

VOICES

of the

UNHEARD

A Public & Mental Health Taskforce



A Project of California Youth Connection
2009-2010



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Voices of the Unheard

Voices of the Unheard is a year-long taskforce formed to advocate, educate and work with decision makers to improve mental and public health outcomes for foster youth.

The Taskforce consists of six CYC members representing Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Riverside Counties, who named the project, "Voices of the Unheard," to represent foster youth who experience challenges with accessing public and mental health services and are traditionally unrepresented at policy making tables.

The goals of the Taskforce are to advocate against budget cuts to mental and public health services, raise awareness of how these cuts affect current and former foster youth, and educate the community about the quality and accessibility of these services. The Taskforce hopes that current and former foster youth will be heard in the development of public and mental health policy and legislation.



California Youth Connection

California Youth Connection is guided, focused and driven by current and former foster youth with the assistance of other committed community members. CYC promotes the participation of foster youth in policy development and legislative change to improve the foster care system, and strives to improve social work practice and child welfare policy.

Founded in 1988 on the model of youth empowerment, CYC maintains a dual focus on policy and youth development. Core CYC activities include:

- * Serving more than 300 foster youth members, ages 14-24, in 29 county-based chapters throughout the state
- * Training members on legislative and policy advocacy
- * Identifying local issues and using community organizing to create change
- * Creating recommendations for legislative and policy changes
- * Educating policymakers and providers and
- * Working with county and state policymakers to implement legislation

CYC has created a fundamental paradigm shift in child welfare policy in California - foster youth are at the policy table, shaping the state's child welfare reform priorities at an unprecedented rate. CYC has a 22-year track record of engaging foster youth in child welfare policy advocacy, setting a new national standard others are eager to emulate.

- Approximately one in four children remain in foster care for 42 months or longer.
- More than half of children in foster care are separated from their siblings.
- 43% of California's children in foster care are moved 3 or more times; 11 % are moved 5 or more times.
- 30% of foster youth function below their educational grade level.
- Half of all foster youth have been held back in school.
- 46% of foster youth fail to complete high school, compared with 16% of non-foster youth.
- Unemployment rates for emancipated youth are estimated at 50%.
- Nearly a third of foster youth will become homeless at some time within the first year after they leave the system at age 18.
- About one fourth of these youth will be incarcerated within the first two years after they leave the system.
- Approximately one third of foster youth will be on public assistance shortly after aging out of the system.

FOSTER CARE DEFINED

The state child welfare services system is the safety net for children who have been abused and neglected. Foster care is the primary component of the child welfare services system. It is defined as the 24-hour out-of-home care provided to children in need of temporary or long-term substitute parenting because their own families are unable or unwilling to care for them. The purpose of foster care is to keep children safe while child welfare services are provided so they can be reunited with their families.

Approximately 60,000 children live in foster care in California. Youth may live in relative care, foster homes or group homes. Due to its complexity and scope, foster care is generally referred to as a system.

The state is required to become involved in a family's life when parents neglect or abuse their children or do not protect them from neglect/abuse. When it steps in to protect children, the state becomes the parent – it takes on the responsibility to provide for the child's safety and well-being.

Foster youth also report that many foster care policies and practices do not meet their needs. Many grow up in, or return to, a system that is commonly labeled "in crisis." And, too often, foster children experience physical and emotional damage within the system that is intended to protect them.

MENTAL AND PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICES & FOSTER YOUTH

Over the past year the Voices of the Unheard Taskforce has been identifying the challenges that foster youth face in accessing mental and public health services and the quality of these services. The members created and distributed surveys to youth in San Bernardino, Riverside and Los Angeles, and to CYC members across the state. In addition the members held focus groups to better understand the challenges of these systems.

BACKGROUND

All foster youth qualify to receive Medi-Cal benefits as their primary source of health insurance until the age 21. Medi-Cal much like the Child Welfare system can be complex and hard to navigate for youth. Foster youth are at the mercy of their placements to provide information about healthy living, medical resources, access to doctors (including transportation), and information about their health care. Unlike youth who reside with their parents, foster youth have to coordinate their medical needs and services with social workers, attorneys, caregivers and/or group home staff. Additional challenges arise when youth move from one county to another - their providers change and often their Medi-Cal does not transfer, particularly for mental health services.

