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A TURNING POINT

content

Report: KC Regional Authority
by Wesley Stewart page 1

Testifying for Change
by Esther Taylor page 1

Letter from the Editor
by Annie Blackledge page 2

Election-ic Warfare
by KC Chiu page 2

Internal Conflict
by Marcel Zulauf-Stewart page 3

2021 Legislative Agenda
Spotlight page 3

Behavioral Health Support
by James Sheard page 3

staff reporters



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 **System Reform**
Wesley Stewart

Report: KC Regional Authority



Wesley Stewart

In my role as the King County Network Representative, I have been tracking the development of the King County Regional Homelessness Authority

(KCRHA) through 2020. This new authority is an agreement between King County, Seattle, Renton (and other cities) to coordinate their response to the homelessness crisis in the region. On the governing board sits Seattle's mayor, the King County Executive, several King County Council members, and other mayors from within the County. On the implementation board sits a diverse panel of policy experts, advocates in public health and education, religious leaders, and individuals with lived experience. This implementation board makes many of the crucial decisions as the regional authority continues to develop.

As some folks may know, there have been a series of major delays and missed deadlines.

Indeed, there are external factors impacting the work, but the six month delay in hiring a CEO should cause concern for communities impacted by homelessness. With this delay, the new authority cannot build a staff and workplan to address the community's needs. There was at least one candidate for CEO who declined the position in March of 2021. The implementation board is considering an interim CEO until a more permanent appointment occurs. Throughout this process, the KCRHA has fallen short of cultivating deep relationships with communities of color, rural communities, and young people. If the regional authority is to be effective, these unique populations must have their needs addressed. Rural communities are in short supply of homelessness services; this not only impacts the individuals needing resources, but also the entire region as folks move into the big cities looking for help. Unhoused or unstably housed youth and young adults are in more precarious situations, as they often have low-paying jobs, no rental history, little to no financial literacy, and no safety net. State and municipal governments have historically prioritized

"economic growth" over community enrichment. I believe it is necessary to flip that model and prioritize community health and wellness or suffer new, escalating, and compounding crises.

Through the pandemic, homelessness provider networks have all faced similar challenges. Many cities have seized this chaotic moment to innovate with bold solutions such as de-intensified shelter models, hotel placements, and direct cash transfer programs. Although these new approaches have proven to be effective, the best solution to a homelessness and housing crisis is preventative care. Community care is a big bucket that includes cultural competency trainings in schools and government departments that engage with diverse communities, investments in public daycare and after-school programs, and equitable policies like increasing the minimum wage, defunding police departments, and universal access to physical and mental healthcare.

As we consider shifting economic investment into our communities, we should also critique some of the antiquated laws that continue to feed the root causes of this crisis. In many parts of King County, including

[see Report, continued on page 4](#)

 **Pay It Forward**
Esther Taylor



Esther Taylor

When youth who have been in foster care are given the platform to tell their stories, it gives social workers and policy makers a different perspective of the child welfare system. Youth who

share their experiences should be listened to because we're the ones who know what it's like from the inside, rather than only looking at it from the outside. Youth who have been in foster care have the potential to change the system because many have the passion and drive to do so. Our advocacy leads to better policies and a better system overall. Our lived experiences in care make us the experts in knowing how to advocate for systems change.

Having been in foster care, and feeling the constant pain and agony of being taken away from my mother, I felt the need to use my voice to speak out for change in bettering the system. I have a deep desire and passion to change foster care into

a system that supports relationships between youth and their biological parents, if that is what they want. Supporting these relationships is important because a child's parents are still their parents regardless of their systems involvement. They need to continually be treated as the parent, even when the child is not with them. Personal experience of the system is vital in changing it because many policymakers don't know what it's like to be inside the system. They only view the system from an outside perspective, which is problematic because they may not know how policies truly impact the lives of young people. When policymakers view the system from our perspective, that's when changes in the system can begin to happen. Our experiences and perspectives of the system matter.

