

YOUTH FOCUS GROUP #1

October 2018

Freedom Forward conducted a focus group in October 2018 to better understand the stated needs of young people in foster care, in order to refine our proposed pilot model to address those needs. The session was the first of several anticipated sessions with youth and young adults. At this first session were 5 participants whose ages ranged from 14 to 24, all of whom had current or prior experience in foster care as teenagers. The session was facilitated by Janay Eustace, a consultant with Youth Law Center's Quality Parenting Initiative who is a former foster youth herself and who has built a career working with youth and adults on improving the foster care system. The session was assisted by Ayanna Rasheed, Freedom Forward's Youth Engagement Coordinator, who also participated in the focus group as a former foster youth herself. All participants were compensated for their time.

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

WHAT DID NOT WORK FOR YOU IN THE FOSTER SYSTEM?

- "Group homes in general." All participants expressed this sentiment.
- Feeling that staff treated youth like they didn't care about the youth and were focused primarily on doling out punishments for breaking rules. "They're more focused on you failing than seeing you achieve."
- Sharing a bedroom with a stranger.
- Separation from siblings.
- Social workers who were inconsistently available and who youth felt were not helpful or responsive.
- An inability to easily access needed resources such as new school clothes or a bus/BART pass to get to school or work. Participants described that barriers to these kinds of resources set them up for failure.

CALIFORNIA'S CONTINUUM OF CARE REFORM IS TRYING TO DECREASE GROUP HOME USE AND INCREASE PLACEMENTS TO FAMILIES. HOW DOES THAT SOUND TO YOU?

- Overall enthusiasm: "That's what's up!"
- Concern: youth noted that the family approval process can be really difficult and takes a long time; they wished that could be made easier.

WHO IN YOUR LIFE SUPPORTS YOU RIGHT NOW?

- Most youth listed biological parents and siblings.
- One youth also listed a former foster parent.

WHO IS IMPORTANT TO YOU IN YOUR LIFE RIGHT NOW?

- All youth solely listed the people they felt they were responsible for, such as a daughter, nieces, and younger siblings.
- (This was somewhat surprising, as I had expected them to describe relationships with adults or peers.)

THOUGHTS ABOUT FOSTER FAMILIES

- Recommendations:
 - **Screening.** Develop better screening of prospective foster families. All youth in the group expressed that some of the families they'd been placed with in the past seemed to put on a good show for others but were cruel or neglectful of the youth in their home.
 - **Allowances.** Have the system provide a small fixed allowance for teenagers in care (perhaps earmarked out of the family's foster care payments), both to ensure that they'll be able to access resources without relying solely on foster families, and to begin to teach financial skills to youth before they exit care.
 - **Matching.** Provide a process to match youth with prospective foster families, especially for teenage youth. That process should include an introductory meeting between youth and families, where they can learn about the family's rules and expectations and both sides can get a sense of fit. That process should also include an opportunity to meet the other children or youth in the family home and observe interactions between the adults and those children.
- It is important to set up family home settings for success. Otherwise, youth "get moved around too much and end up in the juvenile justice system because of a lack of stability."

HOW DID YOU DEVELOP A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP WITH A FOSTER PARENT?

- For the one youth who expressed that she eventually became close with her foster mom, she described what had taken place to allow that to develop.
- Specifically, she expressed that she felt that the foster mom had many conversations with her over a long period of time, was open and caring, and "advised" her from a place of truly knowing her.
- She expressed that 14-18-year-olds need "guidance and structure" in order to maintain stability. "Structure and support go hand in hand."
- In addition, "you have to let people be an expert in their own experiences," rather than being judgmental.

DID THE PEOPLE WHO MATTER TO YOU HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO BE IN YOUR LIFE WHILE YOU WERE IN FOSTER CARE?

- All youth expressed that they did not have enough support connecting to those people, who were primarily identified as members of their biological families (including extended family members).
- "The system made it hard for them to be part of my life." This sentiment was repeated by several youth.
- A challenge that a number of youth expressed was being moved far away from those people, including sometimes feeling they were moved far away not despite but because of the youth's contact with a family member they loved.
- Youth expressed a feeling that the system only wanted them to interact with their biological families in a sterile meeting setting, "not in a natural environment."
- Some things the system could have done that would have made it easier:
 - Taking into account when youth express that they'd like to see and spend time with family;
 - Intentionally placing youth near their families and communities;
 - Providing contact with siblings; and

- Providing transportation assistance for youth to see their family members.

ACCOUNTABILITY: WHAT SHOULD WE BE LOOKING AT OR ASKING TO KNOW THAT YOUTH IN OUR FOSTER CARE COMMUNITY ARE SAFE AND HAPPY?

- Even just showing up regularly and frequently to check in is extremely valuable.
- Ask:
 - Are there things you need that you don't have access to?
 - Do you have access to all the medical care you need? Access to specialists? Medical follow-ups?
 - Do you have access to feminine care products (as applicable)?
 - Are you learning how to manage money?
 - What are your plans/goals/aspirations for after you leave care?
- But don't just ask. Ask, and then actively help youth with their stated needs and goals.
- If youth are behaving in ways that seem wrong, don't assume there is something wrong with the youth. Find out what's going on beneath the behavior. As one youth said, "Dig deeper." For example, "WHY did you steal those clothes?" might reveal that the youth isn't being given enough clothing that fits them or that they feel comfortable wearing. Even "What's wrong at home?" can help.

WHY MIGHT YOU RUN AWAY FROM A HOME OR PLACEMENT?

- Being placed too far from their community and the people they love.
- Needs not being met in the home, such as not being given clothes or other resources.
- Physical or verbal abuse.
- A desire to leave before they get terminated (i.e. rejecting the placement because they're afraid they'll be rejected from it).
- Feeling that they are misunderstood or not respected by the adults/staff, or that the placement is a bad match.
- Feeling that the adults are being "too nosy, sometimes" and invading the youth's privacy.

