The Collective Power of Youth

Changing Systems through Foster Youth-Led Organizing

Betsy Fordyce, JD, CWLS
Ladder of Youth Participation

- Youth-initiated, shared decisions with adults
- Youth-initiated and directed
- Adult-initiated, shared decisions with youth
- Consulted and informed
- Assigned but informed

Degrees of Participation

- Tokenism
- Decoration
- Manipulation


Evolving Strategies: The History of Youth Engagement

- Youth Advisory Boards
- Youth Advocacy
- Youth-Led Organizing
Youth Organizing

“A form of civic engagement in which young people identify common interests, mobilize peers, and work collectively to address quality of life and human rights issues in their schools and communities.”

“Explicitly acknowledge[s] the marginal social and political status of teens and young adults, and provides young people with the tools necessary for them to challenge systems and institutions on their own.”
Foster Youth-Led Organizing

Youth with experience in the system coming together and harnessing their power to create CHANGE.
POWER derives from four areas of influence:

- Political
- Communications/Media
- Grassroots Support
- Legal

The Benefits of Youth Organizing

• Transforms Organizers
• Changes Systems
Foster Youth-Led Organizing Practices

• Build a Community of Shared Experience & Connection
• Establish a Pipeline for Participation and Leadership
• Cultivate Consciousness-Raising and Critical Analysis
• Conduct Campaigns to Change Child Welfare Systems
• Promote Health through Culture
• Secure the Right Organizational Home

project Foster Power’s

Initial Year of Action

• Structure, Leadership Pipelines, & Recruitment
• Youth Action Cycle
• project Foster Power’s Listening Tour
• “Youth Voice, Youth Choice” Campaign
• Ongoing Skill Development
YOUTH ACTION CYCLE

1. Craft our Vision
2. Learn about the system
3. Listen to ourselves & youth around us
4. Pick our issue
5. Develop our action plan
6. Take action
7. Celebrate & reflect
OUR VISION
Youth Voice, Youth Choice Campaign
#passthemic
USE YOUR VOICE BOOTCAMP

Learn about your rights & new advocacy skills

PROJECT FOSTER POWER
step up & speak out

JUNE 9TH
10AM-3PM

LOCATION - TBD
to learn more email:
projectfosterpower@
childlawcenter.org
COLORADO YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

YOU HAVE RIGHTS TOO! Depending on your age, abilities, and permanency goal (the roadmap for your case), you have the right:

- To stay with your parents or guardian, unless it is not safe or good for your well-being; otherwise the court will try to come up with a legal plan that is best for you and make sure you have the right services and supports to help you return home or be placed in another safe home permanently, as soon as possible.
- To have equal access to services and not be discriminated against or harassed based on your race or ethnicity; the country where you were born; your religion; your sex, sexual orientation, or gender identity; your mental or physical disability; or your HIV status.

Safety
- To adult support and supervision in a safe place where you are respected.
- Not to be abused in any way.
- Not to be abandoned or locked in a room.
- To have your court records kept private from people not a part of your case.
- If you are 15 or older, to access mental health therapy on your own.

Placement
- To be placed in a home that understands your needs and your story.
- To be in a placement that is as least restrictive as possible (meaning it has the structure that meets your needs).
- To stay in the same school when you are removed from your home (unless it’s not best for you).

Involvement in your Case
- To have a guardian ad litem (GAL), who represents what’s best for you in court.
- To see your caseworker face-to-face once a month.
- To communicate with anyone working on your case (like caseworkers, GALs, CASAs, probation officers, or other case supports).
- To attend court for your permanency hearing and talk with the Judge about what you want to have happen in your case (this can be in person, by letter, or by talking with your team).
- If you are 12 or older, to participate in your case, review your case plan, be told what’s going on, and be included in decision-making meetings about your future (along with your family and other supporters).
- If you are 12 or older, to consent to your adoption (adoption cannot happen without your agreement).
- If you are 14 or older, to choose 2 supportive people in your life (other than your foster parent or caseworker) to be a part of your case planning team.
Foster Youth Rights: Recommendations for Professionals

Adults, you have an important role to play in helping youth in foster care know and understand their rights!

Developed by the youth of project Foster Power, these best practice recommendations are intended to help you fulfill this responsibility.

**Judicial Officers**
- Ask youth directly, preferably in person, if they have been given copies of their rights, if they understand those rights, and if they have any questions.
- Visibly post youth rights in courtrooms, meeting spaces, and waiting areas in courthouses.
- If youth are not present in court, ask professionals why not.

**Foster Parents**
- Talk with youth in your home about their rights within a week of placement. Answer any questions they might have to the best of your ability. If you can’t answer their questions, help them connect with someone who can.
- Encourage youth to develop healthy communication skills – asking questions, sharing their wishes, expressing their feelings, and using coping skills.

**Placements (Foster Homes, Group Homes, Residential Facilities)**
Post rights in a place where all youth and adults can see them.

**Caseworkers**
- Review rights with youth at each placement.
- Always be transparent and direct with youth about information and decisions affecting their daily lives.
- Ensure that youth rights are visibly posted in county visitation centers and meeting spaces.
- Talk with youth regularly about their cases. Encourage youth to participate to the best of their abilities by asking questions, providing input, and speaking up about their wishes.

**Guardians ad Litem**
- Take time to talk with youth directly about their rights at least once every six months. Be sure they understand the information you share. Answer any questions they have.
- Meet with youth regularly before court dates. Share information about potential outcomes, a general idea of what to expect, and why.
- Always give youth space to ask questions and provide input on their case before every court hearing.

Use the Youth Rights document as a tool to engage youth in their own cases!

1. Ask youth what rights on the list are MOST important to them and WHY.
2. Talk with youth about their own situations and why these rights may or may not be applicable in their cases.
3. Answer any and all questions. Be sure youth understand and feel heard.
project Foster Power’s

Current Sibling Connections Campaign

• Sibling Bill of Rights
• Sibling Rally
• Public Awareness/Outreach
Benefits & Challenges of Youth-Led Organizing
(a practical perspective)

• For Youth
• For Adult Allies
• For An Organization
pFP Youth Organizing Tools

Empowering Youth Voices
Be creative
From,

a Young Person Who Matters
Questions?
Kudos from project Foster Power
YOUTH-LED ORGANIZING

A Strategy for Healing and Child Welfare Systems Change

Foster Youth in ACTION
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INTRODUCTION

As a national organization working with local organizing groups led by young people in foster care fighting for their rights and the rights of the next generation in care, we at Foster Youth in Action continuously ask ourselves and our community how can we reimagine new possibilities – beyond the current system.

How can we create community that does not criminalize young people and their families, offers networks of support that all communities need, and ensures that young people have everything they need and want to thrive. As change agents and community organizers we often come back to the same place — if we are going to create real and lasting change, we need different tools to get there.

And real change is desperately needed. Do a quick online search of youth in foster care, and you’ll immediately be inundated with research that shows that the system is not working to promote the well-being of children and youth who enter out-of-home care. In stark contrast to the stated missions of many foster care jurisdictions to promote well-being, involvement in foster care has profoundly opposite impacts. In fact, the foster care system pushes young people towards homelessness, unemployment, and incarceration. Foster youth, disproportionately young people of color, are aging out of care unprepared, unsupported, and disconnected.

Like their peers outside the system, young people in foster care have hope, want a good
education, and dream of a fulfilling and meaningful life. Foster youth engagement emerged as a way for young people to have a voice in improving the system, but common engagement strategies don’t go far enough. At worst, youth engagement strategies rely on small groups of hand-picked young people to share their stories and offer “advice”, which tokenizes the few and distorts the priorities of the many. If young people continue to be unorganized, systems will have little pressure to make the kinds of changes that move the needle on outcomes for youth leaving care. We need to greatly expand opportunities for youth engagement in ways that make space for all youth to participate; bring young people together; raise up issues from the grassroots; and help young people build power to achieve transformational changes that go beyond the limited reforms that systems would prefer.

Story: California Youth Connection

“Our participation in CYC gives us hope we didn’t have growing up. It’s hope for yourself and hope for the next generation.”

In the summer of 1998, a group of current and former foster youth from Los Angeles got organized to make a change in the system. Since that time, the group that has come to be known as California Youth Connection (CYC) has paved the way for new expectations about what youth could accomplish, and sparked a realization that young people impacted by the foster care system had power to make changes in the system and the circumstances of their lives. With more than twenty statewide legislative campaign victories to their name, CYC demonstrates the promise and potential of youth organizing to transform systems, practice and, most importantly, the lives of young people.

With an annual membership of more than three hundred youth and young adults statewide and a base of thousands more, CYC’s core organizers and members work together to guide campaigns and collective organizational priorities to create immediate and practical results in lives of young people. These results include: access to drivers’ licenses; the right to see siblings while in care; and legal requirements that ensure young people in care have a say in the policies that impact their lives.

This year, CYC’s #FosterStability campaign furthers this commitment to secure basic rights for young people in the system. Drawing on the perspectives, experiences and concerns of their membership across the state, CYC identified the continuing challenge that frequent, sudden, and unexpected placement changes mean for the well-being of youth in care. This campaign issue — and those before them — emerged through an identification and research process that begins at the county level and continues through several stages of youth-driven discussion, analysis and reflection. The mobilization of more than 100 youth at their recent day-at-the-capitol event in Sacramento was not only a celebration of youth voice, but also a clear demonstration of their power to secure the political support needed to secure passage of state legislation to improve placement stability.

