

The Power of Foster Youth and Former Foster Youth Involvement

View from Washington



by Robin Nixon, Director
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I have recently had the privilege of attending two meetings unique in the world of American child welfare. The first, an advocacy planning meeting of the National Foster Youth Advisory Council at the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), focused on the development of a position statement on improving educational supports for young people in care. The second, an initial planning meeting of the national alumni network, brought together a diverse group of young and not-so-young adults (from ages 18 to mid-40s or so) who had, at some time in their lives, been in out-of-home care.

The National Foster Youth Advisory Council (NFYAC) is a group of foster care youth and alumni who have partnered with the CWLA to create a national youth presence and voice on foster care issues in Washington. The Council has developed and published a Foster Youth Involvement Toolkit, conducted training on youth leadership and advocacy at local and national conferences, and advised the CWLA on its youth development programs. One member of the NFYAC sits on the CWLA Board of Directors, and others are members of both state and national advisory boards related to child welfare and youth issues. These active and passionate young people are committed to empowering youth in foster care to advocate for themselves. This year, they will focus on improving educational outcomes

for foster youth as a priority issue, and will be a powerful influence on the many legislative proposals currently being discussed in Congress and the White House. The NFYAC is sponsored by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative.

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The national alumni network grew out of a Casey Family Programs' project, The Foster Youth Alumni Studies. Currently being launched as an independent national organization, the network brings together foster care alumni of all ages for mutual support, communication and advocacy. It represents the first effort in our country to bring foster care alumni together as a powerful grassroots network that will collectively represent thousands of people who have known the system from the inside, and who will be able to advocate from a uniquely legitimate perspective.

These two youth-led organizations represent a sea change in the ability of the child welfare system to bring its ultimate consumers to the table. No discussion of national foster care leadership would be complete, however, without the California Youth Connection (CYC). This advocacy group

of, by, and for foster youth in California has been the Lewis and Clark of foster care and alumni leadership. I can say without question that the CYC has been one of the most effective advocacy groups of any kind in the United States, responsible for numerous pieces of legislation designed to improve foster care and increase the well-being of foster youth. Their influence goes well beyond California's borders. In 1998, it was then-First Lady Hillary Clinton's meeting with representatives of the CYC that sparked the interest of the Clinton administration in the needs of transitioning foster youth, and helped create the momentum for the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999. Legislation developed by the CYC in California has found its way to the Capitol as proposals for new or improved federal programs. Like Lewis and Clark, the CYC has mapped a wilderness for the rest of us to follow!

I am grateful to have been asked as a guest to attend meetings of all three of these outstanding groups. It was an amazing and gratifying experience. As foster care and youth development professionals, we are finding the path toward true youth participation and youth-led advocacy a long and challenging one. I am happy to report that we are well on our way to the Pacific.