

Voices Carry

Recommendations of Young People
in the Foster Care System

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voice



CALIFORNIA YOUTH CONNECTION
2005 Policy Conference Report

Authors:
Jimmy Mosqueda Jennifer Rodriguez

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leadership rights
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INTRODUCTION

The California Youth Connection (CYC) believes that foster youth are the leading experts of the foster care system. Founded 18 years ago, CYC is the only statewide organization focused on foster youth empowerment and advocacy. Current and former foster youth guide the organization in almost every aspect.

Local chapters form the core of CYC; each chapter decides on a series of local policy issues within its county. Furthermore, each chapter works on outreach efforts to inform the community of unique foster care issues. Besides affecting policy on a local level, CYC members are also involved statewide. CYC utilizes the two conferences it coordinates each year to identify and develop issues that will become the year's policy agenda. Members of all of CYC's 23 chapters identify four child welfare topics that will be studied during the course of that conference. The youth are trained in leadership and policy skills and develop policy recommendations on those topics which are presented to distinguished leaders in the child welfare field on the last day of the conference. These are the recommendations contained in this report.

After the conference, members of CYC's legislative committee participate in conference calls to prioritize the statewide issues and decide upon the year's policy recommendations that will be presented to lawmakers at the conclusion of CYC's second yearly conference, the Day at the Capitol.

At the Day at the Capitol conference, members from all around the state gather in Sacramento for a long weekend to train on leadership and advocacy skills and to hone their policy recommendations for the year. They present their ideas in individual meetings with legislators and sometimes these ideas become actual legislation. This yearly cycle provides the youth with numerous opportunities to impact both local and state policy in an effort to improve outcomes and the lives of all foster youth.



2005 CONFERENCE REPORT

For the first time ever, CYC combined its summer leadership and fall policy conference into one, the Summer 2005 Leadership and Policy Conference. Throughout the weekend of August 12th, CYC members participated in workshops in order to develop this year's policy issues as well as increase their leadership abilities. CYC invited a distinguished panel of decision makers as well as a group of special guests to listen to the recommendations. Our distinguished panel sat at the front of the room and was asked to comment on the youth's recommendations after each group of CYC members presented. After the presentations, the panelists and the special guests were invited to join discussion groups with CYC members where all attendees were able to interact and explore the issues and policy recommendations in greater detail. Both CYC members and guests reported gaining something special from this experience: CYC members had the opportunity to hear guest's feedback on their policy recommendations and guests were able to ask clarifying questions and find out more about the foster care experience that led to the recommendation. The discussion groups culminated in CYC members asking guests how they would commit their organization(s) to furthering CYC policy goals.

The distinguished panelists were: Jessica Gunderson, Office of Assembly Member Karen Bass; Jody Marksamer, National Center for Lesbian Rights; and Sher Huss, Director of Shasta County Social Services Department.

This report summarizes the policy discussions and recommendations of CYC members participating in the Summer 2005 Leadership and Policy Conference. The following topics were explored: 1) Post-Emancipation, 2) Higher Education, 3) Family, and 4) Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning (LGBTQQ) Foster Youth.



REPORT 01: **POST-EMANCIPATION**

Most foster youth emancipate from foster care on or around their 18th birthday, but many are unprepared for the transition. At the time of emancipation, former foster youth are expected to be self-sufficient, despite the fact that the average young adult is not fully self-sufficient until the age of 26. Finding housing, employment, and adequate medical care are just some of the challenges former foster youth face when they transition out of care. The statistics form a grim picture: 25% of youth become homeless, 40% end up on public assistance or are incarcerated, and 51% are unemployed. Considering approximately 2,000 foster youth emancipate from the system every year, these statistics show that the state of California is challenged to meet the needs of thousands of young adults who are struggling to get by. As a result of CYC youths' advocacy and the important work of other collaborators, some transitional services are in place to help former foster youth after they leave care, but these services are not enough. Many youth state that these services do not last long enough, if they exist at all. Independent Living Programs (ILP) across the state are available to foster youth under the age of 21. This may seem adequate enough, but when we consider the fact stated earlier that young people do not become fully self-sufficient until the age of 26, we realize that more needs to be done.

