

ONE RECOMMENDATION AT A TIME.

A large, light-colored silhouette of a person from the chest up, facing right. The person's right hand is raised with fingers spread, and a microphone is positioned in front of their mouth. The silhouette is set against a plain white background.

CALIFORNIA YOUTH CONNECTION
2003/2004 Fall Policy Conference Report



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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 23 chapters and over 450 members statewide, CYC is a microcosm of California's foster care youth. CYC members are foster youth from every lifestyle with every foster care experience represented: long term foster care, guardianship, adoption, youth with children, youth receiving mental health services, youth in the juvenile justice system and more.

CYC was founded on the concept of youth empowerment. The CYC philosophy is that foster youth, as recipients of child welfare services, are the leading experts in the child welfare field and need to have input in the decisions made about the foster care system. In accordance with the CYC philosophy, CYC members participate in every aspect of leadership and decision-making within the organization. The foundation of CYC is the *local chapter*. Local chapters are county based and are youth run enterprises—youth call the meetings, set the agenda, take notes, and carry out every function of the chapter. The purpose of the local chapter is to inform child welfare policy at the county level and to educate the surrounding community about foster care issues.

CYC members also organize three statewide conferences per year. In February of each year members organize CYC's annual Day at the Capitol. The Day at the Capitol is a three day leadership /advocacy conference where CYC members are trained on the political process ("How a Bill Becomes a Law") and go to the state capitol to meet with legislators about foster care issues. Frequently, the ideas presented in these meetings are picked up by state representatives and are turned into bills. In many cases, these bills have become laws.

Every summer CYC members organize a leadership conference, organized exclusively to promote capacity building within the membership. CYC leadership conferences give new members the chance to learn more about CYC as an organization, and give experienced members the opportunity to build more advocacy skills. Some topics that have been covered at leadership conferences include: chart writing, facilitation skills, how to work with the media, conflict resolution, and community organizing.

This report is a product of CYC's 2003 and 2004 Fall Policy Conferences. The Policy Conference is the one time per year that CYC members statewide gather specifically to discuss current issues in foster care, and to propose policy solutions to address those issues. The last day of the Fall Policy Conference is spent presenting issues and recommendations to a distinguished panel that has included California State legislators, local policy makers, various directors of child welfare programs and other decision makers within the child welfare system.

2003 FALL CONFERENCE REPORT

For the 2003 conference we evolved from our traditional format to include special guests other than our usual distinguished panel of decision makers. Whereas our distinguished panel sat at the front of the room and were asked to comment on the youth's recommendations after each group of CYC members presented, our special guests were seated in the audience. After the presentations, special guests and distinguished panelists were invited to join discussion groups with CYC members where all 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. Several policy changes did in fact come out of these discussion groups, thus proving our Policy Conference evolution very successful.

THE DISTINGUISHED PANEL FOR THE 2003 FALL POLICY CONFERENCE INCLUDED:

Wanda Bonnell – Academic Advisor, California State University Stanislaus, Educational Opportunity Program (EOP)

Dennard David – President / CEO of D&D Associates, LLC Management Consulting; Member of the Merced County Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Commission

Kathy Dresslar – Legislative Director, Assemblyman Darryl Steinberg (D-Sacramento), chairman of the California State Assembly Appropriations Committee

Toby Ewing – Senior Project Manager, Little Hoover Commission

Linda Lee Whipple – Stanislaus County Family Services Assistant Director

Shannan Wilbur – Executive Director, Legal Services for Children, Model Standards Project

Nancy Williamson – Stanislaus County Superior Court Juvenile Court Commissioner

Our special guests included ILP coordinators, child welfare workers, judicial officers, legislative staff, providers, foundations, youth advocates, academics, various people from the State Departments of Education, Mental Health and Social Services, decision makers within the California State University system, human rights organizations, and more.

CYC's 2003 Fall Policy Conference took place the weekend of November 8th, 9th, and 10th in Modesto, California. This section of the report summarizes the policy discussions and recommendations of CYC members participating in the Fall 2003 Policy Conference. The following topics were explored: Education (K-12), Higher Education, LGBTQQ (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Questioning Queer) Foster Youth and Improving Social Work Services.

REPORT: EDUCATION

ISSUE 1: Foster Youth and Access to Educational Resources

There are educational resources that exist for foster youth. Some examples of resources include tutoring services, money to pay for extracurricular activities such as sports and music, and Foster Youth Services (FYS). However, CYC members feel that available educational resources for foster youth are underutilized because foster youth do not know what resources are available or how to access them. Foster youth do not get this information because social workers and foster parents are not regularly updated on foster care resources.

Recommendations:

- Social workers should spend part of their regular meetings with foster youth discussing available educational resources.
- Child Welfare agencies should convene conferences on accessing resources for foster youth.
- Foster youth and social work staff should work closely together to identify educational resources available to foster youth.
- Utilize local media to get the word out about current services available to foster youth and how to access them.
- County Independent Living Programs (ILP) should publish a monthly newsletter or send individual letters to foster youth listing educational resources.
- Flyers listing educational resources could be created and posted in locations frequented by foster youth.
- ILP could create a “publicity council” of foster youth in charge of creating posters and flyers about educational resources and brainstorming effective ways of mass distribution.

Action Items:

- ❑ Create state and local foster youth education task forces to coordinate education advocacy efforts and disseminate information about existing and needed resources.
- ❑ Ensure all education task force groups and related advisory groups have foster youth representation.
- ❑ Ensure that all Foster Youth Services programs include foster youth in their planning processes and advisory groups.
- ❑ Host county foster youth education summits to share information about resources with child welfare professionals, education professionals, providers and youth.
- ❑ Identify local foster youth education liaisons² and include them in local child welfare trainings and meetings.
- ❑ Create a joint education/child welfare state office to coordinate all foster youth education efforts and resources such as Foster Youth Services, and foster youth education liaisons.

¹Foster Youth Services (FYS) is authorized under Education Code sections 42920-42925, and provides educational support services to foster youth. Outcome data shows that 79% of foster youth receiving FYS support in 2002-03 gained more than one month of academic growth per month of tutoring received. California Department of Education, Foster Youth Services Program, Report to the Governor and Legislature (2004). Available at: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/pf/fy/documents/fylegreport2004.pdf>.

