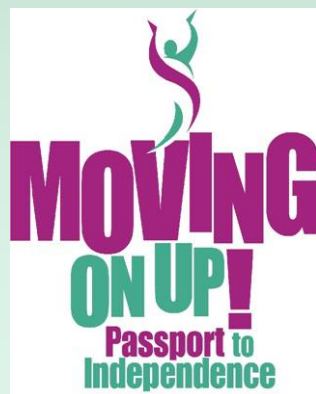


L.I.F.E

Listen. Inform. Future. Empower.



Created by:



Youth Leadership Board

and



elevate™
is a
program
of:





Listen to our story. Understand our point of view and let us Inform you of our goals and dreams for the past, present and Future. Let us know that what we are doing is right and Empower us to move forward. - Angie

State and national research has clearly demonstrated the dismal chances foster care youth have to succeed. In a longitudinal study by Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, researchers offered the following conclusion: *“Youth making the transition to adulthood from foster care are faring worse than their same-age peers, in many cases much worse, across a number of domains of functioning.”* Outcomes studied by Chapin Hall include education, employment, housing, health, and personal and community connections. For example, while Iowa’s overall high school graduation rate is approximately 90 percent; the graduation rate among youth in foster care is closer to 60 percent.

Other statistics for this population are just as concerning: when leaving foster care 50% of the youth are unemployed and 25% experience homelessness. A University of Chicago study recently released found that young women in foster care are 2.5 times more likely than their peers to become pregnant before age 19. By the time they reach 19, almost half of teen wards who got pregnant have a second pregnancy.

Many of the above issues can be better faced when the youth have permanent connections with adults in their lives. Numerous initiatives which have been developed to provide education and life skills for the youth have discovered that these connections are what are really critical during this transition.

The local *Moving On Up! Passport to Independence Youth Leadership Board* and *elevate™*, along with the Iowa Youth Connections Council, began developing this written document at a retreat. Our goal is to have written information to share with legislators and other decision makers about the issues of youth in foster care. The document also includes some of our ideas on how to “fix” the system.

We are wonderfully convincing – we tell compelling stories and are asking for things to change, not so much so that our lives will be easier but for those who come after us. With support we will become a strong force for change.

The transition to young adulthood is never easy. This is especially true for youth that “age out” of foster care. Many of us are unable to turn to our parents or other family members for financial and/or emotional support. Nor can we count on the state for continuing support once we’ve been discharged from foster care. Those of us growing up in state care face a series of challenges that may be exacerbated by the need to leave care before we are really ready to be on our own.

A recent Chapin Hall University study of youth that had aged out of foster care found that they face significant challenges, including mental health and substance abuse problems, poor education experiences and outcomes and access to housing. Most youth leaving foster care and entering the work force are employed in low-paying jobs that do not allow for adequate resources leading to self-sufficiency.

Iowa needs to continue to assist foster care youth ages 18 to 21 by providing access to the supports they need to become productive and contributing members of society.

Listen - if you just took the time to listen to someone else's story.

It could change your life and theirs.

-Monica



Relationships – Permanency

For most youth in foster care, making a successful transition to adulthood will require both adequate preparation in life skills and the support of enduring lifelong relationships.

Equipping youth with independent living skills, while difficult, is the easy part. Helping them develop lifelong relationships – what the child welfare system refers to as "permanency" – is the bigger challenge. Child welfare systems must adopt new strategies and enlist new partners to ensure that no youth ages out of care on his own.

Our first recommendation is:

1. Keep siblings together.

Sibling separation has garnered increased attention recently as more youth in care and former foster youth have identified it as one of their chief complaints about foster care. Most foster care workers try to place siblings in the same foster home, but sometimes there are too many to be accommodated in any of the foster homes that are available. Sometimes, one of the siblings poses a risk to another, or requires residential treatment. And sometimes, the worker judges that it's not in one of the siblings' best interests to live together. As one former foster care youth said, "Brothers and sisters provide each other with emotional permanence. Although officials and workers in the child welfare system know that, it sometimes seems to fall off the radar screen."



