

CAREGIVER FOCUS GROUP #1

October 2018

Freedom Forward conducted a focus group in October 2018 to better understand the stated needs of foster caregivers, particularly those caring for teens, in order to refine our proposed pilot model to address those needs. The session was the first of several anticipated sessions with caregivers. At this first session were 3 participants, all of whom had current or prior experience as foster parents and caring for teenagers. The session was facilitated by Janay Eustace, a consultant with Youth Law Center's Quality Parenting Initiative who is a former foster youth and who has built a career working with youth and adults on improving the foster care system. All participants were compensated for their time.

The following includes both direct quotes and paraphrased summaries of the participants' discussions about the question topics.

WHY DID YOU BECOME A FOSTER PARENT?

- Love of children.
- "Always" wanted to foster.
- Was asked to do so and stepped up.
- One participant said she "didn't anticipate it but met my daughter as a teen and fell in love with her."
- Repeated themes: connections + relationships + love.

YOUR EXPERIENCE AS A FOSTER PARENT: HOW MANY YOUTH, FOR HOW LONG, AND HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED?

- **Participant #1** took in her niece informally when the child's mom (the participant's sister) suddenly got married. She described her niece as being very clear that the participant was not her mom, but that she's had stability. Since then, she has also cared for toddlers placed with her formally through foster care.
- **Participant #2** was a gymnastics coach to a 16-year-old foster youth who was in a group home. Over time, she became the child's mentor, then advocate, then foster parent, and then adopted her.
- **Participant #3** described multiple caregiving experiences, beginning with her nephew (who had been in 3rd grade) and including taking in a family of refugees from Jordan and their baby. More recently, she has been a foster parent to an 18-year-old youth in extended foster care. She's parented him since he was 16 and referred to him as her son. She emphasized that she would do it again if she could.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN INFORMAL CAREGIVING AND DOING SO AS AN APPROVED/LICENSED FOSTER PARENT?

- The greatest differences described seemed to be about the paperwork involved in caring for a youth in the foster system, although it seemed that the paperwork burden was greater to care for younger children than for teens.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BARRIERS THAT MADE IT HARD TO BUILD A RELATIONSHIP WITH FOSTER YOUTH IN YOUR HOME?

- **Participant #3** responded first:
 - She had been between jobs and had time to do all the paperwork and care for the youth, but she said it would have been tough if she had been working full-time, especially before her son was “stabilized with a great team.”
 - She described her sense that different parts of the system felt “fractured,” and said that was a stressor.
 - She also described with frustration a time when she’d tried to take her family out of the country on a joint trip with others. She was told there was a requirement that everyone in the house they were staying in had to have an FBI clearance in order for her son to join the vacation, a fact which mortified her.
 - She felt too much of the system took place in non-family-friendly spaces, or “scary offices” with too “corporate” an atmosphere. She relayed that her son had observed: “They’re trying to teach us to be a family but they take us to the UGLIEST buildings.”
- **Participant #2:**
 - There was a great deal of “incompetence,” with different people saying different things, and she felt that the worst members of her daughter’s care team would drag everything down.
 - The system felt “sterile” and not loving or compassionate.
 - She stated that “it would have been nice to find a team,” but didn’t want to have to interview every single person to create that, given the “incompetence” she encountered with too many workers. She therefore ended up doing everything herself for her daughter.
 - Though she had a lenient, supportive employer, the time constraints of a full-time job were still challenging.
- **Participant #1:**
 - She also worked full-time and found it difficult.
 - Her calls for assistance were never answered or returned, even about childcare approvals.
 - She never got reimbursed for her out-of-pocket costs.
 - “I felt like no one was working with me.”
- All participants described criticisms from others as a major challenge, including people in their circles trying to talk them out of fostering by telling them that the experience would ruin their lives, marriages, etc.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE FEARS THAT PEOPLE HAVE ABOUT BEING A FOSTER PARENT, AND WHAT ARE SOME THINGS YOU WANT PEOPLE TO KNOW?

- All participants stated that they felt their relationship with their foster/adoptive children was no different from being a biological parent.
- Foster parents learn as much from their children as they offer their children:
 - “It’s a 2-way street.”
 - “I’m getting back way more than you think he’s giving me.”
- “I’ve become a better parent to my biological kids because of him.”
- Parenting isn’t about checking boxes.
- It is important to treat youth in your home with respect.
- Every family can use some help.
- Being a foster parent is NOT charity work. And talking about it can help erase some of the taboos and stigmas society has around foster parenting.
- One participant said she felt there were a lot of empty nesters in San Francisco who could be great foster parents to teens, as well as current parents who could easily add another child to the mix.
- “If you’re willing, you can do anything.”

