



Youth Voice Action Campaign

#YouthCanSHINEwith:

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Striving High for Independence and Empowerment

WHO WE ARE:

Florida Youth SHINE (FYS) is a youth run, peer driven youth advocacy organization working hard to change the culture of Florida's child welfare system.

Florida Youth SHINE is Florida's premier, independent, innovative and impactful youth advocacy organization of youth with lived experience in the foster care system or who have experienced homelessness. Florida Youth SHINE has over 350 members ages 13-26 who are or have been involved in the foster care system. FYS has represented the youth voice in Florida since 2005 and is supported by Florida's Children First.

With 14 chapters around the state, Florida Youth SHINE is made up of youth advocates who identify the challenges and successes in the system, and educate the public to create a better child welfare system. Our goal is to share our stories and experiences in order to improve the system of care, for our brothers and sisters currently in care and for those who have yet to enter care.

OUR MISSION:

Our mission as advocates for the youth in Florida is to Empower, Improve, Educate, and Support the growth of tomorrow's leaders through the combined knowledge and experience of today's youth and supporters.

OUR CAMPAIGN:

Our Action Campaign is the result of a youth-led process that began with input from hundreds of current and former foster youth. Florida Youth SHINE (FYS) chapters held listening sessions starting in March of 2022. We asked 250 youth, ages 13-26, to discuss their experiences in the foster care system. We also asked them to describe what supports helped, or could have helped, them thrive. Their responses created Florida's Foster Care "BURNING WALL" of issues - issues that the youth experts identified as ways in which the foster care system can be improved.

The FYS Policy and Initiative team (PI Team), a team of youth leaders from Florida Youth SHINE interested in policy, sorted the identified issues into four main themes.

For each topic in this priority list, FYS members examined the root cause of the issue, placed the problem into context, shared their experiences, examined data, looked at solutions in other states, and compiled recommendations.

We are pleased to share this amazing campaign with you.

Together.... #YouthcanSHINE!





OUR 4 PRIORITY ISSUES

#YouthCanSHINEwith:

- SAFETY, LOVE, QUALITY, & STABILITY
- HOUSING & ECONOMIC SECURITY
- INDIVIDUALS & SUPPORT TO HELP US INTO ADULthood
- ENGAGEMENT & POWER



All children deserve to be loved and nurtured.

Unfortunately, far too often, we live in places without a loving and nurturing family connection. When we don't experience what it's like to have a nurturing, positive person to parent us, and we can't see what healthy, safe, and loving relationships look like, we look for connections elsewhere. That can result in acting out, running away, or looking for love in unsafe and unhealthy relationships. All youth deserve to be in a home that is healing, loving, and nurtures our well-being.

OUR LIVED EXPERTISE

- We need a **LOVING** and **NURTURING** FAMILY.
- We need the system to protect us and ensure our **SAFETY**.
- We need **QUALITY PLACEMENTS** and **CAREGIVERS** that promote our wellbeing, provide for our individual needs, and **RESPECT** our identities.
- We need **STABILITY** in order to flourish.

Our ideas that **DO NOT** require legislative change

- Implement the laws that are already in place by improving and monitoring existing practices.
- Work with youth to ensure caregivers, case managers, and licensing workers are trained on requirements in the law, the importance of respecting youth's individual needs and identities, and support for LGBTQIA+ youth.
- Require foster parent recruitment efforts to focus on recruiting people with various backgrounds and identities that match the children in care.
- Create a grievance process that is publicized, accessible, confidential, and takes complaints seriously.

Our ideas that **REQUIRE** legislative change

- Create an independent process and entity (office of child advocate or ombudsman) that is dedicated to overseeing, reviewing, and providing independent oversight and accountability for how the child welfare system is serving children. This includes a confidential grievance process and reporting system for youth to review their case and placements. (See Kansas Office of Child Advocate for an example.)
- Require DCF/CBC to check in with kids every 6-months after their case is closed due to adoption or guardianship.



Becoming an adult is especially challenging for youth transitioning out of state care. We need help with our finances, emotional support, and stability in both economic and housing security. We need better preparation before turning 18, and ongoing support after we are 18. Current supports do not meet all of our needs and some are inflexible which prevents us from getting the help we need.