Another important thing for policymakers to avoid is to disregard the biological parents and the important role they will always have in the youth's life. In my experience, the more separated I was from

my mother, the more we yearned to be back together. This separation can cause youth to develop abandonment issues, which results in long lasting trauma. I am also aware that some young people don't want a relationship with their biological parents, and that's okay too. Whether a young person decides, the system needs to accommodate and respect their requests.

I advocated for this and shared my experiences in foster care when I testified for HB1227 in January. Testifying for the bill consisted of speaking publicly to legislators - the people who help shape the policies that impact the foster care system. Partners for Our Children write, "HB1227, known as the Keeping Families Together act, recognizes that children and families are best served when children are cared for by their loved ones and in their communities." I support this bill because it will prevent other young people from experiencing the things my siblings and I did when we were placed into foster care.

Before testifying, I met with Liz Trautman, Mockingbird's Director of Public Policy and

[see Testifying, continued on page 4](#)

shout outs!

Every quarter the Mockingbird Youth Network highlights a few chapter members' accomplishments



Shout out to Bunni for being accepted into college and leading a Legislative Advocacy Training for Youth Advocacy Day!



Thank you to E for dedication and this legislative

our team

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Letter from the Executive Director



Annie Blackledge
Executive Director

Recently, I was reminded to “never let a good crisis go to waste.” Crisis is often a catalyst for change. Crisis makes us look back and evaluate where we went wrong – and helps us pave (a sometimes painful) path forward.

But the path that lies ahead for our child welfare system doesn't need to be painful. We know the solution. We all need the same things - things that are especially relevant now after we've endured social isolation, loss, and the fear of not knowing what comes next. We need community. We need security. We need to know that the systems that are meant to protect us are doing so. This is consistent with what Mockingbird's young advocates have been asking for. So, let's not waste this crisis. This is our opportunity to reimagine our most critical systems, and make sure that the young people in our care are heard.

Our existing systems of care have been designed to operate from the top down - basically applying a 'one size fits all' approach. But it doesn't often fit. The fact that entering systems of care is a reliable predictor of negative outcomes for our young people is evidence enough. Our systems are ineffective because they don't incorporate what we know children need to

thrive – support, stability, and community. In essence, our systems continue to ignore that humans develop in context; many factors contribute to a child's well-being. We need to design our systems of care to be interconnected, so they can deliver the positive outcomes we want to see for children, youth, and families.

Currently, our siloed approach to human services leaves gaps, causing undue burden on families, youth, and communities. Families in need must be at risk of losing their children to the system before we pay attention. By then, it's costly, invasive, and traumatic for the families and children we're meant to serve. We also know that the communities disproportionately affected by our systems experience negative outcomes at greater rates on an intergenerational level.

Education, Public Health, Labor, and other government institutions all have a role to play in addressing the welfare of children and youth. Taking advantage of this moment requires a community-based approach. One that breaks down silos between the policy makers and the communities they serve, and brings all the relevant voices of the community together. We must shift the conversation from what the system can offer to the community to what the community actually needs from it. Through this approach, we will develop a more culturally responsive system. One that is not simply applied to the people who experience it, but instead is community-informed and has the

flexibility to evolve and respond to the community's needs.

Mockingbird has demonstrated the power of centering the voices of lived experience in systems change. And we've proved that we can better support our children, youth, and families with models of care that are youth-centered, family-focused, and community-oriented. We recognize that to fundamentally change how the child welfare system operates, we have to build it from the inside out. We need a coalition of interdisciplinary groups working together to develop a blueprint for how to provide the best care for each and every person in our communities. We must address the fact that people's needs are not compartmentalized, so our systems of care must be interrelated in order to meet them.

Let's use this crisis as a transformational opportunity to build a system that is community-oriented, family-based, and youth-focused. If we work together, we can ensure our children and families have the support and stability we all need to thrive. ■

Annie Blackledge
Executive Director



Election-ic Warfare



KC Chiu

The shadow of the recent election has loomed like threat of an imminent attack. As Hamlet muses in his famous soliloquy, “what dreams may come” in the shuffling of the coil that has

encumbered us since the beginning of the last presidential term. What dreams may come, indeed. It is a question I find myself asking in life. It brings the auspice of a fresh start. We are still lost in this sea of fantasy versus reality amidst the myriad lies that were spewed forth by each candidate.

