

# MISSISSIPPI VOICE YOUTH



## Priorities to Help Youth in Our Foster Care System Succeed

This publication reflects the priorities and insights of young people in the Mississippi foster care system. In the spring of 2014, 30 members of the Mississippi Teen Advisory Board came together to share their concerns and solutions for a system to better support youth in foster care and those transitioning out.

The goal of this youth-produced document is to help our state take a more youth-centered approach to foster care, to which we hope will ultimately lead to better futures for the approximately 1,200 youth ages 14-21 in care and for Mississippi as a whole. To date, the board has developed branding in order to express their identity and promote recognition of the board's goals; drafted a proposal to the Mississippi Department of Human Services for aftercare services; and begun development of a public-facing website to address the needs and concerns of youth in care.

## KEY TAKE-AWAYS

In our work, we, on the Teen Advisory Board, have identified several priority concerns and proposed solutions. These include:

### Documentation

Youth in foster care must have access to key personal documents such as birth certificates, Social Security cards and medical and educational records.

### A voice in decision-making

Youth should be informed and meaningfully involved in determining their permanence plans, residential situations, medical decisions, and education and college plans.

### Better communication

Foster children should meet with social workers twice each month as required to build relationships, ensure information exchange and inclusion in permanence planning.

### Family/Community connection

Youth should attend "normal" activities and outings with their families, maintain contact with siblings, and, if possible, grow up in one community.

### Bill of Rights

All youth in care should be advised about the state Foster Care Bill of Rights and receive a copy upon entering the system.

### "Whistle-blowing"

The state should establish a hotline or other method of contact to ensure youth can report concerns without negative consequences.

# Permanence Planning

For those of us in foster care, “normal life” is a relative term. We may not have the same experiences as some of our peers, but we share the same developmental needs and desires. We need to be able to take risks, make decisions and gradually take on increasing levels of responsibility for our lives and our futures.

“If this isn’t the ‘real world,’ what is it?”

- Maya, age 20, TAB member

Like all young people, we need stable, safe environments and consistent, reliable interactions with caring adults. We also need to be informed and involved in our own case planning. We have the right to be heard when it comes to where we want to live and the people we want to be able to turn to for support, including siblings and extended families. These aren’t just “nice” things to do; they are essential for our positive development.

## Staying Connected to Siblings and Extended Family

Staying connected to our siblings and extended family is important to us. We know from research that youth who are able to make peace with their past and experience healthy relationships are less likely to age out of foster care and face an isolated adult life. Sibling contact is an important source of emotional support for many of us, and losing that connection adds to our sense of loss. In fact, maintaining sibling relationships is so important that the federal government included it in its 2008 law, Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act.

We would like more contact with siblings and extended families, and the ability to attend events like weddings, funerals and other family gatherings and outings. Seeing family should never be used a punishment or reward for youth in foster care.

“Every system has its faults, but we are here to change it.”

- David, 17, TAB Member

## Key Solutions:

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- Siblings should stay together whenever possible; if that is not possible they should stay connected through regular visits.
- Specify policies that enable youth to attend family and life events, and outings.
- Ensure that all youth have access to transportation to visit siblings and attend family events.

## A Voice in Our Permanence Planning

Although research has proven the benefit of involving young people in their case planning, too many of us are still not involved in making—or in some cases even being informed about—the decisions regarding our care. We have heard from many young people who are not being seen twice each month by their social worker, as required by policy. In some cases, they cannot even identify their social workers.

We believe that consistent communication is an important priority for the system. So is active, supported youth involvement in decision-making which will help us grow and develop. At 18, we should have the ability to choose to stay in foster care or not—that includes being informed about and able to attend Independent Living events.

## Key Solutions:

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- All youth in foster care should be allowed to take the lead in their case planning.
- Where possible, youth should be able to speak to the judge directly.
- The state should develop a system that will ensure youth and their social worker meet twice each month.
- Young people should be advised to keep a log of their contact with social workers.
- Ensure that all youth have a plan—developed with their input—before they leave the system.

# Housing and Freedom of Movement



We all need a safe place to call home. A place where we can be ourselves, reflect on the day and plan, prepare and dream for tomorrow. This is true no matter whether a young person is home with family, in a temporary foster placement or group home.

## Privacy and Respect

In foster care, it can feel like you're losing a lot, like contact with your family or a "normal" home life. We shouldn't have to sacrifice privacy and respect. It is essential that all youth in foster care feel they and their privacy are respected, whether they're living with a foster family or in a group home.

Sometimes it feels like social workers, staff and even foster parents don't really see us, they just see "problems" or risks. We want unbiased treatment that assumes we will do the right thing until we demonstrate otherwise. When we follow the rules, we should be given additional freedoms and privileges, including the ability to work and socialize without

friends and family being subjected to background checks. Think of how powerful it is to feel trusted and respected.

## Key Solutions:

"Every young person deserves both personal space and to feel safe."

- Youth in care should have access to a phone where they can speak privately.
- Whenever a foster child wishes to speak with their social worker, foster parents and residential staff should allow this without asking why. Some conversations are private.
- At home, youth should be able to send and receive unopened mail.
- Youth should be given the opportunity to attend school and after-school activities with access to safe transportation and without additional scrutiny of friends and chaperones.
- All youth should have the right and ability to attend religious services and activities.