OUR LIVED EXPERTISE

- We need access to our VITAL DOCUMENTS to help us succeed
- We need an ALLOWANCE to learn how to budget
- We need safe, stable, and affordable HOUSING to avoid homelessness
- We need help and support to have a strong FINANCIAL FUTURE

Our ideas that **DO NOT** require legislative change

- Implement the laws that are already in place by improving and monitoring existing practice to ensure youth are receiving their allowance, vital documents, training on financial literacy, have a bank account, and know where copies of their documents are stored.
- The Department of Children & Families should require that Community Base Care lead agencies offer partnerships to local housing authorities in an effort to expand FYI voucher availability across the state.
- Community Base Care lead agencies should designate a staff person to be responsible for coordinating and addressing the housing needs of youth.

Our ideas that **REQUIRE** legislative change

- Create a minimum allowance amount for all youth in care and a process to ensure all youth receive an allowance.
- Provide on-campus housing options at a free or reduced cost for those youth on the foster youth or homeless tuition exemption.
- Direct the Department of Children & Families to use Aftercare funds so all youth with housing vouchers have access to additional funds needed to obtain housing in costly housing markets, regardless of their status in licensed care at age 18.
- Offer secured credit cards so children can develop a credit history before aging out.



Becoming an adult is especially challenging for youth from the foster care system. **We need better preparation before turning 18**, and ongoing support after we are 18 from consistent and positive individuals and supportive programs and resources. Current supports do not meet all of our needs and some are inflexible preventing us from getting the help we need.

OUR LIVED EXPERTISE

- We need a strong support system of caring individuals who educate us and help us navigate transitioning to adulthood and into adulthood.
- We need access to support if we age out of a relative, non-relative, or adopted placement.
- We need more flexibility and an understanding that we are all individuals with our own goals and future.
- We need help to be good parents, so our children enjoy the type of nurturing and support we did not have.

Our ideas that **DO NOT** require legislative change

- Create a team to assist youth before they turn 18 who will stick with them until they graduate college or obtain long-term employment. Not just a Case Manager who checks in, but people we can talk to regularly and help us navigate problems and challenges.
- Eliminate DCF's limitation on Aftercare, which is currently limited to youth that aged out of licensed care at 18.
- Educate us about all resources we may be eligible for as an adult. Verify that we understand the information, starting when we are 13.
- Track what's happening with adopted youth when they become adults to see if they are still in the home after their 18th birthday.

Our ideas that **REQUIRE** legislative change

- Expand eligibility for Aftercare services to be as broad as what the federal Chafee law covers.
- Extend Aftercare services to youth older than 23 who are in postsecondary education.
- Expand Postsecondary Education Services and Support (PESS) to part-time students or supplement the Educational and Training Vouchers Program (ETV) for part-time students who are also working.
- Expand (PESS) eligibility to age 26 for a maximum of 5 years.
- Offer Extended Foster Care to youth who are experiencing homelessness or no longer receive support from their caregivers (adoptive, non-relative, relative, or guardianship) if they had an open dependency case when they were 14 or older.



Engaging young people in planning and decision-making regarding our lives and the child welfare system yields excellent benefits.

However, we can only be empowered and benefit when we are equipped with the knowledge to advocate for ourselves. If we don't know about the great laws in place, we cannot advocate for ourselves. Lack of knowledge makes us feel like we don't have a voice or a choice.

OUR LIVED EXPERTISE

- We need a process in place to ensure we are informed and understand how Florida's excellent laws to help and protect us.
- We need a youth-friendly bill of rights explaining the laws to us, our caregivers, and Case Managers with a way to get help if our rights are violated.
- We need to be authentically engaged in making decisions over our own lives.
- Our lived experience needs to be intentionally and thoughtfully utilized.

Our ideas that **DO NOT** require legislative change

- DCF should revise its "rights and expectations" to list our rights in youth friendly language.
- DCF should designate someone to educate all youth about our rights and monitor implementation.
- Work with Florida Youth SHINE to create youth-friendly documents.
- Require all child welfare professionals to be educated on the essential rights, policies, and resources for youth, updated as legislation is passed.
- Create a virtual lesson for every youth to ensure they know about the laws.
- Put youth in the center of DCF's work.
- Provide information about and access to participate in advocacy and support groups such as FYS to all youth 13 and up upon arrival to foster care.
- Designate someone to prepare youth prior to participation in - and debrief them after case planning, transition planning, and court.

Our ideas that **REQUIRE** legislative change

- Create a bill of rights that: lists and educate us on our important rights including; require that we be educated on our rights; provide a place to call if rights are violated.
- Strengthen the requirement of youth appearance in court to make sure youth are not improperly excluded.



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