Issue #1: Expand and Extend Post-Emancipation Services

Many foster youth emancipate without a "safety net" should they encounter challenges. For the average young person, that net is their family. Many foster youth leave care without a single relationship that will last into adulthood. Because foster youth lack a natural safety net, they depend on post-emancipation services when they are unable to make it on their own. It is important to expand and extend these services in order to provide a larger safety net for all emancipated foster youth. Youth not only need a variety of transitional housing options, but they also need money for rent when moving into transitional or subsidized housing is not a feasible option.

Many foster youth don't have the opportunity to gain job experience while in care because of licensing and placement barriers. Yet, employment is necessary for youth to support themselves in both their careers and while obtaining higher education. As a result, youth need employment, as well as need job training and skills development in order to move up in their job and seek better career paths. The cutoff for most services is 21, which is unrealistic when considering many youth are still struggling to get a foothold at that age. Youth attending college after emancipating are still in school by that age.

Access to medical care is also critical for former foster youth, as many are dealing not only with physical health problems, but mental health challenges as well. In fact, 50% of foster youth suffer from chronic medical conditions, and 50-60 % have moderate to severe mental health problems. After emancipation, many youth suffer even greater physical and mental health issues because they lose the few resources they had available and are in unsafe and unstable situations with no support. Youth receive Medi-Cal until 21, only if they were in foster care on their 18th birthday. For those youth who emancipate early, are reunified, or run away before their 18th birthday—there is no health insurance. This creates major issues for emancipated youth since 30% have had a serious health problem since leaving care and 55% had no health insurance.

Many youth state that they simply want the same benefits and opportunities that the average young person has. Studies have shown that the longer a foster youth is in care past the age of 18, the better their outcomes are for the future. We need to eradicate the notion that the state’s responsibility for foster youth ends at the age of 18. Like all young adults, foster youth continue to need support throughout their young adult life.

Recommendations:

- Extend Medi-Cal to the age of 24, up from the current age limit of 21.
- Increase employment training and job placement opportunities.
- Extend and expand current services such as ILP and Transitional Housing past the age of 21 to more accurately reflect the realities of young adult life.
- Ensure foster youth receive services needed during transition, such as: obtaining legal documents, transferring school credits, etc.
- Make sure that post-emancipation services being offered are flexible and can meet the needs of all foster youth. “One size fits all” does not work.

Action Items:

- Advocate for foster youth to have the option to stay in foster care until 24.
- Advocate for extension of federal programs such as ILP and Medi-Cal to the age of 24.
- Ensure counties are aware of the passage of AB 824 (Chapter 636, Statutes of 2005) that allows Transitional Housing to be extended for foster youth up to the age of 24.
- Advocate for creation of Transitional Housing slots for former foster youth between 21-24.
- Ensure all placements and programs enroll foster youth at One-Stop Career Centers and help youth utilize the employment services offered.
- Encourage state, county, and local government programs as well as private employers to establish preferential hiring and internship programs for former foster youth.
- Advocate for use of county ILP funds to place foster youth in internships and fund stipends.
- Ensure all county ILP programs have set protocols and fiscal procedures in place to allow them to respond immediately to former foster youth in a crisis situation such as homelessness.
- Work on implementation of existing education laws such as AB 1858 (Steinberg, Chapter 914, Statutes of 2004) and AB 490 (Steinberg, Chapter 862, Statutes of 2003) that allow foster youth to receive education support.
- Advocate for former foster youth to be prioritized in receipt of public benefit programs such as subsidized housing, public assistance, food stamps and employment services.
- Change ILP practice in counties of offering services in a classroom based format to individualized mentoring and assistance.

Issue #2: Lack of tracking system for emancipated foster youth

Despite the fact that approximately 2,000 foster youth emancipate in California every year, there is no statewide system for tracking them after they leave care. It is unthinkable that parents would not know when their children do not graduate high school or are homeless. The state assumes the parental role for foster youth, so should know the status of the children they have committed to raise once they turn 18. More often than not, youth are left to struggle on their own. They slip through the cracks and become unemployed, homeless, or incarcerated. The outcomes of foster youth in adulthood are the ultimate measure of the state's success, yet these outcomes are not collected or monitored.