- ❑ Invest in a comprehensive state and local education awareness campaign to inform youth, providers and child welfare workers about the educational resources and rights that are available (similar to the McKinney-Vento education efforts for homeless youth.)³
- ❑ Incorporate information on available educational resources as a regular component of foster parent and social worker training.
- ❑ Develop an education resource handbook with all local resources in each county to provide to caregivers, social workers and youth.

ISSUE 2: Foster Youth and Confidentiality

Few situations are more embarrassing to foster youth than being at school and having one’s social worker walk on campus wearing a uniform, badge, and carrying a cache of official looking papers thus identifying themselves as a social worker. Equally embarrassing for foster youth is finding out that all one’s teachers or guidance school counselors have identified them as a foster youth and possibly have access to sensitive information about their case. These common scenarios are devastating to foster youth, who simply want to live a “normal” high school life—but are daily reminded that their lives are not “normal”, that they are different from other people, and that they are constantly being seen as the stereotype of what a “foster kid” is rather than the unique individual that they actually are.

Recommendations:

- Social workers should remove their badges and conceal their paperwork before visiting youth at their school.
- Social workers should refer to themselves as the youth’s friend, mentor, or other nonrevealing label as opposed to identifying themselves as a social worker.
- Social workers should not identify foster youth to school administrators or personnel unless absolutely necessary.
- School administrators and personnel should take care to keep the student’s status as a foster youth private.

Action Items:

- ❑ Provide training for school personnel on sensitivity towards foster youth and confidentiality procedures.
- ❑ Include training on youth centered confidentiality protections in social worker academies, trainings and MSW programs.
- ❑ Brainstorm processes at the state and local level to collect needed data using existing mechanisms while maintaining the confidentiality of individual foster youth.

²AB 490 (Steinberg-D, Chapter 862, Statutes of 2003) requires each local education agency to designate a foster youth education liaison to ensure and facilitate the proper enrollment, educational placement and transfer between schools of foster youth.

³The 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.

Issue 3: Foster Youth and Student Records

Many foster youth experience changing foster care placements during the middle of the school year, thus disrupting their academic progress and success in school. In February 2003 California Youth Connection co-authored legislative bill AB 490 (Steinberg-D, Chapter 862, Statutes of 2003) in an attempt to address the constant disruption in youths' academic and home life that often results in emotional and behavioral problems, as well as a litany of education-related problems including time out of school, a loss of school credits, delayed academic progress, the repetition of grades and the youth's inability to earn a diploma. AB 490 is the beginning of statewide foster care reform to improve the quality of education for foster youth. CYC members also recommend actions that can be taken at the local level:

Recommendations:

- Caregivers should be responsible for handing all student transcripts and records transfer.
- Guarantee that youth in foster care attend no more than three high schools.

Action Items

- Provide training for local placement workers on AB 490 and the impact of placement stability on educational attainment for foster youth.
- Ensure caregivers are trained on AB 490 and educational advocacy and are provided with contact information for their local foster youth education liaison.
- Survey local child welfare departments to determine reasons for mid-year placement changes, and take appropriate actions to follow up.
- Utilize Alternative Dispute Resolution tools such as mediation to minimize mid-year placement changes.
- Involve local School Boards by providing training on the foster youth student population and asking for their support in guiding local policy and priorities.

REPORT: HIGHER EDUCATION

Issue 1: Foster Youth and College Housing

There are a few basic needs that must be met before people can fully commit themselves to a long-term goal such as obtaining higher education. These elements are our basic human needs of shelter, sustenance, and safety. In order for foster youth to be successful in college, they have to have somewhere to live, preferably somewhere safe, with likeminded people committed to helping each other meet their goals. Many students find this environment in on-campus housing, which provides built in safety, social support and structure.

Seldom do universities guarantee on-campus housing for former foster youth, despite the fact that certain populations such as athletes and the disabled are guaranteed this assistance. College bound

foster youth need to be guaranteed on-campus housing, for as many years as they are in school and require it. Former foster youth usually rely on university housing as their primary residence. When other students leave for their parents' homes on the weekends and holidays, former foster youth stay in the dorms. In the event that the dorms are closed (winter and summer breaks, for example) former foster youth struggle with finding interim housing. The struggle to maintain housing is a major stressor to former foster youth, a stress that interferes with a youth's ability to complete their college education.

Recommendations:

- Emancipated foster care and probation youth who meet certain criteria should have guaranteed year round student housing units.
- Proposed Criteria: youth qualify up to the age of 24 and must have a high school diploma or equivalent, a 2.0 GPA, be employed, and hold a savings account.

Action Items:

- Ensure California State University Chancellors, Community College Board of Governors and local colleges and universities are aware of the mandates of AB 2463 (Caldera-D, Chapter 1129, 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, EOP, 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.
- Adopt a former foster youth outreach and support program similar to the Guardian Scholars model in Orange County.⁴
- Investigate and advocate for use of federal funds to provide housing for former foster youth on college campuses.
- Work towards passage of federal legislation similar to the proposed FOSTER Act (H.R. 4003) (Miller CA-7).⁵

Issue 2: Foster Youth and Support in Obtaining Higher Education

College bound foster youth are often first generation college students. They often do not know anyone in their personal circle who has successfully navigated their way through college applications, financial aid, scholarships, and college prep courses to even gain acceptance into a four-year college, let alone successfully complete their studies and receive a degree. Foster youth do seek educational guidance from the professionals in their lives (social workers and Independent

⁴ The Guardian Scholars Program is a public/private partnership that offers former foster youth students a full scholarship, year round on campus housing, employment opportunities, support services and mentoring. See: <http://www.fullerton.edu/guardianscholars/> for more information.

⁵ 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.

Living Skills Program (ILS/ILP) staff) but sometimes these professionals lack accurate information about required coursework, dates for applying for financial aid, and other information that changes regularly.

Applying to college can be a frustrating process for anybody. For foster youth filling out a college application is never a straightforward process. It almost always requires them to do research on their educational history (i.e. tracking down the names and addresses of the multiple high schools they may have attended) and their legal and financial status (are they considered to be a ward of the court? Who is their legal “parent” and what is that parent’s income?), among other things.

Recommendations:

- Establish a foster youth higher education specialist in each county to assist students in filling out college applications, applying for financial aid, etc.

