



2018 Policy Recommendations

35 current and former foster youth from across the state participated in the 2018 Oregon Foster Youth Connection (OFYC) Policy Conference. On July 24th, many of them presented the following recommendations to an audience of lawmakers, Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) administrators, service providers, and community members. Through its youth-led model of civic engagement and leadership development, OFYC trains youth to identify pressing issues within the foster care system, develop concrete solutions, and then educate policymakers and advocate for change. Since 2008, OFYC has worked to ensure that foster youth are meaningfully involved in the improvement of the foster care system and their voices are heard.

Preventing Houselessness

Communicating Housing Options

Problem: Poor communication surrounding youth housing rights and opportunities due to a lack of coordination between caseworkers and youth; resulting in youth feeling unheard, disconnected, and eventually leaving or being placed in unsafe situations.

Solution: Foster youth need to be empowered to participate in decisions about their living options and conditions.

Policy Recommendation: Hire former foster youth to help bridge communication barriers between DHS and current foster youth.

Mental Health

Problem: Because of the lack of mental health options and when given ultimatums when the topic of mental health treatment is discussed, youth feel they have no voice. They often feel extreme stress due to having to make a choice between going through with a mental health option that doesn't work for them or going to a group home/treatment facility. Because of this their grades and social skills are negatively affected. Therefore they often consider or go through with running away.

Solution: Provide county specific options for housing, shelters, mental health services, and clinics that are specific to a youth's needs. Possibly in a pamphlet format that allows the youth to educate themselves on the options they can then make a choice to access. Providing choices to youth who experience trauma and stress will allow them to feel more in control of their life, and decrease the amount of youth dealing with houselessness.

Policy Recommendation: Present youth in care with a complete list of all mental health resources and options. This will decrease the amount of youth facing or dealing with houselessness.

Discrimination

Problem: In regards to discrimination, we are addressing the lack of affordable and safe housing options for current and former foster youth with consideration to LGBTQIA2S+, and other minorities with active and inactive cases.

Solution: We will solve this problem by prioritizing housing for all foster youth, current and former, including LGBTQIA2S+ and marginalized youth.

Policy Recommendation:

- Mandatory in-person meeting at age 14 informing youth of housing opportunities.
- Mandatory follow-up meetings every 6-12 months to document progress.
- Continued support through follow-ups to show the youth is thriving in housing.

Supporting Youth in Care who are 18-21

Funding Independent Living Program (ILP) Services

Problem:

- The allowance given to ILP is about \$2 million.
 - Both DREAM and Teen Conference cost \$35,000 to run and facilitate each year.
 - Among that, there are 17 contractors and 5 staff to pay at the end of the day. That doesn't even go into the cost for accommodating the youth.
- A vast majority of youth leaving treatment go straight (back) into a life of homelessness, drugs, crime, gang activity due to not having a proper outlet to live independently.

Solution: ILP needs, with the most recent expansion considered, about \$6M to operate within decent means.

- Increase funding in order to help kids coming out of treatment centers, for they are unfortunate if they discharge straight into adulthood.
- Help kids not end up wasting the effort placed upon them to give them solid moral ground by getting thrown right back into their previous life.
- Increase implementation and awareness of the ILP program to kids in treatment

Policy Recommendation: Increase yearly budget and funding of ILP. By increasing funding, we will be able to reach a larger amount of foster youth, and broader life experiences, such as foster youth coming out of treatment centers and/or group homes.

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs)

Problem: There aren't enough CASAs and we don't know how diverse they are.

Solution: Increase funding for recruitment.

Policy Recommendation: Increase funding for CASA to both encourage a more diverse group of people to get involved with CASA work, as well as expand programs to new areas. Recommendations for funding could include incentives such as tax breaks.

Sexual Awareness

Problem: Lack of education, resulting in STD's, unexpected pregnancies, or abusive relationships. More importantly, being uninformed could lead to being groomed, or targeted, indecisive on what risky behavior looks like within relationships (red flags).

Solution & Policy Recommendation: Create a curriculum that consists of teachings from actual doctors that specialize in this subject, and teachings from people who have lived through these experiences themselves (kind of like pointers or advice). The classes could be held at DHS offices and ILP offices. These courses would be for both caseworkers (so that they would be equipped to help a youth in these situations) and youth. Youth could also volunteer to help facilitate these courses. Incentives for participants and facilitators such as gift cards or prizes. These classes could prevent a youth from being taken advantage of, via sex trafficking, and other sexual exploitations. Youth would also be educated on how to maintain a healthy relationship.

Dental and Mental Health Support

Problem: Lack of dental and mental health resources for foster youth.

Solution: OHP needs to expand their coverage to fit foster youth needs.

Policy Recommendations:

- Shorten the waiting lists for braces programs.
- Broaden the OHP coverage so health care providers in Multnomah County and statewide area make it easier to find a dentist and a psychiatrist/therapist office that will accept us.

Quality of Foster Homes & Providers

Quality of Caregivers

Problem: Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) assessments are not being utilized appropriately to serve the youth's needs. Due to the lack of interaction with and around youth, evaluators are receiving inaccurate results with the CANS Assessment, and inaccurate results lead to incorrect level assignment. Lack of communication with youth can prevent them from obtaining the support and services they need.

Solution: Period of Waiting

Policy Recommendation: Have a Period of Waiting (POW) policy that prevents the CANS assessment from being conducted until one month of interaction with mental health specialist. Policy also requires that youth have mandatory counseling during transition into care. This includes "sit downs" with youth and foster parents, family, or any others close to the youth.

Quality of Providers

Problem: There are a lack of resources for foster parents to use to create positive bonds between the youth and the foster parents. There are resources for bio parents as they work to bring back their child but the same resources are not available for foster families. For foster youth to create good relationships and avoid constant moving between foster families these resources will help with the creation of stable and happy bonds.

Solution: Quality of caregivers start with creating positive relationships between the youth and providers.

Policy Recommendation: In order to promote positive and beneficial interactions among foster parents, caregivers, and foster youth, it will be necessary for our Legislators to require caseworkers to provide a resource center for foster parents that includes foster friendly classes, trainings, and resources regarding raising youth with various religions, lifestyles, and suggestions for bonding activities in easily accessible formats like posters, packets, and websites. This will encourage positive interactions and relationships that will nurture positive mental health growth.

Permanency

Problem: Instability in Placements

Solution: Implementing mandatory Crisis Plans to prevent displacement.

- No longer immediately removing the child from the home after an issue has occurred.
- Instead, developing an individualized plan written before the child moves into a home or when they first come into care.
- This plan should be accessible to all parties.
- It will be reviewed when a controversy emerges in order to work towards resolution.
- The goal of the plan will be to solve the issue and keep the child in the home.

Policy Recommendation: Youth Support Crisis Plan. *Should this youth be moved?* Whenever a crisis comes up for a youth, there should be a mandatory meeting between DHS, foster parent, adult supporters and youth. In the meeting every party should be reviewing the Plan, and discussing common understandings for next steps.