

California Youth Connection
2009 Summer Leadership
and Policy Conference Report



Legislative Change Through Youth Empowerment

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INTRODUCTION

California Youth Connection (CYC) is the state's only non-profit youth advocacy and leadership organization dedicated to giving current and former foster youth the skills necessary to engage directly with policymakers to improve the foster care system. Formed out of the fundamental belief that policymakers can benefit from the input of those who have experienced first-hand the impact of child welfare policies, CYC has remained a vehicle for foster youth to enact change on the federal, state, and local government levels.

CYC chapters serve as the main platform for empowering CYC members to create immediate change within their communities. Local chapters are county-based and are run by youth – youth set the agenda, facilitate the meetings, and decide how to work with officials to address pressing issues faced by foster youth in their county. Adult supporters, who are volunteer community members chosen by the local chapter, assist CYC youth in their goal to improve the foster care system.

Each year, CYC chapters host and organize two statewide conferences: Day at the Capitol and Summer Leadership and Policy Conference. The Day at the Capitol conference, held at the end of January in Sacramento, provides members with the unique opportunity to educate legislators and the Governor's administration on pertinent foster care issues. During the three-day conference, members attend youth-facilitated workshops that develop their leadership and advocacy skills, which assist them in their interactions with legislators. On the last day of the conference, youth meet their elected officials to provide them with key recommendations that aim to solve foster care issues in California. To date, over 15 youth-driven policy recommendations that have originated from the Day at the Capitol have been passed into state law.

The Summer Leadership and Policy Conference is an annual conference hosted by one of CYC's 30 statewide chapters. The goals of the Summer Leadership and Policy Conference is three-fold: to build the leadership skills of members, to identify problems that affect foster youth throughout the state of California, and to develop policy recommendations to address those problems. On the last day of the conference, youth present their findings to local child welfare specialists and other interested members of the community. The conference not only instills a sense of collective empowerment among the members, but prepares recommendations for youth to present to the State Legislature at the annual Day at the Capitol conference.

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2009 CONFERENCE REPORT

The 2009 Summer Leadership and Policy Conference was held in sunny Chico, California, also known as the “City of Roses,” over the July 24th weekend. Over 130 youth and supporters attended this conference, which was hosted by the Butte County CYC chapter, and strongly supported by the Glenn County CYC Chapter. CYC members arrived at the conference prepared to address dire issues that plague California’s current and former foster youth population, especially problems that have been intensified as a result of California’s unprecedented fiscal crisis. Prior to the conference, chapters identified four issues that they believed were most important to address in 2009. The four subjects were: Higher Education, Transitional Services, Group Homes, and Family Reunification.

Throughout the weekend, members participated in a variety of

workshops that allowed them to learn about policy implementation and, more specifically, how to craft policy solutions out of current issues with the foster care system. The following pages introduce the recommendations that were formed by CYC members in hopes of improving higher educational opportunities for current and former foster youth, improving transitional services that give former foster youth a meaningful opportunity to achieve self-sufficiency as adults, and developing more efficient group home and family reunification practices. At the close of the weekend, CYC invited a distinguished panel of guests and approximately 100 child welfare leaders to hear the members present their recommendations. This policy report summarizes the policy discussions and recommendations that originated out of the 2009 Summer Leadership and Policy Conference.

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HIGHER EDUCATION

Post-secondary educational attainment has a large impact on the ability of current and former foster youth to lead successful lives as adults. However, studies have continually shown that former foster youth in California experience poor educational outcomes when compared to their non-foster youth peers. For a number of reasons, such as having inadequate support systems, many foster youth in transition fail to achieve higher educational goals. Studies found that 58 percent of former foster youth had a “high school degree by age 19 compared to 87 percent of a national comparison group of non-foster youth.”¹ Furthermore only 20% of foster youth in California who complete high school begin a postsecondary education, compared to 60% of their peers.² While one-fifth of the foster youth population is able to attend a college or university, only 3% actually acquire a college degree.³ These statistics remind us that foster youth encounter numerous hurdles with regards to postsecondary completion when compared to non-foster youth.

