

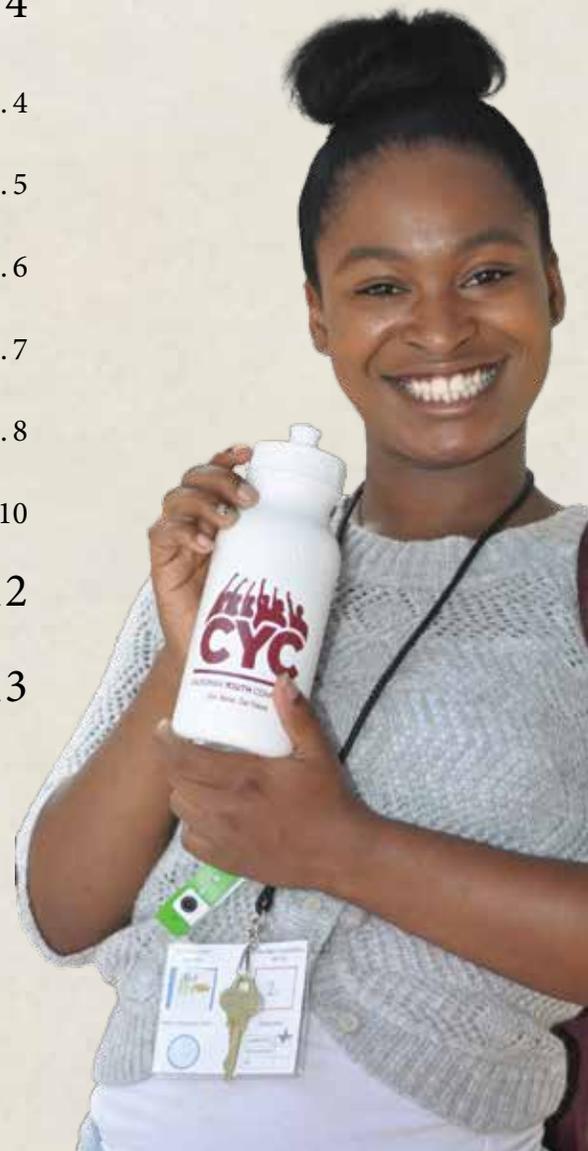


Waves of Opportunities

CALIFORNIA **YOUTH** CONNECTION
LEADERSHIP & POLICY CONFERENCE 2012

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Introduction

In 1988, California Youth Connection (CYC) started with just a few youth members and a handful of committed volunteers who believed that youth could transform the foster care system. Fast forward 25 years and we have seen their vision come into fruition.

Over the last decade and a half, CYC has not only been responsible for passing monumental legislation that will forever impact youth in the foster care system, but CYC has forever changed the lives of its members, giving them the skills to lead, empower, and work together for change. CYC has been responsible for impacting multiple generations of youth. Former CYC members are now business leaders, community organizers, teachers, and politicians, and many of the skills they learned in CYC led to their success.

In its 25th year, CYC stands 32 chapters strong, with statewide offices in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Fresno and Sacramento, has more than 500 youth members, and over a thousand alumni. State leaders are now believers that youth “voice” is essential in developing sound child welfare policy that truly benefits those that it is supposed to serve.

CYC's 2012 Major Policy Efforts

AB 12 IMPLEMENTATION

In October 2010, California passed Assembly Bill 12 (AB 12), California's "Fostering Connections to Success". The passage of AB 12 is a significant milestone in child welfare. The bill drastically changed foster care by optionally extending foster care until the age of 21; increasing support for kinship care, improving education stability, coordinating health care services, providing direct child welfare support to Native American tribes, expanding federal resources to train caregivers, child welfare staff, attorneys, and more. During 2012 CYC co-lead the Youth Engagement, Informing, and Training Focus Area Team alongside the State Department of Social Services, which developed youth friendly materials that explained AB 12. These materials were to be distributed and used by social workers, attorneys and group home staff.



