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Foster Children Need More Community Support

Forum Column

By Miriam Aroni Krinsky

California has almost 85,000 children living in foster care. This is a staggering number, comparable to the population of a medium-sized town. The human consequences - one child at a time - of our all-too-common failure to address the needs of these youth are even more staggering.

Some children stay in foster care for only a few weeks or months while their parents get their lives back on track, but almost half of foster youth spend at least two years in care. Separated from all that is familiar, too many foster children live a tumultuous life in motion. On average, foster children move through three different placements and nine different schools, frequently with little or no warning.

Each May, the Los Angeles Foster Care Awareness Campaign brings public attention to the need for greater community support for the abused and neglected youth living in our county's foster care system. We pause in May to honor the heroes and good work in our system and also to challenge our entire community to step up on behalf of these youngsters. The Los Angeles Awareness Campaign, coinciding with National Foster Care Month, is sponsored by a round table of dedicated advocacy, governmental, judicial and public-interest organizations.

This year, the campaign also will spotlight the importance of youth empowerment and the critical need to give youth a greater voice in decisions that will leave a lasting imprint on their future.

A first-ever Youth Summit, co-sponsored by Home At Last, the Administrative Office of the Courts and Casey Family Programs will bring teens in foster care together for a two-day event at Occidental College. This gathering calls attention to the resilience and insightful perspectives of youth in our child welfare system and the need for these young people to develop the skills to be active participants in the court and legal process.

An art and essay contest similarly afforded youth in foster care nationwide, through creative expression, the opportunity to shed light on their experiences. Their moving work, released this month in a booklet titled "My Voice, My Life, My Future - *Mi Voz, Mi Vida, Mi Futuro*" (available at www.fostercarehomeatlast.org), provides a compelling window into life in foster care.

Courts play a critical role in the lives of children who enter the child welfare system. They determine whether children will enter foster care, how often they will be moved from placement to placement, whether they will see siblings and other family members, and whether and when they will leave the system. Yet far too many foster children have only limited opportunity, at best, to communicate in the court proceedings that so profoundly impact their lives.

In a particularly moving exercise during this year's writing workshop, foster youth in Los Angeles were asked by author Kerry Madden to write about their experiences and engagement in the court and legal process. In particular, youth were asked to express what they would like to say to the bench officer in their case, if they could speak to the court directly. This process resulted in essays that are among the most emotionally gripping pieces in the Awareness Month booklet.

Antoinette, 14, pleads for the court to place her in a safe and stable environment: "Please don't put me in a place, a place of horror and violence. Let me stay in a home with loving parents that care for me. ... I want to be somewhere where I can live life as a child, in a better situation. Can you find a home that is truly good and where the people will help me? You are the one who makes the decisions, and I need to be heard so people may understand how I feel or what I need.

"Can you turn back the hands of time to make it all go away? Listen to me, since no one else will, and try to understand where I'm coming from. Maybe I am a child, but I'm not dumb; I know right from wrong. My life isn't great. ... I need to know that you will make the right decisions for me so that I can live life the way it's supposed to be."

Sixteen-year-old Paul shared his perspectives on the need for the court to view its daily decisions through the foster child's eyes: "Excuse me your honor! You have to understand. Everyone makes mistakes. Even ones to this magnitude.

"Moving is not always better for the child. [W]ho knows how many times we'll move around? I mean we have to make new friends, go to new schools, live in people's houses that are pretty much strangers to us, and somehow keep adapting to all these different changes. Can you possibly look at this from the child's point of view, and what we're going to have to go through?"

Foster youth living in California are more fortunate than other children around the country; most of our state's foster youth are represented by counsel, and state law gives most youths the right to get notice of, and be

participants in, the court process.

In contrast, foster youth in some jurisdictions have no legal representation and do not participate in court proceedings at all and in others have only limited access to the legal process and its protections.

Youth in foster care bristle at this exclusion from the court and legal process.

"[C]hildhood is letting your voice be heard," said Krystin, 12. "Telling a judge like your high and mightiness what you need to say."

Youth in foster care also remind us of the enduring pain of separation from parents and family that can result from decisions made in court. Sixteen-year-old Tiffany described her experiences in court in this way: "One day in the courtroom, a long time ago, my dad was there. ... I sat terrified with a grip on myself that I did not have. Once upon a time, my dad did some terrible things, so my social worker, out of concern, took his visits away. The judge agreed it was best for us not to see each other until my dad took and finished parenting classes. All I could do was cry and cry. The room seemed to spin. The world seemed to come to an end. I wanted to see my dad because he was my father. He may have been sick in the head, but he was still my dad.

"I had no choice in whether or not my dad could stay in my life. My judge just saw the negative in him, but I saw my dad wanted help in his own way."

The voices of youth in this booklet underscore the critical role of our court and legal process and the need to support and enhance this vitally important gatekeeper over the fate of children in foster care.

These voices also underscore the need for us to redouble our efforts to provide a brighter future for our community's most vulnerable children. "All children need safe, permanent families that love, nurture, protect, and guide them," stated the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care.

The Pew Commission's recommendations regarding our court system identify changes in policy that could improve the way child welfare cases are handled in thousands of courts throughout the nation:

To ensure that children's rights to safety, permanence and well-being are met in a timely and complete manner, courts must have the ability to track children's progress, identify groups of children in need of attention and identify sources of delay in court proceedings.

To protect children and promote their well-being, courts and public agencies should be required to demonstrate effective collaboration as a condition for receiving federal funds.

To safeguard children's best interests in dependency court proceedings, children and their parents must have a direct voice in court, effective representation, and the timely input of those who care about them.

To provide adequate direction and recognition of the critical importance of dependency courts, chief justices and state-court leadership must act as champions for children in their court systems and in making sure these recommendations are enacted.

There are more than half a million children in foster care in our nation. Cierra, 12, expresses both the anguish and resilience of far too many in foster care in her poignant poetry:

My life wasn't the best, but I feel like I have to get this off my chest.

All the time I try to hide, what's really deep down inside.

My heart is locked, I hope someone will find the key.

I'm scared to change 'cause nobody will accept me.

I have no family, I am all alone ...

My heart isn't as cold, but I am sill only 12 years old.

The time for us to act - to engage as a community on behalf of your community's youth in foster care, to ensure a continued voice for those who have so much to offer and to implement the Pew recommendations for enhancing our child welfare and court system - is now. As these foster youth so powerfully remind us, we cannot afford to do otherwise.

Miriam Aroni Krinsky is executive director of both the nonprofit Children's Law Center, which represents abused and neglected children in the Los Angeles dependency court system, and Home At Last, which promotes action based on the recommendations of the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care.

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