

INTRODUCTION

California Youth Connection (CYC) is a statewide foster youth empowerment and advocacy organization that is guided, focused and driven by current and former foster youth, ages 14–24. With 22 chapters and approximately 350 members statewide, CYC is a microcosm of California's foster care system. CYC includes representation from youth of color, parenting youth, LGBTQ youth, youth experiencing mental health issues, and other stigmatized groups of young people.

CYC members meet regularly with their local chapters and participate in three statewide conferences per year: "Day at the Capitol" occurs the first weekend in February and is a chance for CYC members to participate in civic leadership by gaining political advocacy skills and putting those skills to work in meetings with their state assembly member and/or senator in Sacramento. After Day at the Capitol, there is a "Spring Conference" and a "Fall Conference." Both conferences provide an opportunity for CYC members to gather together, update each other on local issues in their counties, participate in a variety of different trainings developed by their foster care peers and other experts, and share ideas for legislative and policy change in the foster care system.

Abstract

The weekend of October 4th, 5th, and 6th, 2002 culminated in a remarkable showing of leadership, ambition, and collective expertise as California Youth Connection members presented policy recommendations to local and statewide representatives at the Glenn County CYC conference. Foster youth from 19 different counties across the state came together to address issues in adoption, clothing allowance policy, emancipation preparation and services, foster youth representation in media, and mental health treatment by sharing their personal experiences and recommending interventions that would have made those personal experiences better. From these discussions came concrete solutions and policy recommendations that can be implemented at both the state and county level for the betterment of foster care. This report summarizes the discussions of CYC members in regard to those issues and presents policy solutions that will address their needs.

Adoption

CYC youth see both advantages and disadvantages to adoption. Adoption is considered advantageous when it provides a nurturing home for foster youth who may have lacked stability during their time in foster care. Adoption is thought to provide foster youth with a family-like setting that is conducive to preparing youth

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for emancipation. Some youth feel that life skills such as grocery shopping, cooking, and washing clothes are best learned in a home-like environment which adoption provides more certainly than foster or group homes.

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CYC youth also identified ways in which adoption is not beneficial to children. Youth want to be involved in the decision making process with regard to their case plan. Adoption is considered disadvantageous when youth are not invited to take part in this decision making process and are adopted against their will. Special concern was voiced for children under the age of 14, who often are not asked for their opinions at all. Youth are also concerned that adoption might terminate their legal right to maintain contact with biological relatives. Biological ties to family are considered by some youth to be of the utmost importance. Any arrangement terminating these relationships is considered detrimental to the well being of the child. Some youth feel that adoption in general may make it difficult to maintain loving relationships with their biological parents. This may alienate youth from bonding with their adoptive family out of concern for maintaining relationships with their biological family.

Another issue addressed was that foster youth who later went on to be adopted are no longer eligible to receive some types of financial assistance for college. Foster youth feel that this policy is unfair and often imposes a financial hardship on adoptive families who may not be able to financially support youth during their years in school. CYC youth feel that youth who spent any time in foster care, no matter the length, should be eligible for the same amount of financial assistance as youth who aged out of foster care at 18. Considering the financial burden that is often associated with attendance at a university or other post-secondary institution, this policy could make education continuation an option for more former foster youth.

Clothing Allowance

Foster youth are concerned that the clothing allowances set aside for them are often not spent on fulfilling their clothing needs. State regulations specify that care providers will be allocated a certain amount of money at regular intervals during the year specifically for the purpose of buying clothes. These funds are meant to ensure that foster youth have an adequate supply of school and other seasonal clothes year round. What foster youth experience, however, is that the money set aside for them often does not get spent on them.

CYC youth developed a number of solutions addressing this problem. Youth under the age of 14 should have a mentor or social worker designated for them whose job duties include taking the youth shopping for clothes on a regular basis. This policy would ensure that the money designated for the purchase of clothing actually gets spent as such. Youth 14 and older should receive their clothing allow-

ance personally to allow a degree of autonomy when purchasing clothing, but should be required to submit receipts to their social worker proving they spent the allowance as allocated.