The lack of data impacts the effective utilization of post-emancipation services as well: How is the money supposed to be spent when there is no telling where it is needed the most? A statewide database could help us see trends and changes in the experiences of former foster youth. Where are they excelling? Where do they need the most help? What needs are unmet? Where are they currently living? Currently, the state struggles with where geographically to allocate funds for emancipated youth since they are no longer attached to a county. A database would help service providers better assist former foster youth by allocating their funds appropriately, based on the statistics provided by the database.

Furthermore, a tracking system would help providers better identify the most at-risk youth and get them immediate assistance. Former foster youth often speak of feeling abandoned after emancipating from care. Suddenly, they are cut off from social workers and lawyers and other professionals who played a major role in their lives and helped them access services. Tracking data on former foster youth will allow the state, counties and organizations to keep youth informed about programs and benefits available to them such as Chafee Grants, Extended Medi-Cal, ILP and employment services. A tracking system will keep former foster youth “plugged in” and let them know that there are people who still care about them and are interested in their well-being.

Recommendations:

- Create a statewide database that would track the progress and status of former foster youth once they leave the system. Information should be collected on youth over time to measure outcomes.
- Use the statistics from the database to help service providers better tailor their assistance to former foster youth.

Action Items:

- Advocate for the addition of data on emancipated youth to the statewide child welfare computer system CWS/CMS.
- Encourage Department of Education, Department of Social Services, Department of Mental Health, Department of Health Services, Department of Corrections, Department of Drug and Alcohol Services and the California Student Aid Commission to work together to combine data identifiers and utilize existing data to identify outcomes on emancipated youth.
- Survey counties to determine where emancipated foster youth are currently residing, what services are available and how counties are currently doing outreach to emancipated youth.
- Encourage counties to create their own databases to store and collect information on emancipated foster youth.

REPORT 02: HIGHER EDUCATION

It has become increasingly clear that, in today's society, a college degree is a must-have for anyone wanting to achieve self-sufficiency. Despite this awareness, there is still a formidable gap between the achievements of former foster youth and that of the average population when it comes to higher education. California has an exemplary public university system that is committed to principles of access and opportunity for all potential California students. Statistics show that fewer than 10% of foster youth who graduate from high school go on to college, whereas 60% of all high school grads pursue higher education. Even more alarming: only 2% of all foster youth actually graduate from college. That means that 98% of all former foster youth are almost guaranteeing themselves the inability to be completely self-sufficient during their adult lives. This discrepancy is not for a lack of want on a youth's part. 70% of foster youth stated that they planned to attend college.

It is quite obvious that the foster care system is failing youth when it comes to their aspirations for higher education. The primary barriers for foster youth to attend college are a lack of awareness or knowledge about colleges and the application process, lack of academic preparation to take advantage of higher education opportunities, and a lack of support. Moreover, if a youth manages to make it and attend college, he or she still faces the struggle of keeping up and actually graduating. Youth struggle academically because of their educational experiences in foster care, emotionally because of a lack of support and realities of life, and financially because of the need to be self-supporting. A successful higher education plan must be twofold: targeting foster youth who are still in school and helping them succeed once they are in college.

Issue #1: Higher Education Awareness in High School

As anyone who has gone on to higher education knows, the road to college begins in elementary, middle and high school. Students must be aware of, enroll in and succeed in the necessary courses that colleges require. Students must know about, be able to pay for and take the SAT or ACT or any other test colleges ask for. Students must talk with counselors to develop an educational plan, a timeline and identify the right schools for each student. Then there are the actual college application and fees, not to

mention the financial aid application and any other loan or scholarship forms that need to be filled out in order to make attending college a possibility.

Many foster youth have so many worries trying to survive in foster care; asking them to stay on top of and worry about this is unrealistic. Currently, no one takes responsibility for youth's educational progress and ensuring youth are informed of their educational rights, higher education options and resources. Foster youth and others have fought to create education rights and increased resources so youth have the preparation they need to have the option to attend college. However, professionals need to educate foster youth of these rights and help enforce them. Social workers, foster parents, and other advocates often lack information themselves and are too busy to provide the needed support and encouragement. If we want to increase the number of foster youth who successfully transition into college, we must make college an attainable option.