Keeping siblings together helps the siblings grow fully. When I didn't have my siblings it was the hardest thing and I didn't feel as though I was growing the way I should be growing. I have now gotten in contact with my siblings and I finally feel whole.

-Kayla

Growing up I never had any birth siblings, except for the older son of my guardian mother. He was not around much, so I didn't have much of a connection with him. Now, that I am adopted and have four younger adopted siblings, I feel more complete.

I would like social workers to be truthful about how many siblings there are, where they are and as much information that can be said or written.

-Katie



Our second recommendation is:

2. Permanency – someone who cares, a family for life

I want stability for them.

- Jewel

"No young person should be leaving foster care by themselves. They should be walking out the door with someone who cares about them," Martha Shirk, co-author of *On Their Own* said. Shirk also urges child-welfare workers to make it clear that permanency means lifelong family or family-type relationships, not peer relationships or relationships with paid staff members. She says child-welfare systems need to become more aggressive in helping children in foster care strengthen existing family ties or forge new bonds with adults who will make lifelong commitments to them. "Every youth who is likely to age out of foster care needs the child welfare system to help him build relationships with caring and competent adults whom he can call upon when he needs help," she noted, "relationships with adults who will be there for him because they care, not because they're being paid to care."

Youth need to be asked over and over again if they want to live in a foster family or if they want to be adopted. One young woman tells of being asked once if she wanted a foster family. At that time – after just having been removed from her mother and remembering the trauma of that relationship, she said no. Now that she is past 18, she longs for a forever family and wishes her social worker would have asked again.



Immediate family contacts are great to stay in contact with; each to know how they're doing and embrace the greatness in you.

-Brian

Education

Young people who have "aged out" of foster care face substantial barriers to attending college, according to a comprehensive report entitled "Higher Education Opportunities for Foster Youth: A Primer for Policymakers," recently released by the Institute for Higher Education Policy. About half of the 300,000 youths ages 18 to 25 who have been in foster care are qualified to go to college, but only about 30,000 of them—20 percent—actually are in postsecondary education, compared to 60 percent of their peers. Of those who do go on to college, less than 5 percent actually complete their degrees. High school graduation rates also lag: Only about half of all foster youth finish high school, compared to 70 percent of their peers. Those are among the sobering statistics in the report by Thomas Wolanin, who argues that youth in foster care have not yet had their need for higher education systematically recognized in the way that racial and ethnic minorities, women, and low-income people have.

We recommend that:

3. All youth in foster care should be entitled to free tuition at any state or community college.

ETV (the Chafee Education and Training Voucher program) is great but only pays for a little bit of our expenses. There was disagreement on whether foster youth should have to do work study or pay for a part of their expenses – it probably needs to be decided case by case. But the bottom line is we need to go to college and we need support to do it!

I want to empower others to embrace the opportunities around them.

I want to empower myself to

embrace my education and further my search for a brighter future.

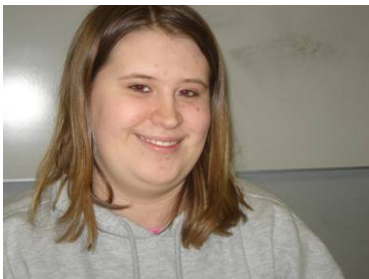
-Patrick



Empower to reach for the stars.
-Mariah

System Change

Many youth in foster care lack certified copies of their birth certificates. Although youth who age out of foster care in Iowa are eligible for Medicaid coverage until age 21, re-enrollment is required, and many youth have inadvertently lost coverage. When leaving foster care 50% of the youth are unemployed and 25% experience homelessness.



Adopted youth should have the ability to access the same scholarships as youth in foster care.

