

National Foster Care Coalition Advocates for Youth

The National Foster Care Coalition (NFCC) brings together national child welfare organizations and foster care alumni to raise public awareness and coordinate advocacy efforts around foster care. As a coalition of national partners, NFCC believes that supporting the positive development of children, youth and families is the collective responsibility of the community. Our partners are committed to helping build communities where:

- Every child, youth and young adult has a safe and stable home and the skills, confidence, sense of purpose and enduring relationships needed for a successful interdependent life;
- Every family has the strengths, supports and resiliency to master life's challenges;
- Every community recognizes its duty to facilitate the development of strong families as essential ingredients in a healthy community; and
- Every policymaker consistently demonstrates a commitment to the well-being of children, youth and families and embraces this as part of the national agenda.

Over the next five years, NFCC will strive to formalize the coalition's structure, coordinate individual organizational activities in ways that will maximize impact and minimize duplication, and provide educational tools to advocates and child welfare professionals to support their foster care improvement efforts.

NFCC continues to work with the National Foster Parent Association, Casey Family Programs' National Center for Resource Family Support, and others to sponsor National Foster Care Month. National Foster Care Month is an opportunity to recognize the contributions of resource families, to call for more resource families nationwide, and to support youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood. For information on Foster Care Month toolkits and resources, visit: www.nationalfostercare.org, and click on the National Foster Care Month page.

With state budget cuts putting foster youth programs in jeopardy nationwide, VOICE interviewed Robin Nixon, Director of the National Foster Care Coalition in Washington, D.C., to learn her perspective on the importance of support for adolescents in care.

VOICE: When was the National Foster Care Coalition organized?

*NIXON: The NFCC originated with the national airing of the PBS documentary, *Take This Heart*, in January of 1998. The Annie E. Casey Foundation and The Casey Family Program had joined together three years*

earlier to fund this film as a way of bringing attention to the often invisible population of foster children

VOICE: What was the public's response to the film?

NIXON: The response was incredible. The *Take This Heart* project included the development of an outreach program, to provide additional information to viewers who wanted to learn more about foster care needs in their own communities. The greatest concern – from state agencies, private organizations and the general public – centered around the issue of transitioning foster youth out of the foster care system.

VOICE: How did the film lead to the formation of the Coalition?

NIXON: It became clear that any follow up activities needed to be coordinated, so the Foster Care Awareness Project was developed in 1998, with the organizations behind the *Take This Heart* film at the helm. As our membership grew, we soon realized that this was no longer a short-term “project,” but instead an ongoing opportunity to talk about child welfare issues and to plan joint projects with shared resources. That’s when we decided to change our name to the National Foster Care Coalition, and establish a more permanent identity.

VOICE: What kinds of organizations make up your membership?

NIXON: We are the only coalition of national child welfare organizations advocating for foster youth, and we have 25 members.

VOICE: In early years, you had the support of major national foundations, and most recently have been under the umbrella of Casey Family Programs. Why is new funding so critical now?

NIXON: New funding is critical, especially as we continue to add members each month. We want to offer financial support so that smaller organizations will be able to join us, and ensure long-term stability for the Coalition. We would also like to publish some updated FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) on the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, which provides funding for states to develop independent living programs for foster youth. Some states have done a good job of using this money, but others need more technical assistance. Recently, foster youth became eligible for vouchers, providing for post-secondary education and vocational training. The states will need to understand all the implications involved.

VOICE: What direction do you plan to take the NFCC in the future?

NIXON: With the economic downturn, it became clear that the next several years will be hard for most of our member organizations, so it would be wise to streamline our operations and budget for minimum funding. We decided to keep the structure more informal and not become a large independent entity at this time. Instead, we are working on becoming a more virtual organization.

VOICE: Is that why you are now basing the NFCC at the Connect for Kids office in D.C.?

NIXON: Connect for Kids is an entirely web-based communications organization, so they seemed the perfect partner for the NFCC. By combining their Internet knowledge with our advocacy strategies, we will be able to help our member organizations communicate better with their legislators and other audiences.

VOICE: When did you develop such a passion for helping foster youth?

NIXON: I've had a very eclectic youth service career, including direct service, administration and advocacy positions. Early on, my husband Al and I became family teaching parents at a group home in Florida. Then we moved back to the Washington, D.C. area and I became an administrator of a shelter for homeless families. In that position, I started getting involved in the advocacy and funding side of youth services – writing grants and working directly with the D.C. government. I was then offered the position of director of a major independent living program in Virginia, which gave me the chance to put all of my professional experiences to use.

VOICE: How did you get into full-time advocacy work?

NIXON: Because the independent living program I directed was very close to Washington, D.C., I was able to network with officials in the federal government and help evaluate new initiatives. That led to my recruitment by the Child Welfare League of America, to direct their National Youth Services division.

VOICE: What are your future goals?

NIXON: I will remain in youth advocacy. I do realize that the Coalition needs to take a wider view, beyond foster care transition issues, because I understand that everything that happens in a foster child's life contributes to who they become as a young adult. I'm a believer in systematic change – looking at the whole continuum of care for a child as he or she grows into adulthood – and I have seen the difference early intervention can make. We need to work harder to change our foster care system for all children, from infancy through adolescence.