Recommendations:

- Social workers should monitor a foster youth's education levels and goals and be trained specifically in higher education needs.
- A training team comprised of current and former foster youth should train school staff, social workers and youth on higher education issues.
- A transitional bridge should be created in order to help middle school foster youth make the transition to high school and then to college. The bridge program should include educational specialists who have knowledge of educational rights, necessary coursework, college applications, financial aid forms, etc.
- Make sure AB 1858 (Steinberg, Chapter 914, Statutes of 2004) and AB 490 (Steinberg, Chapter 862, Statutes of 2003), which create increased education rights and standards for foster youth in public and non-public schools are implemented.

Action Items:

- Incorporate foster youth higher education trainers and information on foster youth's education rights as a regular component of foster parent and social worker training.
- Designate a local and state higher education resource person in the ILP or Foster Youth Services programs to answer questions from youth, social workers and providers about higher education issues.
- Ensure social workers are trained on AB 490, AB 1858, educational assessments and advocacy and are provided with contact information for their local foster youth education liaison.
- Expand Foster Youth Services programs to serve all foster youth in all counties and ensure that these programs provide foster youth with higher education support and information.
- Ensure all social workers, advocates, court staff and foster youth are aware of AB 1633 which allows all youth who have not graduated to stay in foster care until their 19th birthday to finish a high school diploma or equivalency (Evans, Chapter 641, Statutes of 2005).
- Create a joint education/child welfare state office to coordinate all foster youth education and higher education efforts and resources such as Foster Youth Services, and foster youth education liaisons.
- Create state and local foster youth higher education task forces to coordinate education advocacy efforts and disseminate information about existing and needed resources. Ensure all higher education task force groups and related advisory groups have foster youth representation.
- Invest in a comprehensive state and local education awareness campaign to inform youth, providers and child welfare workers about the education and higher education resources and rights that are available (similar to the McKinney-Vento education efforts for homeless youth.)¹

- ❑ Ensure California State University Chancellors, Community College Board of Governors and local colleges and universities are aware of the mandates of AB 2463 (Caldera, Chapter 1129, Statutes of 1996) and are conducting outreach to foster youth in middle and high school.
- ❑ Work towards passage of federal legislation similar to the proposed FOSTER Act (H.R. 4003) (Miller CA-7).²
- ❑ Ensure SB 1639 (Alarcon, Chapter 668, Statutes of 2004), requiring dissemination of information regarding postsecondary preparation, options and financial aid is implemented in your county.

Issue #2: More Assistance While in College

There are some foster youth who do manage to overcome the odds and get into college, but matriculation is only the first step in a long road to getting a degree. The young adult period is a difficult time for all people, but especially for foster youth. Youth find it impossible to commit four or more years of their lives to achieve a Bachelor's degree if there are not enough services to help them with basic needs along the way. Foster youth lack the basic foundation of stability and security that allows most students to succeed.

One of the main challenges to staying in college is the cost of tuition. This is an expense that many parents pay for their children. Recognizing the state's role as parent, 17 states across the country have college tuition waiver programs at all public colleges and universities for foster youth. California does not have a tuition waiver program. CYC youths' repeated attempts to create a tuition waver program in the state have failed. In addition to tuition, former foster youth have to worry about paying for housing, books, and personal expenses because of a lack of family support.

In order to pay for basic living expenses, many foster youth sacrifice their dream of attending college. Often foster youth are seduced by the lure of quick money that comes with a full-time job, not knowing that they are undermining their earning potential by not getting a college degree. Besides that, there are other factors that prevent former foster youth from completing college, factors that are unique to the foster youth population. For example: many youth do not have a place to live when the school dorms close down for the holidays and during the summer. Many youth are forced to work full time during the summer just to pay for housing during the interim period, as opposed to saving money for school or using the summer time to participate in internship programs, which are becoming more crucial when it comes to finding a job after college. In addition, foster youth have expenses that far exceed those of students with families.

While foster youth who enroll in college are on the right path, the truth is that getting in is only half the battle. Foster youth need financial support to pay their bills, comprehensive campus based support to help them cope and feel they belong, and special consideration for campus housing and support services. However, most college campus leaders lack awareness about the unique needs of foster youth and do not offer this critical assistance. As a result, the majority of foster youth attending college never graduate.

Recommendations:

- Require all state colleges and universities to have year-round dorms or dorms that are open specifically for foster youth during the holidays and summertime.