One of the greatest contributing factors to the low level of higher educational attainment among current and former foster youth in California is the low rate of foster youth retention in higher education. This suggests that while foster youth students may enter college, they do not have the support system to encourage them to stay. However, despite the grim outlooks that foster youth face in higher education, CYC members maintain the belief that collaborating with

policymakers, local child welfare officials, and the community can bring about positive change. More specifically, by utilizing a preventative

approach, which consists of assisting foster youth with their educational endeavors while they are still in high school and creating more effective college campus support programs for foster youth, foster youth will have the tools necessary to fulfill their educational ambitions.



ISSUE #1: INADEQUATE CAMPUS SUPPORT PROGRAMS FOR FOSTER YOUTH

Throughout the Summer Leadership and Policy Conference, CYC members continually voiced the concern that the lack of college campus support programs for foster youth in California will worsen the negative statistics already experienced by many foster youth in

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higher education. Upon emancipation from the foster care system, the majority of college-bound foster youth do not have connections to permanent and caring adults, face imminent homelessness, and lack support services during postsecondary education that are crucial for academic success. Despite the known needs of foster youth in higher education, the number of campus support programs dedicated to ensuring the academic well-being of foster youth is limited.

In recent years, many California colleges and universities, with the assistance of philanthropic organizations and the community, have taken it upon themselves to create campus support programs for current and former foster youth. Many of these programs are modeled after CSU Fullerton's Guardian Scholars Program, which offers comprehensive support services for foster youth. Many college campuses, once they have established a campus support program, have adopted the name of Guardian Scholars Program or other program names such as Cal Independent Scholars Network (CISN), the Smith Renaissance Society, Promise Scholars, the Connect Motivate and Educate (CME) Society, and Renaissance Scholars. However, as reiterated by CYC members throughout the conference, many of the support programs for foster youth do not provide resources that are essential for their success in college, which include year-round housing, access to academic counseling, and full financial aid packages. Some campuses lack campus support programs for foster youth altogether. As a result, CYC members created the following recommendations that will assist in the creation of more effective and adequate campus support programs for foster youth:

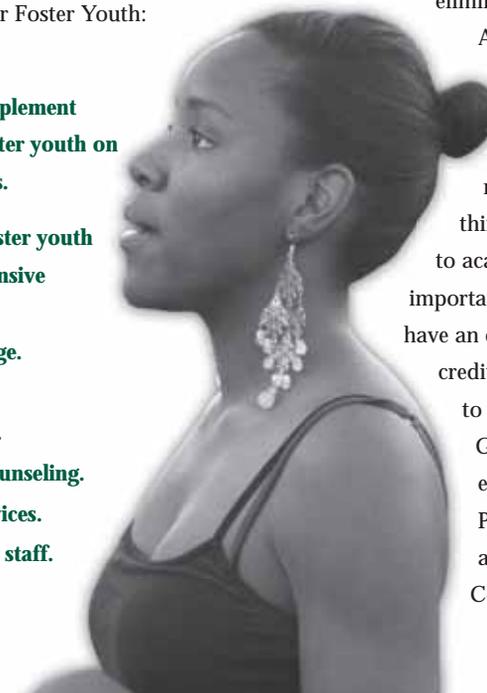
Inadequate Campus Support Programs for Foster Youth: Recommendations

- **The state should mandate and implement campus support programs for foster youth on all public colleges and universities.**
- **Campus support programs for foster youth should provide a set of comprehensive services that consist of:**
 - **Planned transition to college.**
 - **Year-round housing.**
 - **Full financial aid packages.**
 - **Academic guidance and counseling.**
 - **Career counseling and services.**
 - **Dedicated campus support staff.**

ISSUE #2: INADEQUATE PREPARATION FOR COLLEGE

The majority of youth in California's foster care system are not only improperly informed of college opportunities, but largely unprepared for college while in high school. Foster youth, as stated earlier, face numerous obstacles on their path to higher education, which include multiple home and school placements. In fact, "it is estimated that foster youth change placements about once every six months; and for every change, foster youth lose an average of four to six months of educational attainment each time a residential move occurs with a change in school placement."⁴ As a result, many foster youth fall significantly behind in high school, and ultimately discontinue their education.

