



More Precious than **Gold**

The Voices of Foster Care Children

Across West Virginia, there are more than 3,000 children living in out of home settings on any given day.

Half of the children in out of home care are served by two types of family foster care homes - regular foster care and specialized foster care.

Regular foster care is provided by the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources (WVDHHR). It is provided by families who are recruited and trained to provide a safe, nurturing home and positive role models for youth who have been temporarily removed from their own homes. Homes are certified and monitored by WVDHHR.

Specialized foster care is coordinated by nine private providers throughout the state. These families care for children with more intense service and treatment needs, so they receive more training and clinical support from child placing agencies. Homes are certified and monitored by the private foster care provider agencies.

Children in family foster care and specialized foster care homes have been removed from their families, at least temporarily, because they are at risk of harm. Some of these children are returned to their families and others are adopted. However, far too many remain in out of home settings including foster care and group residential care, until they become independent adults.

These are West Virginia's children who ask for nothing more than to have a safe and loving home where they can grow to their fullest potential. Yet, during fiscal year 2002, 772 West Virginia children were placed in care settings outside of the state. Many of them were sent there for services that were not available in their own communities.

How we meet the needs of our at-risk children and nurture their potential is a complex challenge for parents, policymakers and providers. Yet, they are our children and we cannot ignore them. A commitment is needed to invest in them now. Much can be learned from what the children tell us about their experiences. They are our current resources and our future assets.



Listening... *and Learning*

The purpose of this project was two-fold: first, to listen to the perceptions and ideas that youth currently in the foster care system have about the system and how it can be improved and second, to educate and encourage policymakers to value the input of our youth in making system improvements and changes. The following report summarizes the results of three focus groups that were held with children in the foster care system during July-November 2002 in three areas of the state. Twenty-nine youth between the ages of 13 and 18 currently in either a DHHR family foster home or a specialized foster care home participated and shared their ideas about the strengths, challenges and needed improvements of the foster care system.

- The majority had a history of failed placements; length of time on out of home placements ranged from a minimum of seven weeks to fifteen years.
- Nine responded that overall, they had very positive experiences as being part of a foster care family. 15 youth rated their overall experience somewhat positive and five youth said their experiences were not positive at all.
- Participation in the project was voluntary. Only first names were used during the focus group process for purposes of anonymity and confidentiality.

“Listen to us. Let us tell our side of the story.”

Support for this initiative has been provided by the West Virginia Community Voices Partnership, a project of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Partners for this project include the Alliance for Children, Inc., West Virginia Child Care Association and the West Virginia Foster and Adoptive Parent Association. For a full copy of the report, including summaries of individual focus group sessions, please refer to www.wvvoices.org.

“I have a new family to take care of me. I have enough money to get new things for my room.”



Common Themes

There were several common themes expressed across all three focus groups.

Focus group participants described overall positive experiences associated with being a part of a foster care family as:

- feeling loved, supported and listened to.
- becoming a permanent part of a family through adoption.

Common thoughts used to describe overall positive experiences associated with the system itself included

- being placed with foster families that care and that “are not in it for the money”.
- having a caseworker that is responsive.
- having information about the foster care home, including foster care parents and other children in the home prior to placement.
- having the opportunity to stay connected to their own families and communities.

“The family I am with now is the best home - they are not abusive. They don’t put you down. They take care of me as their own son.”

Negative experiences as part of a foster care family were described as

- not being treated equally or the same as natural children in the home.
- being blamed for things they did not do.
- not fitting in with their foster care family.

Negative experiences as part of the foster care system were described as

- being moved from home to home.
- being separated from families as a result of infrequent visits and lack of opportunities to maintain connections.
- having a caseworker that was not responsive.

“Don’t judge me on paper. My caseworker just reads papers and judges me from that.”



“My brother and I had always been together but now we are separated. They told us that we have new families now.”

Being misunderstood and not having a voice in decisions that affect daily life at home and within the system was another common theme voiced by youth in all three groups.

In each of the three groups, the lack of rights and privileges was noted as a key concern.

Also, family foster care instead of group residential care, was the preferred choice of placement among the youth participating, because of the additional rules and regulations inherent in group residential care.

All participants agreed that improvements were needed to the foster care system. Their suggestions included the following:

- More rights, privileges and freedoms in regard to social, faith and family connections.
- More control over their own lives, including better information about their foster care parents, more input and decision making about their own placements and more money (such as higher clothing vouchers) to make their own purchases.

- Reduce duplicative case management and streamline policies and procedures. Examples include using permanent permission slips for travel to special activities and weekend trips across state lines, consistent use of multidisciplinary teams that would include time without foster care parents present and having access to caseworkers that respond and follow up in timely manner to requests for help.
- More support of foster care parents including timely payments, counseling and incentives to take all children, regardless of age.
- Closer examination of foster care homes including ongoing monitoring to ensure that the placement is working well.
- Recruitment of more foster care homes that will take a greater variety of children.
- Priority for younger children over older children in terms of placement with foster care families, as opposed to group residential care.

“My first foster family home was in it for the money. They didn’t spend time with me.”

Conclusions

Although the concerns expressed by youth in the foster care system are in many ways like those of typical teenagers wanting more rights and freedoms, the challenges that face these youth on a daily basis are magnified by the changes they endure as part of the child welfare system. Changes in family values and culture, along with different house rules and family personalities have to be managed with each new placement, often without much information or support.

The critical role that foster parents and caseworkers play in the lives of these youth often goes unrecognized and unsupported. Inconsistencies in the system around caseworker relationships, policy interpretations and insufficient resources to support both families and children compound the problems that our youth face. Their voices become lost, and as a result, they have little control in the decisions affecting their lives.

