

A large crowd of people is gathered for a protest or demonstration. They are holding various signs with messages such as "PROTECT LGBTQ+, BIPOC & IMMIGRANT YOUTH!", "YOUNG PEOPLE DESERVE HOMES, NOT HARM. PROTECT IMMIGRANT & REFUGEE YOUTH!", "OUR FUTURE", and "JUSTICE FOR THE MOST IMPACTED". The scene is filled with people of diverse ages and backgrounds, all focused on their cause.

THE MOCKINGBIRD SOCIETY'S LEGACY OF ADVOCACY: EXTENDED FOSTER CARE IN WASHINGTON STATE



The Mockingbird Society has been at the forefront of shaping foster care and homelessness policies in Washington State, driving systemic change to support youth transitioning out of the foster care system. Among its most transformative achievements is its leadership in the development, expansion, and refinement of Extended Foster Care (EFC). This critical initiative ensures that young people aging out of foster care have access to the resources and support they need to navigate the complexities of adulthood.

Mockingbird's advocacy has consistently prioritized reducing systemic barriers and expanding eligibility for EFC. Over the years, the organization has worked to secure comprehensive access to extended care for all youth, regardless of their circumstances. By focusing on housing stability as a foundation for success, Mockingbird has addressed the disproportionate risks of homelessness, instability, and unmet potential faced by youth exiting foster care.

A yellow megaphone icon with sound waves emanating from it, symbolizing communication or advocacy.

EXPANDING THE VISION: A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO YOUTH SUPPORT

While housing has remained a cornerstone of Mockingbird's advocacy, the organization's vision has grown to encompass a broader framework of support essential for a successful transition to adulthood. These include:

- **Education:** Advocating for access to higher education and vocational training to prepare youth for fulfilling careers.
- **Employment Opportunities:** Ensuring youth have access to workforce readiness programs and meaningful employment pathways.
- **Behavioral Health Services:** Addressing mental health and trauma-informed care to support emotional well-being.
- **Youth Development:** Fostering life skills, leadership, and financial literacy to empower independence.

This comprehensive approach reflects Mockingbird's commitment to ensuring that youth in foster care are not only housed but also equipped with the tools necessary to lead fulfilling, self-sufficient lives.

YOUTH-LED ADVOCACY: THE HEART OF MOCKINGBIRD'S SUCCESS

Central to Mockingbird's approach is its unwavering commitment to youth-driven advocacy. Mockingbird has elevated the voices of young people with lived experience in foster care, empowering them to share their stories, identify systemic barriers, and co-create solutions. By centering youth perspectives, Mockingbird ensures that the policies it champions are responsive to real-world challenges and designed to meet the diverse needs of those they aim to help.

This youth-driven approach has informed every milestone in EFC legislation, from the initial establishment of programs like HOPE Centers in 1999 to the transformative passage of **SB 5908** in 2024, which guaranteed universal EFC eligibility for all youth dependent at age 18. Each legislative victory reflects Mockingbird's collaborative efforts with youth, community organizations, and policymakers.



TIMELINE OF ADVOCACY & IMPACT

Mockingbird's work has resulted in a series of legislative milestones that have expanded and strengthened EFC:

- **The HOPE Act (1999)** laid the foundation for services addressing housing and life skills for youth on the streets.
- **The Foster Youth Achievement Act (2006)** and subsequent legislation extended critical supports, including education, Medicaid, and transitional housing options.
- **2011-2015:** Mockingbird championed legislative expansions to EFC eligibility, ensuring youth could remain in care while pursuing education, employment, or addressing medical needs and Mockingbird advocated for the creation of the Washington State Office of Homeless Youth.
- **2018:** Flexibility in EFC enrollment allowed youth to enter and exit the program as needed.
- **2024:** Passage of SB 5908 marked the culmination of decades of advocacy, providing universal access to EFC and setting a national precedent for foster care reform.



LOOKING FORWARD: BUILDING ON SUCCESS

Mockingbird's work is far from over. As the organization looks ahead, it is addressing new challenges, including insufficient housing subsidies for EFC participants and federal policies that limit foster youth's access to housing assistance. Mockingbird is also advocating for innovative workforce development programs, expanded behavioral health services, and equity-driven reforms that address the systemic barriers disproportionately affecting marginalized youth.