CYC’s accomplishments are measured not just in wins, but in a change in culture and expectations across the state about what young people can offer and why youth engagement is critical for change. Moreover, their impact has extended beyond the state, showing a unique model grounded in collective power that influenced the establishment of other powerful statewide foster youth-led movements in Oregon, Florida, North Carolina and beyond.

Through the process of organizing and building community, young people also heal and grow. A current CYC leader from Southern California breaks it down this way: “The connections I have made with other youth have been amazing. They really support me and push me to go further. CYC has given me a new sense of hope, and it’s not a fake sense of hope. It’s real.”
Youth-Led Organizing

As a specific strategy for youth engagement, youth organizing builds on the legacy of collective action led by young people and is lifted up through the research and support of national organizations and funders. Youth organizing has a long-term vision of building powerful intergenerational or youth-led organizations, is forever seeking to bring in new young members and build a base of support, identifies issues by listening to its constituents, and sees itself as part of a broader social movement. An essential part of its approach to youth engagement is the youth development, healing, community-building, and action that is directly informed by young people most impacted by systems.

In the pages that follow, Foster Youth in Action argues that the youth organizing strategy should be embraced within the area of engagement with youth and young adults who are impacted by the foster care system. Some youth have had opportunities for engagement and participation, but the numbers are very limited relative to the total child welfare system-involved populations nationally. With organizing as a strategy, FYA believes that far more current and former foster youth will derive the powerful individual benefits of participation, particularly healing from trauma, and increase the likelihood that policy, practice and system change led by young people will represent the broadest cross-section of voices.

After laying out our case for youth organizing in the context of foster care, we share a set of practices that underpin youth organizing with current and former foster youth, which we’ve developed and refined based on our experience, as well as the experience of our foster-youth led partner groups around the US.

In the closing pages, we suggest some general directions that stakeholders could take to advance this approach. Expanding the reach of organizing has consequences for child welfare administrators, providers, policy makers, and funders. This approach will require new investments, targeted capacity building towards intergenerational leaders across the country, a new language about foster youth engagement, and perhaps most significant, a greater acceptance of young people as powerful civic actors and partners.
INPUT TO YOUTH ORGANIZING: THE EVOLUTION OF FOSTER YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Thirty years ago, the idea of young people in the foster care system informing practice, sitting at decision-making tables, or rallying for policy change would have been a foreign concept, and its proponents at the fringes. But since this time a huge shift has taken place.

Now the fields of youth engagement and positive development affirms the power and capacity of young people in foster care to create positive change in the systems that directly impact their lives and also recognizes that the benefits of youth engagement for individuals, communities and systems.

In this section, we start by describing important historical factors that shape the direction of foster youth engagement, summarize current approaches to youth engagement, and distinguish organizing led by young people directly impacted by the foster care system as its own distinct strategy for creating transformative change.
History of Foster Youth Engagement

In the last 40 years, there has been an incredible shift in the field of youth development — moving from a problem-centered, deficit-based approach rooted in white supremacy and narratives rooted in oppression — to a positive youth development framework based on empowering the strengths and developmental assets of all young people through skill building, identity development, and community connections. This foundational work has truly set forth a new path for youth services and empowerment programs that more holistically support young people. These efforts have profoundly shaped how we understand and approach youth engagement, youth leadership, youth civic participation, and systems change as a range of strategies and approaches for engaging young people in the foster care system.

Much of the shape and direction of foster youth engagement came from new federal child welfare policy beginning in the 1980s. In 1985, in response to research showing poor educational, employment, and independent living outcomes for older youth in foster care and those emancipated from care, Congress created the Independent Living Initiative as an amendment to Title IV-E of the Social Security Act [Fernandes-Alcantara, 2011]. This legislation authorized mandatory funding to state child welfare systems for the development of services and programs that would develop independent living skills among adolescents in foster care. Funding and programming that grew out of this initiative were limited, and results were not well documented [Fernandes-Alcantara, 2011 citing Courtney & Heuring; Collins, 2004]. Reflecting the overall evolution of the child welfare field away from a more traditional youth services approach and toward a positive youth development approach [LISTEN, Inc., 2003], states began forming foster youth advisory boards as components of their independent living programs. Unfortunately, these boards often lacked adequate staffing, logistical support, funding and practice guidance for youth-driven initiatives, as well as the diversity representative of the broader population of youth in foster care [Crowe, 2007].

With the passage of the Foster Care Independence Act (FCIA) of 1999, Congress replaced the Independent Living Initiative with the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (Chafee Program). Among other provisions, the FCIA doubled the amount of funding to the states for independent living programs and expanded eligibility for Chafee programs and activities, including help with education, employment, financial management, housing, emotional support and connections to caring adults [Children’s Bureau, 2012]. The FCIA also strengthened the role of youth participating in independent living programs: states were now required to show that youth were participating directly in designing their own program activities, and in the wake of Chafee programming, youth advisory boards and groups proliferated across the country [Forenza & Happonen, 2016] and continue to be found in virtually all states and in many local jurisdictions in some capacity.

Current Foster Youth Engagement Strategies

Youth engagement strategies in the foster care system have primarily focused on programs that support young engagement through youth advisory roles, youth advocacy, and youth-adult partnerships.

Youth Advisory approaches include a broad description of groups, councils, or committees who meet regularly to provide advice and feedback to systems leaders about youth priorities, make recommendations for changes, often do awareness raising and other service projects, and are the primary way that child welfare systems incorporate youth voice in planning and policymaking [Collins, 2004; Havlicek, Lin, & Braun, 2016; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012a]. They serve as “important channels through which policymakers can solicit and incorporate youth voices into their decision-making processes” [Forenza & Happonen, 2016, p. 118] and several have been instrumental in the passage of child welfare reforms and initiatives [Crowe, 2007]. At the heart of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative is the idea that the “authentic engagement” of youth in the design, implementation, and evaluation of child welfare programs and services results in greater innovation, relevance, quality, acceptance, and credibility [Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012a]. Indeed, the perspectives of foster youth and former foster youth are sought for evaluation of child welfare services
at the Children’s Bureau, for curriculum development and review for the Child Welfare League of America, for workshops and presentations at conferences, and for positions on boards of directors for multiple national child welfare organizations (Crowe, 2007). As a youth civic engagement approach, youth advisory boards can serve as settings for positive youth development, facilitating access to supportive relationships, meaningful roles with responsibility, and challenging learning experiences (Gambone et al, 2006).

State agencies and other organizations that run foster youth advisory boards, however, have struggled to create the kinds of spaces that promote the independence and collective efficacy of young people to impact public policy directly. In fact, government agencies that fund these initiatives often prohibit advocacy or lay down significant barriers to advocacy.

**YOUTH ADVOCACY** approaches move along the continuum of youth engagement to further the collective empowerment of youth in care by expanding opportunities for youth leadership and civic engagement (Listen, Inc.). Given that Youth Advisory Boards are often integrated into existing governmental agencies, Youth Advocacy Organizations — frequently hosted by nonprofit agencies — have emerged as more flexible alternatives to these boards, often supporting direct policy advocacy. Many of these advocacy groups have won important state legislative victories to improve rights and opportunities for foster youth. However, with youth advocacy strategies, young people may not be identifying the issues they are advocating for, nor driving the campaigns to address these issues.

**YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS** is another powerful youth engagement strategy that engages current and former foster youth through meaningful collaboration and shared decision making power with adults on important issues that affect their lives and their community. Youth-Adult Partnerships offer “equal opportunities [for young people and adults] to utilize skills, make decisions, and independently carry out tasks to reach shared goal” (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012a, p. 4). While youth adult partnerships can be incredible tools for creating shared learning and leadership, it is not typically a youth-led, youth-driven approach.

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**Challenges with Current Strategies**

Recent studies of foster youth advisory boards raise concerns about their reach and representativeness. Several former state child welfare directors interviewed for a study by Havlicek and colleagues expressed concern that youth advisory boards may represent the voices of “a few bold or high-functioning foster youth as opposed to the voices of all foster youth” (p. 7). A study by Forenza (2016), which explored psychological empowerment and the pursuit of social change among participants in a foster youth advisory board, noted among the study’s limitations that the youth advisory board members constituted a “self-selecting, high achieving sample.” In line with these concerns, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative highlights one of the challenges of existing youth engagement approaches: many youth do not participate in them, making it important to develop alternate strategies for soliciting and conveying their perspectives (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012a).
Youth-Led Organizing

As importantly, boards have frequently failed to address the complex histories of trauma and loss that so powerfully define the experience and identity of many foster youth. Underscoring the experience of trauma as a significant barrier to relationship and community building, Havlicek and colleagues (2016) described the challenge that facilitators of youth advisory boards experienced as they encountered the “intensity of connecting with trauma” (p. 7). Given the powerful nature of trauma as a barrier to the development of individual and collective efficacy (Chavez-Diaz & Lee, 2015), a foster youth engagement strategy that does not facilitate healing from trauma will continue to fall short in its effort to promote young people’s positive development and social action.

Groups using these approaches have also struggled to build a membership base that includes the most vulnerable youth in care; to deeply examine root causes of issues or reach out to peers to determine broader foster youth priorities; and to support local or state action that helps hold officials accountable to implementing policy.

The experience of groups in Foster Youth in Action’s own national network affirm these and other challenges. Common themes among requests for support from FYA by our partners include:

- deep struggles with recruiting and retaining young people;
- limited opportunities for young people to assume expanding leadership roles and to exercise real power;
- absence of a meaningful process for identifying and selecting issues that reflect the needs and priorities of the broader base of youth in care;
- inadequate organizational capacity to provide safe spaces or offer the kind of consistency and frequency of meetings that support young people’s needs for healing from trauma; and
- lack of a process that promotes critical reflection on the social realities and histories of youth in care, their families, and communities.

