

The Power of Youth Engagement

Youth engagement plays a vital role in helping young people become empowered, self-sufficient individuals. This method is often used in public child welfare to help bring foster youth and professionals together to create better conditions for young people in care. In some communities, however, there are more professionals engaged in the change making process than youth.¹ As a result, young people are often disconnected from the opportunities and supports that are needed for them to develop and thrive.²

Currently, states are using innovative strategies and promising practices to help motivate young peoples' interest in the planning process. Congress has also recognized this issue and passed new legislation requiring states to include young in their own transition plans. Without proper engagement, youth are more likely to leave care with poor outcomes.³

Youth Engagement: Strategies that Propel Foster Youth towards Independence

Historically, youth were not invited to join child welfare professionals in making decisions. However, over the past decade, social workers and independent living coordinators have sought youth participation in the decision-making process, especially since research has demonstrated the importance of the youths' voice. Child welfare professionals have modified their approach when working with young people by cultivating their communication skills and inviting them to participate in meetings, trainings and panels.⁴ Public child welfare administrators have also sought youth participation through youth councils, youth-led media, self-advocacy and community activities.⁵

Promising Approaches and Innovative Practices to Engage Older Youth

States are increasing their efforts to implement practices that seek more youth involvement in case planning. This strategy help strengthen the working relationship between youth and child welfare professionals. Judges, administrators, service providers and independent living coordinators are engaging more youth. As a result, young people have begun to take on leadership roles and develop positive attitudes toward improving their

outcomes. Today, more foster youth are involved in court proceedings, family planning conferences, and youth advisory boards to ensure their voice is brought to the forefront. Such details are provided below:

- **Family Group Conferencing (FGC)** – allows youth to interact with family members in a group setting to make key decisions on their placement plan. FGC brings young people and their relatives together to create a safety and permanency plan.
- **Treatment Team Meetings (TTM)** - invites youth to have an open dialogue with child welfare professionals about their case plans. During TTMs, young people can contribute to their long and short-term treatment goals.
- **Caseworker & Resource Family Trainings** – helps foster parents, adoptive parents, caseworkers, and advocates better understand the needs of foster youth. Young people are often invited to speak at these trainings so professionals and families can be more informed about youth issues. Youth can offer valuable insight on how to improve child welfare practices.
- **Court Proceedings** – allows youth to express their needs, aspirations, and concerns during placement and permanency hearings. During court proceedings, transitioning youth can collaboratively work with judges, case workers, advocates, attorneys and other child welfare professionals to promote a healthy and stable transition plan.
- **Youth Advisory Boards (YAB)** - assembles young people to discuss issues that affect them the most. YABs are designed to enable young people to take on leadership roles that transform the child welfare system, inform communities and change policy. Additionally, YABs help youth develop strong leadership skills, expand their awareness, and connect them to peer networks where they can share their experiences.

Promoting Youth Engagement: State Examples

Several states administer youth advisory boards that positively impact and serve young people. For instance, the **Iowa** Collaboration for Youth Development (ICYD) actively promotes positive youth development and engages young people to participate in dialogue that addresses their youth needs. ICYD gives youth the opportunity to speak at court hearings, new worker trainings, and foster parent meetings to have a voice in recommending change in child welfare policy and practice.⁶ **Maine** has a youth leadership task force where young people participate in trainings, public speaking events, and serve on advisory committees.⁷

The **California** Youth Connection (CYC) is guided by former foster youth and dedicated members of the community.⁸ CYC encourages youth to participate in policy development and legislative activities that improve California's child welfare programs. **Maryland** operates a similar youth advisory board (YAB) where older foster youth and professionals come together to discuss the issues foster children face today.⁹

Maryland's YAB also hosts an annual Teen Conference in the summer where youth in independent living programs across the state listen and join in panel discussions and participate in workshops to enhance their life skills.

Many states also have foster care alumni association chapters where youth can participate in peer discussions and advocate on issues affecting foster youth. **Florida** gives special hiring preferences to former foster youth and **Florida's** state directors believe these young professionals are vital to have in the field of public child welfare. State administrators also believe that federal policies need to be changed to allow youth to have access to their birth certificates and Social Security information so they can apply for a drivers' license. Young people, especially those living in rural communities, need to have a sense of normalcy in their lives and gain a sense of self-importance, independence and security and thus, flexible policies need to be in place that encourage youth to obtain their license. This approach is one step toward empowering youth.

New Requirements and Options to Assist Youth

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (P.L. 110-351), enacted in October 2008, requires public child welfare agencies to have procedures in place to help youth successfully transition to adulthood. Unfortunately, youth often leave care without solid transition plans to fully assist their housing, health care, employment and educational needs. Research shows that young people who receive extended support past age 18 have better outcomes when they exit

care.¹⁰ Currently, states are strengthening their practices and modifying their policies to implement the older youth provisions of P.L. 110-351.

The new law makes federal funding available for states to support older youth from age 18 until their 21st birthday. These youth receive support if they are engaged in 1) completing high school or obtaining a GED; 2) enrolled in a post-secondary or vocational school; 3) receiving some form of employment or vocational training; 4) employed for at least 80 hours a month; or if incapable of doing the following the youth must have a medical condition that affects their ability to maintain stable educational enrollment and proper employment. Fostering Connections also allows states to extend this support to eligible youth who exit care to guardianship and adoption after age 16.¹¹

P.L. 110-351 requires states to provide youth with an extensive transition plan, 90 days before they leave care.¹² Transition plans may include objectives for youth to obtain housing, medical insurance, employment, and other components needed for them to move toward independence. Many states have this policy currently in their statute and others are ahead of the curve working with youth at age 14 to expedite these plans and ensuring that they remain youth-led. This fundamental approach encourages foster youth to be engaged in their plan, set realistic goals for the future, and establish positive self-esteem.

Youth Need Better Preparation for the Adult World

There is a critical need for youth to be more informed about child welfare services available to them. This step must take place before they age out of care and enter adulthood. Older youth in care must have better preparation and be engaged very early in the process, particularly when they are mentally and emotionally ready. They need to know their rights, how to access valuable resources, and be present at meetings as well as court proceedings relevant to their case plan. When youth are engaged and invited to participate in decision-making, they become motivated to voice their interests and plans for the future.

Youth engagement helps young adults gain the tools they need to be their own advocates to transform their circumstances, shape their destiny and improve their lives and the lives of other youth. States are using innovative practices and promising approaches to help young people build upon these skills. When young people and child welfare professionals are able to simultaneously come together to improve systems and craft better policies, foster youth can have better educational, health, housing and permanency outcomes as they grow older.

¹ The Forum for Youth Investment. Core Principles for Engaging Young People in Community Change. July 2007.

² Ibid.

³ National Governor's Association's Center for Best Practices. State Policies to Help Youth Transition Out of Foster Care. January 2007.

⁴ Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Youth_engagement. March 2009.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators. Youth Aging Out Survey. November 2007.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Maryland Department of Human Resources. www.dhr.state.md.us

¹⁰ Children's Defense Fund & Center for Law and Social Policy. Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act Summary (H.R. 6893). October 2008.

¹¹ Congressional Research Service. Child Welfare: Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. October 2008.

¹² Ibid.