CYC youth report feeling distrustful of foster parents when it comes to the issue of clothing allowance. These youth feel that foster parents regard the clothing allowance as "extra money" that does not necessarily need to be spent on the youth's needs. This proves problematic in the foster parent/foster youth relationship because it makes youth less likely to trust their caretaker in other situations.

CYC youth advocate for a number of penalties that would make it harder for foster parents to misspend clothing allowances. Foster parents who misspend youth's funds should have the incident documented in the social worker's reports; foster parents who consistently misspend should lose their foster parenting license and not be allowed to care for any more foster children. Foster youth also recommend that social workers do monthly inventories of foster parent's expenditures, taking care to note whether or not the clothing allowance was actually spent on the youth.

Foster youth take their clothing allowances very seriously and report feeling angry and disadvantaged when money that is set aside for their needs is not spent on them. Foster youth feel that caretakers who consistently misspend clothing allowances are taking away from the little that foster youth are actually given and are therefore not fit to be foster parents. Foster youth regard the misappropriation of clothing allowance, funds as a criminal offense, punishable by revoking the foster parent's license.

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Emancipation

CYC members identified two major barriers to emancipation in transition aged foster youth: the lack of preparation foster youth get before emancipation and the lack of services provided afterwards. There are four categories that foster youth report struggling with. These categories include: 1) budgeting, prioritizing needs, and establishing credit, 2) forming healthy, emotionally supportive relationships, 3) dealing with daily necessities such as groceries, laundry and food preparation, and finally, 4) housing and job placement assistance. Several solutions were proposed to help youth deal with these obstacles.

Emancipation Preparation. Youth want a mandatory percentage of foster care monies to be put aside for them in a private savings account to be used post-emancipation. These funds will assist emancipating foster youth with start-up expenses such as housing deposits, transportation and school tuition as needed. This will make it less likely that foster youth who emancipate on their 18th birthday will spend their first night of freedom in a shelter or on the streets, as is a common occurrence.

Foster youth also want more workshops/seminars that cover life skills such as money management and establishing credit. Youth often do not receive such

trainings and report difficulties when trying to decipher between needs and wants, and prioritizing a budget in light of these needs and wants. Youth also want to receive training in establishing credit. This is of special concern because it is often difficult to find housing without having established credit, and many utilities such as electricity and phone require a credit check before issuing services. Youth feel that adequate training in the above areas would help ease the transition from dependence to adulthood, making it easier for them to concentrate on making life after foster care successful.

Foster youth recognize the importance of establishing healthy interpersonal relationships if they are to find success in life after foster care. Barriers to this success occur when youth have interpersonal issues weighing them down that may or may not be a direct result of life in the system. CYC members identified psychological counseling and psychiatric services as one avenue by which youth who struggle with interpersonal issues can receive help. This help will, in turn, give foster youth the confidence they need to form long-lasting friendships with people in their communities who can act as an emotional support system.

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Emancipated foster youth who want to utilize psychological services report that they face financial and access barriers that impede them from receiving services. Mental health care is often very expensive and not easily affordable for emancipated foster youth just starting out on their own. Foster youth also feel that many services simply are not accessible to them—they do not know what services are available, where to sign up for them, or where to get them.

Proposed solutions to these problems include mandating social workers to offer long-term counseling services before and/or at the time of emancipation and establishing psychological counseling services at no cost to the current or former foster youth. These interventions are proposed with the intention of making mental health services accessible to foster youth who are facing barriers to establishing healthy relationships due to internal issues they may be resolving because of the time they spent in foster care.

Foster youth also want more instructional classes/workshops that will give them hands-on training in taking care of their daily needs such as grocery shopping, laundry, health and hygiene. Foster youth feel that the Independent Living Program (ILP) is a good start for obtaining such information, but that oftentimes ILP events and workshops are not publicized to them beforehand. Youth would like to attend more classes through their ILP and want to see more “daily living” specific classes offered and made accessible to them. Aside from formalized instruction in the classroom, youth feel that foster/group homes are invaluable resources when it comes to emancipation preparation and that these facilities /should be mandated to involve them in daily activities such as grocery shopping and food preparation. Classroom instruction paired alongside hands-on experi-

ence in the home will give youth the skills that they need to take care of themselves once they live on their own.