Action Items:

- ❑ Encourage local college campuses to use existing outreach funds for disadvantaged students to provide outreach to potential foster youth students and training for local ILP programs.
- ❑ Designate a local and state higher education resource person in the ILP or FYS staff to answer questions from youth, social workers and providers about higher education issues.
- ❑ Use some of the Chafee Grant Program outreach funds⁶ provided to each county to hire a foster youth higher education specialist responsible for training social workers and conducting outreach in each county.
- ❑ Ensure foster youth receive their education records at emancipation so they have accurate information for the college application process.
- ❑ Ensure SB 1639 (Alarcon, -D, Chapter 668, Statutes of 2004), requiring dissemination of information regarding postsecondary preparation, options and financial aid is implemented in your county.

Issue 3: Foster Youth and (FAFSA) Federal Application For Student Aid

The Federal Application For Student Aid (FAFSA) is the most important document that foster youth need to fill out when applying to college. Federal financial aid is only awarded to students who complete this application, and the monetary amount of federal aid is based directly upon the information provided on the application. Foster youth who do fill out this form, and fill it out correctly, are often awarded thousands of dollars in financial assistance, enough to cover educational costs and living expenses for four years or longer.

This cornerstone piece of educational assistance often goes underutilized by foster youth who

⁶ In 2003-2004, California received \$8 million in federal funds from the Chafee Grant Program (ETV), P.L. 108-189, to provide foster youth \$5000 annually to attend higher education institutions. In 2003-2004, counties received a total of \$200,000 to provide outreach to foster youth about this funding.

do not understand the complex language presented in the form. Question #58 of the FAFSA asks, “Are you an orphan or ward of the court until the age of 18?” This question is confusing to foster youth who may not be orphans and, associating the term “ward” with juvenile delinquents, may not feel that the word accurately describes their personal circumstances. Furthermore, in California, even the court uses the term “dependent” to identify foster youth. The consequence of answering this question incorrectly is significantly reduced financial aid.

This question is also problematic because it leaves out youth who might have been in foster care for several years, but either reunited with their biological families, were adopted, or emancipated before their 18th birthday. Youth answering “yes” to question #58 on the FAFSA form are often asked to provide documentation proving their former status as a “ward of the court”. This proof is hard to provide, for a number of reasons. Sometimes a youth has been out of foster care for several years before they decide to apply to college. These youth have a difficult time locating a social worker who is familiar with their former case and who is willing to write a verification letter. The longer it takes a former foster youth to locate someone to write a verification letter, the longer that foster youth goes without much needed financial aid. Even when youth do find someone to write the letter, social workers sometimes write letters that disclose intimate details about the youth’s life since there are no standards on how to compose the letter. This is a great embarrassment to foster youth and violates confidentiality as well.

Recommendations:

- Question #58 on the Federal Application for Financial Student Aid asks, “Are you an orphan or ward of the court until the age of 18?” These terms need to be defined; perhaps the term “foster youth” can be included, since this is the language familiar to youth, caregivers, and social workers.
- Youth who reunified with their families and therefore left care before the age of 18 or emancipated early are not eligible to check the box and receive the corresponding benefits. Any youth who spent a substantial amount of time in foster care should be eligible for these benefits. Youth who were adopted before their 18th birthday should also be eligible for these benefits.
- Add a verification document to the emancipation checklist. This document should be standardized, should be accepted by all higher education financial aid officials, should be received by youth exiting care, and should not include confidential information about a youth’s foster care case.

Action Items

- ❑ Contact your local Congress representative to encourage federal revision of the financial aid form wording.
- ❑ Engage national advocacy groups concerned with permanency on the issue of eligibility for financial aid to eliminate the disincentive to permanency for older foster youth.
- ❑ Encourage the state and local college campuses to supplement financial aid for former

foster youth who are not eligible because they reunified or were adopted shortly before 18 or emancipated early.

- ❑ Create a court verification document to be used for financial aid eligibility to be provided to foster youth before the emancipation hearing. Santa Clara County has a form that can be used as a model.
- ❑ Create a state database where financial aid officials can verify former foster youth eligibility similar to the eligibility database used by the Student Aid Commission to verify Chafee Grant Program eligibility.

REPORT: LGBTQ (LESBIAN GAY BISEXUAL TRANSGENDER QUEER QUESTIONING) FOSTER YOUTH

Issue 1: Community Awareness and Visibility for LGBTQ Foster Youth

LGBTQ foster youth feel invisible because there is no safe way to meet other LGBTQ youth for support and friendship. LGBTQ foster youth would like to have a safe space where they can voice their concerns and learn more about the community of LGBTQ people.

Recommendations:

- Require each county to have social mixers that provide the opportunity for LGBTQ youth to interact.
- Amend the Foster Care Bill of Rights to include the right for LGBTQ foster youth to attend social events without fear of violence or persecution.
- Institute statewide support groups and advocacy agencies for LGBTQ foster youth.
- Require high schools and colleges to offer counseling and support groups to LGBTQ youth.
- Offer a LGBTQ sex education class to interested foster youth that provides factual information on LGBTQ sexuality and STD (Sexually Transmitted Disease) protection.

Action Items:

- ❑ Encourage full implementation of AB 458 (Chu-D, Chapter 331, Statutes of 2003) and conduct local trainings on its provision.
- ❑ Create state and county LGBTQ foster youth task forces with foster youth representation to address local unmet needs or problems.
- ❑ Encourage a particular focus on resources for LGBTQ foster youth in rural areas where there may be much less tolerance, information and services available than in urban cities.

Issue 2: LGBTQ Foster Youth and Foster Care Placements

CYC members are concerned about the violence and emotional abuse LGBTQ foster youth experience in poorly chosen foster care placements. Homophobic foster care placements are not good for *any* youth—LGBTQ or not. Foster parents that teach hatred for any category of human beings are not individuals who should have the privilege of parenting.

LGBTQ foster youth deserve to be recognized as a special category of foster youth—a group that is socially stigmatized as an LGBTQ person and as a youth in foster care—and the resources that come with special recognition.

Recommendations:

- Create a LGBTQ specific unit within the Social Service Department.
- Evaluate all foster care homes for LGBTQ sensitivity.
- Avoid placing LGBTQ youth in homophobic foster homes.
- Create a statewide database of LGBTQ appropriate placements.

