

Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit Report



The Mockingbird Society

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The Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit gathered together 34 foster youth, 20 alumni of care, and 16 allies from all over Washington State on October 25 and 26, 2008 at Cedarbook Leadership Center in SeaTac, Washington. The summit gave youth in foster care a better understanding of their legal rights, information on how to advocate for themselves and improved connections with other foster youth. The Leadership Summit was sponsored by Casey Family Programs, the Washington State Supreme Court Commission on Children in Foster Care (cochaired by Justice Bobbe Bridge), The Center for Children and Youth Justice, The Mockingbird Society and Children's Administration. The goal of the two-day leadership and skill-building summit was to help foster youth and alumni develop their voice and unique perspective while establishing regional foster youth and alumni groups around Washington State.

The Planning

The Commission for Children in Foster Care developed recommendations for change within the child welfare system. One of the Commission's guiding principals includes: "Children and their families must have an informed voice in decisions that are made about their lives." To further the Commission recommendation, the Summit Planning Committee began meeting to develop an event to strengthen and promote foster youth involvement and empowerment in their own cases and in planning for their future. The Leadership Summit Planning Committee was composed of current and former foster youth and community members who shared the same goal of promoting foster youth voice.



SUMMIT PLANNING COMMITTEE

- Casey Family Programs
- Children's Administration
- College Success Foundation
- Commission on Children in Foster Care
- Foster Parents Association of Washington State
- Girl Scouts of Western Washington
- Youth/Alumni Delegates
- Mockingbird Society
- Treehouse
- YMCA Adult Services

Applicants who desired to attend the Leadership Summit were selected through an application process that included an essay and the completion of their applications. Participants were chosen if they met the minimum criteria:

- Must be current or former foster youth age 14-24.
- Must have an interest in forming foster youth and alumni chapters.
- Peer Mentors were individuals that had been to the Leadership Summit in previous years and assisted allies with various responsibilities (three alumni and three currently in care).
- Allies who attended could be alumni over the age of 24 (of which there were twenty). They agreed to support chapters in their communities and allow foster youth and alumni to be the driving voice of the Leadership Summit. Allies also supervised youth under the age of 18.

The Summit Planning Committee entrusted the basic development of the Leadership Summit to foster youth and alumni of care. The following list includes the key objectives for participants:

- Connect foster youth and alumni with one another around their common experiences in foster care
- Discuss the perceived stigma related to growing up in foster care
- Become aware of the history of youth/alumni movement
- Understand the Mockingbird Network and how they can get involved in their own chapters.
- Be familiar with their rights as youths in care
- Establish ways to advocate for themselves while in court
- Learn to use their voices effectively
- Establish regional youth and alumni action groups to address issues important to them
- Identify pressing issues to share and discuss with state policymakers

The Event

To maintain the most inclusive event possible, the Summit Planning Committee recruited foster youth and alumni of care along with professionals to present the workshop sessions. Ten out of the 18 speakers, facilitators, and presenters, were in foster care or alumni of care. On the final day of the event the Commission on Children and Foster Care maintained its tradition of conducting an official meeting to listen to the youth/alumni recommendations for change within the foster care system.

Agenda

Saturday October 25, 2008

- 9:00 a.m. Registration and Check-in
- 10:00 a.m. Brunch
- 10:45a.m. Welcome
- 11:00 a.m. Ice Breaker/Set the Stage
- 12:30 p.m. What We Have In Common
- 2:15 p.m. Foster Youth and Alumni Movement & Mockingbird Network
- 3:00 p.m. Foster Youth Rights
- 4:30 p.m. Legal Representation
- 6:00 p.m. Dinner
- 7:00 p.m. Regional group check-ins
- 8:00 p.m. Family Feud
- 9:00 p.m. Postcard Project/Hang out/Smores/Karaoke
- 11:00 p.m. Lights Out

Sunday, October 26, 2008

- 8:00 a.m. Breakfast
- 8:30 a.m. How To Use My Voice
- 10:30 a.m. Develop Washington State Message
- 12:00 p.m. Lunch
- 1:00 p.m. Commission on Children in Foster Care and Policy Makers
- 2:45 p.m. Wrap Up
- 3:15 p.m. Closing Statements
- 4:00 p.m. Adjourn

What We Have In Common

The two presenters of the “What We Have In Common” session are alumni of foster care. They explained the definition of foster care and out-of-home placement, including residential and kinship care.

