



North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services
Division of Social Services

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August 1, 2011

DEAR COUNTY DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL SERVICES

ATTENTION: DIRECTORS, CHILD WELFARE PROGRAM MANAGERS, SUPERVISORS, AND CHILD WELFARE WORKERS

SUBJECT: YOUTH ENGAGEMENT/YOUTH FOCUS GROUPS

In 2008, the North Carolina Division of Social Services issued a Dear County Director Letter CWS-68-08 (<http://www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/dcdl/famsupchildwelfare/cws-68-08.pdf>) requesting directors of county departments of social services to hold face-to-face focus groups with older youth in foster care as part of North Carolina's Program Improvement Plan (<http://www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/stats/docs/Approved%202008%20NC%20PIP.pdf>). The intention of these focus groups was to engage in a meaningful dialogue with youth about continuous improvement around foster care and youth in transition issues.

The purpose of this letter is to reiterate the importance of engaging foster youth as a means of improving foster care outcomes. Youth in foster care are experts and can offer a unique perspective about the impact of services and program practices on children in care. This information is invaluable to departments of social services as they can focus their resources on issues of importance to youth thereby increasing efficiency within the system. Youth also benefit from opportunities to be heard by child welfare staff. When they feel that their opinions are heard and respected, they will be more motivated to engage in their own plans and advocate for others in care. Youth will build positive relationships with adults and develop an appreciation for their perspectives on issues facing foster children. When agencies include youth in the planning and decision making process, youth are empowered, as they are perceived as partners in the process. Ultimately, youth will develop an improved sense of self-worth as they recognize ability to make an impact. **Directors of county departments of social services are strongly encouraged to meet with their LINKS eligible youth (ages 13 and above) at a minimum, annually.** These meetings should be inviting, interesting and provide an opportunity for the youth to provide meaningful input. Marcella M., Alumni Foster Youth Summer Employee with the NC Division of Social Services, recalls her experience when she met with her county director:

While in foster care, I was fortunate enough to meet with my county's Director of Social Services. My LINKS Coordinator informed the youth that there would be a meeting to give us a chance to talk to our Director. She told us that if we wanted to get our thoughts out then tell somebody who can do something about it; therefore, I decided to attend. Besides myself, there were about four or five other youth, the Deputy Director and the LINKS Coordinator who attended the meeting. The meeting was held at the county department of social services. The atmosphere was informal, friendly and inviting as the county provided food for the meeting. The Director's demeanor was very down to earth and funny. We discussed our satisfaction or dissatisfaction with our present living situations. The Director seemed interested in our views and we were allowed to speak freely about our thoughts and feelings. We also discussed our current school situations. However, the main topic of discussion, focused on the amount of clothing allowance for youth in foster care. We all believed that the amount was unreasonably low and needed to be increased. The Director was receptive to our comments and asked us what suggestions we had for him about the clothing allowance. Every youth participating was given a chance to present and elaborate on their thoughts and suggestions. The Director acknowledged that the amount that we received would not provide us with everything we may need but it would at least help. He explained that due to the number of children in care that received clothing allowances the budget would only allow us to receive two allowances a year at that rate. Even though we couldn't change the amount of clothing allowance we received, I think we all felt great knowing that the Director took time out for us. The feedback I received from other youth who participated in the meeting was that it was "cool" and "at least somebody is

listening. Personally, this experience was beneficial for me because for once in my life I knew that someone was on my side and cared about my feelings and thoughts. Before that meeting, I really never got the chance to express my thoughts and feelings; I had to force them on my social worker. At that time, I didn't have a LINKS social worker. The Director let us know that we could speak to him whenever we needed. Since that meeting, I have met with him four times during office visits. These meetings were unscheduled but the Director was always open to receiving updates about my progress and ideas about what I wanted to do. Meeting with the Director was vital because I had a chance to see that I'm important as a foster youth and that there are influential people on my side.

Marcella's account highlights some helpful strategies to successfully engage youth during these types of meetings:


- **Provide food/snacks-** Youth love good food and it is a simple incentive for youth to participate and create a welcoming environment.
- **Establish a safe environment-** Give youth permission to speak freely about their issues and concerns without fear of repercussion from staff or caretakers.
- **Be open and honest-** Youth can gauge when adults are sincere and demonstrate a genuine interest in their views and opinions.
- **Share information-** Youth want to be informed at all levels even if the information is not what they like.
- **Follow up-** It is essential to follow up with the youth about any questions, ideas and suggestions that are raised during the meeting.

Additional useful strategies include:

- **Arrange for a few games/activities-** These activities may serve as icebreakers to "soften the crowd" and create a fun and relaxed atmosphere.
- **Hold the meeting during the evening-** Youth are very busy with school, extracurricular activities and appointments. Participation is more likely to increase if these meetings do not compete with other obligations.
- **Schedule multiple meeting times-** Counties with greater number of youth may find it more feasible to meet with youth in smaller groups. Youth tend to be more comfortable and open in smaller groups.
- **Provide transportation-** One of the greatest barriers for foster youth is lack of transportation. Ensuring transportation is available to all youth who desire to participate requires early planning and coordination!
- **Ask the youth-** Ask your youth how to make these meetings relevant and meaningful. They are the experts and can provide you valuable information as to what works and does not work.

For additional information about youth engagement, please contact the Strong Able Youth Speaking Out (SAYSO) website at <http://www.saysonc.org> and the National Resource Center for Youth Development at <http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu/>.

Sincerely,



Kevin Kelley, Interim Chief
Child Welfare Services Section

cc: Sherry S. Bradsher
Jack Rogers
Child Welfare Services Team Leaders

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