Action Items

- ❑ Placement agencies should develop a survey to determine the availability and need for LGBTQ sensitive homes.
- ❑ Local child welfare departments should conduct specific recruitment for foster parents within the LGBTQ friendly community.
- ❑ Foster parents and group home staff should be trained on the non-discrimination provisions of AB 458.
- ❑ State Department of Social Services should provide counties technical assistance with the issue of abuse in foster care of LGBTQ 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 for youth.

Issue 3: LGBTQ Foster Youth Rights

CYC members passed Assembly Bill 899—the Foster Youth Bill of Rights—(Chu, Chapter 683, Statutes 2001) in 2001 recognizing foster youth as a socially disadvantaged minority in need of state protection. AB 899 consolidated all of the rights of foster children into a common location in California law. It requires social workers to inform youth of their rights at least once every six months and mandates that the list of foster youth rights be posted in facilities that care for six or more foster children.

CYC members recognize AB 899 as a tremendous step forward towards ensuring equal treatment under the law for foster youth. However, one limitation of AB 899 is that it does not specially

address the rights of stigmatized groups within foster care—including LGBTQQ youth. The ill treatment of LGBTQQ youth within the overarching category of foster youth needs to be addressed—with human rights specific to the LGBTQQ population clearly articulated and implemented:

Recommendations:

- Update the existing Foster Youth Bill of Rights to include LGBTQQ specific rights or create an entirely different LGBTQQ Foster Youth Bill of Rights.
- The Bill of Rights should address:
 - Discrimination
 - Confidentiality
 - Placement consideration
 - Support service or group
 - Freedom of religion
 - Social events
 - Tolerance
 - Religious freedom
 - Relationship freedom
 - Hate crimes

Action Items

- ❑ Include AB 458 mandates in all Foster Youth Rights material such as posters, pamphlets or fliers.
- ❑ 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.

Issue 4: Facilitating Tolerance for LGBTQQ Foster Youth

LGBTQQ foster youth express experiencing both genuinely ignorant and obtrusively homophobic social workers, care providers, and other foster youth. CYC members feel that the foster care system needs to be more proactive about supporting individual rights by requiring child welfare professionals to address personal ignorance and bias towards LGBTQQ foster youth. CYC members also feel that the foster care system should institute consciousness-raising activities to sensitize youth in foster care about LGBTQQ lifestyles. This recommendation comes from the fact that some of the worst violence against LGBTQQ foster youth is committed by other foster youth.

Recommendations:

- Require child welfare professionals to receive training facilitating cultural awareness of LGBTQQ people and sensitivity and tolerance for the LGBTQQ lifestyle.

- Social workers should be trained in part by LGBTQQ foster youth.
- Work with ILP (Independent Living Program) to raise awareness of LGBTQQ issues among non-LGBTQQ foster youth. ILP should sponsor newsletters or mailings that have information about LGBTQQ social and educational activities.
- Mandatory classes to teach tolerance to all foster youth once a year or during ILP training and in group home placements.

Action Items:

- ❑ Include tolerance training as a regular part of social worker training academies and Community Care Licensing group home trainings.

REPORT: IMPROVING SOCIAL WORKER SERVICES

Issue 1: Recruiting Former Foster Youth as Social Workers

CYC members genuinely feel that the best people to work with foster youth are those that have been through foster care themselves. Foster youth are aware of the high turnover rate of child welfare workers—and it is the widespread belief among foster youth that the majority of social workers go into the child welfare field without a clear idea of the challenges that await them. When social workers find themselves unable to meet those challenges, they “burn out” and ultimately leave the profession. CYC members feel that the best way to address this is to promote a massive recruitment campaign—providing incentives in the form of financial aid and job stability, to foster youth who pursue a degree and ultimately a career in social work.

Recommendations:

- Social service departments should make tuition payments or provide tuition stipends to former foster youth working towards a degree in social work, with the intent to work as a social worker after completing their studies.
- Social service departments should offer job placement assistance to former foster youth seeking a career in child welfare.
- Social service departments should actively recruit former foster youth to work in child welfare.

Action Items:

- ❑ Advocate at the federal level for student loan forgiveness for former foster youth employed by social service departments, similar to the loan forgiveness programs for urban teachers or federal agencies.⁷
- ❑ Establish special preference within the Title IV-E social worker education funding⁸ for former foster youth students.

⁷ Federal Perkins and Stafford loans can be cancelled for full time teachers in designated elementary and secondary schools serving low-income children. The Federal Student Loan Repayment Program allows federal agencies to recruit and retain employees by repaying \$10,000 per year (up to a maximum of \$60,000 per employee) if employees agree to work for a federal agency for 3 years. See 5 USC 5379 and 5 CFR 537.

⁸ The Title IV-E Child Welfare Training Project provides stipends to graduate social worker students who commit to a career in a public child welfare agency. Social Security Act- Section 474 (a)(3)(A).

- ❑ Create local student assistant and intern positions for current and former foster youth to create interest in social service employment. Positions should provide living wages and the opportunity for advancement.

Issue 2: Social Worker Sensitivity to the Foster Care Experience

Recruiting former foster youth as social workers is a failsafe way to ensure social worker sensitivity to the foster care experience. A widespread complaint among foster youth is that most social workers come from socially privileged backgrounds (meaning that they grew up in traditional families, were able to obtain an education) and are unable to understand the complexity of the foster youth experience. These social workers have a hard time understanding foster youth culture. Recruiting former foster youth as social workers addresses this perfectly because the social workers will have lived the foster care experience and will thus be better able to understand and address the issues that foster youth face.

Social workers with no foster care background should be required to receive training by current and former foster youth about foster youth culture and how to work effectively with foster youth.

Recommendations:

- Require social workers and social work students to receive training by foster youth/former foster youth, similar to the Y.O.U.T.H. (Youth Offering Unique Tangible Help) Training Project model.⁹

Action Items:

- ❑ Use Title IV-E funds to provide training for social workers by foster youth to meet the Chafee requirements for child welfare training.¹⁰
- ❑ Include training by current and former foster youth as a mandatory component of social worker academies and MSW programs.