AB 1712—AB 12 CLEAN UP

As AB 12 was reviewed by the authors, sponsors and the public, clarification on some of the language in the bill and technical changes were identified. The first set of changes were made in legislation enacted in 2011, AB 212 (Beall). After another year of AB 12 implementation, further issues were identified requiring additional clarification or technical changes. One item that was fixed was the eligibility gap for those whose birthday fell in the middle of the year. AB 12 phased in the extension of care, with youth age 19 in 2012 being eligible and youth age 20 in 2013 being eligible. For the 2,166 foster youth who turned 20 in the middle of 2012, this meant that state funds would dry up on their birthday until they became re-eligible in January of the following year when AB 12 was expanded to 20 year olds. AB 1712 (Beall) allowed youth that fell in this gap period to stay in care during those months.



AB 2093—FOSTER YOUTH HIGHER EDUCATION PREPARATION AND SUPPORT ACT OF 2012

CYC's sponsored bill in 2012 was AB 2093 (Skinner). In today's society, a college degree is almost a necessity to becoming economically self-sufficient. Very few foster youth are able to continue their education after high school, and those that do often encounter significant obstacles that hinder their ability to succeed. AB 2093 (Skinner) would have provided post-

secondary education support services to foster youth who attend California's public colleges and universities by designating a foster care student service coordinator on each campus, using new or existing resources. The bill passed policy committees but died in the Appropriations Committee due to cost concerns.

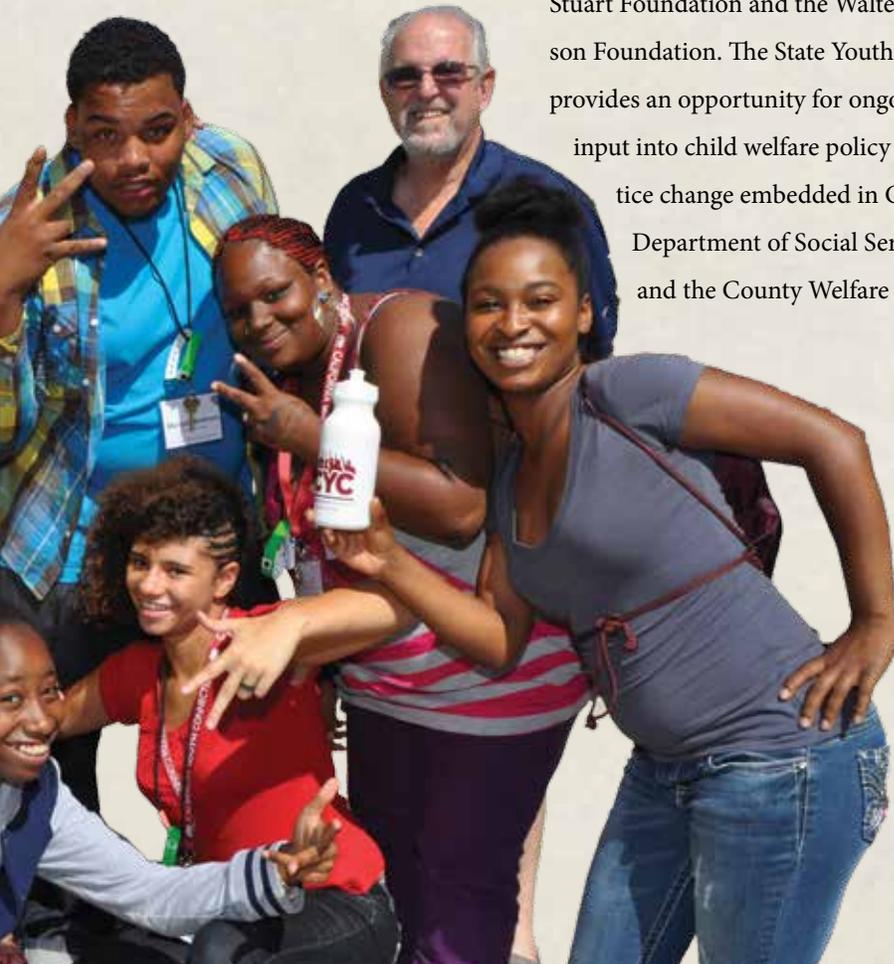


STATE YOUTH COUNCIL

The State Youth Council was started in 2012 as a project of CYC, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS),