## Safety

We can all imagine what it's like to feel unsafe and how devastating the impact of that can be on your entire life. No matter where a youth in foster care is living—with a family or in a group home—we should have access to “whistle-blower” protections to report any concerns, including report verbal and physical abuse without negative consequences.

In addition, foster parents and group home staff should not be told in advance when social workers are coming in order to ensure accurate evaluations.

### Key Solutions:

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- Establish a hotline youth can call with questions and concerns.
- Specify and enforce a “whistle-blower” policy so youth in foster care placements and group homes are encouraged to safely report concerns and problems.
- Social workers should develop relationships with those who work in group homes to ensure safe, respectful environments.
- Create a monthly newsletter for all Mississippi youth in foster and kinship care that includes information on rights and policies.
- Create a Youth Advocate position under a performance-based contract to improve the rules, communication and safety in group homes.

## Independent Living

For many young people, a group home is not an ideal living situation. After a certain age, we believe that more youth should have the freedom and support to live in approved apartments. We would like better preparation to equip us for these apartment placements—including better information about and access to Independent Living Skills events. We'd also like frequent communication with a social worker to keep us informed throughout the process so there are no false hopes and surprises.

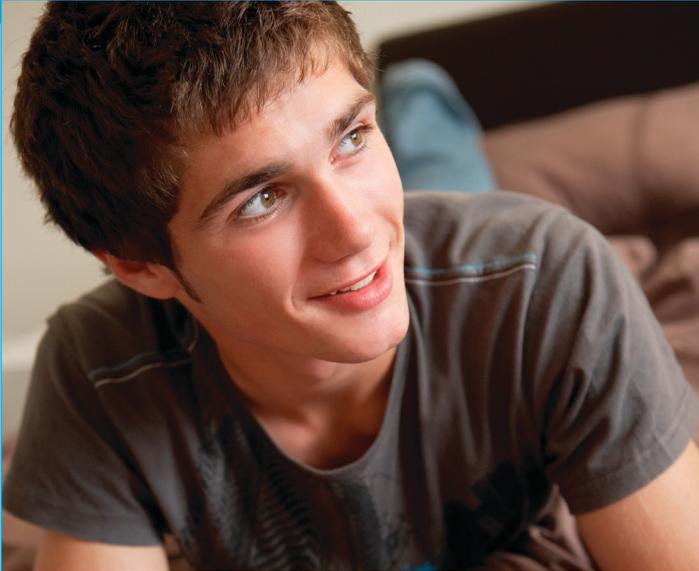
Finally, many of us struggle with physically moving our personal belongings between placements. We need more assistance with this.

### Key Solutions:

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- Provide incentives for attending Independent Living Skills groups and other events.
- Ensure that all youth in foster care have multiple avenues to interact with MDHS staff to accomplish goals, including independent living.
- Provide support to youth to move personal belongings between placements—including suitcases, duffel bags, transportation and help with moves.

# Physical and Mental Health



We, as youth in care, should have an expanded role in and greater control over our case planning. We also should be informed and empowered about our own physical and mental health care.

## Access to Care

All young people deserve regular, consistent access to medical care. For youth in foster care, this can be complicated by the fact that many of us are not covered under our parents' insurance. We may also have a harder time accessing our medical histories and records. We want to learn how to be effective advocates for ourselves when it comes to our health and well-being, and we need

**“When I’m not involved in the process, I feel like I’m not a priority.”**

– Quayshawn, 17, TAB Member

information and support in order to do so. Most of us are Medicaid eligible and need to be better informed about what this entails—and how we can access support for services that Medicaid doesn't cover, such as braces or surgery.

Like all youth, we need support (and sometimes a nudge) to make, keep and get to medical and dental appointments and therapy. We hear from our peers in foster care that it's common to miss doctor appointments and therapy sessions due to a lack of transportation, or support to track and organize these appointments. Social workers can play a big role in helping us correct this.

## Key Solutions:

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- Ensure that all young people have access to personal documents including their birth certificate, Social Security card and medical records.
- Increase access for transportation to and from medical appointments.
- Promote education and enrollment in health insurance/Medicaid after leaving care.

## Medications and Supplements

An area of major concern is that too often young people in foster care are given medications, vitamins or herbs without adequate explanation of what they are for, why the medicine is necessary, and possible side effects and interactions. Even young children should be informed, and in some cases, older youth deserve the right to refuse to take certain medications and supplements.

## Key Solutions:

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- After a certain age, all youth should have access to written justification for prescriptions and medications to allow them to make informed decisions.
- Specify the situations in which a young person has the right to refuse medications and ensure all youth are informed of this.
- Give all youth access to their medical history and records in order to make informed health decisions.

## Hygiene

Proper hygiene is a big part of regular health and well-being. Youth in foster care pay for personal hygiene products out of our monthly allowance which often forces us to make tough or unhealthy decisions.

## Key Solution:

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- Increase the monthly stipend to cover personal hygiene needs or create a separate allowance designated for these expenses.