Issue 3: Social Workers and Foster Youth Sibling Advocacy

An issue always of importance to foster youth is maintaining contact with siblings. This issue is important because it has been a common experience of foster youth, especially of foster youth with large sibling groups, that once they go into foster care they are separated from their siblings. In fact, when siblings enter foster care, only 40 percent are placed with all their siblings.¹¹ In the case where youth have four or five siblings, often what happens is there aren't any foster homes willing to take in that many children. The sibling group, which may have never been separated before, then gets split apart. For sibling groups of four children in foster care, 70 percent will be separated from at least some of their siblings.¹² Another example is when one youth goes into foster care, while their sibling does not. In either case, CYC members want social

workers to be more proactive about advocating for the right of foster youth to maintain contact with their siblings and chosen family.

Recommendations:

- Social workers should provide current contact information for family members (included extended family) on an ongoing basis.
- Ensure at least two visits per month with siblings.
- 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 an adoption order provision that will facilitate sibling contact as long as the adoptive parents do not object.

Action Items:

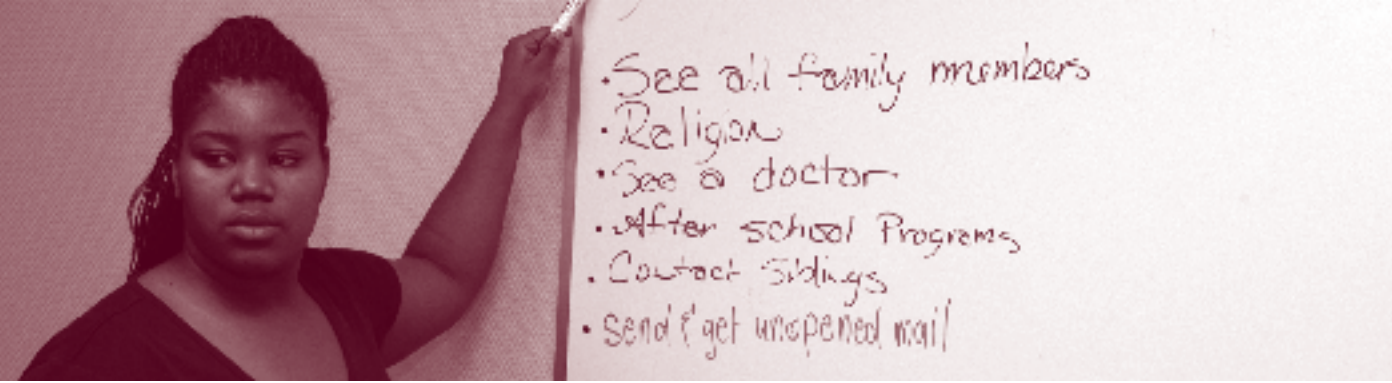
- ❑ Fully implement AB 408 (Steinberg, Chapter 813, Statutes of 2003), which requires social workers to ask youth about important relationships (including siblings) and take action to support those relationships.
- ❑ Ensure foster youth are provided with sibling's contact information as required in the emancipation checklist.
- ❑ Educate local placement workers on the importance of siblings in placement decisions.
- ❑ Develop a survey for foster youth to determine the need for increased focus on supporting sibling relationships and visitation.
- ❑ Require mandatory sibling visitation as part of placement contracts unless youth do not desire this.

⁹ The Y.O.U.T.H. Training Project was a three-year collaboration between California Youth Connection and San Francisco State University's Bay Area Academy (2001-2003). CYC youth were empowered to design and deliver social worker training curriculum that addressed how social workers could better serve adolescent foster youth. For more information, visit http://www.sfsu.edu/~bayacad/YOUTH_Final.pdf.

¹⁰ Chafee requires that states use federal training funds to provide training to help providers and social workers understand the needs and issues of older foster youth. Social Security Act - Section 477(b)(3)(D)

¹¹ Barbara Needell, et al. Siblings in Child Welfare Supervised Foster Care on July 1, 2002 by Placement Type. *Child Welfare Services Reports for California*. UC Berkeley Center for Social Services Research. (2002)

¹² *id.*



2004 FALL CONFERENCE REPORT

THE DISTINGUISHED PANEL FOR THE FALL 2004 CONFERENCE INCLUDED:

Gene Howard – Chief Executive Officer, Orangewood Children’s Foundation

Carroll Schroeder – Executive Director, California Alliance for Child and Family Services

Koji M. Uesugi – Coordinator, Renaissance Scholars

Our special guests included ILP coordinators, child welfare workers, foundation representatives, youth advocates, academics, various people from the Department of Education and decision makers within the California State University system, human rights organizations, representatives from the Department of Mental Health and more.

CYC’s 2003 Fall Policy Conference took place the weekend of October 23rd, 24th, and 25th in Orange, California.

This report summarizes the policy discussions and recommendations of CYC members participating in the Fall 2004 Policy Conference. The following topics were explored: Higher Education, Transitional Housing, Improving Group Homes, and Placement Stability (Permanency).

REPORT: COLLEGE EDUCATION

ISSUE 1: Graduating from High School

70% of foster youth want to attend college,¹³ but only 3% of them actually do.¹⁴ Why the large discrepancy? The low high-school graduation rate among foster youth might be one reason. Only 46% of foster youth actually complete high school.¹⁵ Many foster youth believe this is due in large part to them transitioning out of the system before high school

graduation. This happens for various reasons: many youth are a year or more behind in their schoolwork and thus don’t usually graduate close to their 18th birthday. The system currently offers extended stay for youth until they graduate from high school, but only until their 19th birthday. Thus, youth graduating after that are required to live on their own while still completing high school. Many youth also attend continuation schools or are enrolled in remedial classes where they don’t belong. As a result, youth lose interest in their studies because they are not positively engaged in schoolwork. There is currently not enough activity in the foster care system to track the education performance of youth.

Recommendations:

- The system should identify youth ages 16 and above who are not on track to graduate high school either in general or before emancipation.
- Those youth should be offered an extended care option that lasts until they have graduated from high school or have entered college.
- This extended care should include a detailed case plan geared primarily towards the youth’s completion of high school.