Just as important in the lives of foster youth is the ability to secure housing and find jobs. Foster youth want their ILPs to have more instructional classes/workshops on apartment hunting and job searching. Youth also want ILP to take on the role of a housing/employment resource center by offering up-to-date information on the kinds of housing programs available to foster youth and specific job opportunities that are open to emancipated youth. Foster youth would also like to see the Employment Development Department (EDD) implement a statewide program that will assist former foster youth in finding employment. These interventions will remove some of the barriers to finding housing and employment that foster youth face.

Post Emancipation Services. Several recommendations for post-emancipation services were discussed in the above section as adjuncts to emancipation preparation services. For the most part, foster youth feel that the majority of barriers emancipated youth face could have been addressed far before their date of emancipation through their ILP classes or other specialized services.

One recurring problem foster youth report facing that is not addressed by emancipation preparation services is access to medical care. With the passage of SB 147 in 2000, foster youth's Medi-Cal benefits were extended past the age of 18 to age 21. Despite this tremendous accomplishment on the part of CYC advocates, emancipated foster youth report that social workers never made them aware of this change and that they go for months without realizing they are eligible for this extension. Youth who finally do realize they can sign up for a Medi-Cal extension have trouble obtaining documentation asserting their status as a former foster youth. This can lead to delays in service delivery and deteriorating health care because youth often do not try to see doctors until their condition has already become severe.

CYC members propose two easy solutions to these problems: 1) keep social workers updated on legislation affecting the benefits foster youth are entitled to while encouraging them to share any new information with the youth on their case load, and 2) make documentation of a youth's dependent status another required form that travels with them after they emancipate from foster care. Social workers should keep youth informed about new policies and services that can help them get what they need, but often do not because they are not informed of these policies themselves. County welfare agencies should do a better job training social workers on new legislation. In regard to documentation, a simple statement declaring that a youth was once in the foster care system and is thereby entitled to receive services for current and former foster youth would suffice for eliminating the time lapse between when foster youth sign up for services such as Medi-Cal and

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when they are actually able to receive them. With this documentation, the youth will not have to track down a former social worker just to write a simple letter.

Media

Foster youth are concerned about the ways the media negatively represents them on television and in the newspapers. Foster youth feel these barriers become more pervasive when the media consistently portray youth in care as being “delinquent,” “confused,” and “dealing with issues.” The negative portrayals of foster youth the media offers makes it harder for CYC members to continue their advocacy efforts because they are constantly dealing with stereotypes that make it difficult for people to take them seriously.

CYC members want to see communities take more responsibility for the ways that foster youth are portrayed in media. Foster youth want the world to know that they are not one monolithic group, and that while some youth struggle with delinquency or other behavioral problems, many youth do not. Some foster youth would even be considered model citizens—a phenomenon found in any diverse group of people. Foster youth want to see positive representations of themselves that embrace the diversity of foster youth. Media should portray stories of youth from every walk of life. CYC members especially want television and newspapers to spotlight foster youth and their families who are doing well, as opposed to always running stories about youth who are getting into trouble.

CYC members want to see community-based organizations sponsor rallies, fundraisers, and other special events that aim to educate the public about the experiences of foster care youth, while simultaneously working to break down stereotypes and conquer fear of foster youth and youth in general. CYC members want to participate in building community awareness projects by visiting local legislative representatives such as assembly members, senators and city council members to educate them about the needs of foster youth. CYC members also want to write bulletins for local newspapers that describe CYC, who foster youth are, and CYC regional and statewide events.

Finally, CYC members want to facilitate community awareness by putting on periodic conferences for the public that give lay people a good understanding about the issues foster youth face. CYC youth want to be the ones who develop and deliver the curriculum for these workshops. They also want these workshops to be free and open to the public by way of invitation, flyers and word-of-mouth announcements. The purpose of these workshops will be to sensitize those not familiar with the foster care system to the strengths and challenges of foster youth who experience(d) life in the system.

