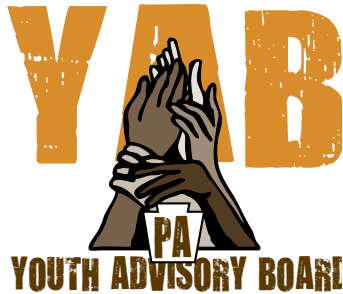


The PA Child Welfare Training Program,
Youth and Alumni Leading Change in the Child Welfare System

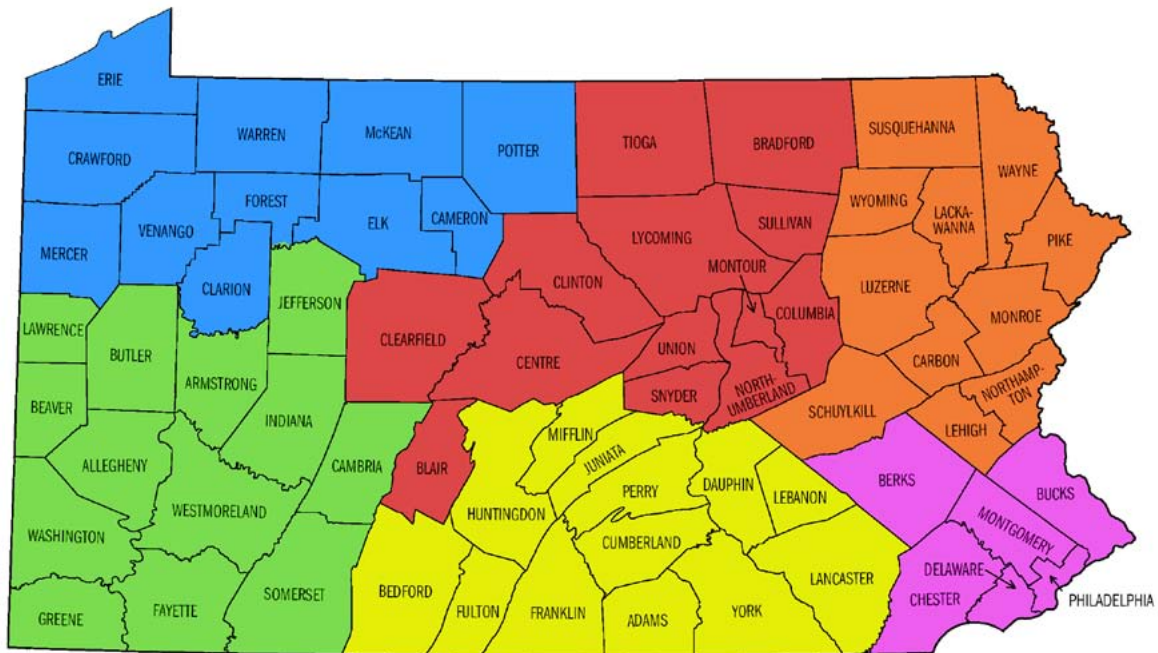


2009-2010 Youth Engagement Annual Report

The Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board Leading Change in the Child Welfare System



The mission of the Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board (YAB) is to educate, advocate, and form partnerships to create positive change in the child welfare system. Youth and alumni of the child welfare system ages 16 and older are organized into 6 regional boards, numerous local county boards, and a statewide board.



There are over 200 YAB members throughout Pennsylvania. These youth and alumni have presented at over 100 conferences, agencies, and other settings and reached over 800 audience members; everyone from foster and adoptive parents, to caseworkers and supervisors, to judges and attorneys have been impacted by the YAB's message.

In addition to presentations, the YAB carries out its mission in the following ways:

- Consulting with child welfare agencies on best practices and policies for children and youth in the child welfare system;
- YAB members engage in peer mentoring to provide guidance and support to youth in the child welfare system facing tough decisions or in need of extra support;
- Training and co-training different curricula for child welfare professionals, youth, and resource parents
- Implementing newly passed laws that affect youth and alumni of the child welfare system.

In addition to engaging in these activities throughout Pennsylvania, the Statewide YAB met for two days in Mechanicsburg to create a strategic plan for the upcoming 2010/2011 fiscal year. The plan focused on internal changes needed to improve the YAB structure as well as external efforts aimed at helping the child welfare system move forward. Some of the internal efforts for the YAB include:

- The creation of an executive committee of the statewide YAB consisting of one elected representative from each region. The executive committee will provide leadership to the YAB and act on behalf of the YAB when time sensitive issues arise;
- Changing the statewide YAB meeting format to a “town hall” style, this will allow for the YAB to invite in partners and others to create dialogue around important issues;
- Providing orientation to all new YAB members on a regular basis so they are comfortable participating in discussion and understanding their roles, and;
- Training all YAB members that are interested on public speaking and advocacy skills so they are better prepared to present in public and offer insights and advice during meetings with child welfare professionals.