As we show below, the distinct approach of youth organizing is well-suited to address these common challenges.

Moving Towards Youth Organizing

While youth organizing as a strategy includes many of the youth leadership and civic engagement activities within the above strategies, it is distinct as a strategy for systems change in that it places current and former youth in foster care front and center in improving their communities and the lives of their peers in foster care.

Youth organizing is defined as “a form of civic engagement in which young people identify common interests, mobilize their peers, and work collectively to address quality-of-life and human rights issues in their schools and communities” (Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012). Like other approaches to youth engagement, including positive youth development, leadership development, and other forms of civic engagement (e.g., community service, participation in youth advisory councils), youth organizing works to meet the personal, emotional, physical, and academic needs of young people as well as develop self-agency and individual leadership (Shaw, 2011). Youth organizing is distinguished from these other developmental approaches to youth engagement, however, in that it “explicitly acknowledge[s] the marginal social and political status of teens and young adults, and [provides] young people with the tools necessary for them to challenge systems and institutions on their own” (LISTEN, Inc.). For marginalized youth, including youth of color, LGBTQ youth, and their allies, this means challenging institutionalized racism, sexism, homophobia, and other social, economic, and political inequities that threaten and disempower young people, their families, and communities.

A strategy for foster youth engagement is needed that includes and amplifies the voices of all foster youth, including those with the highest needs and those aren’t traditionally selected to offer the “youth perspective.” An approach is needed that will promote healing from trauma; explicitly acknowledge the social, economic, and racial injustices that youth and their families have experienced; and build the collective capacity of foster youth and former foster youth — wherever they are in their journey — to imagine and advocate for systemic and structural changes, even when those changes are not in line with policymakers’ and system administrators’ views. The evidence points toward youth organizing as the approach to foster youth engagement with the greatest potential to achieve these outcomes.
WHY YOUTH ORGANIZING?

As youth organizing changes systems to meet youth needs and to achieve greater equity and justice, the systemic changes and legislative successes that result from youth organizing also shifts public perceptions of youth. Youth organizing is “a counter-narrative to prevailing assumptions of youth disengagement from civic and political life.” [Shah 2011, p. 40].

Organizing Transforms Individuals

In comparison to other youth engagement approaches, like youth advisory boards, there is a growing evidence base for the greater effectiveness of youth organizing particularly with young people who, like many in the foster care system, are targets of discrimination, systematic exclusion, violence and marginalization. The evidence linking the specific youth organizing approach to positive developmental outcomes comes from the academic research literature as well as from the experiences of youth-focused organizations [Rogers & Terriquez, 2013; Social Policy Research Associates, 2013]. At the individual level, participation in youth organizing promotes youth’s psychological wellness and academic engagement, as well as their sociopolitical development — an aspect of youth development not traditionally included in theories of human development [Shah, 2011].
Most recently, Shah, Buford and Braxton (2018) drew on a variety of different studies, including those with large sample sizes, comparison groups, and longitudinal designs, to show how youth organizing specifically, as well as in comparison to other youth development approaches, strengthens social-emotional skills, increases positive academic and educational outcomes, and improves current and future civic engagement.

As we argue below, youth organizing is also a particularly compelling approach to help young people heal trauma-inflicted wounds while they heal the systems and communities that perpetuate these traumas.

**HEALING FROM TRAUMA**

Providers and child welfare systems are giving increased attention to trauma and to ensuring that their practices are trauma-informed, but nonclinical trauma practices are underrepresented in the literature and in practice. Because youth organizing embodies many of the principles and practices that address trauma and support healing, and has the potential to promote individual and community healing, it deserves attention by the broader field of child welfare.

As a wealth of research shows, the experience of trauma is pervasive for youth in foster care, and is a product of many different, often co-occurring experiences, including separation, frequent dislocations, as well as the abuse experienced before and during care. (Child Welfare Committee, National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2008). As foster youth are disproportionately black, native, poor, or LGBT, the traumas inflicted by poverty, structural racism, xenophobia, homophobia and transphobia and other forms of systemic oppression compound the unique traumatic experiences of foster care.

Exposure to trauma and toxic stress in childhood is a literally a matter of life and death. In the short term, youth who experience trauma risk losing their sense of safety, their ability to trust in others, and their future focus. In the long run, they...
risk poor health outcomes and a shorter life (Felitti, et al. 1998). In adapting to and coping with an unstable, unpredictable, stressful, violent and oppressive environment, young people shift to a singular quest for survival, eroding the feelings of control, hope, motivation, and a positive sense of self that contribute to long-term health and well-being.

In defining solutions and responses to trauma, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative and the Federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Agency (SAMHSA) have lifted up principles and best practices [shown on previous page and above] to address trauma and promote healing. These themes include safety, community, connection, culture, and action — features that — as we have described earlier and will do in greater detail in the coming section — are integral to youth organizing.

However, trauma healing for foster youth tends towards individualized treatment, case coordination, and therapeutic approaches. It is inarguable that these services are frequently necessary and lifesaving. But are they enough, especially given the pervasiveness of trauma for youth in care and that systemic forces, including structural racism and other systemic forms of discrimination, are at the root of the traumas these young people experience?

Young people who have experienced trauma should have access to treatment, and deserve to be in systems that support, not undermine a healing process. However, healing is a relational phenomenon. As highly successful programs like Alcohol Anonymous have shown, social relations and peer support — the process of reconnecting and rebuilding — is a very important source of healing for many emotional wounds (Goodwin and Patton, 2007).

Others, frequently outside the foster care world, are pointing in a different direction, and towards programs and approaches that draw on relationships, belonging, community, culture and collective action, making the case that a healing process that includes action can build resilience while also healing a broader community (Bradshaw, 2015).

In sharp contrast to treatment modalities, Shawn Ginwright (2015) posits that the work of collective action is the healing intervention itself. Through increased sense of control and power as a result of

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1 See https://www.nctsn.org/treatments-and-practices/treatments-that-work
transforming the causes of the trauma itself, well-being is restored (Ginwright, 2018). As he further explains, “When young people act to improve the quality of life for the group as a whole, the process of movement towards shared goal engenders existential outcomes such as purpose, imagination, meaning, and faith.” (Ginwright, 2015, p. 24)

As a scholar and educator focusing improving the lives of young people of color, Ginwright argues for a new approach to healing for young people who have experienced deep trauma. He posits that efforts to promote healing should: 1) be grounded in culture; 2) build personal agency; 3) foster relationships; 4) be connected to work that is meaningful; and 5) directed towards actions that result in tangible achievements (Ginwright, 2015). These five features have significant overlap with the trauma informed principles and practices outlined by SAMHSA and Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative on the previous pages.

Research shows that youth organizing addresses factors and elements that SAMSHA, Jim Casey, and others in the field argue are important for healing for young people that have experienced trauma. These include:

**HOPE**
- Rogers & Terriquez, 2013; Shah, 2011; and Schwartz & Suyemoto, 2013 describe studies that show the relationship between youth organizing and feelings of hope, optimism, and purpose in life.

**POSITIVE SENSE OF SELF**
- Positive identity was more optimally supported by youth organizing programs compared to traditional youth development programs (Gambone et al., 2006).
- Youth organizing groups provide supportive and culturally relevant contexts for nurturing youth’s positive social identities (Shah, 2011).

**AGENCY AND CONFIDENCE**
- Shah’s (2011) study shows that involvement in youth organizing promotes young people’s confidence in their leadership skills.
- Schwartz and Suyemoto (2013) offers evidence that youth organizing promotes youth’s confidence in their ability to address problems in their communities and to work with others to make change.
EMOTIONAL MANAGEMENT

• Shah et al (2018) show how involvement in organizing help youth manage their feelings and channel difficult feelings towards positive action.

RELATIONSHIPS, CONNECTION AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

• Relationships forged in the context of youth organizing campaigns have been shown to provide more guidance, emotional support, and practical support than do more traditional youth development agencies [Gambone et al.].

• Involvement in organizing helped young people improve their interpersonal communications, enabled them to forge trusting relationships with mentors, and gave them a chance to see their peers as “family”. [Shah, et al]

• Youth organizing builds young people’s resilience by strengthening the social networks they have with youth and adult community members [Ginwright, 2003; Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012]

• Youth organizing builds community capacity by facilitating relational empowerment - the cultivation of social power through social relationships and the ability to facilitate the empowerment of others [Christens, 2012].

ACADEMIC OUTCOMES AND 21ST CENTURY SKILLS

It is well documented that young people with foster care experience are far less likely than their peers to graduate from high school, attend college, and complete their degree. Nearly a quarter of former foster youth have not earned a high school diploma or GED [compared to seven percent of their same-age peers in the general population], and three percent have earned a four-year college degree [compared to one-fifth of their same-age peers in the general population] [Fryar et al., 2017]. Strong evidence points to the potential of youth organizing to address a compelling need with respect to academic outcomes of foster youth, as well as honing complementary capacities and skills necessary for young people to effectively compete in today’s job market.

