



Iowa Youth Advocacy Agenda

October 2017

Young Leaders Offer Recommendations for Positive Change in Iowa's Child Welfare System

Every year, approximately 4,000 children and youth enter the child welfare system in the state of Iowa. Young people who have experienced foster care or other out-of-home placements have unique insights into the system and how it can be improved.

In the summer of 2017, a group of young leaders who have experienced foster care came together to identify issues, brainstorm solutions, and develop recommendations to improve child welfare policies and practices in Iowa based on their own involvement in the system.

The issues and recommendations that emerged as priorities for positive changes to Iowa's foster care system are summarized in this **Iowa Youth Advocacy Agenda**.

"It's important to have our voices heard."



Priority Areas:

1. Positive Connections
2. Normalcy
3. Healthy Relationships
4. Education
5. Transition
6. Housing



1

Maintain positive connections with family, friends and community

Youth often lose connections with their family members, peers and home community when they enter the child welfare system. Even when removal is in the best interest of the child, the abrupt separation from family and friends can be a traumatic experience. Every effort should be made to help children placed out of their home maintain the positive connections and relationships they have, and promote new connections while they are in care.

Our insights:

- **Strive to place us in or as close as possible to our home communities.** Having easy access to familiar people and places lessens the trauma caused by being removed from our homes and makes it easier for us to adjust to being in foster care.
- **Continue to support AMP (Achieving Maximum Potential -- Iowa's Foster Care Youth Council).** Local AMP Councils provide vital social connections and support for teens in care. Having a peer network helps us know we're not alone and gives us a stronger voice in advocating for ourselves and other youth in care.
- **Pay attention to our families, too.** We need help in understanding and resolving issues with our parents and other family members. Don't forget that we often go back home – even if we “age out.” It's important that we have an opportunity to deal with family matters before we leave foster care.

“Some connections are better not broken.”



2

Guarantee opportunities for normal adolescent experiences

Being in foster care too often interferes with the ability to engage in everyday teenage activities – like being on a sports team, learning to drive, or just hanging out with friends. Participating in normal adolescent activities is essential for exploring interests, learning skills, and developing relationships. Normalcy can also help young people heal from trauma.

In 2014, the federal Strengthening Families Act created a reasonable and prudent parent standard to facilitate participation in age appropriate enrichment and social activities for youth in care, regardless of placement type. Iowa passed legislation in 2016 to establish the same standard in state law, but implementation lags behind the official policy.

41%

of youth who age out have a driver's license

Our insights:

- **Ensure that the reasonable and prudent parent standard is effectively implemented and truly improves opportunities** for us to take part in a range of normal, age-appropriate activities. This is especially important for shelter and group care facilities where barriers to normalcy are still common.
- **Create a youth-friendly grievance policy** for us to use if we believe we are being denied reasonable access to normal opportunities. We need to know that we have a process to voice our concerns to a third party that can hold the system accountable.
- **Pave the way for us to obtain driver's licenses.** Learning to drive is not just a normal rite of passage for teens, it's essential to our ability to become responsible adults. Cost, car insurance, access to a car to practice, and liability concerns are often insurmountable barriers to our ability to get a driver's license.

“Why should kids in care have to earn the right to do those types of things that other kids do normally? Foster care is too much like being in jail.”



3

Improve the foster care experience by focusing on relationships

Multiple changes in case workers and placements can cause disruption in young people's lives, result in crucial information and resources slipping through the cracks, and result in feelings of stress, distrust, and resentment among young people in foster care. Improving communication among professionals, foster parents and other caregivers, and youth can increase placement stability and promote healthy relationships.

"I feel like a commodity being traded among workers, foster parents, and other people that are supposed to be supporting me."

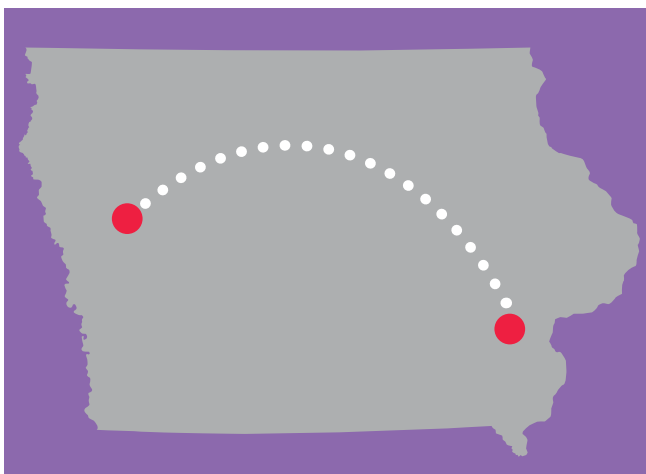
Our insights:

- **Require specific screening and training of foster parents who care for teens.** Older youth in care have unique strengths and needs that foster parents need to understand. Improving the process of introducing us to foster families, and vice versa, could help us establish a positive relationship and reduce the number of placement changes.
- **Allow young people more input on who they are placed with.** Every youth should have the right to say they are not comfortable where they are placed or that they don't feel safe *and have someone listen!*
- **Promote honest, reliable, and caring relationships** between youth and the professionals on our support team. To really be helpful, professionals need to take time to get to know and understand us as individuals and not make assumptions because we're in foster care. How can you help us if you don't really know us?

