

## Background

California's foster care system aims to care for children and youth who cannot remain safely at home due to abuse and neglect. Yet, many children and youth struggle while in care – emotionally, physically, and academically. Despite best intentions and efforts, the system often fails the children and youth it is meant to protect. This is in part because many efforts to fix the foster care system do not consider the voice and choice of youth in foster care. In order to identify solutions that work for youth, we need to collaborate with youth to elevate barriers and develop solutions to the challenges they face in the foster care system.

## Youth's Recommendations to Improve the Foster Care System

Over the past year, Children Now gathered input from young people with foster care experience to better understand the challenges they have faced in the foster care system and to learn what they believe needs to be changed about the system and their proposed solutions. Their ideas converged around three critical changes to the foster care system that they believe would improve youth's experiences.

### Recommendation 1: Peer Navigation to Connect Youth and Caregivers to Resources

Many youth shared that they received insufficient guidance on available services and supports or help in accessing them. Youth said that, although social workers should provide youth in foster care with information on connections to needed supports and services, social workers were often overworked with large caseloads. Youth felt that their caregivers did not know enough about available resources and that social workers are often overworked with large caseloads. Therefore, youth identified a critical need for peer navigation to help access supports for youth and caregivers to promote better experiences, outcomes, and placement stability. They expressed a need for help identifying and connecting to supports and services from others who have lived experience in the foster care system, who know what they are going through and can help them navigate the complicated bureaucracy of the system.

### Recommendation 2: Improve the Matching Process to Ensure Better Placement Matches Between Youth and Caregivers

In addition, youth expressed frustration with foster care placement matches between youth and caregivers that were not appropriate or beneficial based on the youth's needs and the caregiver's ability to address the youth's needs. Youth believed that the foster care system does not always take the time to make appropriate matches, which can lead to disrupted placements. For example, some youth shared that they were placed with caregivers who spoke a different language than they do, making it difficult to communicate with their caregivers and to get their needs met. To address this, youth felt that the system should take more care to understand the characteristics and backgrounds of youth and caregivers in order to make appropriate and beneficial matches. Further, youth believed that the matching process should be youth-centered and prioritize what youth want when making placement decisions. An improved matching process would ensure better outcomes and experiences for youth in the foster care system and promote placement stability.

### Recommendation 3: Increase Access to Therapy and Mental Health Supports

Finally, youth identified the lack of access to therapy and mental health supports as a particular challenge within the foster care system. Youth shared that it takes too long to start therapy and is difficult to find a therapist who is well-trained in meeting the needs of youth in the foster care system who have experienced trauma. In addition, youth said they don't want to participate in only talk therapy and don't want to have to repeatedly tell their stories to different therapists. Youth believed they should have greater access to a variety of therapeutic approaches. In addition to individual, group, and play therapy, they shared that youth need access to nontraditional therapies, such as art and music therapy, as well as enrichment activities that are not formal therapies but give youth a chance to explore their passions. They highlighted the importance of peer navigators in assisting youth and caregivers to identify available therapy options for youth and help access these supports. Furthermore, youth shared the critical need for caregivers to have access to therapy for themselves so they are best able to support the youth in their care and therefore provide a more stable placement.

## Next Steps

Collaborating with youth currently or formerly in foster care is essential to designing and enacting policy solutions that will make a real difference in their lives. Moving forward, we will continue to partner with youth with foster care experience to identify opportunities to advocate for and implement their recommendations to improve the foster care system. By listening to their input and following their recommendations, we can make impactful changes to the system that will truly benefit youth and help them thrive.

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