Inadequate preparation of foster youth for college while in high school does not solely lie in placement instability, as identified by CYC members, but also stems from the non-implementation of existing laws that ensure that the barriers to an equal education for foster youth are eliminated. In 2004, the California State Legislature passed AB 490, a bill that aimed to dramatically improve the educational outcomes of foster youth who were still in high school. AB 490 mandated that care providers, social workers, and juvenile courts work together to maintain stable school placements, and among other things, make certain that all foster youth have equal access to academic and extracurricular resources. One of the most important provisions of AB 490 required every school district to have an educational liaison that assisted youth in obtaining full credits and maintaining school stability. However, according to the Foster Youth Services (FYS) 2006 Report to the Governor and the Legislature, "resistance to immediate enrollment was reported by 25% of FYS Countywide Programs as a challenge and untimely transfer of health and education records was reported by 33% of FYS Countywide Programs as a challenge."⁵



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In addition to these hurdles, many CYC youth reported that foster youth in high school are not prepared for higher education because their caretakers do not assume the responsibility of informing foster youth about SAT and ACT preparation, college application deadlines, or scholarship opportunities. In addition, many social workers often ask youth about their higher education goals in their last year of high school in the mandatory Transitional Independent Living Plans (TILP), which does not help youth when the college application deadlines have already passed. Moreover, CYC members stated throughout the Higher Education workshop that services in foster care focus disproportionately on building life skills, instead of supporting foster youth in their educational goals.

Thus, in order to truly prepare foster youth for college while in high school, CYC members believed that assisting foster youth in their K-12 educational career represents a key factor in ensuring that youth have the necessary resources to prepare for college. The recommendations for alleviating the inadequate preparation of foster youth for postsecondary opportunities are listed below:

Issue #2: Inadequate Preparation for College: Recommendations

- **Each county should mandate that social workers actively assist youth in their preparation for college.**
- **Preparation for college should start the second semester of the youth's high school sophomore year and continue until graduation.**
- **College preparation needs to encompass the following areas:**
 - **Coursework needed for college admission requirements.**
 - **Preparation for the Scholastic Aptitude Test(s) (SAT) and the ACT.**
 - **College visits and college choices.**
- **Scholarships and financial aid are made available for current and former foster youth.**



HIGHER EDUCATION ACTION ITEMS

- **Advocate that California Community Colleges, the California State University, and the University of Southern California develop foster youth campus support programs on each of their campuses**
- **Advocate to California's postsecondary education institutions that all campus support programs have a core program based on the essential needs of youth participants**
- **Further the implementation of AB 490 by collaborating with the California Department of Education and the Department of Social Services as well as the Child Welfare Council and the local Blue Ribbon Commissions on Children in Foster Care**



TRANSITIONAL SERVICES

For many young people, the transition to adulthood does not begin overnight; rather, they continue to receive support well beyond the age of 18. In contrast, youth who emancipate from California's foster care system are expected to find immediate housing, support themselves financially, and navigate the complex world of adulthood, without the aid of a supportive and caring adult. According to the latest research examining foster youth who "aged out" of California's foster care system, former foster youth, when compared to their peers, experience increased involvement within the criminal justice system, greater dependence on government benefits, and lower educational attainment.⁶ More specifically, these studies found that: 65% of former

foster youth leave care without a place to live, 51% of youth are unemployed within 2-4 years of emancipation, and 1 out of 5 foster youth will be incarcerated upon emancipation. These statistics illustrate

that although the child welfare system has been tasked with preparing foster youth for the transition to adulthood, the majority of California's foster youth still emancipate out of the foster care system by age 18 without attaining critical life skills.

In California, over 4,500 youth, ages 18-20, emancipate out of the foster care system each year.⁷ Despite studies and research showing that the average young person does not achieve self-sufficiency until the age of 26, the vast majority of foster youth emancipate at age 18.⁸ In fact, parents provide their children with material assistance totaling approximately \$38,000 between the ages of 18 and 34 according to statistics.⁹ Therefore, expecting foster youth to have the necessary skills to lead successful lives as young adults is irrational. "The Mid-West Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at age 18-21" has given evidence of significant positive outcomes for former foster youth who remained in care past the age of 18. These youth had a higher completion rate of college as well as higher annual and work-life earnings. Consequently, the adoption of policies that allow foster care youth to remain in care past 18 will allow foster youth in California the opportunity to truly gain the skills needed for a successful transition to adulthood.