Participation in youth organizing is associated with increased academic engagement, reflected in students taking more rigorous courses, earning better grades, participating more in class, and having better relationships with teachers [Shah; Schwartz & Suyemoto]. Youth participating in organizing also demonstrate positive academic trajectories, such as greater perceived importance of school for meeting life goals, increased educational aspirations [including plans to attend college and graduate school], and increased likelihood of attending a four-year college or university [Shah; Christens & Peterson, 2012; Rogers & Terriquez]. Rogers & Terriquez provide insight into why youth organizing leads to such positive academic outcomes. As a context for learning, these researchers found that youth organizing provides youth with opportunities to develop skills and intellectual interests as they work on campaigns, engaging in intellectual discussion, critical analysis, creative problem solving, action planning, writing op-eds, and public speaking. As a context for mentorship and guidance, youth organizing facilitates youth’s access to “holistic and culturally relevant college counseling and guidance” and encourages youth to view their educational pursuits as connected to broader political and community empowerment goals. [Rogers and Terriquez, p. 8.]

The development of young people’s capacity for critical social analysis [Shaw] is one of the defining features of a youth organizing approach and what distinguishes youth organizing from traditional youth engagement work [Listen, Inc.]. As described by Shah, youth organizing helps young people to “understand the systemic nature of problems in their community and schools and the need for correspondingly systemic solutions [Executive Summary].” In a youth organizing approach, this deeper understanding of the inequitable opportunity structure facing marginalized youth is cultivated alongside the growth of positive social identity, self-agency, leadership and community organizing skills [Shah, 2011; Rogers and Terriquez, 2013]. Experience in critical analysis, along with the opportunities to collectively plan meetings, events and campaigns, address problems collectively, manage complexity, and deal with failure are just some of the tools and capacities young people are gaining from organizing. Equipped with the experiences and skills of organizing — along with support to translate these experiences to potential employers — young people
who engage in organizing may be competitive in a job market that is increasingly seeking candidates that possess the skills and qualities that young organizers are honing.

**Organizing Changes Systems**

For decades, youth-led organizing, particularly organizing led by young people of color and other marginalized youth, has dramatically changed the world we live in today. Young people, armed with collective power and skilled in organizing practices, have fought for civil rights and greater social and economic justice. From desegregation, educational equity, higher-paying jobs, healthier school food, fewer jails, and more after-school programs, hundreds of youth-led organizing efforts are flourishing across this country. In the foster care space, young people have organized successfully to pass more than 70 state laws, improved organizational practice, and shifted a culture to validate and affirm youth voice.

Just a few examples of the state child welfare laws, rules, and regulations that have been fought include campaigns led by youth in California, Oregon, and Florida.

In California, California Youth Connection members won the fight to create a State Ombudsman’s office that hears grievances, identifies system failures, and educates youth about their rights in care. The bill itself was an important victory — but the recent assumption of leadership by the office by a former foster youth who herself was a young leader (de Sa, 2016) — also demonstrates the culture change that CYC has also driven.

In Oregon, maintaining sibling connections was a priority for Oregon Foster Youth Connection (OFYC) — a statewide youth organizing group working to improve the foster care system. OFYC members worked together to fight for sibling rights within the Oregon Legislature to ensure accountability from state child welfare agencies to maintain these critical connections.

While getting a drivers’ license can be a challenge for all young people, for young people in foster care it can be almost impossible as a result of legal barriers and lack of resources. Florida Youth SHINE members demanded that this change in their state. Through their Keys to Independence Campaign, SHINE members collectively advocated to pass a bill that not only provides legal support for young people in care to get their learner’s permit and driver’s license but also requires court oversight and accountability in transition planning and judicial reviews.
FOSTER YOUTH ORGANIZING IN PRACTICE

In the preceding pages, we’ve shown why youth organizing matters for foster youth individually and collectively. Going forward, we aim to complete the picture, describing six foster youth organizing practices that support individual and collective transformation for the broadest base of youth in care.

These practices are summarized in the table on page 16, followed by a story that illustrates their application in the context of one group’s organizing experience. Drawing deeply from the emerging field of youth organizing, we then describe each of the six practices in depth, showing the context of the unique reality of youth with experience in the foster care system.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>Foster Youth-led Organizing Practices</th>
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| **BUILD A COMMUNITY OF SHARED EXPERIENCE AND CONNECTION** | • A dedicated space  
• Meeting consistency, frequency and accessibility that reflects the importance of structure for youth in care  
• Rituals, traditions and celebrations |
| **ESTABLISH A PIPELINE FOR PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP** | • Relentless recruitment and leadership training  
• A structure and process that supports increased opportunities for leadership  
• An approach that affirms the need for youth in care to step up and step away from active participation while still maintaining their identity and connection to the group |
| **CULTIVATE CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS** | • Critical analysis of systems of power and oppression  
• Unpacking of the history of the child welfare system  
• Root cause analysis of issues directly impacting youth in care |
| **CONDUCT CAMPAIGNS TO CHANGE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS** | • Six stage cycle starting with problem identification  
• Includes developing concrete demands and developing a campaign strategy  
• Steps are a cycle in which results help the group to build power and apply lessons for next campaign |
| **PROMOTE HEALING THROUGH CULTURE** | • Intentional use of ritual, art, and cultural events to promote positive identity and overcome system failures to support young people’s need to connect to their heritage and roots |
| **SECURE THE RIGHT ORGANIZATIONAL HOME** | • Beyond fiscal sponsorship and supervision and towards additional host organizational roles that support effective youth-led campaigns and sustainable organizing over time |
Story: Denver's Project Foster Power

Like many communities around the US, foster youth engagement in the Denver and Colorado Front Range was not new. Youth engagement programs, including those of county youth advisory boards, had operated for years, and state and local leaders periodically sought input of young people from these boards.

Missing, however, was an organized and independent body of young people with the tools, structure, and legitimacy that comes from a deep base that could drive their own agenda for system change. At least as far back as 2013, young activists and lawyers affiliated with the Rocky Mountain Children’s Law Center saw this gap, and began a three year process that birthed the Denver-based Project Foster Power in April 2017.

With a core of 8 youth and young adult organizers (all with experience in the foster care system), and a membership of approximately 150 of their peers across the Front Range, Project Foster Power (PFP) has grown rapidly, is highly visible, and is increasingly taken seriously by institutional decision-makers and elected officials across the state.

From the start, young leaders and adult supporters drew explicitly on youth organizing as the youth engagement strategy guiding their own work. The initial group of young people took on the title of “organizer” in recognition that their responsibility was not just to raise their own voices, but to organize their peers by listening to them and building their capacity as leaders. Organizers knew from personal experience the challenges that foster youth have in sustaining regular commitments. As such, they established membership guidelines that effectively eliminated barriers to participation, enabling young people to affiliate with Project Foster Power and maintain membership even when daily life challenges get in the way of regular meeting attendance. In keeping with the youth organizing approach, PFP focused on the immediate concerns of youth across the region — not just their own group’s priorities — and launched a formal campaign directly addressing a key youth concern. Significantly, they are drawing not just on their individual stories but on the collective power of their growing membership base in ways that helps them secure immediate changes while also setting the stage for bigger changes in the future.

Early efforts to recruit the first members centered around casual hangouts, often in parks, where prospective members had the chance to learn, connect, and chalk up the sidewalks with their visions for change. The efforts to build connection and community among the core membership set the stage for the next critical
In an age where concepts of individual empowerment are preeminent, PFP’s biggest challenge might be to grasp the full power they have as a collective, and channel this significant power into shaping the kind of future they truly deserve for their community and those that follow."

step — deep engagement with their peers across the region. The core membership’s experience in care had certainly shaped their issues and priorities. Nonetheless, members focused important early work conducting a listening tour, where they visited groups of young people in ten different locations, including night shelters for homeless youth, independent living programs, or service agencies. Using the aptly named “burning wall” tool to gather perspectives, insights and opinions at every stop on the tour, PFP was able to build an impressive, and representative picture of many of the most important concerns of their peers. Reaching more than 100 youth in the community, this peer driven effort received praise not only by young people — many of whom expressed to organizers that this experience was the first where they truly felt listened to — but also by agency leaders — who were surprised by the reach and depth of the effort. In true organizing form, organizers used these tours to grow their group, successfully securing dozens of new members in the process. To this day, PFP continues to use creative events and other opportunities to re-shape the ways in which new and emerging members can test the waters, get oriented, and explore what more intensive involvement looks like.

The listening tours provided new insight into the experiences of youth in care across the Front Range, while also imparting valuable lessons for organizers about the power of moving from “me” to “we”. Through the tours, lead organizers felt more connected with each other and the broader community, while increasing their confidence and skills in public communication.

Wrapping up their listening tour in November 2017, PFP’s next steps were about harnessing their learnings for action. Going beyond brainstorming and voting, core organizers took a step back, diving deep into the results of the listening tour, surfacing themes, teasing out trends, and looking at the root causes of the priority problems. "In an age where concepts of individual empowerment are preeminent, PFP's biggest challenge might be to grasp the full power they have as a collective, and channel this significant power into shaping the kind of future they truly deserve for their community and those that follow."
emerging. Selecting their first campaign issue required an additional frame — which issue was the right first issue? Which issue might not only be important on its own, but also build the group’s power to take on bigger issues in the future? Recognizing that they were still months from their first anniversary, PFP wanted to make sure that their first campaign steps were in fact stepping stones.

Project Foster Power’s first campaign is about strengthening the rights of youth in care. Because young people in care frequently don’t know their rights, Project Foster Power is launching an educational campaign targeting youth directly, while also asking decision-makers to make commitments to strengthening youth voices in shaping local and state policy. Their recent rally at the capital was just one vehicle that PFP used to push the issue. In the past, officials might have disregarded these asks. Now, given the size of PFP’s growing membership base, and the legitimacy that comes from that base and their priorities, decision-makers are starting to listen.