As policy changes are made, we must listen to our most vulnerable citizens and advocate for system changes that promote safety, stability and permanence.

Recommendations

The strengths and needs of youth must be addressed quickly and respectfully in a child focused foster care system.

- Institute the use of youth development principles in policy and practice. (see reverse side) These principles recognize youth as partners in the design and implementation of policy and service delivery changes. Adherence to the principles should be monitored through evaluation processes such as satisfaction surveys and focus groups.
- Involve youth, as well as families in identifying their strengths and needs and in developing their service plans. A multidisciplinary team approach that involves the participation of both families and children needs to be used consistently in service plan development, implementation and follow-up.
- Invest additional resources in youth leadership and empowerment programs. These programs inspire youth to create positive changes in their own lives and become responsible adults.
- Provide youth with information about the foster care system as well as their legal rights and privileges. This can begin with the development of a foster care handbook written with input from children in the system.

“The caseworker wouldn’t come when I called. She was worthless. She didn’t return calls - would share my past history - she would break confidentiality with everybody.”

Weaknesses in the foster care system must be corrected so that children get the support and assistance they need.

- Schedule pre-placement visits between foster children and foster families. Ensure pertinent information is provided to the respective parties in order to minimize the stress of placement transition and make the experience successful for the child and the family.
- Support children and families during placement through responsive case management and follow through. Provide children ample opportunities to maintain connections with families and friends from their community of origin.
- Develop a sufficient availability of family care homes to care for West Virginia’s youth through enhanced recruitment and retention efforts, increased reimbursement to foster parents, and specialized training and support for families.

A forum for youth in foster care is needed on an ongoing basis so they can share their experiences, explore the issues that affect their lives and identify common concerns on an ongoing basis.

- Develop peer support networks.
- Expand e-mentoring programs.
- Provide information sharing opportunities through conferences and meetings.
- Develop newsletters and websites to keep youth connected to each other.

What You Can Do...

What you can do to support foster care children and their families.

- **Become a foster parent.** Families who have positive parenting skills are needed to care for children who need homes. For more information call 1-888-WVFAMILY or go to the DHHR website at wvdhhr.org/oss or contact one of the nine private agencies listed on the back of this report.
- **Volunteer to mentor a foster care child.** You can be a positive influence and a good listener.
- **Support foster parents.** Being a foster parent is a rewarding but often difficult job. Offer respite care to foster parents or help them in other ways.
- **Involve your organization or workplace in foster parent recruitment efforts.** Hang posters and distribute information.
- **Contact your elected officials and educate them about the recommendations to improve foster care.** To learn who represents the children and families in your area call Legislative Services at 1-877-565-3447 or access the website at www.legis.state.wv.us.

Youth Development Principles

1. **Adolescent Centered:** Adapts services to the adolescent rather than expecting the adolescent to adapt to the services.
2. **Community Based:** Provides local, integrated and coordinated services.
3. **Comprehensive:** Recognizes the multiple needs of youth, and ensures comprehensive services and holistic care.
4. **Collaborative:** Draws on the resources of the community, or works in coordination with other programs to provide a range of services, in-house or through interagency agreements.
5. **Egalitarian.** Provides services in an environment and a manner that enhances the self-worth and dignity of adolescents; respects their wishes and individual goals.
6. **Empowering:** Maximizes opportunities for youth involvement and self-determination in the planning and delivery of services, and fosters a sense of personal efficacy that encourages youth to want to effect changes in their lives.
7. **Inclusive:** Serves all youth, or provides and tracks referrals for those youth whom the program is unable to serve.
8. **Visible:** Accessible and Engaging: Provides services that attract youth.
9. **Flexible:** Incorporates flexibility in service provision and funding to support individualized services.
10. **Culturally Sensitive:** Works to provide culturally competent services.
11. **Family Focused:** Recognizes the pivotal role that families play in the lives of high-risk adolescents.
12. **Affirming:** Targets strengths, not deficits, of youth and their families.

Pires, S., & Silber, J. (1991) Georgetown University Child Development Center

West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources

Office of Social Services

350 Capitol Street, Room 691
Charleston, WV 25301
(304) 558-7980

Private Foster Care Providers

Appalachian Community Health Center

725 Yokum Street
Elkins, WV 26241
(304) 636-3232

Brale & Thompson, Inc.

P.O. Box 1396
St. Albans, WV 25177
(304) 722-1704

Burlington United Methodist Family Services

P.O. Box 69
Burlington, WV 26710
(304) 289-6010

Children's Home of Wheeling

1 Orchard Road
Wheeling, WV 26003
(304) 233-2367

Children's Home Society of WV

122 Kanawha Boulevard, East
P.O. Box 2942
Charleston, WV 25330
(304) 346-0795

KVC

200 Bradford Street
Charleston, WV 25301
(304) 347-9818

Pressley Ridge Schools of WV

400 Capitol Street, 2nd Floor
Charleston, WV 25301
(304) 345-0525

Try Again Homes

1800 Locust Avenue
Fairmont, WV 26554
(304) 363-5863

West Virginia Youth Advocate Program

4437 Rosemary Road, Suite 3
Parkersburg, WV 26101
(304) 485-0791

Contact Information

*For additional copies of
this report, contact:*

Alliance for Children, Inc.

P.O. Box 3717
Charleston, WV 25337
(304) 342-8477
scottb@intelos.net

*For a full copy of the
report, including summaries
of individual focus group
sessions go to
www.wvvoices.org.*