Action Items:

- ❑ Fully implement the law allowing youth to stay in foster care until 19 years old to finish high school, and ensure children’s attorneys and CASAs are educated on how to effectively advocate for extended care.
- ❑ Require training for dependency judges on the importance of using their discretion to extend foster care when a youth has not graduated.
- ❑ Ensure that foster youth are informed about their educational rights and resources that exist, so they can advocate for their needs.
- ❑ Provide regular education assessments to determine youth who need additional support early before emancipation.
- ❑ For youth in special education, ensure their IEP transition plan development includes child welfare staff.
- ❑ Work with local teaching credential programs to provide tutors for youth who have been identified as being at risk for not graduating before emancipation.
- ❑ Train dependency judges on the importance of inquiring about a child’s educational progress, educational needs and placement, and progress towards graduation. Encourage use of tools such as the Judicial Checklist on Education Needs.¹⁶

¹³ Curtis McMillen, et al. Educational Experiences and Aspirations of Older Youth in Foster Care, 82 *Child Welfare* 475 (2003).

¹⁴ California Department of Social Services, Data Systems and Survey Design Bureau, Independent Living Program, Annual Statistical Report (2002). Available at: <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/research/res/pdf/Soc405a/2002/SOC405Aoct01-Sep02.pdf>

¹⁵ Ronna J. Cook, Are We Helping Foster Youth Prepare for Their Future?, 16 *Child & Youth Services Rev.* 213 (1994).

- ❑ Encourage dependency judges to order any needed services such as educational assessments, IEPs, tutoring, or referral to local attendance review boards.
- ❑ Encourage use of federal Chafee ILP funds to pay for housing for youth who are emancipated until they complete their high school diploma.

Issue 2: Lack of Resource Knowledge

Being aware of and utilizing resources that are offered to the general population and to disadvantaged youth is an important key to successfully entering college. Foster youth are often the first in their family to attend college and therefore have no idea about the necessary steps to prepare for higher education or the available resources. Foster youth look to others such as social workers, foster parents or group home staff for information, but often these people lack the knowledge themselves. This combination of ignorance and lack of information impedes youth in their quest to gain resources for college.

Recommendations:

- An outreach coordinator should be created for middle and high school students. This coordinator would be knowledgeable in resources available and would work specifically with foster youth.
- The outreach coordinator should especially be knowledgeable about college prep courses, scholarship resources, and application procedures, all of which are crucial for foster youth to know in order to successfully transition into college.

Action Items:

- ❑ Explore the use of federal funds such as those available through the Title IV-E, Chafee or Title I¹⁷ programs to hire a local outreach coordinator within the local child welfare or education offices.
- ❑ Ensure the local Foster Youth Services program offers this type of resource information to youth and others.
- ❑ Encourage the State Department of Social Services to create a state website with higher education information, resources and links to local contact staff for foster youth.
- ❑ Encourage local colleges and universities to provide an outreach staff person to focus on middle and high school foster youth students to fulfill the outreach mandates of AB 2463¹⁸
- ❑ Provide an in-service training for foster parents and group home staff on higher education resources and information.
- ❑ Encourage federal college readiness programs such as TRIO or GEAR UP¹⁹ to target foster youth.
- ❑ Work in your county on the implementation of SB 1639 mandates requiring foster youth have access to information regarding postsecondary options.

¹⁶ The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges developed this national checklist for judges to ask appropriate questions about the educational status and progress of foster youth.

¹⁷ Title I, Part D of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act [ESEA] provides support to states, local agencies and schools for supplemental programs that meet the special educational needs of children and youth who are neglected or delinquent or at-risk.

- ❑ Educate your local UC, CSU and Community College campuses regarding their responsibility under AB 1639 to disseminate information to foster care agencies regarding admissions requirements and financial aid.

REPORT: TRANSITIONAL HOUSING

Issue 1: Standardization of Transitional Housing

The guidelines for transitional housing programs vary from county to county. Standardization across the state could help improve transitional housing programs (THP) in struggling counties and make it easier for a youth from one county to transfer to another county if needed. As it is, there are major discrepancies from county to county when it comes to THPs. For example, one county may offer a comprehensive residence program where former foster youth live on site. Another county may only offer rent stipends, forcing youth to look for their own housing. Granted, some youth prefer the second option, but should not a county offer both options, making the same options available to all youth? If standardization existed and if inter-county transfers were allowed, then the variety of THPs available to a youth would increase greatly.

Recommendations:

- Different guidelines are needed for youth under 18 and youth over 18 as to address their specific needs as well as legal concerns that arise for youth who are technically not emancipated from the system.
- The requirements to be in the program would be standardized as well. For example: all youth should be required to be in a school or have a job.

Action Items

- ❑ Create county transitional housing advisory groups that consist of a majority of current and former foster youth to develop guidelines and requirements for transitional housing.
- ❑ Advocate for laws requiring transition services such as housing to be standardized across counties and that access is fair and equitable statewide.
- ❑ Ensure that county transitional housing programs are aware that they must accept youth from out of county and educate youth, providers and advocates about this requirement.

Issue 2: Mentorship and Transitional Housing

Besides such necessities as food, shelter, and clothing, one of the most important components of foster care is psychological services. Youth in care have access to mentors and therapists while in care, but lose access when they transition out of care, even when they transition into a THP. For many youth, the loss of a mentor can be a devastating experience. What's more, even if

¹⁸ AB 2463 (Caldera, Chapter 1129, Statutes of 1996) requires California State Universities (CSUs) and California Community Colleges to conduct outreach to foster youth and provide support services to enroll them and retain them in college.

¹⁹ Federal TRIO and GEAR UP programs provide outreach, tutoring, mentoring and support programs to help low-income, first generation college and disabled students in middle and high school prepare for and enter college. See: <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html> and <http://www.ed.gov/programs/gearup/index.html>

these youth want to continue meeting with a mentor, they are not sure where to look. Mentors and therapists are important to the emotional growth of foster youth and should be a vital part of any THP. Mentors can help youth with challenges unique to this niche of the foster youth population such as: moving into a new community, dealing with newfound independence, looking for employment, higher-education challenges, and general living skills. Furthermore, youth transitioning into a THP may not be familiar with all of its components; a mentor could facilitate transitioning into the program by making clear the guidelines, thus establishing an important connection between youth and mentor as well as providing practical information for the youth.