Mental Health Treatment

CYC members are concerned that some youth are being forced to participate in mental health treatment for “irrelevant reasons.” Foster youth consider “irrelevant reasons” to include the following: sadness and grief experienced over the loss of a loved one; adolescent rebelliousness; nonconformity; and anger at being mistreated or having personal needs unrecognized. Foster youth feel they are forced to attend therapy sessions and take medication without having any input about whether or not they actually feel they would benefit from treatment. Youth also feel social workers and therapists should recognize the “real issues” that occur in their lives and to stop forcing them into treatment as punishment for normal adolescent behaviors.

Improper diagnosis and overmedication are two other categories of vital concern to foster youth. Youth have been given improper diagnoses due to behaviors they exhibited or that were misinterpreted in the past. An example of this is if a youth in foster care went through a period of sadness and grief because they lost a family member and long after the fact were still being treated for depression when the condition no longer existed. Foster youth feel they are becoming dependent on drugs they may not even need and that social workers are not pressing for intensive medical examinations before a youth is made to take those drugs.

Foster youth want social workers, care providers, and psychotherapists to consider the long term implications of labeling youth as having mental health problems. Foster youth who are labeled “mentally ill” whether or not they exhibit actual symptoms of mental illness experience low self esteem, a sense of alienation from their peers, and a poor outlook on their future. Also, youth who had mental illness documented into their court reports and case files report that these labels are perceived negatively by future social workers and caregivers they come in contact with. Youth feel that labels follow them around throughout their life in foster care and these labels ruin any chance they might have had to start fresh in a new home.

CYC members proposed ways social workers, care providers, and psychotherapists could support foster youth around mental health awareness, treatment, and stigma. First, foster youth want to be involved in the diagnosis and treatment process. They want their treatment plan to reflect actual ailments they are dealing with and not normal adolescent behaviors such as rebellion or nonconformity. Foster youth do not want to be medicated as punishment for behavior. Nor do they want medication to be their only treatment option. Psychotherapists should be encouraged to brainstorm multiple ways that a particular condition can be addressed and to share these options with the individual youth they are working with.

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In the event youth have to be medicated, social workers and psychotherapists should be required to monitor the long-term effects of medication and take care to never put youth on medications that could trigger dangerous side effects. The health and well being of the youth should be assessed in regular intervals, and if it is found that medication is no longer necessary, the use of that medication should be immediately discontinued. Foster youth are concerned that youth become addicted to psychotropic medications long before emancipation, and then when they emancipate, have trouble finding jobs or securing housing because of this addiction.

CYC members want social workers and psychotherapists to slowly decrease the amount of medication administered to foster youth prior to emancipation so they can be medication free when they leave the system. Youth feel drug-dependency makes it harder for them to focus on overcoming obstacles they will inevitably face after emancipation. Also, emancipated foster youth may have trouble paying for psychotropic medication after they leave the system due to limited health insurance. This makes the withdrawal period more severe because youth have no choice but to completely stop taking the medication, which may have adverse side effects.

Finally, youth would like care providers and psychotherapists to show increased sensitivity when working with foster youth experiencing mental illness. This sensitivity can be obtained through attendance at training classes designed to introduce them to the special emotional needs of foster youth. These classes should also focus a substantial amount of time on the real-life stressors foster youth face such as homelessness, financial insecurity, lack of familial support and how these stressors impact mental health. Foster youth also see the potential for teachers at the high school level to undergo such training.

Conclusion

This report summarizes some of the current issues affecting the lives of California's transition aged foster youth. California Youth Connection publishes this report in hopes that the experiences and recommendations of its membership will be heard and the call to take action will be heeded. Policy makers, child welfare workers, foster parents and other community members involved in the lives of current and former foster youth now have an opportunity to advocate for change for foster youth just as CYC members have always done. Help support EMPOWERMENT through ADVOCACY. We encourage you in your efforts and, as always, CYC will be working hard to bring the voices of foster youth into the mainstream for the betterment of foster care everywhere.