¹ The McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 42 U.S.C. §11431 et seq., helps homeless children enroll in and remain in school, and assures them necessary services. See <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/education/> for examples of educational material developed.

² H.R. 4003 is currently pending in the 108th Congress U.S. House of Representatives, and provides competitive federal grants to public and private higher education institutions to assist foster youth to prepare for, enter and graduate from college, to receive on campus housing, to improve access to financial aid and to track retention rates of former foster youth students.

- Create tuition waivers specifically for foster youth at public colleges and universities.
- Increase campus based support for foster youth attending college.
- Change the Federal and institutional methodologies for determining financial aid need for former foster youth to reflect the increased financial need of former foster youth attending college. The methodologies should be based on a 12-month calendar instead of a 9-month calendar, since foster youth do not have assistance with living expenses during the summer.

Action Items:

- Advocate to the University of California Regents and the California State University Chancellors for tuition waivers and statewide expansion of the Guardian Scholars program which offers year round housing, full scholarships, support services and mentoring to all California public college and university campuses.
- Ensure California State University Chancellors, Community College Board of Governors and local colleges and universities are aware of the mandates of AB 2463 (Caldera, Chapter 11.29, Statutes of 1996) and are collecting data, surveying former foster youth student housing needs and responding appropriately.
- Meet with campus directors of Student Affairs to offer assistance in implementing the provisions of AB 2463.
- Encourage creation of local campus former foster youth student housing task groups to involve all needed entities (student housing, financial aid, administrators, Equal Opportunity Program, former foster youth students, local child welfare department representatives, etc.).
- Allow former foster youth students year round and priority housing similar to policies for international students and student athletes.
- Advocate at the federal level for increased funding for Education and Training Vouchers (Chafee Grants).
- Analyze California Student Aid Commission data to determine college campuses with a large percentage of foster youth students that could institute a tuition waiver program.
- Advocate at the federal level and at individual colleges for a new specific formula for computing financial need for foster youth.

REPORT 03: FAMILY

For foster youth, the concept of family means much more than blood relatives. Family is defined by relationships: healthy, long-lasting relationships between two or more people that are mutually beneficial. For foster youth, the lack of a biological family unit in their lives can be a serious inhibitor to personal growth. But it does not have to be this way. Foster youth advocates are beginning to see the importance of deep, lasting connections and how they help youth during their time in the system and when they emancipate. We now understand the importance of foster youth having lifelong permanent relationships with people who love them and care about them. Permanency in foster youth's lives has become a major goal for all child welfare workers.

In the last several years CYC has worked to ensure that social workers involve foster youth in permanency efforts and to ensure that people understand that permanency is not a type of placement, it is a relationship. Often child welfare workers forget that a foster youth has already established permanent connections in one way or another. Foster youth all come from families, and it is important that we consider those families when it comes to finding permanent connections for all youth. For example, foster youth have strong bonds with siblings that deserve to be nurtured, maintained and valued.

Family is not just about where you came from, it is also about where you are going. Many youth are starting families of their own, sometimes even when they are in the foster care system. Currently, about 10% of foster youth are parenting. For many foster youth, the opportunity to be a parent is the first chance they have ever had to be connected to someone for the rest of their life. These youth desperately want to provide their children with a life better than the one they had growing up in foster care, but are frequently not provided with the support to do so. Foster youth who are parents face additional challenges becoming self-sufficient and successful. It is important that parenting foster youth learn valuable skills and have the support needed to maintain a healthy family.

Issue #1: Sibling Togetherness

Many foster youth have families, especially brothers and sisters, who deeply care about them and vice versa. Too frequently, the nature of the foster care system splits siblings apart. Foster youth lose the last remaining connections they have to their biological family due to bureaucracy and other matters out of their control. CYC foster youth have fought to have laws passed so foster youth have the right to maintain relationships with their siblings. However, in many counties these laws have not been implemented after many years and sibling relationships are still not given the protection they deserve. Current statistics show that only 42% of foster youth are placed with their siblings in foster care.