“To vote or not to vote” is another quandary. In this past election, it seemed the approach by most was that of a community galvanized into action. This is a far more heartening display, especially after seeing the lethargy that led to the prior election's result. This is a blessing and curse for those living in areas where a varied populace means that tensions naturally run high. The fervent need for change is magnified in these times of fear and loneliness. I felt the conscious determination of the public to organize while still following the health guidelines that have now become routine. There were no Election Day parties like those I fondly remember from the 2012 election. No house parties as

Despite these facts, our courageous youth ventured out and braved the trek to the polls, as reflected by the record numbers of voters this election

we acclimated to life over the virtual platforms that allow us to connect. And so, an enervating gloom hung like a foreshadowing that troublesome events would unfold. And they did.

After the election, COVID-19 cases surged in Washington - again. Promises of a new relief package were left unfulfilled. Venues in which people convened indoors were given the “OK” to do so. This greed-driven premature reopening cost people their lives, especially the unhoused who are the most vulnerable as they seek any available shelter. Despite these facts, our courageous youth ventured out and braved the trek to the voting polls, as reflected by the record number of voters this election. We owe these populations - the ones most affected by those who flouted the restrictions intended to decrease the spread of disease - our eternal gratitude for not allowing their circumstances to keep them from participating in the voting process. I know how hard it is to follow through with scheduled plans when you are experiencing homeless-

ness. It seems far easier to be complacent and inert in fear and isolation. Yet, in casting our votes, we are akin to all who have done the same, and an irreplaceable piece of the collective whose voices were amplified to reach farther than any house party could who have done the same, and an irreplaceable piece of the collective whose voices were amplified to reach farther than any house party could.

All of the conflicts that continue to rage around us (whether you believe in them or not), should serve as a reminder of the battles that have been fought to give us these rights. Remember the many wars fought throughout history so that we could be given freedoms that inspire critical thinking and engagement in our communities. All in all, we should remain encouraged to know that our voices have the power to affect change. Hopefully, this change will create the future we've been dreaming of. ■

about us

The Mockingbird Society's mission is to transform foster care and end youth homelessness. We create, support, and advocate for racially equitable, healthy environments that develop and empower young people at risk of — or who are experiencing — foster care or homelessness. Working in partnership with young people with lived experience, we change policies and perceptions standing between any child and a safe, supportive and stable home. We envision each young person, regardless of race or individual experience, reaching adulthood with an equitable opportunity to thrive. The Mockingbird Times is a key component of our youth development program, the Mockingbird Youth Network. All youth reporters are paid employees, and contributors from across the country receive up to \$25 for published works. The Times is distributed nationally to more than 20,500 through our mailing list and as an insert in Real Change, a Seattle-based community newspaper. As a nonprofit organization, we appreciate your private contributions to support our youth and family programs. Donate online, by phone, or mail.

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Family Stochel for her hard work on HB 1227 session!



Shout out to Dre Thornock for providing powerful testimony in support of SHB 1219! Way to go!



Power of One
Marcel Zulauf-Stewart

Internal Conflict

I've always been good at being able to identify exactly what it is that I'm feeling. Up until recently, this has been one of my strongest defenses and helps me to constantly evolve. But now I have a dilemma, causing me an internal conflict. I've reached a point where I'm torn between what my mind and my heart wants. My heart wants desperately for connection on an intimate level, especially with the man I fell in love with. But my mind tells me I don't deserve a person like him. I feel this conflict I'm experiencing stems from childhood trauma, and the feeling that I'm not deserving of love and human affection. For me, this has been a reoccurring issue. My Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD) works hand in hand with my tendency to use avoidance whenever I have a chance to keep real connections. I don't know what to do or how to feel. I want for him to be in my life, but I also want to be alone.