The YAB is also focused on the following external efforts for the upcoming year:

- Creating a value statement about the importance of maintaining family connections and educating stakeholders on its importance and how they can encourage it in their work;
- Creating a value statement about high quality casework skills and educating caseworkers, supervisors, and child welfare agency administrators on how they should ensure high quality casework among their staff, and;
- Creating public relations and marketing materials to further communicate the YAB’s mission and goals in order to encourage additional youth/alumni to join as well as reach out to more child welfare professionals.

The YAB’s partners are extremely important in supporting and leading the change efforts needed for Pennsylvania. These partners include the Department of Public Welfare, Office of Children, Youth and Families, the Juvenile Law Center, Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, and KidsVoice.



“By creating a forum for youth to speak about the child welfare system, the YAB has created more accountability and made the system more responsive to the individuals it is supposed to serve. State leadership and support for youth engagement activities, such as the YAB, is central to meaningful improvement in the child welfare system.” – Jenny Pokempner, Esq., Supervising Attorney, Juvenile Law Center

The Pennsylvania Child Welfare Training Program is proud to support student internships for youth and alumni of the child welfare system that are currently enrolled in post-secondary education. Youth Ambassadors play a critical role in all Training Program products and services including advising and assisting with technical assistance, reviewing training curricula, developing policies and procedures, and many other activities throughout the Commonwealth. There were four Youth Ambassador positions during the 2009-2010 school year. Here is the perspective of one of those Youth Ambassadors, Chris Nobles from Montgomery County.



Chris Nobles
Youth Ambassador
PACWTP

In February of 2010 a unique and exciting opportunity was brought to my attention. There was an opening as a Youth Ambassador with the Child Welfare Training program, a position available to former or current foster care youth currently attending college. I understood immediately that I met these qualifications---I am a sophomore in college currently and had just aged out of the system a little over a year prior. What was not entirely clear is what I had to offer, and admittedly the formality of it all seemed beyond me.

For example, the term 'Youth Ambassador' made for an awkward title at first. An Ambassador is typically an individual working as a spokesperson from one place, or culture, or environment to another. While these drastically different places most likely have a working knowledge of one another---or at least that the other exists---an Ambassador's role is unique in moving at least temporarily from their home setting and being immersed into whichever environment expects to receive them.

I did not honestly expect any of this to apply to me when I signed on for the Youth Ambassador position. I thought the term was a bit of an exaggeration, or a coined phrase I was simply going to be stuck with for the duration. I had these beliefs right up until orientation.

My first day at the CWTP---Child Welfare Training Program---office in Mechanicsburg, I was greeted with more smiling faces than I expected. I was greeted with more folders of information than I ever anticipated. It was explained to me that as alien as the immaculate office and business-attire-clad workers felt to me, my feedback would be appreciated simply for how out of place I actually was.

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"The YAB provides an incredible opportunity for youth to advocate for change and to educate other youth about their rights." – Jennifer Staley, Esq., Supervisor/ Program and Policy Coordinator, KidsVoice

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I would be taught skills of the strange new work environment---how to participate in meetings and digest hours of conversation for example. My first day at the office was the first day I'd worn formal shoes for more than two hours at once. I learned first to walk in the fascinating environment, one that had always existed directly beside (or above) the one I was accustomed to. I was invited into meetings, and eventually I found my voice among them.

It was a voice I grew accustomed to using, frequently, for the entire summer. In just over two months, a two day DAPIM meeting for the statewide YAB, the SWAN conference in Lancaster, the Youth in Transition conference in State College, the SOC Retreat in Harrisburg, the Independent Living Retreat in Johnstown, and in between more than enough assignments to keep the position active and engaging. In all places, I found myself again and again pleasantly surprised by how relevant my input and the input of other youth truly turned out to be. The 'system' is taking large steps to move toward this incorporation and I'll always value a summer I spent close to the forefront of that move.

Ambassador is a term that implies not only a voice to others, but a level of immersion in the new setting. In the beginning, only one of the two words in my to-be title felt as though it fit me. I am certainly a Youth, but 'Ambassador' seemed like a bit of a long shot. The experience took my simple 'Youth' tag and made me into a Participant, a Facilitator, an Advocate, an Expert---an Intern, a Student, and a Friend. Ambassador can mean a great deal and I end a summer as a Youth Ambassador with many things. One of which is a title that is not simply a title given for the sake of tokenism but one that I know now attempts to express at least a half dozen real purposes and possibilities in only two words.