Transitioning youth have further challenges accessing Medi-Cal. Once a youth transitions from foster care, they must reapply for Medi-Cal every year or whenever they move. As many foster youth emancipate into unstable housing, move frequently and often experience episodes of homelessness, these requirements are challenging for youth to meet.

- In the US, 1 in 10 children and adolescents suffer from mental illness severe enough to cause some level of impairment.
- Youth who have been exposed to abuse and neglect experience increased behavioral issues including: emotional dysregulation, insecure attachment behaviors, anxiety, PTSD and depression.
- Foster youth occupy 40% of the child mental health inpatient beds on any given day.
- Many youth receive mental health services from therapists who are funded directly by their placement and are forced to stop treatment when they move placements.
- Foster youth are at especially high medical risk and likely to have acute, chronic, and complex health needs resulting from past neglect or abuse.
- One in two youth in foster care have a chronic medical condition.
- Approximately 67% of parents with youth in the child welfare system require substance abuse treatment, but child welfare agencies are able to provide treatment for only 31%.

Public Health Recommendations

1. **Extend Medi-Cal for foster youth until age 26**



2. **Eliminate Medi-Cal annual re-eligibility forms for foster youth so they receive uninterrupted Medi-Cal until age 21 as intended by law**

3. **Foster youth should receive Medi-Cal cancellation notices six months prior to Medi-Cal being terminated**



4. **All counties should develop a plan to identify the public health services needed in their county and action steps to address the needs**

5. **Each county should have a Health Specialist or Public Health Nurse to promote health education for foster youth in their county**

Mental Health Bill of Rights

- 1. You have the right to interview two to four therapists prior to working with them so that a connection can be built.**
- 2. You have the right to refuse medication as long as you are not at risk of hurting yourself or others and you are at least 10 years old.**
- 3. You have the right to be presented with all of your mental health options, including but not limited to: holistic or natural approaches, mentoring, peer counseling, therapy, and medication. In addition, you have the right to refuse treatment after you have attempted your options.**
- 4. You have the right to continue services with your therapist or counselor if you have moved placements within 30 miles of your previous placement. It is the county Department of Social Services' responsibility to find appropriate transportation to ensure you can continue these services.**
- 5. You have the right to have your mental health assessed by a trained evaluator who has had no personal ties to you before you entered into services.**
- 6. You have the right to have mental health services provided outside of your place of residence.**
- 7. Your social worker must help complete the necessary paperwork in order for you to obtain mental health services and these services must be included in your emancipation checklist.**
- 8. You have the right to obtain your health records (i.e. education and health passport).**
- 9. You have the right to confidentiality when interacting with mental health professionals, unless you are at risk of harming yourself or others.**

Voices of the Unheard Taskforce



Brittany Edwards is a former foster youth. She spent 8 years in the Los Angeles County foster care system. She is now emancipated and currently working for California Youth Connection as a Clerical Assistant in the Los Angeles field office. She loves what CYC does: it shows endurance, motivation, persistence and the ability to help future and current foster youth. Ms. Edwards obtained her high school diploma from Partridge Private School with a 3.05 GPA. She has successfully completed cosmetology school and will be taking the licensing exam soon. She recently moved into her own apartment after transitioning from Transitional Living.

Celeste Brown-Osborne is 21 years old, likes to watch movies, read, and play basketball. Ms. Osborne was a ward of the court at birth. She had one failed adoption, and numerous placements before she was 5. At the age of 7 she was adopted again. She soon realized the adoption was not a good fit, and wanted out. However no one would listen and she was forced to stay in the home. A week after Ms. Osborne graduated high school she was kicked out of her adopted home. Ms. Osborne currently works for San Bernardino Children and Family Services as a Peer and Family Assistant. She loves making improvements within the foster care system so the future for foster youth is brighter!



