



*The National Foster Care Youth and Alumni Policy Council present
to the Administration for Children & Families:*

FIVE IDEAS

Background:

At the inaugural meeting of the National Foster Care Youth and Alumni Policy Council, the 21 members discussed a wide range of ideas about how to improve the foster care system. In a meeting with the Federal Administration, Acting Assistant Secretary George Sheldon asked the group to develop a list of five ideas that his team could begin to consider right away.

The Council crafted a strategy to develop the five ideas. A small workgroup was established to create a list of ideas that represented the concepts that were most discussed at the inaugural meeting of the Council in February 2012. The full Council then voted on these ideas, narrowing to a list of the five top choices.

The Council members appreciate the willingness of the Administration to work collaboratively on topics the Council is interested in working on. We appreciate the opportunity to be connected with other federal stakeholders in order to provide foster care youth and alumni perspective about topics that are important to us. In future meetings, the Council would like to request background information about federal stakeholders that will attend the meeting in advance, so that the Council can fully prepare and understand the role of the representatives. The Council is particularly interested in having ACF assistance in connecting with federal agencies that are stakeholders in the areas of work that the Council has identified as priority areas:

- Education
- Normalcy and well-being
- Mental health, including the use of psychotropic medication
- Homeless, runaway, and trafficked youth
- Aging out issues, including addressing permanence needs of older youth

The council is interested in collaborating with ACF at the regional level, as was mentioned in the meeting with George Sheldon. The Council would like to be aware of issues the regional offices work on, and what they are currently doing to include youth and alumni in regional meetings and to encourage States to engage youth and alumni. Additionally, Council members would like to work with ACF regional offices to assess the level of youth and alumni engagement within their region, and to provide guidance about how to ensure foster care consumer voice is represented and meaningfully engaged.

The following list of five ideas represents a collective effort of Council members to identify priority topics that represent the interests of their peers in foster care. The Council requests assistance from ACF in disseminating these ideas, as the Council recognizes some of the ideas presented herein may be addressed at the state and local levels.

Idea 1:**Involve the Council in translating NYTD into better services and outcomes for our peers.**

The NYTD (National Youth in Transition Database) requires States to collect information on youth outcomes and the independent living services they receive as they transition from foster care. States were required to begin collecting NYTD data on October 1, 2010, and report data to ACF semiannually.

The Council has a high level of interest in reviewing the data compiled as a result of the NYTD and would like the opportunity to provide youth and alumni insight about what the data means, and how the findings could be translated into better services for their peers in foster care.

Council members believe that there should be a second step to the NYTD process. It seems to us that it is unfair to ask young adults to take the survey to support ACF and state services, but not to provide services or referrals based on a young person's responses to the survey, should they be in need. The Council feels that these young people deserve relevant referrals based on their answers. We also feel that young people across the country who participate in NYTD deserve to hear the results of the survey. We would like to discuss with you how to accomplish these goals.

Idea 2:**Support and encourage research and best practices that legitimize the empowerment and engagement of young people.**

Youth and alumni of the foster care system are uniquely qualified to share their experiences, perspectives, and insight to help create policy, policies, and laws that affect youth in foster care. The Council appreciates the Administration's recognition of the important role of consumers of foster care in defining and implementing a better child welfare system.

However, we recognize the degree to which young people are engaged in foster care, both individually and collectively, varies greatly across the country. There should be an increased role in peer-to-peer advocacy and support. Young people need support groups to help them through the challenges in foster care — just as other groups do such as breast cancer, addiction, divorce, etc. While many of these types of groups have been started (largely as grassroots efforts across the country), we believe an evaluation of this approach as a strategy to improve the well-being of youth in foster care can help to legitimize the empowerment and engagement of young people. Research could help to define meaningful and productive involvement of young people, on an individual basis (promoting self-advocacy in case planning) and collectively (in advocacy efforts to inform system reform). It also could inform how the voices of youth and alumni have led to policy improvements or practice changes that achieve better outcomes.

Idea 3:**Don't leave us vulnerable in foster care.**

The Council believes that vulnerable foster youth must be equipped to advocate for themselves and that all youth in care should be provided with a safe way to get help.

The Council believes that foster youth should have the right to *know their rights*. While some states have produced a list of rights for foster youth, dissemination of these lists is spotty at best. We believe caseworkers should be required to share/review a youth-friendly list of rights, as defined by a state, at periodic intervals. The Council believes that a young person's awareness of their rights in foster care and engagement in case planning will lead to improved outcomes and encourages research that would demonstrate this. If well-being of young people in foster care is to be ensured, we must provide these primary stakeholders with the capacity to advocate for their own best interest.

When a youth's rights have been violated or they find themselves in an unsafe or unhealthy situation, young people in foster care often don't know where to turn. They may not

feel comfortable or safe talking with their case managers or foster parents when they have a concern or problem. The Council would like to see a federal formal grievance process or hotline to ensure that youth have a way to elevate complaints (such as a national ombudsman and/or helpline, perhaps modeled after the Runaway Switchboard, National Child Abuse hotline). We believe peer support should be a component of such a hotline.

Idea 4:

Fulfill the promise of the independent living program.

The Council is concerned that the quality and quantity of services available varies greatly from state to state, and even from community to community. There should be greater awareness about these variances and how they are affecting outcomes for older youth. The Council recommends that federal standards for Independent Living Programs be established or reviewed and updated. As consumers of foster care and independent living services, the Council would like to provide guidance about services and programs they found to be effective, and would like to provide guidance about how these services are measured and what outcomes are tracked.

As part of their independent living services, older youth should be receiving preparation and support to play a meaningful role in finding and retaining their own permanence. We believe skills training must inter-connect with permanent connections for youth. States that are extending care beyond age 18 should receive guidance to include provisions for permanence for youth during the ‘extension years,’ as part of their preparation for adulthood.

We also would like to be informed and engaged in further efforts to evaluate independent living programs by ACF, so that the voice of youth and alumni help to direct how these dollars could be better targeted to achieve the right outcomes.

Idea 5:

Investigate why youth are “aging out” of adoptions and look at how it can be prevented.

Through a growing number of stories we hear from our peers, we believe there is a problem with older youth being “let go” from their adoptive families once they turn 18 and subsidies end. We would like federal help in tracking how often this is really happening.

- Are youth coming back into foster care after a disrupted adoption occurs?
- What support and resources are available to youth when this occurs?
- What post adoption services should be available to families to assist them prior to a disruption?

Permanence isn’t something that child welfare achieves and then walks away from. We believe that young people adopted from foster care, along with their families, deserve access to continued support and education to help them adjust.

The members of the National Foster Care Youth & Alumni Policy Council appreciate ACF’s interest in hearing directly from youth and alumni of the foster care system. We look forward to working with ACF to improve outcomes for our peers in foster care.

About the National Foster Care Youth & Alumni Policy Council: *The Council convenes to provide federal stakeholders with relevant and timely information as policies and procedures are created that will affect children and families throughout the country. The Council represents a collective viewpoint of youth and alumni who have experienced the child welfare system first-hand. The Council is a project in partnership between Foster Care Alumni of America, FosterClub, and Casey Family Programs. Advisory organizations include the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute, Foster Care to Success, Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, National Foster Youth Action Network, Young Adult Training and T/A Network (a project of the National Resource Center for Youth Development), and Youth Communications.*