31%

of youth who age out have 6 or more placements

"Stereotypes become self-fulfilling prophecies."



- **Assign workers closer to where youth are placed.** It's hard to have a good relationship with a worker who's half way across the state. We need professionals who are available and willing to share their knowledge and help us access local resources and opportunities that will enable us to be successful.

4

Increase education stability and post-secondary preparation

Completing high school and preparing for college is difficult for youth who are in foster care, especially those who have multiple placements and school changes. Gathering transcripts, choosing the right classes, and filing for financial aid can be more than they can handle by themselves. Youth need guidance and ongoing support to help navigate available resources and set realistic education and career goals.

Our insights:

- **Make staying in our home school a priority.** Frequent school changes create all kinds of problems. We lose ground every time we have to move to a new school.
- **Start early in planning for future education and career.** It's not enough to focus just on the present. To be successful, we need help in making choices and preparing for the future. We also need our long-term plans to carry-over even if our placement changes.
- **Restore funding for the All Iowa Opportunity Foster Care Grant.** Dedicated scholarships for former foster youth are critical to our ability to attend college. Extending the time financial aid can be used and allowing students to use that aid at out-of-state colleges would also be helpful.
- **Support preparation and first-year support programs for college-bound students.** Having extra help and support when we're getting started in college can improve enrollment and retention. Iowa should offer more transition and first-year supports for foster youth who want to continue their education or training after high school.

59%

of foster youth
approved for
financial aid don't
attend college



"I really just wanted to focus on school!"

Preparing to begin college was very stressful. It would have been nice to have someone at the college assigned to help me get started so that I didn't have to worry about my class schedule, where I was going to live, and managing financial aid all by myself. It was overwhelming trying to figure out many of these things on my own.

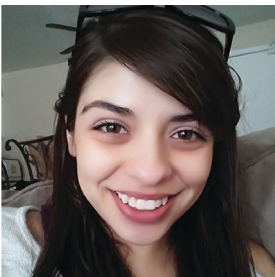
Far too many of youth who age out of care feel unprepared for the abrupt transition from being a ward of the state to independent adulthood. Youth should be active participants in the transition process, equipped with the necessary resources, and allowed to make strategic decisions about their future with the help of supportive adults.

Our insights:

- **Guarantee that we have an opportunity to participate in transition planning** through the Youth Transition Decision-Making (YTDM) process. A YTDM makes sure that everyone is on the same page when it comes to helping us get ready for the future.
- **Help us understand the resources that are available to us.** Learning about and knowing how to access resources like health care, mental health services, education, and employment are vital to being ready to leave care.
- **Enforce the requirement that we receive essential documents**, including our social security card, birth certificate, and a state ID or driver's license, before leaving care. It's also important that we have or know how to get our education and medical records, credit reports, immigration papers, or other records that we will need as adults.
- **Extend Aftercare services to age 24.** Services for youth who age out in Iowa currently end at age 21, an age when few young adults are fully self-sufficient. Allowing us to continue to access supports as needed would provide time for us to finish our educations and/or establish a career.

400

Iowa youth age
out of foster care
each year



"The transition process is sloppy! I need to be in control of my life."



"I have never even heard of a YTDM? It would have been helpful to have that opportunity."

6

Assure access to safe housing

One of the first challenges for youth exiting care without achieving permanency or having strong connections with supportive adults is locating safe, affordable housing. Not having safe housing places young people at high risk of victimization and homelessness.

Our insights:

- **Develop creative solutions to address barriers to housing.** Youth exiting care typically have limited income, savings or credit history, and many don't have access to an adult who can serve as a co-signer on a lease. These factors seriously limit our options to secure decent housing.
- **Don't exit youth to homelessness.** Youth should not be discharged from care if they do not have a realistic plan for safe housing. That plan needs to include backup plans for housing if the first or second options don't work out.
- **Consider extending foster care to age 21.** The option to remain in or return to care with the safety and supports the system provides can be a life saver and make a real difference in our long-term success.

"Trying to make it on your own at 18 is virtually impossible."

25%

of youth who age out report an episode of homelessness by age 21

58%

of youth who age out have zero earned income

"I had to pay a huge security deposit just so I could have a home ..."

I was not really sure where I was going to live when I aged out of care. I didn't get a lot of help developing a plan for housing - I was pretty much on my own. It took a long time to find an apartment that would work with me since I did not have a cosigner, and I had to pay a huge security deposit just so I could have a home.



The Youth Policy Institute of Iowa

was honored to support young leaders in the development of this Advocacy Agenda. YPII is a nonprofit organization that concentrates on improving policies, programs and practices affecting young people transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, especially those who have been involved in Iowa's child welfare or juvenile justice systems. The principles of positive youth development, authentic youth engagement, and data-informed decision-making are foundational to YPII's approach to programming and advocacy. www.ypii.org

AMP (Achieving Maximum Potential)

is a youth engagement program for current and former foster and adoptive youth summarized by the motto "Nothing about us, without us." AMP serves as Iowa's Foster Care Youth Council through a contract from the Iowa Department of Human Services to YSS. The primary purpose of AMP is to empower young people to become advocates for themselves and give them a voice in system-level improvements in child welfare policies and practices. In SFY 2017, more than 1,000 young people participated in at least one AMP meeting or event. www.ampiowa.org



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