Child Welfare Directors Association (CWDA), Co-Investment Partnership, California Connected by 25-Initiative, Stuart Foundation and the Walter S Johnson Foundation. The State Youth Council provides an opportunity for ongoing youth input into child welfare policy and practice change embedded in California Department of Social Services and the County Welfare Direc-

tors Associations work. The 13 member youth council met every other month and worked hard to highlight youth concerns and opinions on AB 12 Implementation, Permanency, and Mental Health. Members coordinated surveys and met with youth in their counties, bringing a variety of opinions and recommendations to the attention of statewide officials.



2012 Summer Policy Conference Report

In August 2012, CYC members from across the state met in Ventura County to learn about policy and advocacy and to develop a policy platform for the organization in 2013. Following is a view of that conference through the eyes of a youth member who participated in the conference.



About the Author

Sade Daniels is a California native, born and raised in Oakland. Emancipating from foster care at 19, Sade spent many of her adolescent years in group homes and transitional housing placement programs. Sade was active in many youth advocacy organizations/projects such as California Youth Connection, Youth Led Evaluation Project, the Y.O.U.T.H. Training Project, and the Sexually Exploited Minors Network. She has also been featured in the San Francisco Chronicle and Essence Magazine, a nationally published magazine. She was recently featured as an Influential African American in the Bay Area in *Wee Pals Soul Corner* Comic Strip—a first for a Bay Area Youth. Sade was the recipient of the Youth SCORE award and inducted into the Alameda County Women's Hall of Fame in 2007. She recently graduated from Philander Smith College with a Bachelor of Social Work, and is currently employed as an On-Site Residential Advisor by Bay Area Youth Centers. She is also a noted public speaker.

Approximately 200 youth filled the auditorium at California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks, CA for the California Youth Connection's (CYC) Summer Leadership and Policy Conference. Although they traveled from all areas of the state, with some youth traveling as long as 10 hours to be there, the excitement of the attendees was not diminished. The conference began with a rousing ice breaker that showcased the commonalities of the youth's experiences while in care. Questions such as "Do you feel that your social worker has or had time for you?" or "Have you ever experienced discrimination while in a placement?" were asked and youth were instructed to step forward if the question or statement applied to them. This activity not only showcased the similarities between the youth's experiences, but it also touched upon the seven policy topics for the conference: finding biological family, foster youth who are parents, social worker and attorney caseloads, mentoring programs for foster youth, foster youth mental health programs, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning (LGBTQQ) foster youth, and foster parent accountability. Lastly, the activity gave youth a chance to see which issues were wide scale and those which may be more situational or unique.

For the 2nd year now, youth were able

to learn detailed information about the seven policy topics and pick four of them to create policy recommendations. The seven topics were chosen by the youth curriculum development team who were responsible for creating the vision for all of the workshop activities, so that youth could develop sound policy recommendations over the three day conference. In an effort to expand advocacy efforts through the use of technology and social media, youth were able to text in their votes and watch results come in instantaneously. The four policy topics that were chosen by youth were: 1) LGBTQQ Foster Youth 2) Foster Parent Accountability 3) Social Worker and Attorney Caseloads, and 4) Mentoring. In between workshops, youth were encouraged to 'tweet' messages on Twitter and post on Facebook about the conference and the policy work taking place. Vlogs, also known as video blogs, were being filmed in the lobby depicting the experiences youth had while in care and their thoughts on CYC.

After narrowing the topics, youth were able to register for one of three workshop tracks that would further assist them in the creation of their policy recommendation: government, art, or leadership. In the government track, youth were taught the basics of the local, state, and federal branches of government. Youth learned

about the legislative process and how federal funding trickles down to the state and local levels for programs such as child welfare. In the art track, youth were introduced to the various ways that art is used to express feelings and/or emotions. Youth participated in various activities that allowed the exploration of how art can be used in advocacy. Youth were then able to create their own art about their chosen policy topics using various mediums such as photography, spoken word, or music. Lastly, the leadership track focused on the qualities that make great leaders and how one possesses those traits. Youth were able to give their own definitions of great leaders and identify ways they were leaders.

