



FLORIDA Youth SHINE News

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Thank you to our Legislators!

As you know creating a balanced budget is no easy job. Can you imagine having to do it for the entire state of Florida? Every year our legislators are asked to create a balanced budget and still meet the needs of all Floridians. One of the biggest pieces of our state's budget falls into Health and Human Services – the Department of Children and Families, Agency for Health Care Administration (Medicaid), and Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD) are just a few of the programs that fall in this category. Our legislators were faced with very difficult decisions about how to divide the state's money. One of the proposed solutions to save the state money was to cut all Independent Living (IL) services and funding for children who have aged out of foster care when they reached the age of 21 (rather than 23). Florida Youth SHINE spent a lot of time in Tallahassee sharing our stories and educating legislators about all of the good things that come from supporting young adults who have aged out of foster care. We also explained that most of us who age out of foster care have had so many school placements that we are way behind our peers academically and need extra support to complete both our high school and post-secondary educations by 23. With sincere thanks to several legislators who listened closely to our stories, we were thrilled to celebrate the state's decision to continue to fund the IL program to 23.

Florida Youth SHINE would like to thank all of the Senators and Representatives and their staff for listening, caring, and being our champions in the Florida Legislature. This year was more difficult than most and we thank each of them from the bottom of our hearts for their passion and dedication to all youth in care.





FLORIDA Youth SHINE News

Children's Week 2012 - In Our Worlds



April White is the Legislative Chair of Florida Youth SHINE. She is also a founding member and leader of the FYS Pinellas/Pasco chapter. In addition, April works with the non-profit Ready for Life to prepare the teens and young adults aging out of care in the St. Petersburg area to be ready for life on their own.

“We have to cut the budget.” That was the consensus we heard from legislators while we were in Tallahassee for Children’s Week. For as many times as we heard that statement Florida Youth SHINE stood strong, held our heads high and repeated: “You cannot wash your hands of your children.” A few years ago we were all the states children. Mothers had given up on us, adoptive parents had given us back, and foster parents saw us as just a job. Therefore, at eighteen each one of us was forced to step out into this world alone, with just a hope, a dream and a check. A check that our parents - the state of Florida - gave us instead of a finding us a forever family.

Children’s Week was an emotional rollercoaster for me. Friday through Sunday I was excited and overjoyed to be with my Florida Youth SHINE family. For some of us this was our first meeting but within two days we were like brothers and sister at a family reunion and knew each other for a lifetime. Monday morning my feelings had changed from excited and being overjoyed to feeling nervous and overwhelmed. We were about to speak with legislators about maintaining funding for the Independent Living program, something we knew was being hotly debated. That first day we met with over ten legislators and were feeling pretty optimistic about our chances; then Tuesday came. We still felt encouraged Tuesday morning and our meeting with Senator Haridopolos furthered that feeling deep in our hearts. He understood the need for strong services to those of us aging out of the foster care system and told us that he would help to continue to fund the Independent Living program. That afternoon, however, we had meetings with representatives who just didn’t get it. We sat teary eyed in their offices and told our stories. They felt they understood, but in all honesty that was far from the truth. We left the Capitol feeling disheartened. We regrouped at the end of the day and expressed how we felt, we knew that Wednesday was our last day to let our voices be heard and we wanted to go out with a BANG. Wednesday morning the Senate Health and Human Services Appropriations Committee was holding a meeting and five of our members had the opportunity to speak about cutting the Independent Living funding and how that would affect them. As each young adult spoke they carried every youth who had aged out of foster care without a family on their backs, they did it with such elegance that I was overcome with emotion. During that committee meeting my feelings transformed to being proud, honored, and grateful to be part of such an amazing group. I knew that regardless of the outcome, we did what we went to Tallahassee to do!

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FLORIDA Youth SHINE News

Children's Week 2012 - In Our Words



Hi, my name is **Jelisa Hudson** and I am a member of the **Tallahassee** chapter of Florida Youth SHINE. I recently attended my first Children's Week at the Capitol and made so many new friends from across the state. During Children's Week we talked to a lot of legislators who were working on laws that affect the foster care system. We each shared a piece of our personal story about being removed from our homes, growing up in care, and how most of us aged out of the system at 18. The legislators listened carefully to every word we had to say. We also got to meet the Secretary of the Department of Children and Families – Secretary Wilkins – which was awesome. I'm glad I had the chance to speak with so many members of the legislature and meet so many other members of Florida Youth SHINE.

Going to Tallahassee that week was one of the best things I've ever done. I was able to meet new people and learn a lot about the way the government works. During our weekend prep I learned how to speak to our legislators and how to share my story on behalf of my foster sisters and brothers who are still in care. Sitting in all of our prep meetings day in and day out totally paid off. I really enjoyed going to the Capitol knowing that I was making a difference every second of the day. I'm looking forward to keeping up with Florida Youth SHINE and continuing to help others improve the foster care system. While in Tallahassee I became an advocate.

- **Jaznice Relaford**
FYS Hillsborough



My experience with Florida Youth SHINE during Children's Week was amazing! Never have I ever worked with such pure and kind hearted people. I would like to thank everyone who I met from across the state for helping me find my voice. After being in Tallahassee for Children's Week I now know how powerful my voice can be and I intend on using it to continue helping those in my community. I cannot wait to bring the members of my chapter to speak with our local Senators and Representatives so they can learn more about the foster care system in our community.

- **Breon Callins**
FYS Broward

How to Donate

Florida Youth SHINE is funded and supported by Florida's Children First (FCF). Donations of any size can be made to FCF on behalf of FYS and will contribute to the continued growth and success of our program. To donate go to www.floridaschildrenfirst.org.

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