Current California statutory laws gives courts the ability to extend foster care to age 21, but due to a combination of factors, an astonishing 9 out of 10 foster youth in California are emancipated at age 18.¹⁰ Given the current policy of emancipating youth at age 18, California must provide youth in foster care with adequate post-emancipation resources that will enable them to fully meet the challenges associated with adulthood. Regrettably, many foster youth in transition have constantly stated that when it comes to adequate post-emancipation resources, the foster care system falls short.

ISSUE #1: INSUFFICIENT POST- EMANCIPATION PLANNING AND RESOURCES

In California, foster youth are not properly prepared for the often daunting transition from foster care to adulthood. Foster youth in group homes, long-term foster homes, or other out-of-home placements found that when the juvenile dependency court terminates jurisdiction of their case, they are not prepared for the realities of adulthood. CYC members in the Transitional Services workshop raised concerns that during the emancipation process, youth in foster homes and group homes are not supported by their foster parents and group home staff, who are crucial in the preparation of foster youth for emancipation. Despite the creation of the "Independent Living Skills Program" (ILSP) in California, which teaches foster youth money-management skills, job marketing skills, and how to realize their educational goals, the vast majority of ILSP programs are fragmented and vastly

underfunded. As a result, many of the ILSP programs cannot aid current or former foster youth in a meaningful way. Consequently, studies have shown that less than 50% of

eligible foster youth receive ILSP services, which limits the ability of former foster youth to achieve self-sufficiency upon emancipation.¹¹



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The problem of inadequate post-emancipation planning also connects to the fact that many youth in care do not have sufficient post-emancipation resources. One of the most important resources that former foster youth need upon emancipation is transitional housing. The chronic underfunding of these programs undercuts the ability of transitional housing programs to effectively and adequately meet the housing needs of youth who have “aged out.” In California’s 2006-2007 proposed budget, the state appropriated only \$8.2 million for these programs, with \$5 million designated for THP-Plus programs which serve youth 18–24.¹² A recent study in Los Angeles County showed that out of 5,100 former foster youth who are eligible for transitional housing services, the county only possessed 244 slots for the Transitional Housing Program Plus. Estimates have also shown that only 2% of eligible former foster youth receive transitional housing program assistance.¹³ As a result, many former foster youth continue to experience homelessness at startling rates, which limits their ability to succeed.

In order to fully prepare foster youth upon emancipation, CYC members provided the recommendations listed below:

Insufficient Post-Emancipation Planning and Resources: Recommendations

- **“Community Care Licensing” should be responsible for ensuring, through the licensing standards, that foster parents meet with social workers and/or probation officers to create an emancipation plan with youth and actively participate in the emancipation process.**
- **Every county needs to have a resource coordinator for THP-Plus that will create partnerships with large corporations to secure funding and in-kind resources for transitioning foster youth. In addition, the resource coordinator for THP-Plus will create partnerships with large property management companies and will be responsible for distributing state funds based on THP-Plus needs.**
- **Social workers should be required to inform foster youth of the Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP). ILSP services should be extended to the ages of 14-25, and should include youth in all out-of-home placements such as**

guardianship. New ILSP members receive an orientation when ILSP services and expectations are explained. ILSP workers help make a transitional plan to be reviewed at least every six months starting at age 14. Counties should also provide vouchers for job interview clothing.