The government, art, and leadership tracks provided fundamental knowledge to youth that would not only benefit them in their chapter work but also in the creation and presentation of their policy recommendations. At the conclusion of the Government, Art, and Leadership tracks, youth attended policy workshops based on the topic they were most interested in creating recommendations for.

Below, I will highlight the policy topics chosen by the 200 youth attendees of the CYC Summer Leadership and Policy conference, the scope of the issues, and our recommendations for change.

Issue #1

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning (LGBTQQ) Foster Youth

PROBLEM:

Youth in care who identify as LGBTQQ experience discrimination at an alarming rate. Studies have shown that LGBTQQ youth represent a disproportionately high number of children in foster care attributed in part to conflicts arising about their sexuality in their family of origin and harassment in school. These issues of acceptance continue to plague LGBTQQ foster youth while in care, and as many as 78% continue to experience harassment and abuse (National Center for Lesbian Rights, 2006). Also, service providers are not well matched with youth and those that are willing to support LGBTQQ youth are not well-versed in resources to support them in employment, housing, and general well-being. Because of the lack of knowledge of resources, LGBTQQ youth find themselves in dire situations including homelessness and poverty.

INFORMATION:

- 80% of LGBTQQ youth reported physical violence after “coming out” to their families
- (American Humane Society, 2012)
- 18% of youth in foster care are LGBTQQ (Pergamit, 2011)
- 70% of youth in group homes reported violence based on their LGBTQQ status (American Bar Association)
- 78% of LGBTQQ youth were removed or ran away from placement due to hostility toward their LGBTQQ status (Shannan, 2006)

SOLUTION:

In order to better ensure positive experiences and outcomes for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning (LGBTQQ) foster youth in group care facilities, foster homes, and schools, CYC youth members recommend providing a specialized training for volunteers and staff who serve LGBTQQ foster youth. It is also recommended that a collaboration be made with the Gay-Straight Alliance Network (GSA Network) to develop and promote resources and leadership opportunities for LGBTQQ foster youth as well as develop additional trainings for front line workers, administrators, and foster parents.



Issue #2

Mentoring Foster Youth

PROBLEM:

Due to the instability of their home life, many foster youth have acknowledged they have difficulty finding and sustaining meaningful relationships. For this reason, the need for mentors continues to be prevalent for youth in foster care. Dealing with various adolescent issues coupled with familial issues and feelings of low self-esteem, foster youth need mentoring and guidance to help them better develop their cognitive and emotional skills. Without the guidance provided by mentors or a loving and caring adult, youth are more prone to teenage pregnancy, truancy, and addiction.

INFORMATION:

Children who have mentors tend to have better relationships with adults, fewer disciplinary referrals, and more confidence to achieve their goals. According to the California Mentor Foundation's survey (California Mentor Foundation) of 124 mentor programs with 57,659 mentees who were matched with 36,251 mentors:

- 98% stayed in school
- 85% did not use drugs
- 98% deterred from teen pregnancy
- 98% did not join a gang

It is important to note that youth who participated in a mentoring relationship that lasted at least 12 months had more positive benefits as compared to youth in mentoring relationships that lasted fewer than 12 months

SOLUTION:

Youth affirm that mentors play a vital role in assisting the development of successful young adults. They encourage the child welfare system to support these relationships by making it mandatory for social workers to brief youth on the purpose and the role of mentors, as well as refer youth to mentoring organizations throughout the community. Youth recognize that there are existing mentoring programs, but believe that information about these programs is not widely known to youth. The "first approach" should be to use existing funds to help youth connect with programs already operating in their communities.



Issue #3

Foster Parent Accountability

PROBLEM:

The child welfare system is not adequately or consistently monitoring foster homes and foster parents. Youth have stated that they felt confused in their placements and didn't know who to turn to if there was a pressing issue. Youth often feel neglected and even re-abused while in care. A lack of accountability and consistent monitoring can lead to multiple placements for youth as they are unable to communicate issues with foster parents to social workers.