WHAT WOULD HELP YOU STAY, OR RETURN IF YOU'VE ALREADY LEFT?

- "Call me! And keep calling. Show that you care." Specifically, call to check in with love and concern, not to threaten the youth.
 - This approach was contrasted with what one youth described of their experience after running away: "My social worker left like one message, then put a warrant on me."
- Demonstrate that there's a way back to the home.
- Provide conflict mediation, so youth can address conflicts in the home that might have contributed to leaving.

WHAT IF YOU COULD HAVE A FRIEND OR FAMILY MEMBER YOU COULD SOMETIMES GO TO OUTSIDE OF THE HOME, INSTEAD OF BEING CONSIDERED "AWOL?"

- That would be great for both youth and families.

FREEDOM FORWARD WANTS TO DEVELOP A NEW COMMUNITY OF FOSTER YOUTH AND FAMILIES AND PROVIDE LOTS OF SUPPORT TO EVERYONE IN THE COMMUNITY. IF YOU WERE A PART OF THAT COMMUNITY, WOULD YOU WANT TO COMMUNICATE WITH OTHER YOUTH IN THE COMMUNITY? AND IF SO, HOW?

- All youth said yes, they would want to be connected to the other foster youth in the same community of care.
- Sentiments included:
 - It's nice to be able to relate to others who can help each other.
 - Having others to talk to who have been through similar things can make you feel more confident in yourself.
 - Otherwise, "it feels like it's just you."
- Youth expressed an interest in a combination of social media and "real-life" connections with others, specifically using something like Facebook to share resources and encouragement with each other.
- Youth described the importance of peer supports in their own lives, and one noted that "You can't tell someone who to do with their life if you won't be there to support it." In some ways, youth trust other youth more than adults to do so.

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THE WORD "CSEC," FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO HAVE HEARD IT BEFORE?

- There was a mix of feelings about the term.
- One youth said they recently watched the movie *The Color Purple* and had some clarity when they realized that one of the characters was experiencing "CSEC." This seemed to provide some comfort, being able to describe the character's experiences in that way.
- Several youth said that the term "feels bad," "fragile," and associated with "trauma."
- One youth said they supported using the term, but more as a classification than as a label. They explained that they believed that the experience of the exploitation should allow more support to open up for a youth, but should not be used to say anything about who the youth is as a person.

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THERAPY? IS THAT SOMETHING WE SHOULD ENCOURAGE OR REQUIRE?

- There was a mix of feelings about therapy.
- One youth said they liked therapists who worked like life coaches, actively helping them work toward long- and short-term goals.
- One youth said that they had never yet felt ready to talk about the past. They described having made many appointments and even gotten as far as the therapist's parking lot but never made it in the office door of a therapy session.
- Another youth said they also didn't feel ready to talk to a therapist, explaining that they didn't feel like they could tell personal things even to people they're already close to and therefore definitely didn't feel they could tell a stranger.
- One youth said that therapists who can understand and "have been there" and who make clear that they won't judge the youth can be helpful, but that otherwise "clichés come out."
- Youth were not generally keen on the idea of group therapy, saying that it depended on the "vibe" and that it was tricky because in a group setting, everyone needs to be engaged for it to feel valuable. On the other hand, as one youth put it, "One-on-one, I have your attention."

WHAT KINDS OF RULES AROUND CELL PHONE USE DO YOU RECOMMEND FOR OUR COMMUNITY?

- Youth uniformly rejected coming into a new home with any restrictions on their use of their cell phones, even if they themselves played a central role in the rule-setting process.
- Sentiments included that “strictness causes sneakiness” and that it felt especially unfair to impose restrictions on youth who were paying for their own cell phone bills.
- One youth explained, and the others agreed, that these kinds of rules build a wall of distrust before even starting a relationship with a new family, and that they might be more open to the idea of such rules once a trusting relationship was already established.

IF YOU HAD A MAGIC WAND, WHAT WOULD YOU BUILD INTO A COMMUNITY OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN FOSTER CARE?

- The ability to access AB12 services at a younger age than 18.
- Workers who are patient and willing to let youth take the time they need to grow.
- Mentorship: creating a plan with youth to help them develop self-sufficiency for after they leave care.
- Training on money management and financial literacy, as well as other skills to live in the adult world.
- A fixed allowance for youth, with a budget and structure.
- Support for biological parents, so that when foster youth inevitably return to them (either through family reunification or after they age out of care), the old problems don’t resume.
 - That support should include concrete resources, not just therapy, for the biological families.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Connection to biological family and other existing community is profoundly important to the participants. Participants felt like those connections were not respected during their experiences in foster care, both in terms of placement locations and facilitation of visits or other contact. This contributed to times when they ran away from placement, among other things.
- Being genuinely heard and respected by the system and its providers is necessary to build trust. Some activities participants expressed as lacking in their experiences include workers checking in regularly and without threat (especially when youth are out of the home), responding to calls, providing access to resources, and listening when youth describe their needs.
- Family-based foster homes are generally preferable to group homes, but it's important to set up family homes for success by improving the screening of foster families and engaging in more intentional matching for youth and families to assess fit.
- Some resources participants wished they could have accessed include small allowances while in care, mentorship and training on financial literacy and other adult living skills, transportation assistance, and resources beyond therapy for biological family to improve the circumstances that led to removal.
- Restrictions (especially those perceived as overly harsh) from foster families or service providers were difficult for participants to swallow until a trusting relationship was established. But once trust was established, participants craved and benefited from a certain amount of structure and guidance, supplied in the context of an unconditionally loving relationship.