Youth whose siblings are adopted into other families lose all contact rights. After an adoption, foster youth are no longer considered legal family to their sibling. They can only maintain contact if the adoptive parents agree and a court order is created. Most adoptions are now open allowing a relationship with biological parents because policy makers recognized the practice of cutting off all ties to parents is detrimental. The same rationale needs to be extended to the outdated practice of severing sibling ties with adoptions. Many

youth say that keeping in touch with their siblings is their top priority. They value the emotional support a brother or sister can provide. They appreciate having someone they can talk to who shares their experience and can make them feel comfortable. Siblings need to maintain these ties to share their history and develop their sense of self. In the hectic world of foster care, having a close relationship with a sibling is crucial to maintaining a sense of stability that transcends any and all placement and personnel changes that a foster youth ultimately experiences.

Recommendations:

- Create legislation that allows siblings to maintain their legal relationship if one or more of them are adopted into a new family.
- Siblings should be given the right to stay in contact at least once a week with their biological siblings unless there is a safety issue.
- If a safety issue exists, a sibling should still be able to maintain contact through letters, supervised visits, etc.

Action Items:

- Research how many foster youth have a post-adoption contact order with their siblings which is currently being enforced.
- Fully implement AB 1987 (Steinberg, Chapter 909, Statutes of 2000). This law requires social workers to include in court reports a section on the child's sibling relationships and the plans for visitation of siblings. It also requires social workers to notify children on their caseload of significant events in the lives of siblings.
- Fully implement AB 2196 (Washington, Chapter 1072, Statutes of 1997). This bill aimed to increase contact and visitation when siblings are adopted separately. When a child is going to be adopted, the bill requires the social worker to include a discussion of sibling visitation and contact in the child's case plan. The bill also authorizes the court to include in an adoption order provisions that will facilitate sibling contact as long as the adoptive parents do not object.
- Fully implement AB 408 (Steinberg, Chapter 813, Statutes of 2003) and AB 1412 (Leno, Chapter 640, Statutes of 2005), which requires social workers to ask youth about important relationships (including siblings) and take action to support those relationships.
- Ensure foster youth are provided with sibling's contact information as required in the emancipation checklist.
- Develop a survey for foster youth to determine the need for increased focus on supporting sibling relationships and visitation in your county.
- Require mandatory sibling visitation as part of placement contracts unless youth do not desire this.

Issue #2: Parenting Foster Youth

Foster youth who have babies require extra care when it comes to providing services, whether they be monetary, psychological, etc. They represent a very vulnerable population who have little resources and have no modeling from either their birth family or the foster care system of what it takes to be a successful parent. Many of these youth struggle with the increased responsibilities of parenting combined with the instability of foster care, which puts their family at risk for being victimized or disrupted. This leads to a vicious cycle where the children of foster youth end up in foster care themselves. To stop this sequence, parenting foster youth must be given more support. Asking them

to take care of a child when they are still themselves a child is a difficult task, but they are up to it. Unfortunately, they are being let down. Often parenting foster youth are forced to switch placements when they have children because of a foster parent's prejudice or a group home's policy. This placement change causes instability in a parenting foster youth's life, just when they need a stable home the most. Also, transitional housing for parents are few and far between. Parenting foster youth say they just want to have the same opportunities as others have while raising their child. To stop the cycle of foster care, a parenting foster youth must be equipped with the skills to become a good parent. Foster youth who are pregnant and parenting deserve the support to give their children a stable, safe living environment and the opportunities they did not have.

Recommendations:

- Increase services and programs for parenting foster youth to address both their needs as a foster youth and their needs as a parent, such as transitional housing, baby supplies, day care, etc.
- Provide easier access to programs already in place such as WIC, Medi-Cal, etc.
- Ensure that foster youths' babies are not removed solely because their parent is in foster care.
- Ensure that foster youths' babies do not have to be placed in foster care in order to receive services and assistance.

Action Items:

- ❑ Encourage the Department of Social Services, Department of Health Services, Department of Education and the programs serving young parents to create a state level task force to coordinate services and outreach to parenting foster youth and their children.
- ❑ Advocate for prioritization of current and former foster youth who are parenting for public programs and benefits such as WIC, Medi-Cal, TANF, subsidized child care, Cal-Learn and Head Start.
- ❑ Advocate for additional support for pregnant and parenting foster youth to give them the assistance they need to learn to be strong, capable parents. Explore funding and create best practice models for statewide innovative programs such as public health home nurses, Traveling Grannies, Birth and Post-Natal Doulas and Birth and Beyond targeted specifically at pregnant and parenting foster youth.
- ❑ Educate social workers, care providers and youth about available programs and services and application processes. Ensure foster youth have all documentation necessary to access services.
- ❑ Track how many foster youth are parenting and how many foster youths' babies are taken away and placed in foster care.
- ❑ Ensure implementation at the state and local level of SB 1178 (Kuehl, Chapter 841, Statutes of 2004) which directs agencies to provide parenting foster youth support services, assistance with educational attainment and increased placement resources. Additionally, SB 1178 requires the state and counties to collect and aggregate data annually on the number of foster youth.
- ❑ Ensure implementation at the state and local level of SB 500 (Kuehl, Chapter 630, Statutes of 2005) which specifies that children cannot be removed simply because their parent is in foster care, and encourages foster youth and their babies to be placed together.
- ❑ Ensure implementation at the state and local level of SB 436 (Migden, Chapter 629, Statutes of 2005) which mandates that counties assess available housing and support services for emancipating pregnant and parenting foster youth and develop a corresponding plan.
- ❑ Inform foster youth of their rights as a parent and the services and resources available to assist them.

REPORT 04: LGBTQ FOSTER YOUTH

LGBTQQ foster youth have two layers of challenges facing them: the fact that they are foster youth and the fact that their status as LGBTQQ invites discrimination and prejudice. Violence and harassment are all too familiar to LGBTQQ youth. Estimates of how many foster youth identify as LGBTQQ range from 1 in 10 to 1 in 20. Often, youth are placed in foster care after suffering abuse or rejection from their family because of their LGBTQQ status. Unfortunately, even in the foster care system LGBTQQ foster youth are not safe from discrimination and abuse.

LGBTQQ foster youth issues are often ignored or forgotten when discussing foster care placements, programs, services or needs for change. It is estimated that 75% of youth will be subjected to anti-LGBTQQ abuse and discrimination once put in an out of home placement. This is on top of the discrimination they already experienced before entering the foster care system. LGBTQQ youth deserve to be recognized as a special group within the foster care system; a group with its own unique needs and issues that must be appropriately addressed. Furthermore, it is the responsibility, moral and legal obligation to all that work in the foster care system to end the cycle of hate and discrimination that so many LGBTQQ youth face on a day-to-day basis.

Issue #1: LGBTQQ Awareness in the Community

So often LGBTQQ youth face discrimination, whether it is at school, in the workplace, or simply on the street. Although there are laws in place preventing such abuses against people because of their sexuality or gender identity, the truth of the matter is that LGBTQQ people are a marginalized group that doesn't receive the protection they deserve. The public lacks understanding and sensitivity, so when abuse occurs it is often tolerated because of fear or ignorance. On top of that, foster youth are also marginalized and misunderstood. This combination leads to an extra layer of discrimination against a large population of LGBTQQ foster youth.

Because the foster care system has not taken the necessary steps to promote acceptance and humane treatment for these youth, CYC feels that it must take action and educate communities on the unique issues of these young people. We believe change should be targeted towards an area where foster youth spend most of their time and also face the most harassment: school. But change should not stop there. It is important that all members of the community understand and recognize not only foster youth, but also foster youth who identify as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or who are questioning.

Recommendations:

- Promote acceptance of LGBTQQ foster youth in public schools.
- Build an educational plan for staff and students that addresses the issues that LGBTQQ foster youth face.
- Require all school districts to implement a training program for staff and students that promotes awareness and acceptance of LGBTQQ foster youth.
- Promote public outreach and advocacy to the entire community about the unique needs of LGBTQQ foster youth and the need to ensure a zero tolerance policy for discrimination against them.

Action Items:

- Train school staff on the needs and rights of LGBTQQ foster youth and how to recognize, respond and prevent harassment and discrimination.
- Ensure foster youth are aware of their rights, and train youth on how to advocate for themselves when their rights are violated.
- Survey foster youth to determine the extent of harassment in the school setting and their ideas for creating a safe environment.
- Require high schools to offer counseling and support groups to LGBTQQ youth.
- Engage LGBTQQ support and advocacy groups in the effort to support foster youth and educate the public about the double discrimination faced by LGBTQQ youth in foster care.

