

For Legislators: How Can Legislators Better Engage Youth? Ask the Right Questions

“No one has a greater understanding of what is best for young people in foster care than the young people who have experienced this system. Sharing personal stories is one of the ways we can engage with adults. We want to provide insights on how policies have hindered or helped us, and what measures should be taken to make our rights and needs a priority.” (Krystal Goolsby, New Mexico)

Working in Partnership

Legislators and young people can partner to review policies that affect children and youth in care, or at risk of entering care. Youth can offer their perspectives from their personal experience in the child welfare system.

Questions lawmakers can ask youth who are currently in, or have aged out, of foster care, can include:

- What worked, or is working, for you in the child welfare system?
- What did not work?
- What were, or are, the barriers in the system that may have hindered your success?
- What was your transition plan? How did that process work? What did not work? Who was involved in helping you to create your transition plan?
- What kinds of services were offered to you as part of your transition plan? Were they effective?
- Where did you live during your transition plan period? Were you ever homeless?
- Did you finish high school? If so, what help did you receive to stay on course? If not, what types of services or programs would have been beneficial?
- Do you want to go on to get a post-secondary degree or other training? In what field? Do you believe you are getting adequate assistance to pursue a postsecondary degree or other training? What type of assistance or program would be most effective?
- (If applicable in your state) Did you know about the option to stay in care beyond age 18? Did you opt to do so? Why or why not? What types of services would be most helpful to you if you decided to stay in care beyond 18?
- Who played the most significant, positive role for you while you were in care?
- What would you do to change the child welfare system to help children and youth?

Legislator Checklist for Youth in Foster Care-Friendly Proposals and Policies

- Have youth reviewed the policy?
- Is the policy appropriate for older youth ages 14 - 21?
- Is the policy easily understandable?
- How will youth be informed about the policy?
- Is the policy voluntary? Will a young person be able to participate in decision-making on this issue?
- Will services be accessible to youth? To homeless youth? Will transportation be provided?
- Will the program consider:
 - School schedules
 - Work schedules
 - Court and other case-related meetings
 - Extracurricular activities
- Have LGBTQ youth been included in the policy and in reviewing the policy?
- What about parenting youth?

- Are sibling considerations included in the policy?
- Will caseworkers be trained on the policy? Who will check to ensure that they are knowledgeable about policies and are informing youth?
- Can caseworkers help youth access the services, find other services if these are not appropriate and check to see if youth continue to use the services?
- Will the courts hold the child welfare agency accountable?
- How will other systems be informed about the policy and their role in implementing the policy?
- Are the services effective? Does anyone ask youth if they are effective? Can youth provide feedback on the services?
- What are the potential barriers facing the program? How will these be addressed? Who will need to be at the table to discuss barriers and solutions?
- Are there any confidentiality issues?
- Will the legislature require regular reporting on effectiveness?

Legislators can:

- Convene stakeholder meetings (regionally and/or statewide) that include state and local agencies outside of child welfare – including health, mental health, substance abuse services, housing, law enforcement, education, TANF, employment services, domestic violence services, service providers, faith-based providers, faith-based organizations such as churches, civic groups and organizations.
- Mandate the establishment of children’s cabinets, children’s or foster care ombudsman offices, child and family advisory groups and councils to examine child welfare programs, services, strategies and outcomes.
- Request data from state child welfare agencies; lawmakers can also require that agencies provide specific data related to race and disparity.
- Request a legislative audit of the entire child welfare system or of specific aspects within child welfare such as services for older youth.

Consider hosting activities where youth can partner with legislators and legislative staff:

- Do role-playing scenarios to help lawmakers understand what it’s like to be a young person in care in high school:
 - To have to get permission to do a sleepover.
 - Attending court hearings and missing classes and tests.
 - Wanting to join the football or cheerleading team.
 - Not having someone to guide a young person through the college admission process.
 - Getting a driver’s license.
 - Going on a date.
 - Understanding challenges faced by LGBTQ youth/Native American/African American/Latino youth.
- Learn whether your state has Children’s Cabinet, a Children’s Caucus, a Youth Advisory Committee. Join these organizations to get to know legislators and help them to understand your concerns. If you are already participating, but there are no legislators involved, reach out and personally invite their participation.
- If your state child welfare agency offers a “drive-along” opportunity for legislators to accompany a caseworker, offer to accompany the lawmaker, if appropriate, to explain what they may be seeing from a youth’s perspective.
- Use the [Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide](#) with legislators to examine racial disproportionality and disparity in child welfare.

Questions lawmakers and youth together can ask the child welfare agency, advocates and other partners:

- How many children and youth enter and exit care each year?
- Why do children and youth enter care?
- Why do youth exit care? What are their case plan goals?
- What are health, mental health, economic, educational, housing and other outcomes for youth who exit care at 18, 19, 20, 21 (if applicable to your state)?
- Does the state extend care past 18?
- If so, what kinds of services are offered to youth once they are beyond 18?
- How many youth participate in the services and extended care programs?
- Why do youth not want to participate?
- How do youth learn about extended care?
- Are there plans to work with youth to offer improved, more developmentally appropriate services (if necessary)?
- What happens to younger siblings of youth in foster care? Can older, transitioning and aging out youth remain in contact with their siblings?