The issues of rights and voice are great first issues and will generate some important wins for Project Foster Power. Progress to date has also made this group in great demand to speak at conferences, attend hearings, and meet with officials around a range of issues including those that are not aligned with their priorities. Project Foster Power recognizes this important and potentially risky moment, when adult and institutional power holders attempt to co-opt youth voices and youth stories in order to build legitimacy of adult goals and priorities. In response, PFP is picking their invitations carefully, knowing that the praise and attention bestowed on them may feel good, but could impair their ability — and autonomy — to push for bigger changes in the future.

Just over a year old, Project Foster Power’s core youth leadership is justifiably proud of its accomplishments both collectively and personally. In the words of one core leader, “organizing helped me go from feeling powerless to a force to be reckoned with.” Another credits PFP with getting her life back on track and improving her confidence [Brown, J. 2018]. PFP does face challenges, as most youth organizing groups do at this stage. Membership is growing, but hindered by a relative lack of one-on-one, face-to-face outreach that is the bedrock for sustained growth of membership. Current and former foster youth 18 and up are the majority of participants, and the group has struggled to engage 15-17 year olds, a demographic group at a developmental stage where this kind of experience could be particularly transformational. In an age where concepts of individual empowerment are preeminent, PFP’s biggest challenge might be to grasp the full power they have as a collective, and channel this significant power into shaping the kind of future they truly deserve for their community and those that follow.
Practice 1: Build a Community of Shared Experience & Connection

In foster-youth led organizing, building a safe and supportive community is a critical practice. Foster youth organizers strive to create the conditions where their peers feel safe to be themselves, to share their experiences, to connect, and, collectively act to transform the systems that impact their lives.

Building community is as much about the physical space and organizational culture as it is about creating opportunities for personal identification, shared experience and emotional connection. When young people enter the foster care system, they are removed from their family, their friends, and their community. They can be moved to entirely new neighborhoods, cities, and even states and often experience a separation from cultural practices and ancestral connections as well. Spaces where young people currently and formerly in foster care feel a shared sense of identity & connection can be an invaluable touchstone during incredible uncertainty. Connections not only increase the power of foster youth organizing groups as a whole, but help to build relationships and a network of support that can decrease individual feelings of isolation, mitigate the impacts of trauma, and promote a positive sense of self (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012c).

WHAT THE PRACTICE LOOKS LIKE:

Some of the activities foster youth organizers use to build community include:

• **ESTABLISHING A "HOME":** A physical space that can serve as a “home base” encourages foster youth organizers to meet regularly, hang out, and build connections. Spaces work best when they are centrally located and physically accessible for all, with universal restrooms and child care for young parents. To create a sense of true ownership, foster youth organizers build a space that reflects their culture, creativity, and artistic expression. For some young people organizing across regions, virtual spaces using social media and other new media platforms are being used to build community, though not without challenges that come from a lack of face-to-face connection.
• **HOLDING REGULAR & CONSISTENT MEETINGS:** Building community and creating these connections is facilitated through frequent and consistent meetings that bring young folks together on a regular basis. While not all members of the organization may be able to attend, it is important that a group of core organizers meet often to work on recruitment, campaign strategy, and base building events that continue to bring new young people into the work. The regularity offered by this approach provides structure that strengthens connections; the frequency (ideally once a week) ensures that young people who occasionally step out to deal with urgent issues can quickly reengage.

• **CREATING RITUALS, TRADITIONS, AND CELEBRATION:** Group rituals and traditions are an important part of creating a sense of group identity and connection. These traditions are created collectively by the group and reflect the unique culture of its members as well as the culture of the group as a whole. This can include call & response, chants, honorings, swag, and community celebrations & events.

### CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Foster youth organizers working to build community can face challenges such as access to transportation, systems barriers that limit opportunities for community connections, and limited funding and/or administrative support. While in foster care, there are often restrictions to getting a driver’s license, obtaining insurance, and even participating in out-of-home activities such as hanging out with friends, attending community activities, or participating in clubs, despite federal regulations designed to lift these restrictions [Pokempner, Mordecai, Rosado, & Subrahmanyam, 2015]. In addition, changes in placements, housing instability, and limited accessibility for young people with differing abilities are some of the obstacles young people face when trying to sustain and build social networks [Smith, et al. 2015]. Some groups, particularly those with-

**FLORIDA YOUTH SHINE (FYS)** is a statewide youth-run, peer-driven organization with 14 local chapters across the state organizing to change the culture of Florida’s child welfare system through legislative advocacy, local accountability, and community education. Not only is FYS an example of collective power in action, the community they have built through local chapter development, creating a shared “Shine” culture among members, and a radical love for each other is the foundation for their work. From celebrating each other during school graduations, always shining their light on each other, and standing together on the front lines creating change - Florida Youth SHINE members are there supporting each other as a community and as a family.

out substantial support of a host organization, struggle to secure consistent, accessible space.

Many young people currently or formerly in foster care are also navigating relational trauma from experiences inside and outside of the system. Given that the system that promised to care for them broke this promise, many are naturally apprehensive as they begin to make new group connections. To cultivate a shared sense of connection and community, effective foster youth lead organizing groups invest time to build trust, intentionally welcome and orient new members, and give young people time to feel out and get to know the group on their terms.

A local or regional organizing focus facilitates efforts to build community and connection. A wealth of civic engagement research suggests that local issues that directly impact people’s day-to-day lives are most likely to spur engagement and participation. In contrast, early foster youth engagement efforts frequently had their origins at the state level, where selected foster youth leaders weighed in on state policy and practice. Now that child welfare policy making is increasingly decentralized and counties have growing authority to set policy, a local organizing focus is not only more practical from a system change level, but also facilitates community and connection by members.
Practice 2: Establish a Pipeline for Participation and Leadership

Different from traditional advocacy that supports the development of individual leaders, foster youth organizing emphasizes building the collective power of the group through the relentless and systematic development of young leaders throughout the organization. Building collective power from the grassroots challenges a hierarchical model that often concentrates limited opportunities for only a handful of young people and creates meaningful opportunities for a broad group of young people to contribute at varying levels of intensity that reflects their interest and the reality of their lives.

In addition to distributing power to more young people, youth organizing roles allow for a range of commitment and skill. The pipeline structure permits young people to transition in and out of roles while still maintaining a sense of connection to the larger group. This well-established element of the broader youth organizing movement is particularly important to young people currently, or formerly, in foster care as they navigate personal transitions, family, and other commitments. Maintaining the connection to the group is an opportunity to sustain critical relationships and a greater sense of community, despite disruptions that occur in care. For current and former foster youth experiencing severe instability, have differing abilities, or live with special emotional needs and who might face major hurdles to participation in more traditional leadership opportunities like student government, youth organizing has the potential to provide a unique setting to explore leadership and contribute to collective change.

WHAT THE PRACTICE LOOKS LIKE

Foster youth-led organizing uses the practice of "Base-building" as the structure to building collective foster youth power and leadership. By regularly recruiting, orienting, and training new members from the constituency throughout the organization, foster youth-led organizing groups build their membership base and nurture their leadership to take the next step. Base-building is about both group structure and practice. At each of the rings of the base building structure described at left, young people increase opportunities for leadership and participation.

Base-building plans include strategies for targeted outreach, continued follow-up, and events that help youth move from the constituency and base into roles as member, leader, and organizer. Examples of base building events include fun and engaging events open to the public, community training, and conferences.

In youth organizing, leadership development is the on-going work that happens for youth at all levels to raise up the next generation of leaders within the group. This
WITH OVER 30 CHAPTERS AND NEARLY 500 MEMBERS, NORTH CAROLINA’S SAYSO (STRONG ABLE YOUTH SPEAKING OUT) uses their collective people power to speak out about needed changes in the foster care system and provide support to young people who are currently or formerly in care. SaySo builds power through local chapters led by foster youth organizers and advocates working to build community, identify local priorities, and raise up important issues throughout the state. Using base-building events such as annual celebrations and community events, SaySo continuously builds support. SaySo also works to build a pipeline to grow leadership from local chapter members, to core leaders, to alumni in staff positions.

SaySo intentionally and strategically plans youth events in different parts of the state each year so they can have a broader reach to engage youth in care. They use alumni positions called SaySo Regional Assistants that work within their regions in the state to work with local Dept. of Social Services to get youth involved, build local chapters and help spread the mission of SaySo.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In many ways, the challenges to building collective power and leadership are similar to the challenges that foster youth organizing groups face when working to create a local place-based community. Logistical support, travel, and access to participation in out-of-home activities continues to be a barrier when groups are working to recruit, train, and bring in new members through base-building.

Faced with limited funding, groups frequently must make difficult choices on when and how often they meet, impacting their ability to engage new members and strengthen their base. Some groups will use their resources to focus on a smaller group of young people to represent the voice of youth across a particular state or region. This can be a good practice to ensure youth engagement, but it greatly limits their ability to grow organizational power and concentrates leadership opportunities to a small handful. Statewide foster youth organizing groups often establish local chapters supported by adult volunteers to build membership, using larger base building events to train selected leaders and organizers or for state-level issue selection and campaign development. Many of these local chapters create volunteer opportunities for alumni members to support ongoing group development, extending leadership opportunities beyond direct membership. Without dedicated staffing or a robust volunteer recruitment and training program, local chapters may not receive the necessary support and guidance to develop and sustain local campaigns, which limits their ability to attract new members or secure concrete victories that maintain youth energy and enthusiasm at the chapter level.

includes working with members to develop practical skills and systemic analysis by engaging them in organizing activities, one-on-one support, and political education & training.
Practice 3: Cultivate Consciousness-Raising and Critical Analysis

When young people reflect on and analyze root causes of problems that shape their experience, they develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills as they increase a sense of their own power and see how their issues are related to the challenges that youth in their communities face. Challenging the limitations of merely “telling your story” these processes support foster youth to understand how their experiences connect to past challenges, current struggles and collective solutions.