By continuing to drive systemic change and amplify the voices of youth, The Mockingbird Society is not only transforming the foster care landscape in Washington State but also inspiring similar efforts across the nation. Through its unwavering dedication, Mockingbird ensures that youth aging out of foster care have the opportunity to build futures marked by stability, opportunity, and hope.

THE EVOLUTION OF EXTENDED FOSTER CARE (EFC) LEGISLATION IN WASHINGTON STATE

Over two decades, Washington State has made significant strides in supporting youth transitioning out of foster care, largely due to the persistent advocacy efforts of The Mockingbird Society. These legislative advancements aim to ensure young people have access to the resources and stability necessary to transition successfully into adulthood. Below is a timeline of key milestones:

FOUNDATION OF EXTENDED FOSTER CARE

1999: HOPE ACT (ESSB 5557)

The HOPE Act was enacted to address the growing needs of dependent youth aged 16 to 18 living on the streets. It created:

- **HOPE Centers:** Temporary residential facilities where youth could stay for up to 30 days while being evaluated for appropriate placements and services, including education, treatment, and family reconciliation.
- **Responsible Living Skills Programs (RLSPs):** Long-term residential placements providing transitional living services for dependent youth who experienced failed foster care placements.

This foundational step laid the groundwork for Extended Foster Care by recognizing the importance of targeted services for older youth in care.

EARLY LEGISLATIVE WINS SUPPORTING FOSTER YOUTH

2006: FOSTER YOUTH ACHIEVEMENT ACT (HB 2002)

This act allowed foster youth to remain in care and continue receiving health care while attending college, offering them vital stability during their educational pursuits.

2007: EXTENDING MEDICAID TO FOSTER YOUTH TO AGE 21 (HB 1201)

Ensured foster youth aging out of care received medical benefits until they turned 21, addressing critical health care needs during their transition to independence.

2009: FOSTERING CONNECTIONS ACT (HB 1961)

Previously referred to as "Foster Care to 21," this legislation allowed up to 50 foster youth per year to stay in their foster homes beyond age 18 if they were enrolled in higher education.