# Financial Stability and Literacy



How did you learn to manage money and plan for your future? Maybe it was from your family; maybe from a mentor. Chances are it wasn't in a classroom as few schools teach personal financial management. We know that making positive financial choices doesn't "just happen" for any young person—it takes coaching and information to learn to manage money responsibly and plan for the future.

**"We can't get a job because we don't have a permit, a driver's license or an ID."**

– Morgan, age 16

## Personal Documentation

For young people in foster care, even the most basic documentation can be a challenge. Many of us have difficulty accessing our birth certificates and Social Security cards. Without these, we can't

obtain employment or get a driver's license to travel to and from jobs and school.

## Key Solutions:

- Ensure that all youth in foster care have copies of their birth certificate and Social Security card.
- Train social workers to ask youth if they have this documentation and help them obtain it if they do not. When necessary, allow MDHS to intercede on behalf of youth.

**Research shows that young people who have assets at age 23 have better outcomes in employment, marriage, and health.**  
(Institute for Public Policy Research)

## Stipends

There is also a lot of confusion about stipends and allowances for youth in foster care—and some stigma attached to the way these are (or aren't) distributed. When we talk to our peers in foster care, we learn that stipends and financial conditions are unequal and often rely too much on foster parents. Some of us have had trouble getting our stipends from foster parents. Those youth participating in Independent Living are entitled to funds to help cover costs, but not all young people are aware of this or are receiving their money.

Another area of concern is that clothing vouchers are normally only issued once when a child first enters the foster care system. These should be issued at least three times each year as the weather changes and as we grow. Additionally, as noted above, we are asked to pay for hygiene products out of our monthly allowances which often forces us to make tough or unhealthy decisions.

In Mississippi, financial support currently expires at age 21. We know—and research supports—that the more financially stable we are as we prepare to leave care, the better our outcomes will be.

## Key Solutions:

- Stipends should be direct deposited to a bank account for youth. Youth age 14 and up, as required by law, should be able to have a debit card to access these funds.
- Increase the clothing allowance and/or distribute funds three times each year rather than just once upon entering the system.
- Develop a consistent statewide system to prepare youth in care for financial stability after leaving care—including financial coaching and extending financial support for six months after leaving the system.
- All youth should have a copy of the Foster Care Handbook and a social worker should provide instruction on it to ensure youth are informed of their rights and understand disbursement of available stipends.

## Access to Jobs and Appointments

For many of us, work is both a necessity to make ends meet and an opportunity to learn skills and develop professionally. We need more support to be able to get and keep good jobs.

Like our peers who are not in foster care, we also want to be able to make it to doctor appointments, school and after-school events, and other activities. After all, getting to and from school, jobs and appointments isn't a privilege, it's a necessity.

This starts with being able to access our personal documentation, as noted above. It also includes having reliable transportation. Many of us live in areas with limited or no public transportation options and where jobs are scarce. We may have to

**“We need to be able to work outside of our town. We only have Subway and McDonald’s in our small town. The other town has more opportunities.”**

– Maya, age 20



travel to neighboring communities to find work or attend appointments.

## Key Solutions:

- All youth should be allowed and encouraged to work, unless the law states they are too young to manage the money earned.
- Designate a liaison to help youth get a driver's permit or license.
- Two or three times a year, have a designated day when local youth in foster care are taken collectively to get a learner's permit or driver's license.
- In small rural areas, the system could assign one individual to provide transportation for employment needs and appointments.

# Education

A lot of progress has been made in helping youth in our state's foster care system stay connected to schools even when they move to different homes. Still, we believe more can be done on this front. One area where we'd like to see improvement is in our ability to access our school records and ensure those records transfer when we do.

We'd also like more attention to helping us engage in school. Because foster youth move around a lot, it can be hard to stay aware of and connected to clubs, volunteer opportunities and after-school activities. It's essential for our development that we have access to these opportunities. Social workers could liaise with school staff to identify and follow-up with us about clubs and activities. We also need access to reliable transportation to and from activities, as noted above. And when we do participate in extracurricular activities, we should be allowed to do so without our chaperones, friends, coaches or friends' parents being required to undergo background checks.

For many of us, postsecondary access remains a major issue of concern. We would like more say in both when and where we attend college. We'd also like more financial support to attend college and postsecondary training programs. For many of us, the Educational and Training Vouchers (ETV) funds do not last as long as we need them to. We need more time to spend the funds. Youth should also be educated on how they can use these funds. This is often not explained to youth which causes funds to go unused.

Like all young people, we need guidance and support to succeed in completing our education. The system should see this as part of its responsibility to provide us with educational supports during and after care.



## Key Solutions:

- Social workers and staff could liaise with school and after-school staff to help youth understand the clubs/volunteer opportunities available.
- Right now, Mississippi has no tuition waivers for youth who leave foster care and subsequently attend college. The state should establish such waivers. It should also be possible for youth in foster care to attend school out-of-state at no cost.
- Develop and enforce a system to efficiently and easily transfer school records and ensure that all young people can access their records.
- Time limits on Educational and Training Voucher (ETV) funds should be extended.