"As we put plans in motion that will lead to system change it is important that we listen to the voices of those who matter most – the children we serve. Through the development of our Youth Advisory Board, we communicate with our youth about their experiences in the foster care system. More importantly, we ask them for suggestions for future systems change and are including them in development of policies and practices that impact service delivery. I've been fortunate to interact with many of our youth and I am impressed with their fortitude and the young adults that they have become... it is clear they see their mission as making the child welfare system a better place for the children who will be involved with the system in the future. For them, it's less about what the system did to them and more about what it could do for those after them." – **Cathy Utz, Bureau Director - Office of Children, Youth, and Families.**



Edwin Turner
Youth Ambassador 2009



Myrta Aguavivas
Youth Ambassador 2009



Barbara Huggins
Youth Ambassador 2008



The Pennsylvania Independent Living Youth Retreat | C.H.A.N.G.E.

The 2010 Independent Living Youth Retreat brought over 170 youth, alumni, and child welfare professionals together for a week of educational, experiential, and fun events. There were 37 counties in attendance and 25 private provider organizations that lived on the campus of University of Pittsburgh Johnstown (UPJ) from August 9th through the 13th. The Retreat is co-sponsored by the Office of Children, Youth and Families at the Department of Public Welfare and the University of Pittsburgh's School of Social Work – Pennsylvania Child Welfare Training Program (CWTP.)

The Retreat is a youth-planned and youth-led event. Stakeholders from across Pennsylvania including youth, alumni, county IL coordinators, private provider agency staff, CWTP staff, and representatives from OCYF participate as part of a Retreat Steering Committee. The Steering Committee is responsible for planning and implementing the entire Youth Retreat. Youth and alumni co-chair the steering committee and its subcommittees.



This year's theme for the week was C.H.A.N.G.E. (Confidence, Hope, Achieve, Navigate, Goals, Endurance.) The youth and alumni on the steering committee chose this theme because it resonated with their experiences transitioning from the child welfare system. The classroom curriculum for the week – discussion based sessions facilitated by youth/alumni and child welfare professionals – focused on each letter of the C.H.A.N.G.E. theme and allowed participants to explore their own lives and share experiences with their peers.

In addition to classroom sessions, everyone participated in activity sessions throughout the week. These activity sessions were meant to teach youth new skills, help them get outside of their comfort zones in some instances, and have fun. The activity sessions were as follows:



- Art Discovering**
- Your Inner Chef**
- The Art of Making Music**
- Finding the Power in You**
- Fun Furniture**
- Hip Hop Dance and Talent Show**
- Jewelry Making**
- Journaling and Journalism**
- Leadership Outdoor Experience**
- Reverse Painting**
- Self Portrait/Banner**
- Stained Glass**
- “Tye It, You’ll Like It”**

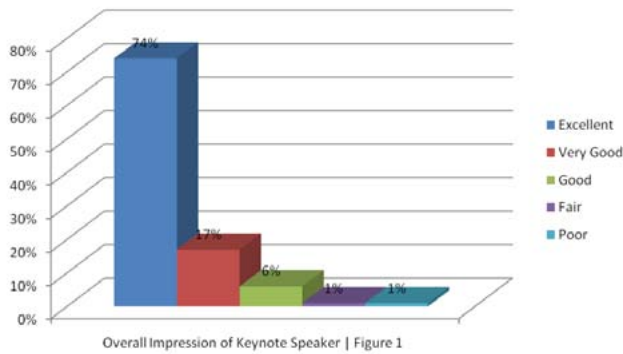
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Youth and alumni had the opportunity to perform skits and showcase the products of their work at the end of the week.

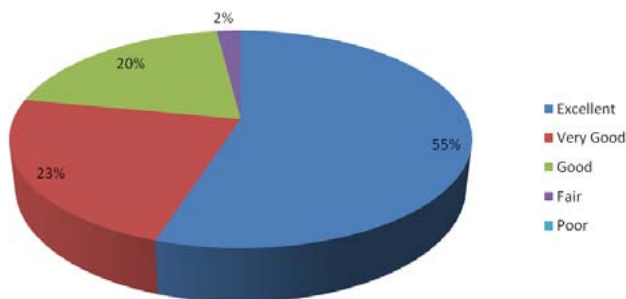
The other critical aspects of the Youth Retreat week were the inspirational presentations from two guest speakers and a keynote speaker. The guest speakers discussed the pitfalls and triumphs associated with being successful in life and gave specific man-to-man and woman-to-woman advice to youth and alumni. Gerald Proctor and Pat Gadsden shared their inspirational messages with audiences of all men and then switched and each was able to speak to an audience of all women. In planning for the guest speakers, youth and alumni recognized the important role gender plays as young people are coming of age and wanted to have time to hear from both the male and female perspectives.

