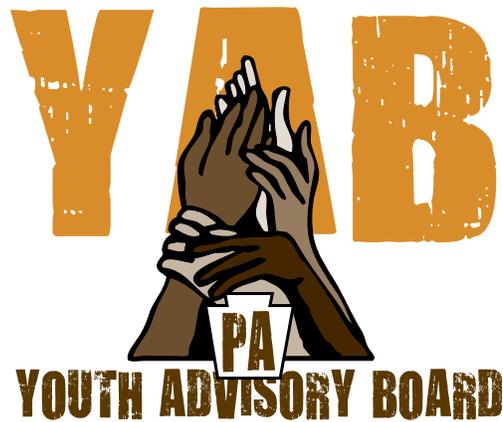




**Fostering Family Connections:
Insights and Policy Recommendations**



The Mission of the Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board is to educate, advocate, and form partnerships to create positive change in the child welfare system.

During August of 2010, over 90 youth from Pennsylvania's child welfare system participated in the Independent Living Youth Retreat. As part of this experience, these youth and alumni of the child welfare system participated in focus groups. The focus group questions were developed by the Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board in order to produce recommendations for policy makers and child welfare system administrators and staff. The questions were asked as follows:

- **What were the best parts of your experience in the child welfare system?**
- **How important were family connections to you? How did the child welfare system help or hurt your ability to stay connected to your family?**
- **What would you change about the child welfare system?**

The following report is an analysis of the focus group responses. It includes major themes and recommendations from the responses as well as specific quotes made by youth that relate to the major themes. The purpose of this report is to provide decision makers with insight and recommendations from the collective experience of older youth involved with the child welfare system. Questions related to this report can be directed to Justin Lee (jml75@pitt.edu or 484-553-6343) at the University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania Child Welfare Training Program.

The narrative of this report was compiled by Justin Lee, staff coordinator of the Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board (YAB), and edited by youth. Bolded language in this report represents direct quotes from the focus group responses of youth and alumni. All recommendations contained in the report were written by members of the YAB in their own words.

Special thanks and recognition goes to the youth leaders that facilitated the focus groups:

| | |
|---------|---------------------|
| Melyssa | York County |
| Esther | Northampton County |
| Ivory | Allegheny County |
| Taryn | Lancaster County |
| Boriss | Washington County |
| Tiffany | Lawrence County |
| Marie | Lehigh County |
| Faron | Philadelphia County |
| Davon | York County |
| Chris | Montgomery County |
| Myrta | Lancaster County |

“I got a lot of encouragement. They trusted me, let me do some things, and gave me a chance to prove myself.”

When youth were asked about the best parts of their experience in the child welfare system, there were three fundamental themes:

- Family Resources
- Financial Resources
- Personal Connections

Family Resources

Youth feeling as though they were a part of a foster family was very beneficial. For example, one youth stated, *“They took me to the shore for a week. I was part of the family.”* It was also extremely important to these youth that they were able to stay connected to siblings and other birth family members. Youth appreciated being able to find family members they did not know existed and being able to reconnect with them.



Financial Resources

Concrete resources related to finding employment, paying for higher education, and daily living, i.e. clothing, food, and shelter, were all especially helpful for youth. In most instances, these resources were provided by the Independent Living Program. One youth expressed her gratitude, *“I am grateful for IL. They are supporting me to go get ready for college. I am taking every advantage that I can. They are helping me get a car. I have learned a lot with them.”* In the vast majority of focus groups, financial resources were typically the first thing mentioned when discussing the benefits of the child welfare system.

Personal Connections

Youth expressed their appreciation and need for permanent, personal connections in a variety of ways. One youth stated, “[Foster Care] helped me for the better and allowed me to talk to people who I trusted.” Other youth mentioned the importance of good caseworkers in their lives. “I got blessed with really good caseworkers...I was glad that every caseworker was good to me. They did a wonderful job.”

Policy Recommendations



1. Increase funding available to Independent Living Programs for life skills instruction, employment, housing, education, prevention/support services and other concrete resources. Expand the program so that all youth can participate – no matter what their age. Expand the age limit for services past age 21.
2. Promote family connections – both biological and foster – by helping us to find our family members and build healthy relationships. Caseworkers should look for family resources from day one and continue to help us build these family connections.
3. Revise policies that prevent us from being part of our family. We should be encouraged to visit and contact our family. We should be allowed to have friends and do things that other teenagers do.
4. Develop mentorship programs that support us having healthy relationships with caring adults. Make sure we have permanent connections before we leave foster care.

“I would love to see my parents but I am not allowed. I am just going to wait until I age out of care to build that relationship. They are my parents.”

It was a powerfully emotional discussion when youth began discussing their experiences maintaining family relationships while in the child welfare system. **This particular topic was clearly one of great importance to youth.** The following themes emerged:

- Keeping Siblings Together
- Keeping Family Connections

Keeping Siblings Together

One youth stated the purpose of keeping siblings together very succinctly, ***“I don’t want to wait until we are both adults to have a connection with my siblings. I want to grow with them and share our experiences.”*** The bond between siblings, especially those separated within the child welfare system, remains exceptionally strong. Youth cited long distance travel, difficulties coordinating transportation, placement rules, and background clearances as the biggest hurdles to staying connected to family members.