The woman who helped me to use my voice and got me into advocacy told me that, "What I want, wants me." My optimistic and resilient side wants so desperately to believe in this statement. But, the part of me that is constantly at odds with my positive outlook tells me that I'm not good, or pretty, or successful enough for what my heart desires. This makes it hard to believe that what I want can become a reality. Cliches exist for a reason; they hold some truth to them. We are our own worst critics. I know that I've made progress in trying to change how I view myself; I know that I'm no longer the lost little girl, trying desperately to find out

who she is. But the aftereffects of many years of childhood trauma can be difficult to overcome. It's a frustrating and saddening form of conditioning. It's an everyday struggle to try and retrain my mentality and thought processes. And the truth of

You know that you have the power inside of you to achieve your dreams, and yet every day you are instead focused on how you are falling short of this potential.

the situation is that I may never fully be free from this conditioning. My god mom says it'll most likely be something I will struggle with all my life, and that's a very counterintuitive thing to accept. It makes it even more difficult to remain optimistic and hopeful. It makes it hard to see that bright light at the end of the tunnel that, in theory, leads to my future. The future I've fantasized about since I was little. When I was locked away in my room all alone with nothing but my hopes and dreams to keep me company.

Fear is a part of the human condition. We all have fears. I am no exception to that unchangeable fact. There are a wide variety of fears. My fears are not the physical kind. The things I fear take shape and manifest themselves emotionally and spiritually. I fear being alone, due to the forced isolation I was subjected to when I was younger. Being locked away in an empty room for countless hours with nothing but a mattress was a form of punishment I experienced, intended to change behaviors I wasn't able to correct. If you judge a goldfish's intellect and rate of survival based on its ability to fly, then of course the goldfish will be rated low on that scale. Does this mean the goldfish itself is worthless? The same holds true when you subject a child to unusual and cruel forms of punishment, and then wonder why they are struggling and unhappy years later. If you don't give a child the proper tools needed for everyday life, then that child is thrown in a flurry of confusion and without the skills they need to succeed.

I fear my potential and achieving all that I am truly capable of. This might seem like a confusing and irrational fear. But paired with a negative self-image problem, it creates a negative mass of energy every time you look in the mirror. You know that you have the power inside of you to achieve your dreams, and yet every day you are instead focused on how you're falling short of this potential. Every second of the day you're assaulted with the frustrating questions, "Why can't I get this stuff right?" and, "Why am I nowhere near the finish line?" When things are difficult,

see *Internal*, continued on page 4



System Reform
James Sheard

Long-Term Behavioral Health Services

When a young adult enters the foster care system, it is often due to negative circumstances they've faced in their life which can include neglect, abuse, and loss. Most of the time it is because their parents are consistently unable to meet their physical, emotional, or basic needs. These life circumstances consequently lead to young adults in foster care having an increased need for physical and mental health services. Unfortunately, these needs are often unmet, which can create barriers to their future success.

The overall goal when a young person enters the foster care system and becomes a ward of the state is successful and safe reunification with the biological family or permanent placement with another guardian that can meet their needs. However, the current COVID-19 pandemic is causing those significant health needs to grow and contributing to an already nationwide lack of foster and adop-



The author leads a rally at the Capitol on Youth Advocacy Day, 2019. Photo: Michael B. Maine

tive families who are able and willing to meet the needs of these young adults. This is causing young adults to feel depressed, suicidal, and isolated, which leads to an increase in negative coping behaviors as a result of the inadequate services that are provided.

Since the start of this pandemic, I have noticed a decline in my mental health,

which has caused me to feel like I am in a depressed state even though I have no diagnosis of depression. I am sleeping more and feeling an increased sense of fatigue. I used to spend my time off hanging out with friends and seeing new sites in King County. Now, my activities have been reduced to working and sleeping every day. According to the statewide forecast of behavioral health impacts of COVID-19 from the Washington State Department of Health, "The rest of 2020

and early 2021 will likely be defined by experiencing the disillusionment phase of disaster recovery, which is also known as the honeymoon phase of the disaster recovery chain, as we navigate the stresses related to a possible third wave of infection rates and higher rates of hospitalization."