- **THP-Plus should be offered to youth in the county where they reside no matter what county they originated from.**

TRANSITIONAL SERVICES ACTION ITEMS

- **Advocate to the Department of Social Services that youth be eligible for transitional housing services throughout California**
- **Advocate at the county and state level that the ILSP program be extended to 14-25 and include all youth in out-of-home placements**
- **Advocate that each county develop a mechanism to collaborate with the community and local businesses to provide resources to THP and transitioning foster youth**



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GROUP HOMES

Throughout the state of California, thousands of foster youth in group home care experience vastly more negative outcomes than foster youth in non-group home placements. Group homes, as defined by the California Department of Social Services, are residential facilities designed to provide 24-hour non-medical care and supervision to



children in a structured environment. More specifically, group homes are designated as placement options for foster youth who have significant emotional or

behavioral problems and require a more restrictive setting. Many problems arise within group homes that defy the assumption that group homes can actually provide for and prepare foster youth for the challenges associated with emancipation. Group homes were intended to provide short-term placements for foster youth, however many foster youth spend countless years in multiple group home settings without ever returning to a traditional family setting. Furthermore, when the counties cannot find an appropriate placement for foster youth, foster youth who would not otherwise be considered for placement in group homes are also placed into group homes.

Statistics illustrate that the outcomes for foster youth who reside in group homes are among the worst when compared to foster youth in other out-of-home placements. Youth in group homes are more likely to spend less time in school, more time in juvenile detention facilities, and experience a higher rate of placement instability. Furthermore, many youth in group homes are not adequately prepared for emancipation, and are swiftly transitioned to the adult welfare regime. Post-emancipation, these youth often have to receive services through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program or homeless shelters.

A great concern voiced by CYC members centers on the fact that group home staff are not properly trained or educated to assist youth with emancipation or other matters associated with daily living, which contributes to the negative outcomes experienced by youth in group homes. Because of the fact that group homes are designed

as short-term placements and the fact that many group home staff are uneducated about the resources available, many youth go on for years without receiving ILSP services. In order to alleviate the negative statistics that plague foster youth in group homes, CYC members sought to develop a set of recommendations that will ensure that group staff are educated about the needs of foster youth and that all youth in group homes have sufficient access to ILSP resources.

ISSUE #1: UNDERTRAINED GROUP HOME STAFF

Within the vast majority of group homes in California, group home caretakers are not adequately trained to meet the needs of foster youth. Many group home staff professionals are not properly instructed on how to respond to foster youth difficulties, and instead overreact to situations that could be solved through proper management techniques. For example, a common occurrence among group home staff is to call 911 when a difficult situation arises, instead of utilizing conflict management techniques for situations that do not need a response from local law enforcement. Although youth living in group homes realize that staff must address conflicts that occur in the group home, they are concerned by the short list of options that group home staff utilize.



Youth living in group homes are not given the opportunities needed to excel in restrictive group home settings. Foster youth in group homes, and foster youth in general, deal with a vast array of problems that range from uncertainty about their placements to problems arising from personal history. However, youth in group homes also have to contend with group home professionals who have little training on how to work with foster youth. In fact, another problem that persists in group homes revolves around the fact that staff are often not educated about ILSP resources. Independent living courses are crucial because courses that teach foster youth about money-management

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skills and, more generally, courses about post-emancipation opportunities, give youth the skills needed to lead productive lives as adults. However, because group home staff do not know about ILSP eligibility and are often not concerned with the participation of youth in group homes, many youth go without ever attending an ILSP course.

In general, California Youth Connection members believe that group home professionals need training in critical areas that affect the quality of life for group home foster youth. To ensure that group home staff professionals are properly trained in the areas of conflict resolution, emancipation resources for foster youth, and how to work with foster youth from diverse backgrounds, CYC members suggested that the Y.O.U.T.H. (Youth Offering Unique Tangible Help) Training Project provide group home trainings statewide for all group home professionals. The Y.O.U.T.H. Training Project is a program out of San Francisco Bay Academy consisting of former and current foster youth between the ages of 14-24 who provide essential training to social workers throughout the state of California. As a result of the valuable service the Y.O.U.T.H. Training Project already provides for the child welfare system, members of CYC believe that the Y.O.U.T.H. Training Project can greatly improve the work of group home professionals.