Keeping Family Connections

The majority of youth discussed the need and importance of staying connected with birth and extended family members. These connections, when they were established and maintained, provided a source of comfort and stability for youth. Even for youth that were adopted, having that relationship was still important. One youth stated, ***“My mother’s rights were terminated, not mine. We don’t stop being family just because one of us got adopted.”***



Policy Recommendations:

1. Children and Youth Agencies and private provider organizations should place siblings together. We support programs developing an infrastructure that if we need to be taken from our family we can remain with our siblings. This includes having foster parents live in the same area or be connected so that they can get us together as families do.
2. If we cannot be placed with our siblings, then we should be allowed frequent visitation, phone calls, and other contact to maintain our relationship. Transportation and time for visits should not be a reason why we can't see our brothers and sisters.
3. Teach us strategies to help us find our family and build relationships. These strategies should be used early and often. They need to start before we are placed and continue throughout our lives. People and circumstances change.
4. Help us find out our family history including medical, physical, mental health, education, etc. Basically, let me know about any document with my name on it.
5. Create a safe environment for us to connect with our family and resolve any issues before we leave care.
6. We should be able to contact our siblings that have been adopted by other families and they should be able to contact us no matter where we go.
7. Allow us to have a relationship with our birth parents even if parental rights were terminated.

“I was told to be independent but not allowed the room to be independent.”

Youth shared many insightful and varied recommendations to improve the child welfare system. Several major themes resulted:

- Allow youth to have more age appropriate freedoms while in the child welfare system
- Improve quality of caseworker visitation and interaction
- Improve screening and investigations of foster care placements

Age Appropriate Freedoms

The ability of youth to experience as “normal” an experience as possible during their placement in the child welfare system exhibited itself in many ways. Youth discussed the need for flexible rules and regulations suited to their needs, the ability to be able to find employment, the ability to obtain their driver’s licenses, relaxing rules on background clearances for sleepovers with friends, and making it easier to practice independent living skills in a realistic setting.



Caseworker Visitation and Interaction

It is clear from the focus group discussions that a good caseworker can make an appreciable difference in a youth’s life while the opposite is also true when the caseworker does not meet the youth’s needs. Youth discussed the need for caseworkers to, first and foremost, listen to youth. Listen to youth’s needs, wants, and understand situations from a youth’s point of view. Youth also viewed good caseworkers as those that were good communicators; important communication skills included returning calls in a timely manner, explaining decisions and circumstances in a thorough, understandable way, and building supportive relationships with youth. Or, in the words of one youth, ***“Just because you know our case file doesn’t mean you know us.”***

Screening and Investigation of Placements

A rather disturbing trend was discovered as a result of the focus group discussions. Several youth discussed the need to perform better background checks on foster parents before placing youth into the home in order to prevent abuse and bad living situations. Youth also encouraged caseworkers to make unannounced visits and discuss issues in the home separately from foster parents. Foster parents sometimes presented a different image when caseworkers visited. In addition, several youth were unsure of what their foster parents used county payments for and desired more transparency.

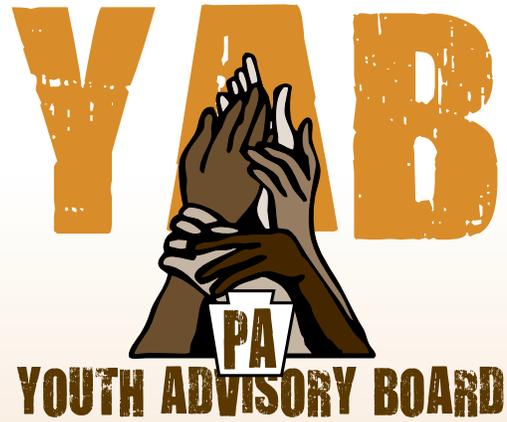
Policy Recommendations:

1. Review and revise policies to allow for all youth to experience age appropriate freedoms and responsibilities. Rules in the home should be geared towards maturity.
2. Improve caseworker supervision and training to include a focus on listening skills, improving communication skills, and ensure caseworkers are visiting youth on a regular basis.
3. Improve safety checks before, during, and after placing us in a foster home or other placement.
4. We need more foster homes that are interested in parenting older youth. Age does matter.
5. Improve transparency of process for funding our needs. Clearly define what costs foster parents are responsible for and how a funding for a child welfare placement is used.
6. We should be able to evaluate the performance of our caseworker.



Moving Forward

The Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board (YAB) is pleased to present these recommendations for implementation. YAB members are available to consult with child welfare agencies directly on how to implement the recommendations contained within this report. In addition, YAB members can educate agency staff, resource parents, adoptive parents, community members, and others. For more information or to schedule a consultation or training please contact Justin Lee at jml75@pitt.edu.



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