The group participated in two activities. First they played a game called “All on the Bus.” The purpose of this game was to find out what they all had in common by comparing and contrasting the things they have in common by using bus stops. The facilitator would call out something people were connected to such as the number of siblings one had or who liked ice cream. From there people would move to the bus stop representing what they were connected with. This was designed to help break down some of the stereotypes that one may not belong or connect in this environment.

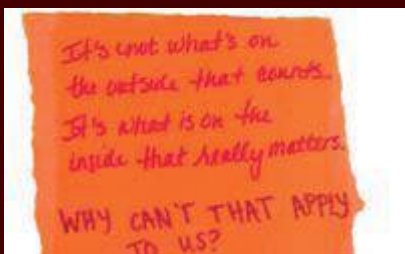
The second activity was the “Postcard Project.” The participants picked out specific postcards that they connected with and identified their shared feelings of being labeled as bad or difficult or being seen as manipulative. All of these preconceived judgments from others are associated with the stigma of growing up in foster care. Many participants were very honest and spoke openly about their foster care experience. They then took time to develop their own postcards.



THE POSTCARD PROJECT

Exploring the Culture of Foster Care

This community art project visually exhibits foster youth and alumni of care's thoughts surrounding their experiences from foster care. Through this project foster youth and alumni are able to connect around their shared culture, the culture of foster care which seems to surpass racial, ethnic, religious, age, gender, and placement history. Below are postcards created at the Leadership Summit.



One youth stated "We all learned that we share a sense of belonging and that we all are a community and also a family. It's important to know because majority of us think we are alone and people don't understand us and everything we go through, and that's not true. In this workshop we learn that we are "One in the same, no one is alone!"

Foster Participants and Alumni Movement

Participants learned what changes had been made in the system since this movement started 10 years ago. They found out the factors that could make you privileged versus oppressed, such as being white or a person of color, rich or poor, able or disabled, etc. With that they also learned about movements that helped empower the oppressed, for example, the civil rights movement. The presenter, told them about challenges throughout the foster youth movement such as coordinating to make change instead of turning it into a program, deciding who can join, how the allies fit in the movement, and issues with assumptions, stereotypes, and credibility.

The movement has two main goals:

1. To connect with other participants and alumni from foster care through shared experiences.
2. To transform the foster care system for our brothers and sisters from foster care.

Your Rights

In the Your Rights Training the participants learned their rights as youths in the system. The focus was safety & well-being, court proceedings, placement & visitation and education. The purpose was to allow the youth to grapple with these key issues and to challenge them to advocate for themselves or others in the system if they are not getting what they have a right to. Many youth were surprised at what they had rights to. One youth stated "my social worker only told me what he thought was important but not the whole rights."

Each youth received a "Your Rights" brochure produced by Mockingbird so they have something in hand that helps them advocate for themselves.

All workshop participants completed a pre-and post-test survey related to the overall training. After completion of the rights training, 77 percent of respondents reported that their understanding of their legal rights improved in at least one target area:

- 53% of respondents reported that they had an improved understanding of their legal rights where they live.
- 47% of respondents reported that they had an improved understanding of their legal rights regarding family visitations.
- 51% of respondents reported an improved understanding of their educational rights.
- 47% reported an improved understanding of their rights regarding safety and well-being.
- 55% of respondents reported an improved understanding of their legal rights in the courtroom.

Overall, youth reported the largest increase in their understanding of their legal rights in the courtroom. In the pre-test, only 6 youth reported that they understood their legal rights in the courtroom well enough to explain them to others. By the end of the training, this number had increased to 21.

Legal Representation

The goal of this workshop was to help participants understand how to participate in their court hearing. The facilitators demonstrated this by creating a mock dependency hearing. Three separate scenarios were presented during this mock trial to demonstrate various levels of representation for the foster youth and the impact of attorneys bringing the youth voice in the courtroom.

The three scenes consisted of one proceeding with a social worker, one with a CASA, and one with an attorney. The basic scenario was a hearing for “Julian” a 16-year-old male who was in his third placement. Julian ran away from his last two foster homes. He had also been missing school. Julian had been working evenings and made requests to see his siblings (the skit with the attorney is the only one where the youth received what he asked for).

After the scenes concluded Julio Carranza explained the difference between “best interest” and “stated interest.” The attorney general, social worker, and CASA all present what is known as “best interest” is the opinion of the adult (CASA or otherwise) of what is in the best interest of the child. It does not have to include what the child is asking for (although it can). “Stated Interest” is what the child/youth states as his or her request. An attorney presents what is known as stated interests, which are the client’s requests and desires in regard to their case. The legal professionals informed the youth if they live in King, Spokane, or Thurston County they should be receiving dependency hearing notices. At a dependency hearing youth have the right to remain silent and request an attorney to represent them. Lastly, they encourage youth to be an active participant in their dependency hearings.