Undertrained Group Home Staff: Recommendations

- **Professional staff in group homes should attend county-wide trainings every six-months throughout California.**

- **Trainings should include how to assist youth with money management, sensitivity to youth, cleanliness, age appropriate behavior, and respect for all youth regardless of their backgrounds.**
- **The trainings will be given by current and former foster youth who work with the Y.O.U.T.H Training Project.**
- **The Department of Social Services and Community Care Licensing should also require a series of assessments and documents that show proof of youth participation in ILSP.**

GROUP HOME ACTION ITEMS

- **Advocate to the Department of Social Services that licensing considers the participation of youth in group homes in ILSP courses and that it be a consideration for ongoing licensure**
- **Advocate to counties, the Legislature, and the Department of Social Services that group home staff be given a series of sensitivity and resource trainings by current and former foster youth at least once every six months**



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FAMILY REUNIFICATION

In California, foster care providers are an alternative placement for youth who, because of abuse or neglect, need to be separated from their parents. According to recent statistics, nearly 60% of youth in foster care placements are there as a result of neglect, 10% due to physical abuse, and 30% due to other circumstances.¹⁴ Although statistics estimate that there are more than 65,000 youth in California's child welfare system, the foster care system rests on the fundamental premise that out-of-home placements are temporary and only used as a last resort. If youth are placed into the foster care system, the child welfare system strives to reunify a youth with his or her biological family for a number of reasons. First, the child welfare system holds the belief that children benefit greatly and excel later in life when they are in a continual relationship with a caring caregiver, which in many cases are their biological parents. Second, the separation of a child from their parents and the experience of multiple home placements place considerable strain on the psychological well-being of a child. Consequently, family reunification remains one of the central pillars of the child welfare system in California as well as the United States.

The number of foster youth who are reunified with their parents in California has increased dramatically in recent years; however, there are additional ways in which the child welfare system can improve in the area of family reunification. A major problem that child welfare policymakers and foster youth have identified is the fact that many foster youth who are eventually reunified with their parents experience a major service gap due to the child welfare system terminating support services upon reunification. In other words, parents receive inadequate support services that are needed to ensure that the problems that resulted in their child's placement into the foster care system do not reoccur. As a result, many have attributed the lack of effective support services for reunified families as a major contributor to the high number of youth re-entering California's foster care system. Another problem identified by CYC members was the delay of family reunification efforts due to system overload and the problem of foster

care drift.¹⁵ Many youth in the child welfare system are eligible for reunification with their families, but due to the overburdened nature of the foster care system, many foster youth go for months without a social worker reviewing their case before they are eventually reunified with their parents. Furthermore, many foster youth experience

years in the foster care system drifting from placement to placement before the system recognizes that family reunification is not likely and the system arranges for a more permanent placement, such as guardianship.¹⁶

In the past, there have been significant policy efforts to solve many of the problems associated with family reunification. In 2004, California passed AB 408, a bill that allows foster youth in group homes the opportunity to establish a life-long connection with a caring adult. AB 408 stipulates that social workers ask youth who are 10 years or

older about how they can best support their connection to a caring adult. More recently, in 2005, the California State Legislature passed into law AB 1412, which gives foster youth the ability to actively participate in their permanency case plan after the age of 12. An important provision of AB 1412 includes the requirement that social workers take action to support relationships that are important to all foster youth, regardless of placement option. Nevertheless, despite these legislative accomplishments, CYC members continue to hold the belief that California's child welfare policymakers can institute key recommendations that will ensure that foster youth have the ability to reunify and that their families possess the necessary resources to maintain reunification.



FAMILY REUNIFICATION

ISSUE #1: TERMINATION OF NEEDED SERVICES

Upon reunification, parents and former foster youth lose the services that are needed for maintaining reunification as well as other supportive services that are crucial in determining the success of the youth. Many families rarely receive services when the parents are finally reunited with their children. In fact, according to CYC members, the lack of services designated for families that are reunified contributes to a higher recidivism rate, whereby the problems that precipitated the initial placement are not solved, and the youth

ultimately returns to foster care. Consequently, the termination of supportive services that the parents received while their child resided in foster care does not help foster youth, or their parents, because of the significant emotional burdens placed upon the child resulting from separation. Other costs resulting from the termination of supportive services include the relatively high price of maintaining a child in foster care, which studies have estimated at \$4.2 billion annually for foster care as well as foster care services.¹⁷