INFORMATION:

To operate a foster home, it must be licensed. Licensing requires a licensing social worker to visit a home (called a home study) and meet with the foster parents and other family members. Minimum personal, safety and space requirements are required by law. Foster parents work with social services staff to decide the type of child best suited for their home. Licensing requirements include:

- Foster Parents must be at least 18 years old or older
- Foster Parents may be single or married, in traditional or same gender families, of all ethnicities and income levels, with or without children
- Foster Parents must complete application packet
- Foster Parents and all adults, 18-years and older, living in the residence must be Live Scanned (fingerprinted), background checked, and TB tested
- Foster Parents and all prospective caretakers must attend a training program
- Foster Parents must have adequate bedroom space to accommodate all family members, including foster children, and others that may reside in the house
- Foster Parents must have adequate income to meet their needs and financial obligations
- Applicants' homes must have smoke alarms installed and in good working order
- Foster Parents must ensure all weapons in the home are unloaded and stored in locked, secured places
- Foster Parents cannot be licensed if the applicant or any adult, 18 years old or older, living in the home, is on probation or parole
- Foster Parents may not spank or use any corporal punishment to discipline foster children
- Foster Parents must have a working telephone
- The applicants home or apartment and outdoor activity space must be safe and in good condition
- Foster Parents and all licensed adults, 18 years old and older, living in the home, must be trained in First Aid/CPR
- Foster Parents must ensure that all medications and poisons are kept in locked, secured places

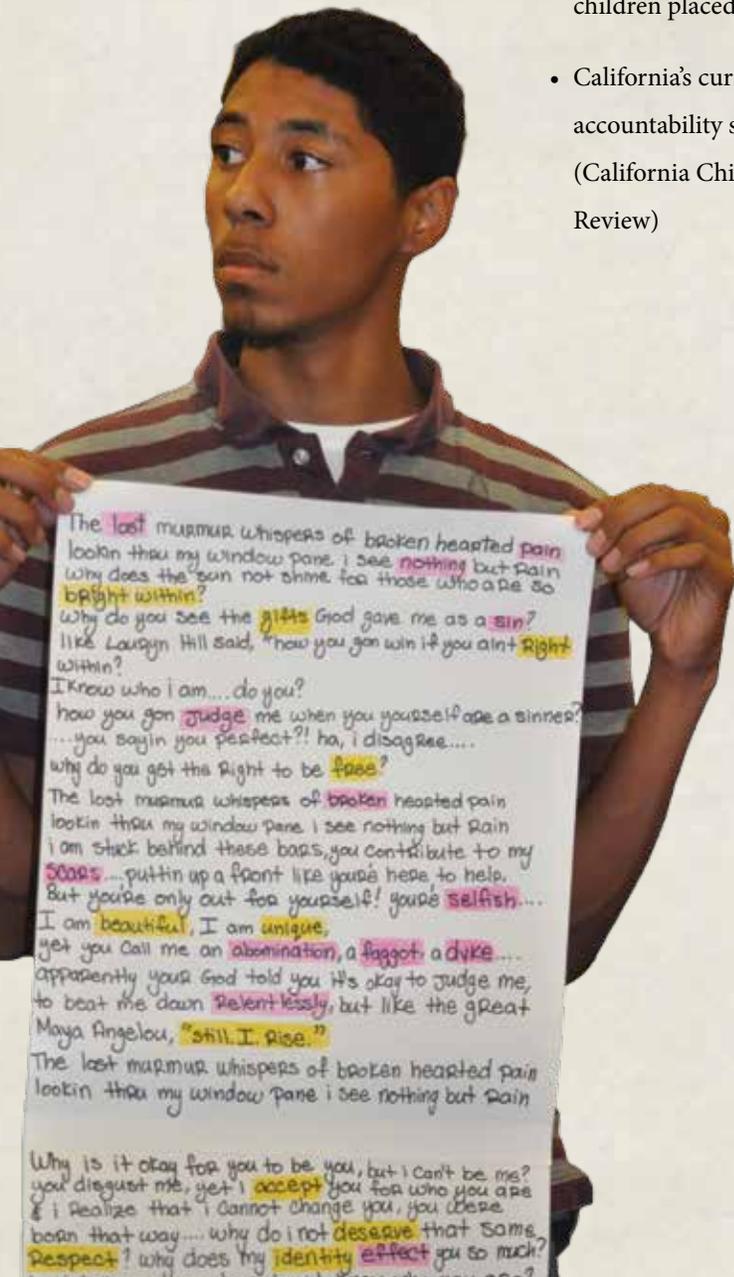
ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