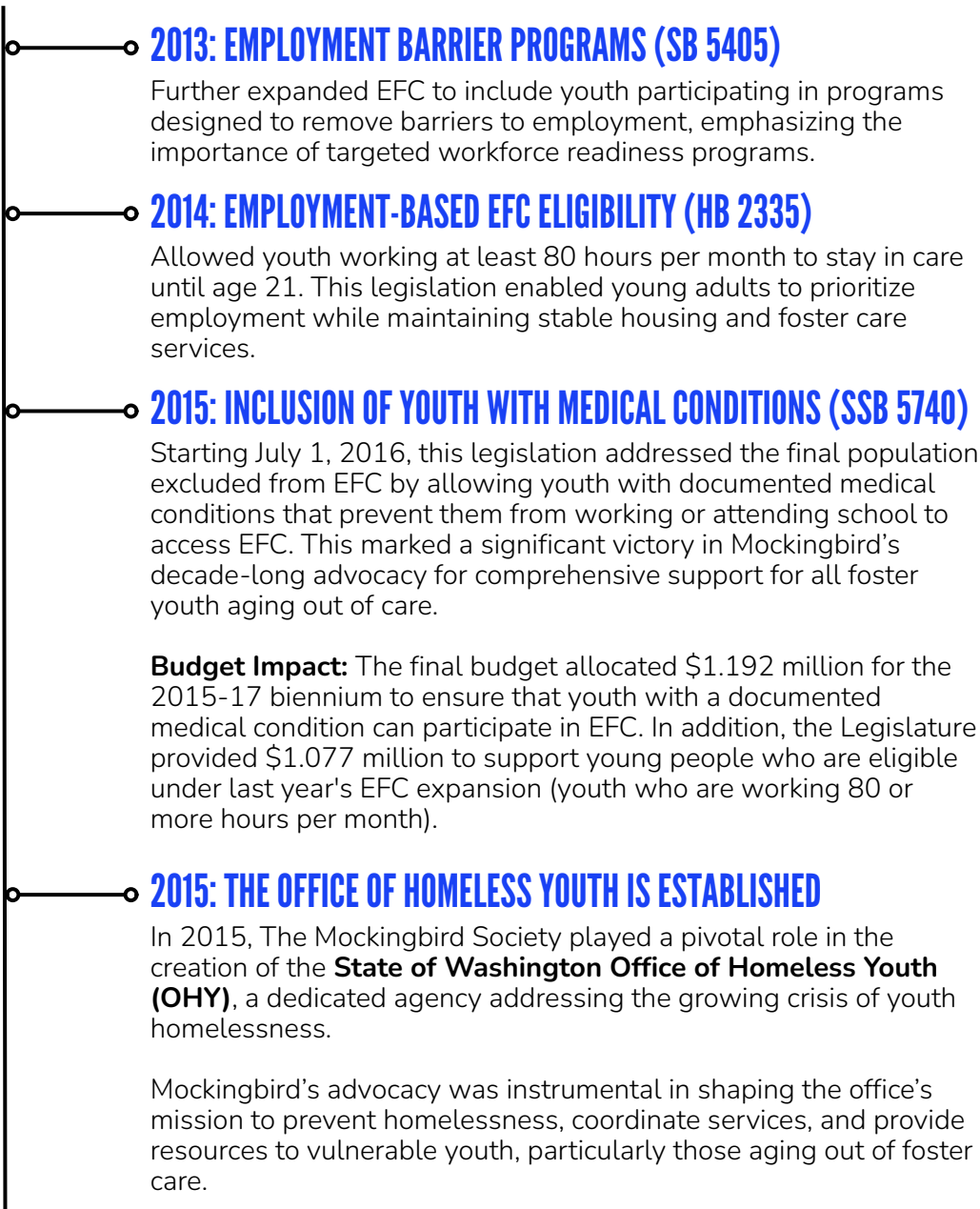
THE MOCKINGBIRD SOCIETY'S ADVOCACY LEADERSHIP

2011: EXTENDED FOSTER CARE ACT (HB 1128)

Mockingbird played a pivotal role in advocating for the passage of this bill, which allowed youth working on their high school diploma or GED to remain in foster care until age 21. This act aligned Washington State with the federal Fostering Connections Act, enabling the state to receive matching funds for extended care programs.

2012: COLLEGE AND VOCATIONAL PROGRAM EXPANSION (HB 2592)

Extended EFC eligibility to include youth enrolled in college or accredited vocational programs, ensuring broader access to support during educational endeavors.



THE MOCKINGBIRD SOCIETY'S ROLE IN ESTABLISHING THE OFFICE OF HOMELESS YOUTH

2013: EMPLOYMENT BARRIER PROGRAMS (SB 5405)

Further expanded EFC to include youth participating in programs designed to remove barriers to employment, emphasizing the importance of targeted workforce readiness programs.

2014: EMPLOYMENT-BASED EFC ELIGIBILITY (HB 2335)

Allowed youth working at least 80 hours per month to stay in care until age 21. This legislation enabled young adults to prioritize employment while maintaining stable housing and foster care services.

2015: INCLUSION OF YOUTH WITH MEDICAL CONDITIONS (SSB 5740)

Starting July 1, 2016, this legislation addressed the final population excluded from EFC by allowing youth with documented medical conditions that prevent them from working or attending school to access EFC. This marked a significant victory in Mockingbird's decade-long advocacy for comprehensive support for all foster youth aging out of care.

Budget Impact: The final budget allocated \$1.192 million for the 2015-17 biennium to ensure that youth with a documented medical condition can participate in EFC. In addition, the Legislature provided \$1.077 million to support young people who are eligible under last year's EFC expansion (youth who are working 80 or more hours per month).

2015: THE OFFICE OF HOMELESS YOUTH IS ESTABLISHED

In 2015, The Mockingbird Society played a pivotal role in the creation of the **State of Washington Office of Homeless Youth (OHY)**, a dedicated agency addressing the growing crisis of youth homelessness.

Mockingbird's advocacy was instrumental in shaping the office's mission to prevent homelessness, coordinate services, and provide resources to vulnerable youth, particularly those aging out of foster care.

Mockingbird's Contributions

- **Youth-Led Advocacy:** Mockingbird empowered youth with lived experience to share their stories with policymakers, highlighting systemic gaps contributing to homelessness.
- **Policy Leadership:** The organization worked with legislators to craft the foundational framework for OHY, ensuring a focus on prevention, crisis intervention, and transitional housing.
- **Coalition Building:** Mockingbird united stakeholders, including service providers and community leaders, to build broad support for the initiative.

OHY's Impact

Since its creation, OHY has:

- Coordinated state and local efforts to address youth homelessness.
- Secured significant funding for prevention and intervention programs.
- Launched innovative initiatives like host home programs, street outreach, and long-term supportive housing.