These processes — often described as Political Education — are the foundation of youth organizing, giving young people a space to critically analyze the systems of power that shape their experience AND the tools to address the conditions impacting their lives.

Developing a critical consciousness of the social and political conditions that influence the child welfare system from past to present can facilitate both individual and community transformation (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002) by acknowledging the impact of power on marginalized communities, deconstructing internalized narratives, and taking action to dismantle these systems of power (Ginwright, 2011). Many young people in foster care face incredible stigma and internalized blame rooted in deep misunderstanding, stereotyping, and an often criminalizing narrative of foster care. Examining power and oppression in this way allows young people to begin to deconstruct these narratives and create new stories of hope through personal agency and action. This powerful practice can also help ground young people in a deeper understanding of the system they are trying to navigate.

WHAT THE PRACTICE LOOKS LIKE

In this practice, young people with experience in the foster care system reflect on their own experience as it relates to the history of the child welfare system, current political conditions, and their work as organizers striving to create systems change. Training activities that facilitate this practice include: unpacking the history of the child welfare system and mapping the current landscape inside and outside of the foster care system, with a focus on how these systems operate and which institutions and stakeholders have the power to make needed changes in the system. Story-telling activities that support young people to
make the connections between their personal experiences and the broader system provide critical context that strengthens learning and the application of those learnings to collective next steps.

**CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

As one foster youth organizer put it, "[we] may all have been in foster care, but we did not all experience foster care the same way." This statement both affirms the importance of political education and reflects the reality that race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, and ability has a direct experience on a young person’s experience in care. In critically analyzing the child welfare system, it is important to acknowledge these differences and name the different systems of oppression that marginalize young people within the foster care system. For young people whose very social and political identities are under assault, maintaining a safe and positive environment for them to explore these complex social systems while trying to openly reflect on very personal experiences requires an experienced facilitator to guide the process. Political education creates an opportunity to not only lift up these experiences but raise awareness and build coalitions based on a shared understanding of the problem.

Host organizations supporting foster-youth led organizing frequently see themselves as underprepared to support young people to reflect on power and systemic oppression, and often underestimate the investments necessary to support this particular practice. Staff need significant prep, and may need to partner with outside facilitators. Moreover, youth need concentrated and dedicated time, often though retreats and special training days to effectively explore these concepts. Wrestling with their own role in the system, host organizations may have their own concerns about being confronted about how their practices and decisions maintain the status quo.

Often reflection and critical analysis can feel like a luxury — a step that can be sacrificed when problems seem clear and there is a sense of urgency to act. Taking time to reflect as part of taking action not only helps foster youth organizers pick the right problems, but gives them perspective and vision that can sustain their organizing over the long term.

**Practice 4: Conduct Campaigns to Change Child Welfare Systems**

Campaigns are the vehicles that drive change in youth organizing. This is not a single activity, person, or point in time. Campaigns are strategic coordinated actions around immediate issues that make a real and concrete difference in the lives of young people, while mobilizing the next generation of foster youth organizers. (School of Unity and Liberation, Foster Youth in Action, and California Youth Connection, 2107). Powerlessness — the inability to control circumstances and events — is pervasive among foster youth. Because campaigns are focused on a concrete system, policy or practice change that directly affects youth, they motivate other young people to join the group, give members a sense of their own power, and inspire a future vision for change. In the process of making change, young people experience a sense of agency, experience hope that things can actually change, and practice and use vital skills, like planning, analysis, negotiation, and public communication. Because campaigns are invaluable guides for young people in how the world really works, campaigns are powerful teachers. Even if young organizers don’t achieve their immediate collective goal, the lessons and learnings from the process give all those who participate unique insights that are truly applicable to next steps in personal, career, and professional development.
Youth-Led Organizing

**WHAT THE PRACTICE LOOKS LIKE**

Foster youth-led organizing follows time-tested stages that countless other youth organizing groups have successfully deployed in the past. While we describe the six stages below as being in a particular order, the actual campaign process is more of a circle than a line, and reflects the reality that campaigns are part of a bigger effort of foster youth-led groups to build their power to achieve even greater change over time.

- **IDENTIFYING A PROBLEM:** Foster youth organizers identify problems facing them and their peers through collective storytelling, shared experience, and “listening” activities that reach out to young people outside of their group. These activities can include listening tours, town halls, rap sessions, graffiti walls, and other creative means.

- **UNDERSTANDING THE ROOT CAUSES:** Using a root cause analysis, foster youth organizers begin to understand their problem more deeply and identify underlying conditions. Some groups use a “root causes tree” to visually help organizers identify the leaves (symptoms), trunk (problem), and roots (causes & conditions).

- **CREATING A SET OF DEMANDS:** Demands are important because they tell key decision makers what young people want changed. They also communicate to potential supporters and allies what they are working for. Demands reflect the needs of the community, concretely improve conditions that youth face, and address root causes of the problem.

- **DEVELOPING A CAMPAIGN STRATEGY:** Campaign strategy is a plan to achieve a group’s goals. In comparison to work plans or project plans, campaign strategy is more explicit about identifying people and groups (e.g., local elected officials, the child welfare administrator, etc.) who have the authority to make decisions that result in the change youth want. A strategy also says how the group will get decision-makers to meet their demands.

- **TAKING ACTION:** Tactics are the escalating actions a group takes to carry out the campaign strategy and move the plan forward. Tactics can include meeting with people who can influence decision-makers, organizing public demonstrations, collecting signatures, testifying at public hearings, and media tactics.

- **EVALUATION & CELEBRATION:** Evaluation and celebration are critical steps of a campaign that allow foster youth organizers to honor accomplishments and thoughtfully reflect in order to inform next action steps.

**FOSTER YOUTH ORGANIZERS ACROSS THE COUNTRY ARE LEADING A MOVEMENT FOR SIBLING RIGHTS** in their community through strategic local campaigns to hold systems accountable to this fundamental human right. In the last two years alone, groups in Oregon, Minnesota, and Idaho have organized campaigns to increase sibling connections and codify a sibling bill of rights to ensure local accountability. Each of these groups led campaigns that reflected the priority of their community, brought young people into the struggle, and made changes that directly impacted young people in foster care today.
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Because campaigns are about redistributing power and radically addressing unjust conditions, moving a campaign forward can surface feelings of fear and anxiety for both foster youth organizers and the institutions they are fighting to change. Foster youth organizers may have very real concerns that their safety and security will be threatened—or even lose important services or supports—if they push back on the system that has power over all aspects of their lives. Some organizations that support foster youth organizers may also be funded by the same system they are working to change and have real concerns that a campaign might be blocked or their jobs threatened. At minimum, individual organizers and groups should proactively address these concerns, identify possible risks, and strategize together on how to strategically move forward with their campaign. Foster youth led groups in similar situations have occasionally partnered with other community groups that have more independence to take direct action (particularly in legislative advocacy) in order to achieve campaign goals while not jeopardizing the ongoing work of the foster youth-led group.

Many foster youth led groups have focused campaigns around a state legislative advocacy cycle, coming together a few set times over the course of a year to determine priority issues and push for state level policy change. This can be a powerful strategy, particularly for state child welfare systems, and dozens of new state laws have been successfully enacted by youth led groups through using this structured process. However, by putting in place a specific strategy prior to the selection of the issue or the formulation of the demand, youth organizing groups are constraining their ability to work locally, or to take action that doesn’t have a legislative angle.

THE TREEHOUSE FOUNDATION’S HEROES YOUTH LEADERSHIP PROJECT uses performance, storytelling, and community-based arts to raise up their stories and influence change-makers in the foster care system. Each year, HEROES members collaborate with Enchanted Circle Theater teaching artists to create a staged group-performance using music, spoken word, dance and collective storytelling. The show is entitled “Youth Truth,” which they perform for a packed house of key child-welfare leaders and stakeholders. “Dear DCF,” a popular scene from 2017, has received national attention.

Practice 5: Promote Healing through Culture

Art and ritual are cornerstones of culture and community. Youth organizing groups draw on a wide range of cultural practices, from traditional healing ceremonies to beat-boxing and graffiti art, as a way to strengthen positive sense of self, stimulate expression, restore community connections, and promote healing.

Like the broader youth organizing movement, The integration of culture in foster youth-led organizing builds community, sustains long-term goals, and empowers young people by creating a space where their whole selves are recognized, lifted up, and loved.

Cultural traditions and practices are a critical part of identity development, community connection, and a basis for healing and transformation (Chavez-Diaz & Lee). Stories, dance, visual art, music, and ritual—both modern and traditional—inspire, connect, and ground young people and help them connect to the struggles and successes of those that came before them. Through cultural integration, foster youth organizers have an opportunity to explore their
Youth-Led Organizing

history and reconnect pieces of themselves that may have been severed and compartmentalized as they navigate and survive new foster care placements. Cultural organizing strategies and practices have a practical effect as well, increasing awareness of the organizing effort, engaging new members, and elevating important issues.

WHAT THE PRACTICE LOOKS LIKE

Cultural organizing strategies can include the integration of cultural and spiritual traditions as well as contemporary youth culture into group practices; creating space for reflection and restorative justice; and using arts & culture in campaigns. Some examples that youth organizing groups use — and that foster youth organizing groups are also turning to — include using indigenous practices, honoring ancestors, using music and dance, healing circles, hip hop, spoken word, & other performance art, graphic arts, and community building through cultural events (Chavez-Diaz & Lee).