During this phase, it is highly recommended that an increase of corresponding resources and services for behavioral

health are made available. Behavioral and mental health supports are going to be needed, not just for young adults in the foster care system, but for the general public as well. Some outcomes from COVID-19 that are likely to see are increased rates of depression and anxiety in those who are undiagnosed, and worsening symptoms in those with previous diagnoses. This is due to the experience of loss, social isolation, and significant changes in lifestyle.

Washington State must find ways to move young adults more efficiently from the foster care system to placement permanency or reunification. The state must also better support young adults entering adulthood when they age out of foster care. Ultimately, we may be receiving one-time additional funding from the federal government for behavioral health, but it is not significant enough to provide support to the youth and young adults in Washington who need it most. ■

2021 Legislative Agenda Spotlight SHB 1219

We are pleased to share that SHB 1219 has made it farther in the legislative process than ever before! SHB 1219 ensures youth ages 8 & up are appointed a well-trained attorney to advocate for their interests in the dependency process. This is a legacy issue for Mockingbird advocates - they have been advocating for legal representation since 2017. Follow us on social media for updates!

"My attorney advocated for me and with me. Because of this, I was able to find my forever home."

- Heaven Calvert,
Yakima Chapter Leader

Ways to Engage:

1. Receive Advocacy Alerts: mockingbirdsociety.org
2. Share and Like us on social media!
3. Support Youth Voice:



blog bar

“COVID-19 challenged us to adapt our annual events and find new ways to build community between young leaders, policymakers, and our partners. Although we weren’t able to advocate together in the halls of the Capitol, we were able to lean on our Mockingbird community to support the voices of young people with lived experience. — Araceli Efigenio, MSW Practicum Student

Report, from page 1

large swaths of Seattle, there are laws banning any housing denser than a single-family home. This serves to protect the status quo for landowners while blocking the development of transitional and permanent housing. As the law stands, youth homelessness service providers are compelled to have a relationship with law enforcement. Local police are often called to handle a mental health crisis despite having no expertise in crisis response. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers are contacted when undocumented youth turn 18.

It is crucial we envision healthy, stable communities... We must allocate resources to build that vision

This relationship between providers and law enforcement must be reevaluated with an antiracist lens. We must consider how this began and work to develop better solutions than the over-policing of Black and brown individuals. The school to prison pipeline is not an accident – it was designed alongside the War on Drugs and, decades later, continues to operate like a well-oiled machine; after more than \$200 million in construction costs, a new youth jail was opened in Seattle in 2020. It is crucial we envision

healthy, stable communities, and disassemble components of bad zoning laws, law enforcement and carceral systems. We must allocate resources to build that vision.

The King County Regional Homelessness Authority will continue to develop in 2021, ideally with a bit more urgency. There are various reporters and agencies doing a great job tracking the work; if you are curious and want to get engaged, you can join the conversation and stay updated at the Regional Authority’s website: <https://regionalhomelessnessystem.org/> ■

Testifying, from page 1

Advocacy to prepare my testimony. She gave me great advice on what points to discuss, which made it easier to organize my thoughts. While sharing my experience of only being able to see my mother once per week, the emotions I felt then (and even now) come to the forefront. When it was my turn to testify, I spoke my truth and shared how being in foster care has affected my life. I emphasized the importance of keeping youth entering foster care and their biological parents together. The more the system creates separation and distance between a youth and their biological parents, the more trauma it creates in their lives. All in all, the system needs to be more intentional about keeping youth and their biological parents connected – not tearing them apart.

Other advocates testified in support of this bill with me, including parents whose children have been in the system. Hearing the others testify reassured me that I was doing the right thing in speaking out, both for myself and for other young people. I chose to speak because I wanted to bring attention to the importance of this issue. It was encouraging to see other people speaking in support of this policy because it meant that they too recognize the importance of a system that better supports the relationships between youth and their biological parents. Family connection is vital because when youth and parents are split apart it creates a physical and emotional distance that can’t be repaired, even if children and their families are ultimately reunified. Trauma from the foster care system is long lasting. Take it from someone who has been in the system; I am still dealing with the trauma from it to this day.