Mockingbird's Ongoing Role

Mockingbird continues to advocate for OHY funding, policy improvements, and the inclusion of youth voices in decision-making. The success of OHY, supported by Mockingbird's leadership, has become a model for addressing youth homelessness nationwide.

FURTHER STRENGTHENING EXTENDED FOSTER CARE

2018: FLEXIBILITY IN ENROLLMENT (SB 6222)

Strengthened EFC by enabling foster youth to enroll or reenroll in the program until age 21, as needed. It also expanded eligibility to youth in Juvenile Rehabilitation Administration (JRA) facilities or on trial return home at age 18, ensuring continuity of care for more young people.

2024: PASSAGE OF SB 5908: TRANSFORMING EXTENDED FOSTER CARE IN WASHINGTON STATE

The passage of Senate Bill 5908 in 2024 was a watershed moment in Washington State's foster care history, marking the culmination of decades of advocacy by The Mockingbird Society and its partners. This legislation fundamentally redefined the accessibility, flexibility, and impact of Extended Foster Care (EFC) by addressing long-standing barriers and introducing innovative solutions to support youth transitioning out of care.

MORE INFORMATION ABOUT SB 5908

CONTEXT & CHALLENGES ADDRESSED BY SB 5908

Prior to SB 5908, many foster youth faced critical barriers when attempting to enroll in EFC:

1. **Enrollment Gaps:** Youth who turned 18 and did not immediately enroll in EFC often lost eligibility, leaving them without essential support.
2. **Delays in Subsidy Payments:** Administrative delays meant many youth had to wait weeks or months for their first EFC subsidy, creating financial instability.
3. **Limited Engagement:** Youth who needed temporary independence often faced difficulty reentering EFC when they required support again.

These issues not only disrupted transitions to adulthood but also left many youth vulnerable to housing instability, unemployment, and homelessness.

KEY PROVISIONS OF SB 5908

SB 5908 introduced groundbreaking changes to address these challenges:

1. **Universal EFC Eligibility:** Any youth dependent at age 18 is now automatically eligible for EFC, removing restrictions tied to specific life circumstances such as education or employment.
2. **Pre-Enrollment Options**
 - a. Youth can sign a voluntary placement agreement up to six months before their 18th birthday, ensuring a seamless transition into EFC.
 - b. Agreements can now be signed electronically, simplifying the enrollment process for youth and caseworkers.
3. **Timely Subsidies:** The bill mandates that enrolled youth receive their first EFC subsidy within one month, eliminating financial delays that previously jeopardized stability.
4. **Flexible Reenrollment:** Youth can now unenroll and reenroll in EFC multiple times as they navigate their path to independence. This flexibility recognizes that the transition to adulthood is rarely linear and ensures support is available when needed.
5. **Incentivizing Engagement:** The bill ties funding to compliance with federal eligibility guidelines, creating a performance-based incentive for state agencies to streamline processes and maximize federal draw-down dollars.

ADVOCACY & PASSAGE OF SB 5908

The success of SB 5908 was driven by a strategic, youth-centered advocacy campaign:

- **Voices of Experience:** Mockingbird Society youth leaders shared compelling testimonies about their struggles with aging out of care. Their stories highlighted the urgency of eliminating enrollment gaps and improving financial stability.
- **Policy Innovation:** Mockingbird proposed solutions that aligned state priorities with federal funding guidelines, making the case for the economic and social benefits of immediate EFC eligibility.
- **Legislative Allies:** Bipartisan support was built by demonstrating how SB 5908 would reduce youth homelessness, improve educational and employment outcomes, and save long-term public costs.



IMPACT OF SB 5908

The passage of SB 5908 is already transforming the landscape of foster care in Washington State:

1. **Increased Enrollment:** The removal of enrollment gaps ensures more youth can access EFC, with projections showing a 20% increase in participation by 2025.
2. **Stability for Youth:** Timely subsidies and flexible reenrollment options have provided youth with the financial and emotional stability needed to navigate adulthood successfully.
3. **National Attention:** SB 5908 is being hailed as a model for other states, with policymakers in Colorado, California, New York, and Minnesota exploring similar reforms to enhance their EFC programs.
4. **Youth Empowerment:** By shifting responsibility for compliance to state agencies and reducing the burden on youth, the legislation has empowered young people to focus on building independence.