- The role of a foster parent is to provide a supportive and stable family for children who cannot live with their birth parents until family problems are resolved. In most cases, foster parents work with social services staff to reunite the child with birth parents
- Licensing complaints are filed with and led by the Community Care Licensing Office in each county
- Although there are licensing requirements and regulations, there is no formal system in place to hold foster parents accountable for the outcomes of children placed in their care
- California's current foster care accountability system is the CCFSR (California Child and Family Service Review)

SOLUTION:

Youth developed an additional set of recommended criteria for foster parents and placements to better support the relationship between youth and their caregivers in order to avoid disruption and create greater stability in the youth placements:

1. Licensed foster parents and staff that supervise youth in group care should be at least 25 years of age.
2. Foster parent income regulations should continually be enforced.
3. A formal foster parent evaluation system should be created.
4. Foster parents and youth should have access to in-home mediators for conflict resolution.
5. Wrap-around services should be available to support the stability of foster homes including family counseling and peer support.
6. Ongoing training for foster parents should include children and teen development, appropriate boundaries, and communication.



Issue #4

Social Worker and Attorney Caseloads

PROBLEM:

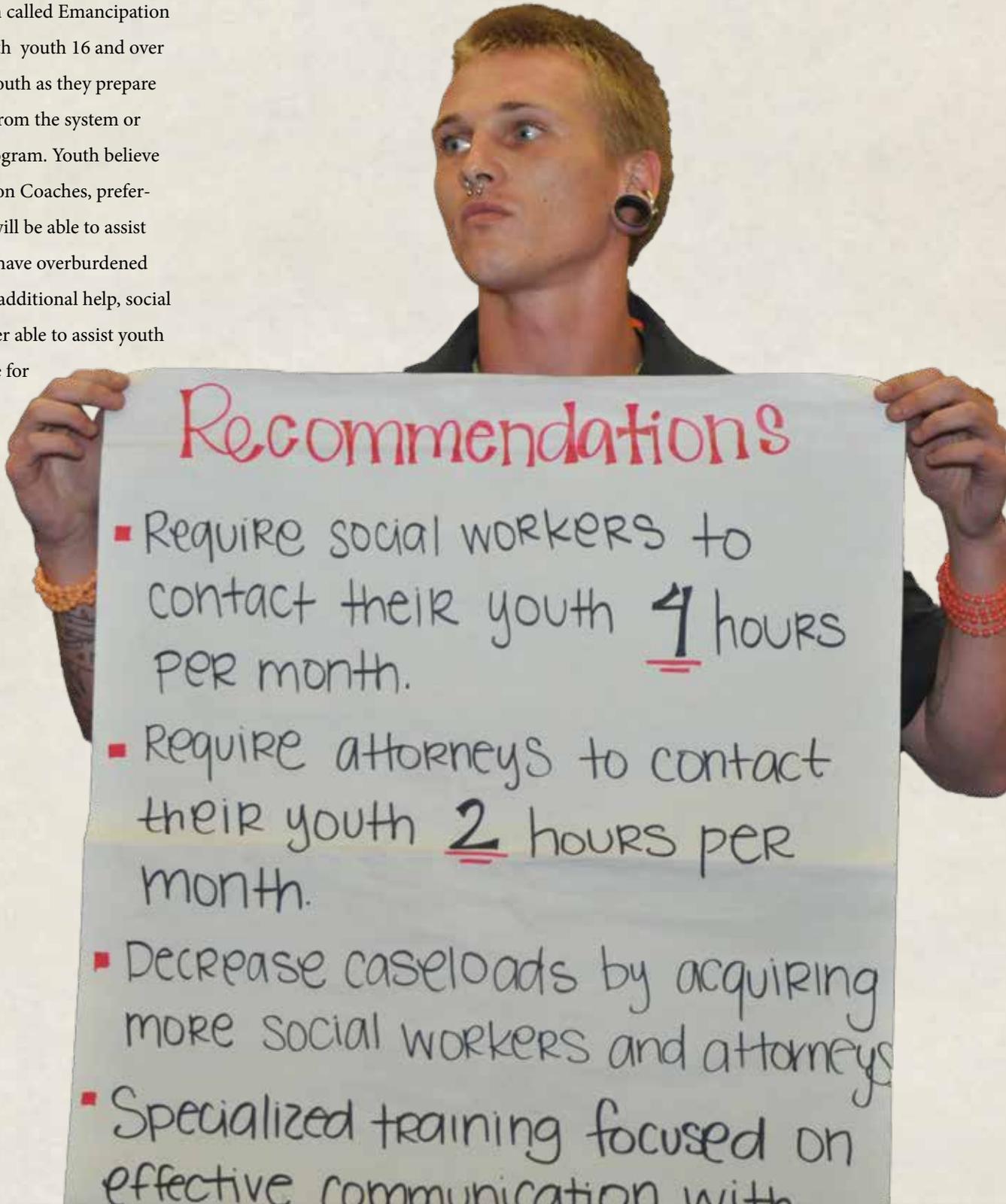
With the heightened caseloads of social workers and attorneys, youth often feel that they are unable to reach their social workers and/or attorneys when faced with pressing issues. Youth have reported having a difficult time contacting their social worker and attorney or feeling like they were not being heard. The high number of caseloads can affect the quality of work done by social workers and attorneys, and can negatively impact youth in care accessing services, re-connecting with biological families, securing adequate representation in court, and preparing to transition out of foster care. Additionally, due to the lack of data collected about the impact of high caseloads, it has been difficult to bring awareness to the issue.