Finally, the Retreat week culminated with a keynote presentation from national speaker George Duvall. Mr. Duvall is an alumni of the child welfare system and shared his story of resilience, hope, humor and the importance of permanent connections with all of the Retreat attendees during a formal banquet. The banquet was emceed by several of the youth and alumni retreat steering committee members. The charts and graphs below represent evaluation responses from youth and alumni participants:



As Figure 1 illustrates, the vast majority of youth (91 percent) rated the keynote speaker George Duvall as either very good or excellent. Below, in figure 2, approximately 78 percent of youth found the overall retreat experience to be either very good or excellent. Only 2 percent of respondents rated the retreat as fair and no one rated it as poor.

Overall Impression of the Retreat | Figure 2



Youth Engagement at the Local, Regional, and Statewide Levels

In order for youth engagement to be effective, it must occur at all levels of the child welfare system. The PA Child Welfare Training Program strives to model youth engagement and incorporate youth engagement principles at the local, regional, and statewide levels. This integration occurs in a variety of different ways.

Local youth engagement starts with direct consulting and technical assistance provided to counties by Youth Ambassadors and YAB members. Youth and alumni participate in local county meetings, committees, and other policy and practice discussions. Every county participates in an Independent Living Program site visit review. During this meeting, youth and alumni receiving services are asked to participate in reviewing the program's service array and make suggestions for improvement. Youth and alumni are seen as part of the team and not simply a "token" presence.

Regional youth engagement is supported by assigning Youth Ambassadors to be standing members of CWTP Regional Teams. These Regional Teams are comprised of practice improvement specialists that work to meet the needs of counties and private provider organizations in their regions. Youth Ambassadors are critical in the practice improvement process and play active roles throughout.

Regional Youth Advisory Boards also play an important role in forming partnerships and encouraging youth engagement. One example is a partnership between the Southeast Regional Youth Advisory Board and Cabrini College, which is located in Radnor, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. The YAB members partner with freshman students enrolled in Cabrini's "Engaging in the Common Good" course. This course explores issues of poverty, race, ethnicity, gender, and social stratification in America. Students are encouraged to make connections and learn from real people and communities. Thus the SE YAB partners with students throughout the semester to discuss their experiences in the child welfare system, share recommendations for change, and partner on a community service project or education and awareness campaign. One Cabrini student, Jessica Regina Johnson-Petty, an 18 year old freshman stated, "All of the research on the internet and in books on the system could not get the information voluntarily shared with us that the YAB provided! The time we spent with the YAB was not only informative, but emotional and eye opening."

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"The YAB is a critical player in making sure that Pennsylvania's child welfare system is effective in addressing the needs of children and families. YAB members have first-hand experiences and insights that can greatly improve programming and practice at the state, regional and local levels."

-Todd Lloyd, Child Welfare Director, Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

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In the Spring 2009 semester, Cabrini students partnered with SE YAB members to write articles for the Cabrini College newspaper and other local papers. The articles focused on the need for support – both financial and emotional – for alumni of the child welfare system enrolled in higher education.

Dr. Michelle Filling teaches the ECG curriculum and has partnered with the YAB extensively. When asked about the YAB's impact on her students and their learning, she replied, "Each semester my students write a research paper on issues within foster care. Their level of enthusiasm and passion for the assignment increases after meeting with the YAB. I love the moment when you can see in my students' faces that they recognize that these issues are real. I was especially proud this past spring when former ECG students presented on foster care issues at a research symposium on our campus. The YAB's impact on my students is having a "pay it forward" effect where my students are now educating their peers, families, and teachers on what they have learned about the strengths and weaknesses of the [child welfare] system."



Dr. Michelle Filling

Statewide youth engagement is the final piece of the youth engagement puzzle. Youth and alumni present and co-train at a wide variety of conferences including those sponsored by:

- Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network/IL Services
- PA State Resource Family Association
- Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts
- Annual Pennsylvania Permanency Conference
- Transition Conference

Youth also help co-train several CWTP curricula including:

- Charting the Course
- Adolescent Issues, Risk, and Resiliency
- Independent Living Overview and Service Continuum



Cabrini students

In addition, Youth Ambassadors and other YAB members are standing members of statewide committees. When youth and alumni are able to participate on committees with other child welfare professionals and offer solutions to problems, the system as a whole benefits because these solutions are more likely to be effective.

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