WHO PROVIDES YOU WITH PERSONAL SUPPORT?

- Family.
- Friends.
- Other foster parents and adoptive parents.
 - One participant stated that another woman who had adopted a teen was “the singular most helpful thing,” making the experience feel relatable and “not sterile.”
- One participant stated that the lead on her child’s Seneca wraparound team helped when the child’s social worker “was terrible.”
- The participants noted that they did not like to call county workers for respite.

WHAT SERVICES REALLY HELP?

- College tours, provided by ILSP.
- Consistent providers “who get it.” There are so many services, but if the people in the jobs aren’t good, it’s no use.
- Giving multiple chances at things.

WHAT ELSE IS NEEDED?

- A service for in-home de-escalation of crisis situations.
- A service that can provide transportation assistance in a normal way (i.e. not in a county vehicle, but in a Lyft or Uber) to help youth when they’re not at home. For example, one participant described her son needing this when he would visit his biological family, whom he loved but who did not always provide a healthy environment, and sometimes he needed to be able to leave quickly.
- A more convenient way to pick up or drop off children. According to one participant, the facility where children are dropped off and picked up from care has moved too far away; she wished it could be closer or that children and youth could be brought directly to the home.
- Goal-setting with youth, beyond simply putting some goals in writing, and by someone who can be part of the process in helping implement the plan.
- A child-care center.

TRAINING: WHAT WAS GOOD AND WHAT IS NEEDED?

- Needed:
 - “Super trauma training.”
 - A separate training for caring for older youth.
- Good:
 - A class on co-parenting between foster and biological families.
 - Online trainings where you can choose the topics.

WHAT SHOULD WE ASK TO LEARN IF A YOUTH IS SAFE AND CARED FOR?

- Ask youth:
 - Do you have enough to eat?

- Do you have enough clothes that fit?
- How do you feel about your clothes and shoes?
- Do you feel comfortable?
- Do you ever have friends over to the home?
- Ask youth and foster parents:
 - What are your plans for the holidays?
- Ask foster parents:
 - Do you know who the kids' friends are?
 - How often and how do you connect with the child's biological family?

REUNIFICATIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH BIOLOGICAL FAMILY: HOW HAVE THOSE EXPERIENCES BEEN FOR YOU?

- **Participant #1** didn't want a child she was caring for to return to his biological family. "I wanted him for longer." She described feeling "really sad" and said there was "no support" provided at the time.
- **Participant #2's** daughter started running away the week she was adopted, after never having done so before. The family learned she was going to her biological family. After she turned 18, they stopped calling the police about it. She is now 20 and lives with her biological sisters in what the participant characterized as a toxic environment, and she's now beginning to see that her biological family isn't that healthy.
- **Participant #3** recommended that foster parents try to be polite but keep biological parents at arm's length. Her son visits his biological mom regularly, and it's "complicated," but because he's in extended foster care he can't live with his biological family for the time being. She said that he sees the good and bad parts of his biological family on his own. It has been challenging to navigate the stream of parenting-related texts she gets from her son's biological mom.

HOW HAS YOUR EXPERIENCE BEEN IF AND WHEN YOUTH HAVE RUN AWAY FROM YOUR HOME?

- **Participant #2** spoke on this in some detail:
 - She felt that no support was given when her daughter ran away.
 - She said she "just got really good at being a detective" herself.
 - She dealt with the grief of those occasions by writing a blog about her experiences.
 - There was a situation where some aspect of the running away behavior became a safety concern for the participant's family, so they had to "let her go for good."
 - Over time, she has come to the belief that "[parenting] is about us showing up every day, saying 'I love you,' putting a little food in her belly, and that's it," rather than maintaining other kinds of expectations.

FEEDBACK ON FREEDOM FORWARD'S PROPOSED MODEL

- The pilot definitely needs to have a large mental health component, including access to therapy once a week.
- It is important to provide support to youth for socializing with friends, cousins, etc., and to cover normal extracurricular activities.
- One participant recommended finding a way to teach older youth how to access regular medical care, not just the emergency room or a baby pediatrician.
- Participants were positive about the secondary caregiver feature of the model, with one participant exclaiming that she wanted to be a "grandma" in the program when we launch.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Love and deep personal relationships are key.
- Working full-time while becoming a foster parent for a teen is possible but very challenging.
- There needs to be much more support provided to parents when youth run away.
- Interactions with biological parents are both inevitable and fraught.
- The model's mental health, support for extracurriculars and organic relationships, and secondary caregiver features look promising and exciting.