The termination of supportive services also disproportionately affects the quality of life for former foster youth. Upon entering the foster care system, many foster youth are qualified for assistance programs such as the Independent Living Program, Transitional Housing Program Plus, and other educational services. However, when foster youth are reunited with their parents, even if the youth has spent a significant time in the foster care system, they lose most, if not all, of these essential services. These assistance programs are crucial in the

lives of youth because these programs give youth participants the ability to pursue their life and educational goals. CYC members do agree that the state budget

constrains the ability for the child welfare system to offer assistance to all foster youth who are reunified with their families, but believe that the state should not terminate services before the foster youth reaches the age of 16. By mandating that social workers, attorneys, and foster parents inform and offer services to foster youth before the youth reaches the age of 16, CYC youth hope that other foster youth will have the opportunity to succeed once reunified. The recommendations that serve to augment the number of positive outcomes for youth who are reunified with their families are provided below:

Termination of Needed Services: Recommendations

- **If reunified prior to the age of 16, reunification should not terminate the services offered such as ILSP, THP-Plus, Chafee and other educational services.**
- **Foster youth and their parents should be informed by social workers of the loss of services if reunified.**
- **Foster youth and their parents should continue to receive services if needed by social workers, foster parents, and attorneys.**
- **A contract stating that the child was informed of all the services they are eligible for needs to be signed and a follow up should occur when the child is 16 years old.**



FAMILY REUNIFICATION

ISSUE #2: NON-REUNIFICATION OF FAMILIES

In California, for a number of reasons, many youth are not reunified with their parents or placed with extended family members, despite significant progress made in this area. Permanency in the lives of foster youth has always been one of the stated goals of social workers as well as California's child welfare system. In fact, statistics estimate that 60% of foster youth in California have family reunification as their permanency goal. If family reunification does not seem plausible, social workers should attempt to find alternative placements that are more permanent for youth, such as adoption or guardianship. However, many social workers are not actively seeking reunification for youth who are otherwise considered eligible for reunification. Many have credited this problem to the overburdened nature of the child welfare system, as well as the large caseloads that social workers currently have. Nevertheless, efforts must be made in the area of family reunification and permanency because, as stated by CYC members, reunification with their families is very important in the lives of foster youth.

There are many problems that arise as a result of social workers not actively seeking the reunification of foster youth with their families. Studies indicate that the longer a youth remains in the foster care system, the chances of a successful reunification significantly lessen. In addition, many foster youth with family reunification as their permanency goal spend years in the foster care system drifting from placement to placement because the social worker has yet to realize that reunification is not possible. Many CYC members also expressed a great concern over social workers not seeking out extended family members who have the potential to act as the youth's caregiver. As a result, CYC members stated during the conference that social workers need to have certification in a family finding program and implement the program in the case plans of foster youth. By finding and connecting children in foster care with relatives, social workers as well as CYC members hope that the relatives can provide a permanent and caring home for the youth in care.

Non-Reunification of Families: Recommendations

- **Social workers should be certified in the Family Finding and Engagement Program to locate extended family members as possible caregivers or as a support system for youth who enter foster care.**
- **If family reunification is an option, social workers need to carry out the case plan and provide services to reunify with parents in a timely matter. Should family reunification not be an option, social workers should move on to find a permanent placement for the youth.**



FAMILY REUNIFICATION ACTION STEPS

- **Author state legislation that requires all social workers to be trained in and utilize a family finding and engagement program**
- **Advocate to counties and the state to carry out case plans in a timely and consistent manner**



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CONCLUSION

Throughout the state of California, there are thousands of foster youth who experience common problems – a decrease in higher educational opportunities, an increase in the number of youth who are involved in the criminal justice system, and an ineffective child welfare system that does not properly prepare youth for the transition to adulthood. Nevertheless, youth, especially those who are impoverished, neglected, or abused, are caught within a structure that denies them the opportunity to meet with policymakers to address these problems in their community. Consequently, through advocacy and grass-roots organizing on a state level, CYC members have consistently fought to create a space in public policy that values the input of youth and at the same time empowers them to fight for the implementation of more effective polices to address the growing problems affecting the foster care system. The 2009 Summer Leadership and Policy Conference represents a materialization of CYC's core values: that true legislative change within the foster care system can only occur when youth are empowered to fight for the creation of more equitable and effective child welfare policies in California.



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