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

At the root of many of the individual challenges that foster youth face as they transition into adulthood is the lack of culture and cultural integration within the foster care system. Without awareness of their community’s history and culture practices, or feeling that their identity and culture has been threatened because of their experience in care, some current and former foster youth become culturally detached as a survival or coping strategy. Even when foster youth organizers take steps to promote positive cultural practices, these actions may themselves trigger a sense of loss for members. As their cultural identities are erased, foster youth led organizers have found that identification with their experience in foster care creates a salient “foster youth identity” and culture. This can be an opportunity to lift up shared experience and connections, in conjunction with practices that reflect and affirm the other unique and shared cultures of group members.
MUTUAL TRUST AND SHARED BENEFITS: FOSTER YOUTH-LED ORGANIZING GROUP GEORGIA EMPOWERMENT’S PARTNERSHIP WITH MAAC

How can foster youth-led organizing groups have flexibility, autonomy, and control while retaining financial and administrative support so crucial to long term sustainability? FYA partner Georgia EmpowerMent offers a unique story with critical lessons for our field.

The spark that ignited Georgia EmpowerMent’s foster youth led-movement goes back to 2004, when current and former foster youth from the Atlanta area independently organized a state-wide foster youth summit to raise up issues and priorities that youth wanted addressed by Georgia’s child welfare system.

Health care for youth aging out was a prominent issue at the time, and this nascent group’s early organizing centered around extending Medicaid eligibility for Georgia’s foster youth to 21.

The movement was originally focusing on engaging youth in the metro-Atlanta area. As they increasingly realized the power their collective efforts could yield, this grassroots group sought out an institutional home that would allow them to expand their reach and impact statewide.

In seeking a host organization, a traditional approach might have been to plead with their closest allies to “adopt” them. Georgia EmpowerMent flipped this script, instead putting out a “request for visions” to several state organizations. For EmpowerMent leaders, a deal that offered them a physical space and financial support didn’t go far enough. These organizers needed to see alignment in values, in priorities and, in particular, in culture. In this youth-driven search process, interested host organizations had to submit applications and meet face to face with EmpowerMent leaders as part of an intensive youth-led group interview and vetting process.

Like several organizations across the state, the Multi-Agency Alliance for Children (MAAC) threw their hat into the ring. What was in it for them? MAAC had an expressed commitment to youth voice and choice, shared Georgia EmpowerMent’s vision for what needed changing in the child welfare system, and knew that young people had to be part of the process for those changes to be realized. The alignment of vision and values made MAAC the top choice, and the organization accepted Empowerment’s offer to serve as host.

It’s been 11 years since the establishment of this relationship, which is going strong to this day. Like all important and significant relationships, Georgia EmpowerMent and MAAC have put in the time to make it work. Crucial to maintaining this relationship have been important guidelines, agreements, practices and procedures that have both reflected a culture of intergenerational partnership and strengthened the culture. These include:

- **MARKETING:** Specific rules clarify branding, marketing and publicity in ways that support the preservation of Georgia EmpowerMent’s unique identity.

- **GOVERNANCE AND POWER-SHARING:** A Georgia EmpowerMent founder is a full member of MAAC’s governing board.

- **GRIEVANCE:** Georgia EmpowerMent members and staff can take advantage of a grievance process as a check and balance on staff power, and to address issues that impact the youth-led organization’s autonomy.

- **COMPETING AGENDAS:** MAAC and Georgia EmpowerMent have the freedom to have separate agendas and stances on issues, including government policy or legislation.

MAAC’s commitment to this partnership exemplifies trauma-responsive practice. Negotiating, maintaining and upholding the agreements and practices outlined above require concrete investments of resources, but the results — trust, mutual respect, shared power between young people and adults it facilitates — help heal trauma. As new foster youth-led organizations consider their own path to sustainability, Georgia EmpowerMent’s process for host selection — along with the strategies they’ve created in partnership with MAAC to maintain this mutually beneficial relationship — is a powerful example to consider.
Practice 6: Secure the Right Organizational Home

While foster youth organizing is built on the foundation of youth-led action, the vast majority of groups are housed or integrated into larger adult-run non-profit organizations and child welfare institutions that provide support, fiscal sponsorship and a physical home. However, the success of foster youth organizing depends in large part on the degree to which young people can act independently. Host institutions best suited to support foster youth-led organizing are those where the leadership affirms young people’s ability to determine the issues they want to address as well as campaign strategies they employ to resolve these issues. Ideal host organizations blend the courage and belief in young people with the commitment to provide a rigorous framework, clear structure and consistent support to build membership, identify issues, and carry out campaigns.

Perhaps one of the most important reasons for ensuring organizational commitment and healthy relationships between host organizations and foster youth organizing groups is sustainability. For foster youth organizing groups, sustainability is not only about funding and long-term success — it is also about not recreating the trauma of instability, severed relationships, and harmful disruptions that most young people experience while in foster care. The relationship between host organizations and foster youth organizing groups can also provide consistency, intergenerational connections, and community networks that support groups as they build their own organizational power.

WHAT THE PRACTICE LOOKS LIKE

According to the Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing, “youth organizations that have maintained the closest and healthiest relationships with their parent organizations have an alignment of analysis, mission and program, along with a high degree of communication and interpersonal trust.” (Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing, 2007) With this alignment, host organizations are best suited to work in true partnership with foster youth-led groups.

One of the ways groups maintain or strengthen their relationship with host organizations include creating a written memorandum of understanding that outlines mutually beneficial roles, distribution of power, financial and administrative commitment, and autonomy of foster youth-led groups to identify and lead efforts on their priority issue. These strategies reduce the possibility that foster youth organizing groups are co-opted for host organization goals that are not a priority (or run counter to) the youth-led priorities of the group.

In FYA’s experience, intentional training and opportunities for organizational staff — particularly organizational decision makers — to learn about, explore, and buy-in to the explicit youth organizing practices and campaign stages in collaboration with key youth organizers — is integral to a successful partnership. See the preceding page for a story about one foster youth organizing group’s efforts to secure and sustain the right organizational home.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

There can be many challenges to building these working relationships. Adultism, power, control, and competing organizational interests can lead host organizations to make decisions that can disempower foster youth organizing groups. It is important that host organizations be mindful of the ways they use their power to disinvest in group development, influence priority issues and work plans, and tokenize young people to lead their own larger institutional goals.

Staff who may be in roles that directly support foster youth organizers can also feel isolated, underprepared, and stuck between the demands of the larger institution and grassroots goals of the group. In additional to memoranda about roles and commitments, an agreed-upon framework and youth organizing curriculum supports staff in direct supportive roles to create conditions where organizing or campaign actions and decisions will have the full backing of host organizations.

Funding can also set up institutional barriers that can dictate the level of group autonomy and support an inherently problematic relationship between adult organizations and foster youth organizing groups. Identifying funding sources that align with a foster youth organizing principles and practices is key. Financial transparency is also important and can be a great opportunity to build organizational power and leadership among foster youth organizers.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FIELD

Over the recent decades, a tangible shift in the understanding of why youth engagement and participation is important has occurred. While current approaches, like youth advisory boards, are more common in child welfare, youth organizing as an approach has expanded significantly because of its potential for broad individual, community, and systems change impacts in the most marginalized communities and populations.

As a strategy for personal and community transformation, youth organizing with youth in care has real promise and deserves more attention and investment. As communities and institutions consider how to more effectively engage foster youth voices, particularly those who aren’t typically sought out for leadership, FYA strongly encourages youth organizing as a strategy. For institutions and groups weighing whether and how to support this shift, FYA offers a set of recommendations based on our experience and those of our colleagues:
**Build Organizational Capacity to Support Foster Youth-Led Organizing**

**INVEST IN YOUNG ADULT LEADERSHIP AND BUILD A STRONGER LEADERSHIP PIPELINE**

Foster Club All Stars and the Congressional Caucus on Adoption Institute have done exceptional work to prepare a select generation of former foster youth to assume policy and other systems change work across the country. A similar fellows program or intensive leadership development opportunity for the next generation of foster youth organizers could seed the expansion of this youth engagement strategy as well.

**EXPAND INTERGENERATIONAL TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SPECIFICALLY IN YOUTH ORGANIZING**

For young leaders and adult supporters doing organizing in other arenas than child welfare, training institutions like the School of Unity and Liberation (SOUL), as well as curriculum created by SOUL, Movement Strategy Center, Community Justice Network for Youth, Californians for Justice, and others have been fundamental to the development of strong organizing programs. For youth organizing to grow in size and impact as an engagement strategy for youth with experience in care, FYA recommends similar investments in intensive training of support staff and lead youth organizers, shared learning opportunities for practitioners, and dedicated curriculum which speaks to the unique challenges and diverse experiences of youth in this system.

**Strengthen Ties with the Broader Youth Organizing Community**

Youth organizers in the juvenile justice, immigration and education justice community are linked together through a broader movement for social and racial justice. While young people in foster care share many of these issues, the broader system has limited recognition of foster care, and why organizing with foster youth is important. The recent collaboration between Foster Youth in Action, CYC, and the nation’s largest youth organizing training center (SOUL) is helping to break down these barriers. With more of these collaborations and connections, we’ll spark shared learning and draw in child welfare system involved young people that might not otherwise want to be connected to or identified formally as a foster youth.