Because in speaking out about my experiences, I am changing the system for the better. My voice is powerful.

I encourage youth with lived experience to speak out about the injustices they have faced in the system. Not only on the topics of family visitation and family reunification, but anything they have experienced and want to see changed. Many young people who exit the system are broken because of how we were treated in the system. It can scar us in many areas of our lives. When a youth speaks out about their foster care experiences, LISTEN TO THEM. Empathize with them, and do not turn a blind eye to the injustices and mistreatment youth in care experience on a daily basis.

I saw the power of what can happen when people who have experienced the system come together to use their voices. When people with lived experience advocate for change, policymakers have the opportunity to see another perspective, one that may be different from theirs. It helps them to acknowledge the flaws within the system that can no longer be overlooked or unaddressed. When each of us testified, we spoke to make sure that other young people in foster care don’t experience the same treatment we did. Our voices matter.

Ultimately, I communicated to legislators MY story of being in foster care. No one can, nor ever will, tell me how to tell my story, because it happened to ME. I will continue to tell my story the way I want to, because I believe in not filtering your experiences in foster care. If I want to talk about the emotional trauma that I have from being in foster care, I will. If I want to talk about the abandonment issues that I have from being in foster care, I most certainly will. Youth who are in foster care now and youth who will be in the system should not have to experience what I experienced. Period. What society would likely label as a negative way of talking about foster care I see as a positive. Because in speaking out about my

experiences, I am changing the system for the better. My voice is powerful powerful, and I will continue to use it to bring attention to the system.

The system needs to prioritize the voices of youth who are and have been in foster care and want to speak passionately about their experiences. Listening to people with lived experience is key to transforming the system because our firsthand experience of the system will change it from the inside out. That’s the difference. ■

Internal, from page 1

you wonder if there is something inherently wrong with you. But, (as I’ve learned through therapy), when you are subjected to a continuous cycle of toxicity and trauma with no time to heal, and without the tools necessary to do so on your own, it’s not logical to hold that against yourself. An individual must be given the precise environment, tools, and insight for the healing process to begin.

The same woman who taught me how to use my voice for change once said, “Children don’t run from anything. It is quite the opposite. Children run TO things. Run to love, run to shelter, run to acceptance.” When you lack the tools to recognize a positive and healthy support system, sometimes you run towards the opposite. Combine that with mental illnesses that have gone untreated for years on end (if ever), and it becomes even more difficult to overcome the barriers to your success.

These are only a few issues that kids subjected to years of neglect and abuse are forced to live with their whole lives. But despite the seemingly endless storm of negativity – there is a light in all of this. There are many individuals who have dedicated their lives to giving youth experiencing homelessness a chance at a future. And it is because of

Race Equity Vision

The Mockingbird Society will define racially equitable partnerships, practices, and processes. Mockingbird has an internal culture dedicated to addressing racial inequity and intersectionality for ourselves and those we serve.

Race Equity Mission

The Mockingbird Society is committed to actively creating racial equity and eliminating the negative impact of intersectionality in our work by embodying the changes we want to see.

We Welcome Your Work

We welcome submissions of articles, poetry, artwork, and photography from our young readers who have experience in the foster care system and/or homelessness. If you want to be, or have been, published in the Mockingbird Times visit mockingbirdsociety.org, call us at (206) 323-5437 or email us at youthprograms@mockingbirdsociety.org.

Note: Incoming letters to the editor and correspondence to youth under 18 years should be addressed to the Mockingbird Times and will be opened first by adult editorial staff.

these people that I have been blessed with the opportunity to begin the healing process in a safe and healthy environment. So while I may still struggle with these fears of mine, the difference is that I am finally in a place I can begin to call home. I can build up my strength and make progress slowly, little by little. Though it seemed nearly impossible before, I finally have a chance at building the future I want. Because now it’s just a difficult path instead of an impossible one. ■