INFORMATION:

- California has a high attorney caseload compared to most states (Center for Public Policy Research at UC Davis, 2006).
- The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) recommends that workers investigating allegations of abuse and neglect carry at most 12 active cases per month. Workers carrying ongoing in-home protective services cases should carry no more than 15 to 17 families, while those providing intensive family preservation services should serve between 2 and 6 families at a given time. CWLA suggests at most 12-15 children in family foster care (out-of-home services) per worker (Child Welfare League of America, 1995).
- Attorneys who represent children and parents in California courts have an average caseload of 273, which far exceeds the attorney caseload standards of 188 recently adopted by the Judicial Council. Some counties experience attorney caseloads of more than 500 to 600. (Moreno, 2008)
- In 2000, the Child Welfare Services Workload Study, required by SB 2030 (Costa), determined that social workers carried too many cases to effectively ensure the safety and well-being of California's children. The SB 2030 Study, as it is commonly called, proposed minimum and optimum caseload standards for social workers. The state has yet to adopt these standards for caseload budgeting.

SOLUTION:

CYC members recommend counties develop a new position called Emancipation Coaches to work with youth 16 and over and to assist these youth as they prepare for their transition from the system or into the After 18 program. Youth believe that the Emancipation Coaches, preferably peer mentors, will be able to assist social workers who have overburdened caseloads. With the additional help, social workers will be better able to assist youth who need to prepare for exiting the system.



Conclusion

The summer policy conference served as an opportunity for foster youth to learn about leadership development and the legislative process, provided a vehicle to develop policy recommendations, and also served as a reminder of California Youth Connection's continued commitment to empowering youth to take ownership and be a part of improving the system on all levels.

As CYC continues to strive for change, it's important that service providers, legislators, and other supporters continue to encourage youth to get involved and share their ideas for change. While youth lead the charge, they cannot be successful without the commitment and dedication of the larger community to support them. In order for youth to push forward their work and impact the foster care system, they need you to stand side-by-side with them and promote awareness of the plight of children and youth in foster care.

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