**Address the Reality of Federal Funding for Youth Engagement**

Youth organizing works best when young people have the opportunities to identify and organize around their own issues. Yet the bulk of funding that supports youth voice nationally are federal pass-through funding that states use either internally for state and regional advisory boards, or through contracts with nonprofits to administer these boards. Youth advocacy groups — especially in cases where all or the bulk of funds are government sources — are particularly constrained. Host nonprofits risk losing funding if youth leaders on advisory boards advocate for priorities that run counter to those of the agencies, or if organizing strategies target directly challenge policies, practices, or personnel. Some child welfare agency leaders have found creative ways to support arms-length arrangements that allow young people to propose and advocate for legislation or other practices that might not align with government interests, but these arrangements tend to work best when nonprofit leaders have deep political savvy, and government agency leaders are explicitly supportive of being held...
accountable by young leaders. Working with nonprofits and government agencies to organize government resources to focus on investments on improvement individual outcomes, while securing private investments that could be exclusively allocated to organizing, could be one solution to this predicament.

Dedicate Resources for Organizing at Local Jurisdictions

FYA encourages both funders and host organizations to increase investments in local foster-youth led organizing. A wealth of civic engagement research suggests that local issues that directly impact people’s day to day lives are most likely to spur engagement and participation. However, foster youth engagement efforts have frequently had their origins at the state level, where selected foster youth leaders have weighed in on state policy and practice. Given very real financial limitations, and the fact that sources of funding were frequently from state agencies, a state level focus is not surprising. However, it has often come at the expense of local engagement. As a result, youth engagement groups are particularly stretched at the local level, and often rely on volunteers or interns. As child welfare policy making is increasingly decentralized and counties have growing authority to set policy, youth voice needs to shift to that level. Local organizing reflects the reality of many of our current child welfare challenges, which is less about the need for new laws, and more about local implementation and accountability. Without local staffing, however, many groups struggle with the direct engagement, retention and leadership development of local youth — particularly those young people who are not already engaged in other programming or service. Financial resources targeted at the local level, especially in the form of staffing support, is critical to supporting local youth engagement.

“For youth organizing to grow in size and impact as an engagement strategy for youth with experience in care, FYA recommends investments in intensive training of support staff and lead youth organizers; shared learning opportunities for practitioners; and dedicated curriculum which speaks to the unique challenges and diverse experiences of youth in this system.”
Ensure that Investments to Start Up New Youth Organizing Efforts Support a 2-3 Year Build-Out

FYA encourages funders to take a long-term view in terms of outcomes and impacts. While it might be possible to build a group, identify an issue, develop a campaign, and secure a concrete change or win in 12 months, short-term victories may come at the expense of building a solid community and membership base that can support sustained system change work over time as the group continues to cultivate new member leadership. Multi-year investments at the project’s outset should account for a two or (ideally three) year timetable for youth recruitment, training, membership development, and campaign execution. Key indicators, like group formation, growth in the base and membership, individual leadership changes, identification of core issues, and other proxies are helpful in showing progress without requiring actual policy changes over a single year.

Continue to Build the Case for Organizing

With a clearer understanding of youth organizing as a distinct practice, we’ll be better able to assess its impact at individual, community, and systems levels. Drawing on FYA’s existing work on indicators, as well as those being used in the broader youth organizing field, the early adopters of foster youth led organizing can build the set of data that shows which are the most significant long term impacts, and which features and practices in the youth organizing framework are most closely related to individual or systems changes. An implementation research study, which tracks key individual and broader outcomes for a set of new, emerging and existing groups over a longer time frame would be particularly useful in assessing the best program designs, training approaches and other factors that make the difference. Of particular interest and potential could be the application of youth organizing/youth engagement in a research context, utilizing methods such as participatory action research whereby young leaders who have experienced foster care can collaborate as partners and researchers in designing and driving innovations in this field.
REFERENCES


Training and equipping foster youth to be strong leaders and organizers
Growing capacity of local groups to organize for justice for foster youth
Creating a movement of youth change agents across the country

www.fosteryouthaction.org
LISTENING TOUR

BURNING WALL INSTRUCTIONS

*project Foster Power* is a group of current and former foster youth, ages 15 to 25+, who are working to improve the Colorado foster care system through youth-led organizing and advocacy. This work is about taking action on an issue that represents the collective voice of as many current and former foster youth as possible, as opposed to any one individual. In order to get this input each year, we host a **Listening Tour** - stopping out to meet with youth wherever we might find them -- at group homes, independent living classes, shelters, and more -- and hearing the problems in the foster care system that they think are most important to change.

At each Listening Tour stop, our youth leaders facilitate an activity called the Burning Wall of Problems, which our national partners at *Foster Youth in Action* were kind enough to share with us. We've modified it a bit to fit the culture and spirit of *project Foster Power*. The focus of this activity is on helping us **LISTEN**.

**Here's how the Burning Wall activity works:**

- Before any Listening Tour stop, gather your supplies. You'll need lots of sticky notes and markers. You'll also need a big piece of white paper - be sure to write "Burning Wall of Problems" at the top. You can hang the Burning Wall sheet up before you begin the activity.
- Pass out sticky notes and markers to all of the youth at your meeting.
- Have youth close their eyes, or gaze at the floor, and reflect on their experiences while in care. You can read the following questions out loud to prompt that reflection:
  - What did you experience in foster care that made life more difficult?
  - Were there any problems or issues that you experienced?
  - What do you think needs to change in the foster care system?
- Ask youth to take a few minutes to write down the problems on sticky notes. One problem per note. Youth can write on as many sticky notes as they want. Each is anonymous.
- Encourage youth to stick their notes on the Burning Wall when they feel ready. Usually, we give youth about 15-20 minutes to do this and turn on some music in the background while they work.
- Once everyone is finished, have each youth take a marker and go over to the Burning Wall. They should read the sticky notes and put a dot on any that they agree with or have personally experienced. This helps youth start to see the commonalities of their experiences.
- This activity can bring up lots of emotions for some youth. We generally wrap up with a check-in activity or icebreaker just to see how everyone is feeling.

We repeat this same activity at each of our Listening Tour stops, collecting all of the sticky notes and making one big Burning Wall. We identify themes at the end of the tour and use these themes to analyze possible issues for action in the coming year.
Are you a current or foster youth? Between the ages of 15 and 25?

**project Foster Power** wants you to participate in our Letter Tour to further our 2018 “Youth Voice, Youth Choice” Campaign. We are collecting letters from as many young people as we can to raise up these voices and show professionals and others with decision-making power that foster youth voice is so important – that each of us has power in our voice. These letters are either about a time that your voice was heard and why that mattered or a time when you feel like your voice wasn’t heard and why you wish it had been.

What are we going to do with them? We are hoping to get enough to showcase our voices through a display in a public space – probably in May or June. We also might read some of them with permission at our youth rally or even mail some to legislators and others in positions of power.

Here's how you can get involved:

- Find a pen and paper, or message us and we'll send you a “Hear My Voice” form.
- Take a few moments to think about the following questions:
  - During your case, was/is there a person who listened to you and made you feel heard? How did that make you feel?
  - During your case, was/is there a person or people who made you feel like your voice didn't/doesn't matter? How did that make you feel?
  - How could/can that person listen better? What advice do you have for them about listening to youth in the future?
  - Why is youth voice important? What does it mean to be heard?
  - Do you know your voice is powerful and worth being heard?
  - Why does being heard make you feel empowered?
- Do any of the questions stand out to you? You don't have to answer all of these questions - they are meant to help you get started.
- While you might have a specific person in mind when you write your letter, please don’t write their names on your letter. We want the focus to be on your message, not the person’s name!
- Also, we ask that you don’t sign the letters with your name. You can either leave that part blank or if you want to, you can sign them with your initials.
- Take some time to write a letter with these questions in mind. If writing is not for you, feel free to draw a picture or write the words that come to mind.
- Please mail your letters to **Project Foster Power** at the **Rocky Mountain Children’s Law Center**: 1325 S. Colorado Blvd. # 701 Denver, CO 80222. When you send us your letters, if you want, place a little note inside with it to share your name and a way for us to contact you – that way you know the letter made it to us.

**THANK YOU FOR SHARING YOUR VOICE!**
DEAR ADULT,

FROM, A YOUNG PERSON WHO MATTERS
**project Foster Power** is a group of current and former foster youth, ages 15 to 25+, working to improve the child welfare system. Through youth-led organizing and advocacy, this group seeks to harness power in numbers to create change. **project Foster Power** is the Colorado partner of **Foster Youth in Action**, a national network of 23 groups across the country who believe in the power of foster youth voice.

Our work is about taking **ACTION** on behalf of the **COLLECTIVE voice** of Colorado current and former foster youth, as opposed to any one individual. We gather this input by hosting a Listening Tour.

**Our Fall 2018 Listening Tour**

**Current & Former Foster Youth** + **Burning Wall Activity** = **Finding Themes & Analyzing Root Causes**

**Supportive & Nurturing Foster Homes**
Every foster home should take the time to get to know the individual needs of the youth in their care. They should provide support to help these youth reach their full potential. These homes should be environments that encourage LISTENING, provide comfort, and encourage long-term supportive relationships.

**Childhood Opportunities**
Youth in foster care should have the same opportunities as their peers, especially when it comes to drivers’ licenses, social media access, sleepovers, and after-school activities. Foster care should not be a detriment to childhood milestones and experiences.

**Our 2019 Priority Issue for Action:**
**SIBLING CONNECTIONS**

* Stay Tuned for our Action Plan!

To learn more, contact us at projectfosterpower@childlawcenter.org or (720) 413-3692.