Gardenia Benicio is a senior at Film and Theater Arts Charter High School Big Picture Los Angeles. She has served her community by being involved with California Youth Connection (CYC), where she is the co-chair of her chapter and she interns at the Southern Region office. Ms. Benicio became a part of the Voices of the Unheard to bring more awareness to the issues going on in mental health and to raise awareness to the steps people can take to make it better. She hopes to attend UC Berkeley in the fall of 2011.

Kassandra Peterson is 20 years old. She is a 3rd year Psychology and Women Studies major at the University of California Riverside. In addition to her involvement in California Youth Connection and the Taskforce, she works in a research lab on campus where she studies foster youth and how their adversities affect achievement. As a former foster youth, Ms. Peterson has witnessed the atrocities in the foster care system, and is driven to promote change. She is the oldest of four children, and would like to make a difference in the lives of her siblings still in foster care, as well as, children entering the system daily. Some of her hobbies include rock climbing, reading, spending time with friends, and skateboarding.





Porschea Williams is passionate about advocating on behalf of foster youth and making changes in the system. She grew up in the LA County Child Welfare system, entering care at 2, living with her paternal grandmother until she was 14, and emancipating from care at 18. Ms. Williams is active with CYC and with the Pasadena Alumni Support Center. Currently attending Los Angeles Trade Tech College, pursuing an A.A. in Child Development, Ms. Williams plans to transfer to California State Polytechnic University in Pomona, California and earn her degree in Social Work. Ms. Williams is a career development intern with L.A. County DFCS. She is the proud mother of 2 sons and recently became the guardian of her infant nephew.

Shawn Davis is 18 years old. He attends Options for Youth Home School in Victorville, CA. He is a talented and award winning poet, expressing himself through words and song. Mr. Davis also enjoys cooking and bonding with friends. He has been a part of CYC for over a year and joined the taskforce 8 months ago because he wanted to bring awareness to the struggles foster youth face in the mental and public health care systems.



Supporters



Cynthia Freeman is active in supporting the advocacy of foster youth and has been an Adult Supporter with California Youth Connection for over 4 years. Ms. Freeman is currently attending school, studying Criminal Justice, and hoping one day to be able to use her degree for the benefit of the youth she works with. This last year working on the Mental & Public Health task force has been eye opening for her. Ms. Freeman had no idea of the medical issues facing foster youth that she and her children have taken for granted. She looks forward to the change this forum will bring about.

Trinity Wallace-Ellis was raised in the LA County Foster Care System, has struggled with adversity and surpassed those challenges to become an inspiration for those currently experiencing the foster care system. She offers a unique perspective of foster care experience blended with that of a professional working in the field. Her inspirational words have touched the lives of thousands of children, parents and employees of the child welfare system. Her speeches and trainings have directly impacted policy and legislation on a county, state and national level. With the continued support of her husband, children and siblings, Ms. Wallace-Ellis is motivated to continue her mission to share her vibrant personality, her vision, and her passion with others.



On behalf on the all of the Voices of the Unheard taskforce members, we would like to extend our deepest gratitude to the following organizations and individuals for their support over the past year..

The California Endowment

California Youth Connection Statewide Staff

**Supporters:
Cynthia Freeman
Trinity Wallace-Ellis**

Holiday Inn in Ontario

**California State Department of Social Services
The counties of Riverside, San Bernardino, and Los Angeles**

**The Public and Mental Health Forum
Keynote speaker: Dr. Lorna Kendrick**

**The Public and Mental Health Forum Panelists:
Christina Riehl
Summer Hardy
Ke Andre Bell-Washington
Angela Hudson
Tatianna Byrd**



STATE

604 Mission Street
Ninth Floor
San Francisco, CA 94105
P: 415.442.5060
P: 800.397.8236
F: 415.442.0720

NORCAL

744 P Street
MS 8-13-25
Sacramento, CA 95814
P: 916.651.6254
F: 916.657.3791

SOCAL

901 Corporate Center Dr
Suite 205
Monterey Park, CA 91754
P: 323.267.0720
F: 323.267.0620

www.calyouthconn.org