Recommendations:

- Mentors and therapists should be on-site or nearby so as to be easily accessible to youth in a THP.
- Mentors should be knowledgeable in transitional housing guidelines as well as independent living.
- Mentors and therapists should be held accountable for their performance, which can and should be measured.

Action Items

- ❑ Advocate use of mental health dollars from Proposition 63²⁰ for mental health support for youth in THPs.
- ❑ Connect with groups offering mentoring and pro bono therapy services to develop mentoring/mental health programs.
- ❑ Solicit feedback from youth living in THPs on their need for and satisfaction with mental health and mentoring services.
- ❑ Require a youth evaluation component as part of any THP contract with a mental health provider.

Issue 3: Expanding Transitional Housing

A big detriment to transition-aged youth is the lack of options available to them once they transition. Having a THP in the county is a plus, but often they are located in certain areas that may be too far from a youth's school or place of employment. For example, let's say a youth lives in a small county with no college or universities nearby. Perhaps the youth was accepted to a prestigious university in a different county, perhaps a different part of the state. Having access to the transitional housing program in the same county as the university can be a big plus for the youth. Also, in larger counties (geographically speaking) the youth population is spread out across a vast area. Often a county with a THP only has their housing in large cities, which may not serve the rest of the county youth population well. Having more options for youth would prove to be a big plus. Expanding THPs across the state, as well as making it easier for youth to transfer

²⁰ Proposition 63 was passed by voters in 2004, and is expected to create over \$1 billion in new funds to provide mental health services to children and adults.

from county to county, would make it easier for youth to take advantage of housing options everywhere. In short, transitional housing should be available to each and every eligible foster youth that wants it.

Recommendations:

- Counties should take advantage of the Transitional Housing Plus program,²¹ in which the state provides 40% of funding to match the 60% of county money that goes towards expanding transitional housing.
- Counties should look towards non-profit organizations to help with funding an expansion of THPs.
- THPs should expand to include youth older than 18 who wish to opt in to the program (if a county doesn't allow this already).

Action Items

- ❑ Collaborate with other agencies to provide the county match for establishing THPs such as state and federal housing or mental health agencies.
- ❑ Educate state legislators on the importance of changing to 100% state funding for THPs to create consistency and meet the need for housing.
- ❑ Ensure THPs accept youth from all counties so that services are available to all youth, regardless of county of origin.
- ❑ Include foster youth in the planning process for THP development to get feedback about ideal location and program structure.
- ❑ Research available Housing and Community Development funding for creating new Transitional Housing Programs.

Issue 4: Promoting THPs to Youth and the Community

Even when transitional housing programs are available, many youth are not aware, thus they miss out on opportunities that are incredibly beneficial. This problem is often due to the simple lack of information provided by social workers and others who work closely with the youth, people who should know the ins and outs of the foster care system, especially transition services for emancipating youth. The lack of promotion for THPs also proves a detriment.

Also, many people in the community are not aware of what transitional housing is or, if they are aware, have negative connotations of it. Community members often refer to stereotypes of foster youth—that they're criminals, emotionally disturbed, all-around delinquents—to justify their prejudice against youth and THPs located in their neighborhoods. This is due to a lack of information not just about transitional housing but foster youth and the foster care system in general. A little education and community involvement can help to break down these stereotypes.

²¹ The Transitional Housing Plus Program was established by AB 427 (Chapter 125, Statutes of 2001) and then modified by AB 1119 (Chapter 639, Statutes of 2002). This program expands Transitional Housing Programs to allow 18-20 year old youth to participate. The program was initially funded with \$10 million, but has since been reduced to less than \$1.4 million. Only three counties have established THP Plus programs.

Recommendations:

- Fliers or pamphlets should be distributed to all THP-eligible youth notifying them of this opportunity.
- County workers and agencies should be supplied with information so as to not let their youth miss out on transitional housing opportunities.
- Education and promotion of THPs should include the community at large so as to combat the negative stereotypes of foster youth that exist as well as possibly increase community involvement and support.

Action Items:

- Include youth notification of THP opportunities as part of the required transition plan.²²
- Hold an in-service for child welfare staff to inform them of THP opportunities available to the youth they work with.
- Contact the media to produce positive stories on the value of transitional housing and the needs of transitional foster youth to combat negative stereotypes.

REPORT: GROUP HOMES

Issue 1: Improving Staff Hiring Policies

Group home staff often “make or break” a group home in terms of its overall functionality and the happiness and success of its residents. Of the approximately 98,000 children in foster care in California, about 18,400 of them reside in group homes and must rely on group home staff as their primary caregivers.²³ But foster youth notice that, more often than not, group home staffers are not properly trained before hiring. Many hired group home workers lack basic skills in conflict resolution, child and adolescent development, and other pertinent topics to group home settings. This often causes problems soon after they are hired, leading to a large turnover among staff. This high turnover impedes the relationship building between youth and staff that is so essential to the success of a group home. CYC youth feel that better hiring policies could remedy these problems and thus improve group home life for residents. Improved hiring policies could “weed out” bad or incompetent workers.

Recommendations:

- Before a staff person is hired, he or she should volunteer in the group home that they are interested in for at least 60 hours. The hours would be accumulated throughout a variety of different types of shifts while shadowing an experienced group home staff.
- Residents of the group home would be part of the hiring process by being on a panel that gives a potential staff member feedback on their performance as well as give approval ratings in various areas such as handling conflicts and attitude towards residents.

²² Federal law requires that each youth age 16 and older have an Independent Living plan that specifies the services they are receiving to help them transition from foster care to independent living. 42 U.S.C. § 675 (1)(D).

²³ Steve Christian, Educating Children in Foster Care. National Conference of State Legislatures, Children’s Policy Initiative (2003)

Action Items:

- Implement statewide performance based contracting that measures resident satisfaction with group home staff quality to reward homes that make efforts to hire competent workers.
- Implement a customer satisfaction survey that allows youth the opportunity to provide ongoing feedback regarding staff hiring policies and staff quality.
- Establish resident councils in all group homes to deal with improving staff hiring policies and problems that arise.