Two participants shared that the mock trial gave them “the passion to get involved to change the system” and “when you go to court you should be prepared so your social worker and lawyer can help you get what you need.” In addition, they stated they would tell other foster youth to “get an attorney; they will fight for you” and “to be an advocate for yourself and be involved.”

How To Use My Voice

The goal of the “How to Use My Voice” workshop was to give youth in care the skills to share their life experiences to inform legislators, decision-makers, and professionals on policy and practice changes that need to be made in the foster care system. This workshop helped them to make their message effective and protect their well being. The Presenters used the “Telling It like It Is” DVD featuring former foster youth strategically sharing their stories as a learning tool. This gave the participants an opportunity to see how other foster youth have used their experiences to change the foster care system. During this workshop participants learned about credibility and were asked the question, “what makes someone credible to you?” Many said it is important to have character, competence, and expertise; to be well prepared and organized; and to have well supported arguments.

Participants then had a chance to practice articulating issues they wanted to see changed within the foster care system while using another tool that the presenters gave called the “Prep Model.” This model teaches youth to state your point, give your reason, provide an example, and in conclusion restate your point. One participant stated, “I’m so glad they gave us the Prep Model tool, this will keep me from scattering all over the place in order to make my message effective while telling my life experience.”

The presenters pushed the point that while discussing your life experiences with legislatures or professionals you must protect your well being. This is considered a lifelong tool. You should be able to inform people of your story without giving details that you may regret later (sharer’s remorse). At the conclusion of this workshop, participants were better equipped to utilize their personal experience to facilitate change within the foster care system.

Develop Washington State Message

The Commission on Children in Foster Care chaired by Justice Bobbe Bridge attended the Leadership Summit to hear the concerns and recommendations for change from foster youth and alumni. The individuals who were on this panel were:

- Aleksa Lazarewicz, Communications Coordinator, CASA
- Justice Bobbe Bridge, Center for Children & Youth Justice

- Debra Purce represented Cheryl Stephani, Director, Children’s Administration
- Joanne Moore, Director, Office of Public Defense
- Julio V. A. Carranza, Foster Youth Alumni
- Kelly Stockman-Reid, CASA
- Representative Ruth Kagi, Serving north King and southeast Snohomish counties
- Judge Richard McDermott, President, Superior Court Judges’ Association
- Ron Hertel, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction
- Sassi Jarvela, Foster Care Youth
- Stephen Hassett, Senior Counsel, Attorney General’s Office

Participants brainstormed the top issues they believe needed to be changed in the foster care system and each regional group addressed the panel of policymakers on the following four issues:

1. Kinship Care:

Two regions (Region 2 and Region 4) both had powerful opinions about the changes within the kinship care system. They first informed the legislatures about the similarities and differences in the kinship care and foster care systems. The similarity being that they are the exact same system. The only difference is that in kinship care you are staying with a relative and in the foster care system you are staying with a complete stranger.

The youth then began giving personal stories of living with relatives and then being taken away because the relative could not afford to take care of them or because the relative’s house was too small. Both regions agree that if the kinship care system had the same resources as the foster care system, living with a relative would not be a problem. One participant said, “If I got to stay with my grandpa I would have made better choices in life, I could guarantee you that I would not have made the mistakes I’ve made if I had his guidance.”

Another change the youth were determined to have change in the kinship care system was, youth not being informed of the few resources that they were entitled to. “Even though we barely get any, I wish I knew about the resources that are offered to us before I turned 18,” said Ashlie Lanier (a youth reporter at the Mockingbird Society). “Now it’s too late, if it’s not a scholarship offer I can’t get any help, or can I? My exact point, I’m not being informed!”

Youth and Alumni Recommendations:

- A. Those that are in kinship care should receive the same benefits of those in the foster care system.

2. Siblings:

Two regions (region 1 and region 6) both had strong arguments and moving life experiences to share with Commission representatives about this issue within the foster care system.

Youth in both regions had similar stories of after exiting the foster care system not being able to have contact with their younger siblings. One participant argued “Once I turned 18 my younger siblings, who were in the same home as me, were not able to be in contact with me. When asked why they replied that ‘they were being punished for misbehavior’ and I don’t think that is fair.” Legislators present for the report out informed youth that both a law had been passed and substantial funding in the area of \$2 million had been authorized by the legislature for sibling visits. Another participant gave a personal example of not being in the same home as her younger siblings but was able to have contact with them while in the foster care system. Once she exited, however, she lost all contact and hasn’t been allowed to talk to them in almost four years. Both regions made it clear how important it is to be with family while going through the good and bad situations while in the foster care system. The consensus: “If we have family we should not be separated but always together!”

