



YouthAction Community Leadership Course Meeting the Needs of NYC Youth in Foster Care

Citizens' Committee for Children's (CCC) YouthAction Community Leadership Course (YCLC) is a youth advocacy training program for high school students from New York City's public and private schools. CCC is a sixty-nine year old independent child advocacy organization whose mission is to ensure that every child is healthy, housed, educated, and safe. Since 1999, YouthAction NYC has introduced aspiring young leaders to civic engagement and advocacy opportunities.

During this ten-week advocacy training course, YCLC participants meet once a week after school to research and analyze youth issues, and to develop policy and budgetary recommendations to improve the lives of young people in New York City. This semester, the YCLC focused on the child welfare system, paying particular attention to the needs of older youth in foster care. Students heard from experts in the field, analyzed relevant statistics, and conducted site visits to organizations that provide services, conduct research, and/or work to influence public policy for this population. The following is a summary of the group's findings and recommendations.

Findings and Recommendations

There is a need for additional caseworkers, attorneys, and family court judges so that all foster care cases receive adequate attention. Lowering the caseloads of these professionals will allow them to better protect and care for youth in foster care.

- We **recommend** that New York City provide additional funding for child welfare agencies to increase the number of case workers.
- We **recommend** that New York City officials advocate for more state funding to increase the number judges and attorneys.
- We **recommend** the New York State legislature increase the number of Family Court judges.

Sometimes youth in foster care are assigned to caseworkers who do not meet their needs. While acknowledging that there are many effective child welfare case workers as well, YCLC participants believe there is work to be done to ensure that all caseworkers have the skills necessary to do their jobs.

- We **recommend** that foster care agencies have additional resources to provide comprehensive supervision and professional development opportunities for caseworkers.
- We **recommend** that youth in foster care be more effectively made aware of their rights, including how they may file a complaint about their caseworker.

Adolescents coming into care are too often placed in residential care. Youth in residential care are less likely to attain permanency.

- We **support** the emphasis placed by the Administration of Children's Services on preventive services for older youth and their families which aim to keep adolescents out of the foster care system.
- We **support** that successful preventive service models are being expanded, replacing programs that are found to be less effective.
- We **support** the "Be Their Champion" ad campaign, which encourages New Yorkers to become foster parents.
- We **support** an increase in legal and advocacy services for biological parents to help elevate their voices in court proceedings and help them comply with the court's conditions for reunification.



YCLC participants believe that there are too many instances in which foster families and/or residential care facilities are hostile or indifferent to the needs of youth. We found that this is particularly true for foster youth who identify as LGBT.

- We **support** the screening process for potential foster parents to ensure that there is not bias in the home.
- We **recommend** ongoing training and oversight for foster parents to ensure they are providing a safe and welcoming home and that government funding is being used appropriately for the care of the child.
- We **support** efforts by the Administration for Children's Services to increase the number of LGBT and LGBT-affirming foster parents.

Youth aging-out of the foster care system struggle to gain employment, housing, and higher education opportunities and often leave care without a support system to help them in young adulthood.

- We **recommend** expanding services for youth aging-out of care, modeled after successful programs, in the following areas: GED and college readiness, job training, supportive housing, and mental health.
- We **recommend** that ACS and foster care agencies start an initiative to train and employ former foster youth within the child welfare system as mentors, advocates, and youth workers.
- We **recommend** increased funding for therapeutic extracurricular activities for youth in care, such as writing, art, and music, which can provide a sense of community, help youth set goals, and build skills and confidence.

Youth Voice

The statements below were made by YCLC participants in response to the following question:

What can New York City government do to better meet the needs of youth in foster care?

"Youth need to be prepared to live and be independent on their own, so there needs to be more programs, mentors, and job training to help them achieve this and be successful in their bright futures." –Tendai Hinds

"NYC government should increase the number of LGBT adults, as well as LGBT-affirming adults, who are foster parents." – Michael Cohen

"The New York City government needs to make sure that each and every youth in foster care gets treated like a human being-nice and special. Because every human is unique." –Reme Terrelonge

"New York City can better meet the needs of youth in foster care by staying in touch with kids who have aged-out of foster care to help them expand and have a successful future." –Marisa Shwartz

"There is a need for productive, innovative, and improvement-based programs in the foster care system." – Dequan Gambrell

"Since children are struggling to have their voices heard in foster care, the government should provide funding for more lawyers and people to advocate for them." – Leonardo Phillips

"There should be more state funding for Family Court judges and attorneys so that cases can be paid attention to more thoroughly and more successful decisions can be made." – Isatou Daffeh

"NYC needs to give a voice to these children who, once placed in the foster care system, are in the care of the government. Through effective casework and by providing a means of self-expression, these children can begin to reclaim their lives, rather than remaining stuck, silent." – Sarah Fanco