Issue 2: Setting Higher Standards For Staff Members

Closely linked with the issue of better staff hiring policies is setting higher standards for staff. Often staff members in group homes are not required to do much else besides make sure the rules are being followed and that medications are distributed. These staff members do not have the skills necessary for dealing with the unique needs of group home youth, such as emotional issues and succeeding in a group home environment. These staff members often turn to help to other parties such as the police or doctors to deal with issues that normally would not involve the law or medicine. Instead, youth feel that staff should be able to make better judgment calls and fewer assumptions about residents. Also, staff members as much as possible should strive to create a “normal atmosphere” akin to family foster care in group homes, so youth do not have to feel like they are living in a hospital or shelter.

Recommendations:

- Staff should be trained on how to tell the difference between age appropriate and situational behavior and behavior that requires medical or professional attention.
- Staff should be more sensitive to youth and their needs.
- Staff should be sure to not blatantly violate youth’s privacy.

Action Items:

- Include foster youth in all required training of group home operators and staff.
- Ensure group home staff is trained on the negative effects of labeling foster youth and making assumptions.
- Expand the Alameda County Youth Led Evaluation Project²⁴ model statewide to allow youth to evaluate the atmosphere and needed improvements in their group homes.
- Require group homes with excessive incident reports involving police or hospitals to receive technical assistance and evaluate staff training procedures.
- Educate placement workers and social workers on the impacts of placing youth in group homes where they feel institutionalized and are denied the opportunity to experience a family atmosphere.

²⁴ The Youth Led Evaluation Project (YLEP) is a 3 year CYC project in Alameda County training foster youth to develop survey and research tools to evaluate youth’s satisfaction with the quality of their group homes.

Issue 3: Youth Participation on the Countywide Level

Decision makers that are not in touch with the needs of group home youth make many rules and regulations that are enacted in group homes. These rules have a direct effect on group home youth, despite the fact that the youth have no say in the decision-making. This unfair system could be remedied if those higher up and making decisions had a youth voice to listen to when it comes to developing group home policies. By working together, group home administrators, child welfare workers and group home youth can develop better policies that will benefit all youth in group homes that are under their jurisdiction.

Recommendations:

- One seat on every county group home contract negotiation meeting should be reserved for a representative from CYC who is also a group home youth.
- Each representative should have the opportunity to provide feedback and have decision-making power on each proposed group home program plan.

REPORT: PLACEMENT STABILITY (PERMANENCY)

Issue 1: Fostering Placement Stability

Placement stability happens when there is an adult or care provider in a youth's life that is consistent and permanent. Most child welfare workers and advocates agree that permanency is one of the most important aspects of a successful transition into adulthood. But many youth in the system encounter barriers to permanency. Some of these barriers are: inappropriate placements, poorly selected and trained foster parents, and unsuccessful relationships between the youth and the care provider(s). In fact, 1/3 of foster youth who emancipate from California's foster care system have had at least five placements before leaving care. Certain groups within foster care are more prone than others to lacking placement stability. These barriers are often the cause of relational, emotional, and physical problems. These instabilities lead to the inability to trust and build strong relationships with people in the community. Often for youth, being able to stay at a particular school or church for more than a year is seen as an accomplishment instead of as an expectation.

Recommendations:

- There should be organizations and/or homes that address specific placements needs. For example, homes that cater especially to the LGBTQQ community or homes that are open to certain religions.

²⁵ Barbara Needell, et al. Youth Emancipating From Foster Care In California: Findings Using Linked Administrative Data. UC Berkeley Center for Social Services Research (2002).

²⁶ Child-Specific recruitment tactics focus on a child's particular needs, relationships, and resources to develop an individualized plan for permanency. See: http://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/articles.cfm?section_id=4&issue_id=2003-06

- Interviews for both care providers and youth should be conducted prior to placement in order to establish expectations on both sides; this would make clear for both parties what will happen after placement has occurred, assuming it happens in the first place. The needs and wants of the youth should be preeminent in these "negotiations."

Action Items:

- ❑ Survey foster youth in each county to determine specific placement needs and follow up with targeted recruitment to meet those needs.
- ❑ Utilize Alternative Dispute Resolution tools such as mediation when a placement change is considered.
- ❑ Use tools such as child specific recruitment to identify appropriate families for foster youth.
- ❑ Train placement workers on the importance of keeping youth placed in the same neighborhood when a placement change must occur to minimize school and relationship instability.
- ❑ Train social workers, child welfare staff and advocates on state and federal requirements related to placement and education stability.

Issue 2: Fostering Permanent Connections

In 2003, AB 408 (Steinberg, D-Sacramento) was passed; it requires that social workers collaborate with youth to ensure that every young person emancipating from the foster care system has some type of permanent connection (with an adult). But AB 408 is widely neglected statewide. Also, only youth older than 10 years old and in group homes are covered by AB 408 and are asked about permanent connections; all younger youth and youth in non-group home placements are not asked about permanency—despite the fact that permanency-building should occur as early as possible. For many foster youth who constantly move, permanency is a key ingredient to a successful emancipation. The issue of permanency is so important that all parties involved in the life of a youth (CASA workers, lawyers, family) should concern themselves with fostering a permanent connection.

Recommendations:

- All youth, regardless of age or placement situation, should be asked about permanency in their lives. Their voice should be the most prominent when it comes to the issue of permanency.
- A team of adults that includes the social worker, lawyer, and others should be created and involved with the issue of permanency for the youth. This task force would be put together as soon as the youth is put in foster care and would continue to make recommendations for permanency as time passes.

Action Items

- ❑ Expand the actions required by AB 408 to all youth in care, regardless of age or placement situation.

- ❑ Ensure efforts to establish permanent connections required by AB 408 are occurring in your county.
- ❑ Educate federal representatives on the need for increased resources and incentives to achieve permanency for older youth.
- ❑ Require social workers and attorneys for youth who have not achieved permanency to have the lowest caseloads to allow work with a team and the youth to create a permanency plan.
- ❑ Explore the use of Title IV-E funds to support creation of a permanency task force for each youth or a family group conference type model.
- ❑ Ensure the agencies and attorneys provide foster youth with the opportunity to attend their court hearings to participate in discussions regarding their permanency plans.

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 hoping that the experiences and recommendations of its membership will be heard and the call to action 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 in the foster care system just as CYC members have always done. Help support YOUTH EMPOWERMENT through ADVOCACY. We encourage you in your efforts and, as always, CYC will be working hard to bring the voices of foster youth to the forefront for the betterment of foster care everywhere.



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