After Legislatures listened to all the life experiences, questions, and arguments due to this problem, they clearly have seen that there needed to be a change. This was one of the same issues that were confronted last year at the summit.

- A. Youth and Alumni Recommendations:
- B. Mandatory sibling placements together
- C. Court ordered sibling visits, when not placed together
- D. Phone cards should be provided to youth in care so they are able to stay in touch with their siblings if they are not placed together.

- E. Every youth in care should be given their sibling contact information, if they are separated from one another.
- F. Youth should be placed with or close to siblings.

3. Notification of rights at age 12:

Region 3 talked about within the foster care system most youth aren't given the knowledge of their rights until it's time for their exit. Participants in Region 5 asked commission members for a required copy of the "Notification of Rights" for foster care youth at the age of 12.

Participants argued that caseworkers are trying to protect the youth instead of informing them of the rights they have. This issue includes homes, lawyers, housing, etc. A participant argued the point that "At the age of 12 we know right from wrong and by that time know why we ended up in the foster care system." Her point being that we are no longer "children" at that age. We know what we want to get out of life whether we lose or fail at our decision. We should be informed of all the "twists" and "turns" of the system to make our own judgment call instead of having someone else plan for our future. We need to be aware of our choices!

Youth and Alumni Recommendations:

- A. By the age 12 youth should receive a "Notification of Rights."

4. Federal foster care and U.S. foster care need to have equal benefits:

Participants in Region 5 asked legislatures for federal foster care and U.S foster care to have equal benefits. A federal foster care alumnus stated that "federal foster care's current funding structure fails to meet the needs of the child welfare system." His personal experience in the system caused damage to his success. He told commission members that when he moved to the United States from Africa and became part of the federal foster care system while becoming a U.S citizen he barely got help with his needs during his childhood.

Most federal foster care youth claim that they are thousands of dollars in debt after trying to continue their education after high school and exiting the system. "We are not given the same benefits as U.S foster care youth and it is not fair," the participant argued.

Youth and Alumni Recommendations:

- A. Those that are in the federal foster care system should receive the same rights of those that are in the U.S. foster care system.



Region 1

NEED TO LOOK AT HOW SIBLING VISITATION IS DEALT WITH



Region 2

KINSHIP CARE NEEDS TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY FOR SCHOLARSHIPS EMOTIONAL LIFE EXPERIENCES



Region 3
ASKED FOR NOTIFICATION OF RIGHTS AT THE AGE OF 12 TO HAVE KNOWLEDGE OF RIGHTS



Region 4
ASKING FOR BENEFITS (RESOURCES) FOR KINSHIP CARE



Region 5
ASKING FOR FEDERAL FOSTER CARE AND U.S. FOSTER CARE TO HAVE EQUAL BENEFITS



Region 6
ASKING FOR SIBLING VISITATION

Pre-Post Survey Results

The participants from the summit all completed a pre-and post-test survey related to the event. Survey results showed that 85% of respondents reported improvements in at least one target area.

- 54% of respondents reported an improvement in their understanding of their legal rights.
- 46% of respondents reported an improvement in their ability to share their story to positively advocate for themselves.
- 46% of respondents reported an improvement in their ability to share their story to help transform the foster care system.
- 49% of respondents reported an improvement in their connection with other foster youth.

Closing

The third annual Foster Youth/Alumni Leadership Summit was a success. Those that attended enjoyed their time and felt they were making a difference. One ally wrote “the kids had a great time connecting with others and being a region and state united. We left them incredibly inspired. . .” The Cedarbrook Leadership Center was highly impressed with the professional attitude the youth had while staying at their facility.

The Leadership Summit Committee decided in 2007 to have Mockingbird Society (MBS) as the lead this year, which helped make this event a success. This was done by MBS providing staff to assist with administrative tasks and resource specialists to oversee each region. The committee also decided to have a nurse, peer mentors for each region, and security at night.

After the Leadership Summit the resource specialists from MBS followed up with each of the youth in their region to help them get connected with other youth/alumni of foster care. This was made possible through the Mockingbird Network. The Mockingbird Network is an organized, focused network of youth advocates who are informed, trained, and empowered to transform the quantity and quality of child and family services while strengthening their peers, their communities, and themselves.