Issue #2: LGBTQQ Awareness in the Foster Care System

It is unfortunate and greatly concerning that so many individuals identifying as LGBTQQ face ignorance and intolerance in the community. However, it is even more saddening and disturbing that they face the same exact things in foster care, a system that explicitly exists to protect youth from harm. As much as individuals try to help all foster youth, LGBTQQ foster youth still face discrimination and harassment in the system. Youth face discrimination from child welfare workers such as lawyers and social workers; from care providers such as foster parents, group home staff, and from other foster youth.

Efforts to end this harmful discrimination are often hampered by personal beliefs. CYC believes that every person working within the foster care system should check his or her biases at the door. Child welfare workers, care providers and advocates are paid to work with all foster youth, and must accept all youth as they come. Foster youth have an identity and have had many experiences before entering foster care, and those working within the system and caring for youth must be committed to equal, fair treatment for all youth. Furthermore, it is up to us to teach others understanding and acceptance of LGBTQQ foster youth.

Often there is a lack of understanding because so many child welfare workers do not have any type of background or training in working with LGBTQQ issues. As a result, issues that are important to LGBTQQ foster youth are ignored or dismissed. Many LGBTQQ foster youth say they feel “invisible” in the system. For example: many social workers do not consider sexuality or gender identity when making placement decisions. Homophobic placements are still a major problem for foster youth. Some foster parents have clearly stated that they refuse to care for LGBTQQ foster youth because of their religious beliefs. Other foster parents believe they should try to change LGBTQQ foster youth through therapy, medication or

punishment. It is humiliating and terrifying to be placed in a home where you are powerless and hated because of who you are. Because of a social worker's lack of awareness, an LGBTQQ foster youth could be exposed to even more discrimination, or even violence. Those working in the child welfare system must make a commitment to educate themselves and to set an example of awareness and acceptance for all people.

Recommendations:

- Require all foster parents to take special trainings that deal with LGBTQQ foster youth issues.
- Create an LGBTQQ organization focusing on group homes and foster homes that helps with placement options and education.
- Create an LGBTQQ foster youth community center where young people can feel comfortable in a public setting.
- Be aware of the unique challenges LGBTQQ foster youth face and provide special support and services for LGBTQQ foster youth as needed.

Action Items:

- Encourage full implementation of AB 458 (Chu, Chapter 331, Statutes of 2003), requiring training for foster parents and group home staff on non-discrimination policies and LGBTQQ foster youth issues.
- Encourage a particular focus on technical assistance for placements in rural areas where there may be much less tolerance, information and services available for LGBTQQ foster youth than in urban cities.
- Placement agencies should develop a survey to determine the availability and need for LGBTQQ sensitive homes.
- Local child welfare departments should conduct specific recruitment for foster parents within the LGBTQQ friendly community.
- State Department of Social Services should provide counties technical assistance with the issue of abuse in foster care of LGBTQQ youth.
- Community Care Licensing should interview youth during licensing visits to ensure youth feel safe in their placements and are not being subjected to abuse, and institute a customer satisfaction survey.
- Include AB 458 mandates in all Foster Youth Rights material such as posters, pamphlets or fliers, and ensure Foster Youth Bill of Rights posters are posted in all homes with six or more residents.
- Train foster youth on their rights so they can be effective self-advocates.
- Include mandatory classes to teach tolerance to all foster youth once a year or during ILP training and in group home placements.
- Include tolerance training as a regular part of social worker training academies and Community Care Licensing group home trainings.

CONCLUSION

This report is a summary of current issues that California's foster youth feel are the most pressing in 2005. Through their advocacy and outreach efforts, CYC members have educated policy makers, child welfare workers, foster parents, and community members on the unique needs of transition-aged foster youth and how those stakeholders can make a difference. With this report, CYC hopes to further educate people and to share the concerns and recommendations that CYC members have made during the past year.

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CALIFORNIA YOUTH CONNECTION

604 Mission Street, 9th Floor
San Francisco, CA 94105
Phone (415) 442-5060
Toll Free (800) 397-8236
Fax (415) 442-0720
www.calyouthconn.org

REDDING OFFICE

1650 Oregon Street, #111
Redding, CA 96001
Phone (530) 243-8450
Fax (530) 243-8650

LOS ANGELES OFFICE

523 West 6th Street, #365
Los Angeles, CA 90014
Phone (213) 489-0720
Fax (213) 489-0620