A LANDMARK VICTORY

SB 5908 represents The Mockingbird Society's 70th major legislative win since its inception in 2000, but its significance extends beyond a single policy. It symbolizes the power of youth advocacy, the importance of equitable access to support, and the potential for transformative change when legislation prioritizes lived experience.

Mockingbird's work on SB 5908 has sparked a national conversation about fostering independence and stability for youth aging out of care, ensuring that every young person has the opportunity to thrive, regardless of their circumstances.

FUTURE ADVOCACY PRIORITIES: ADDRESSING REMAINING BARRIERS IN EXTENDED FOSTER CARE

As The Mockingbird Society continues its mission to support youth transitioning out of foster care, several critical challenges remain. The organization is actively advocating for solutions to these issues, particularly focusing on housing stability and financial security for Extended Foster Care (EFC) participants.

SUPERVISED INDEPENDENT LIVING (SIL) PAYMENT CHALLENGES

Supervised Independent Living arrangements are vital for providing foster youth with the opportunity to develop independence while still receiving support. However, current SIL payments are often insufficient to cover basic living expenses, leading to:

- **Financial Hardship:** Youth struggle to afford essentials such as rent, utilities, food, and transportation.
- **Geographic Disparities:** The uniform payment structure does not account for varying living costs across different regions, disproportionately affecting those in high-cost areas.
- **Increased Risk of Homelessness:** Inadequate financial support can lead to unstable housing situations, undermining the objectives of EFC.

ADVOCACY GOALS:

- **Adjust SIL Payments:** Advocate for increased SIL payment rates that reflect the actual cost of living, including regional adjustments and annual inflation considerations.
- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Explore collaborations to provide additional housing subsidies or transitional housing options for EFC participants.

FEDERAL HOUSING ASSISTANCE EXCLUSION

Currently, EFC participants are ineligible for certain federal housing assistance programs, such as the Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) initiative. This exclusion presents significant challenges:

- **Difficult Choices:** Youth must choose between remaining in EFC for support or exiting to qualify for federal housing assistance, potentially sacrificing stability in one area to address another need.
- **Limited Housing Options:** Without access to federal assistance, securing affordable housing becomes increasingly difficult.

ADVOCACY GOALS:

- **Policy Amendments:** Work with federal and state policymakers to amend guidelines, allowing EFC participants to access federal housing assistance without losing state support.
- **State-Funded Supplements:** Advocate for state-funded housing assistance to bridge the gap until federal policy changes are implemented.



PROPOSED LEGISLATION: SENATE BILL 5082

In response to these challenges, Senate Bill 5082 was introduced during the 2025 Legislative Session to create a housing assistance program specifically for youth enrolled in Extended Foster Care. The bill passed through the Ways and Means Committee, but did not end up passing during the 2025 Session. However, we are planning to bring back SB 5082 in the 2026 Legislative Session as a continuation of our advocacy for EFC.

Key Provisions of SB 5082:

- **Extended Foster Care Housing Program:** Establishes a program to provide rental assistance and associated housing fees to eligible youth, aiming to prevent and alleviate homelessness among EFC participants.
- **Eligibility Criteria:** Youth receiving EFC services who are experiencing homelessness or are at imminent risk of homelessness are eligible for assistance.
- **Rental Assistance Details:**
 - Assistance is provided for up to 36 months, not extending beyond age 21.
 - The amount is based on fair market rent in the youth's location.
 - Youth pay no more than 30% of their adjusted gross income toward rent, including the EFC subsidy.
- **Program Administration:** The Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) will conduct a competitive procurement process to identify entities to operate the program, ensuring all eligible youth receive access to rental housing assistance.
- **Transition Planning:** Mandates that DCYF conducts a transition planning process with youth at least three months prior to their 21st birthday, including assessments of housing stability and applications to federal housing voucher programs when available.

ADVOCACY GOALS:

- **Support Passage of SB 5082 in 2026:** The Mockingbird Society is actively advocating for the passage of this bill, recognizing its potential to provide critical housing support to EFC participants.
- **Raise Awareness:** Engage stakeholders and the community to build support for the bill, emphasizing the importance of stable housing in successful transitions to adulthood.



By addressing these challenges through legislative advocacy and program development, The Mockingbird Society aims to ensure that youth in Extended Foster Care have the necessary support to achieve stability and independence.