-Jessica

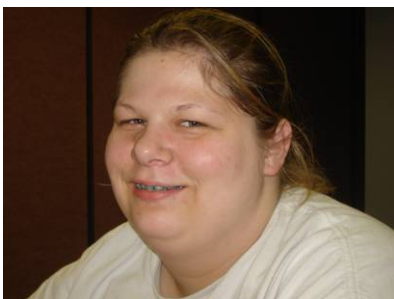
There have been some changes in the foster care system in the past few years – they have been helpful and we appreciate it, but it hasn't been enough...we really need help and support in figuring out how to live on our own. Just putting us in an independent living program doesn't cut it – we really need to learn independent living skills – how did you learn them? how did your children learn them? – that's what we need.

Listen about our past and to our Dreams. Help to make them come true.

- Gabby

Because of all the changes and issues we go through/experience, we are the experts of our own life, and therefore recommend that:

4. Youth in foster care should be part of the decision-making process every time there is a change in placement.



Empower - to be powerful and encourage others to speak about their stories to give people hope.

-Nikki

Many youth in Iowa have support from their families when they go off to school or move out on their own. They often are covered by their parents insurance for a while or have copies of all sorts of important papers.

We don't have that, so we recommend that:

5. Youth in care should have a certified copy of a birth certificate, a social security card and a state photo id. These should not be so hard for us to get. Youth 14 and older should have their own copy as well as one in their file.

Inform - social workers or people in charge of the youth's case should inform both the child and the parents of important documents and if they have to change anything.

-Mike



We also recommend that:

6. The system, caseworkers, and social workers provide support for finding apartments, jobs and help with applying for college before we age out.

And **not** just the month before. Turning 18 or 21 are big milestones – they also can be very scary without support. We need you.

To empower is to help, and to help means compassion.

-Patrick

And:

7. Youth in foster care should be automatically eligible for Medicaid until their 24th birthday.

For example, Michigan is making Medicaid re-enrollment automatic for all youth when they leave care - up to age 21. Dept. of Human Services and Dept. of Community Health are linking data bases so the re-enrollment is seamless and doesn't have to be initiated by the youth. Also in Michigan, for youth older than 21, Blue Cross/Blue Shield offers a very low cost (in the vicinity of \$45/month) health insurance for all young adults - because that age range is low risk for health costs.



Empower - I think when I get older I will move forward and make good choices!

-Breanna

Resources

Because we know what it is like to be in foster care and we know what we need our recommendation is that:

8. Youth panels should be included in all foster parent trainings.

We know this happens in some places, but it should happen everywhere. There are lots of young people who are willing to share their expertise on what it is like to be in foster care. This way new foster parents can see that teenagers aren't so bad and understand the issues we face.



I know that I would like to have someone help me get set up to become a foster parent and get to know the requirements to help me prepare or set goals to prepare. I know that it will take some time so what better time to start learning.

-Kim

We need to be heard - Listen! We want to be loved, happy and be something in life
-Russonda



And we recommend:

9. The state should recruit more culturally diverse foster homes for teens and homes for teens with children of their own.

Foster homes need to provide African-American hair care products for African-American youth in care. DHS needs to provide training for foster parents and staff on how to care for the needs of African-American youth.

Listen to teens about their stories, they're very important and very informative. Teens know what is best for them.
-Mike

We also need financial resources. It's tough making it on your own – it would be helpful if the state could support us by:

10. Giving youth in foster care priority for free or low cost items (cars, computers, etc) at state auctions, and youth aging out of foster care should have access to low cost insurance: health, dental, life, car and the state should develop a savings account for each youth in care when they enter the system. Monies should be dispersed when the youth in care exits the system. Or a portion of the savings should be allocated for long term savings to be dispersed incrementally.



A future for a foster child is so important. Sometimes we feel like we aren't going to make it. It would be easy to give up. Stick by our side for better futures and outcomes.
- Lorisha

I want to improve the system in any way that I can.
-Mikelle

