

Statewide Survey of Young Adults with Experience in Foster Care

Executive Summary

This study provides a perspective on the state of child welfare in Washington from the viewpoint of those who have been served by the system. The study was developed in consultation with Mockingbird Society program participants with lived experience. It consists of 219 online surveys of young adults who had experienced foster care in the state, in which respondents graded the services they had received. The reasons for the grades were explained in 63 follow-up one-on-one interviews.

Participants were recruited through multiple nonprofit agencies and a weblink promoted by other partners. The participants do not represent the larger population of foster care alumni; the majority entered the system as pre-teens or teenagers. They were thus less apt than the average child/youth in foster care to have been reunited with family or adopted after a relatively brief time. Most were entering adulthood without family support and still using nonprofit services; half were in Extended Foster Care.

However, the racial/ethnic mix, prevalence of those identifying as LGBTQ+ and other demographics were representative of the entire State child welfare system.

This study confirms many known issues, including concerns that have been raised over the years by Mockingbird's direct participants. However, the findings give even more voice to the impact of the system's deficits on those receiving services and codify the ineffectiveness of many programs.

Service Grades

Almost all the services queried received "C" average grades (2.3 on a 0 to 4 scale). Around a third of respondents gave "B" average grades and a quarter gave services an average grade of "C-". Sub-groups who gave the lowest average scores included those:

- ◆ Who identified as LGBTQ+ (1.9 average)
- ◆ With eight+ placements (1.9)
- ◆ Who termed their mental health as "poor" (1.7)

"A" and "B" grades went most often to services provided by non-profit agencies – both "Education Supports" and "Non-profit Services" (in general) received an "A" or "B" from the majority. This was true regardless of the nonprofit through which the respondent was contacted.

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Transforming foster care & Ending youth homelessness

“ It kinda helps when people listen.

“ Foster kids need more voice in their decisions about what they participate in.

“Diane” describes herself as having been relatively lucky in foster care, although she acknowledges, “Being a foster child is not easy ... it is not a walk in the park.” She credits an early social worker, whom Diane calls “amazing ... She listened to every concern I had.” The social worker always took her out of the house during visits, for pizza or ice cream, and spent as much time as necessary.

Diane needed the social worker’s help initially, as she was first placed, as a pre-teen, across the state from home with a family that did not accept her LGBTQ identity. The parents tried to “counsel the gay out of me.” “My self-esteem was in the shitter ... I was suicidal,” she continues.

Her social worker then found an LGBTQ friendly placement, where Diane flourished for years. However, after two years she was given a new social worker, whom she was told specialized in Native American youth such as her. That social worker, and most of the four that followed, were not as successful as the original assignment.

For more on Diane, see page 33

“Keeping the Same Social Worker” received the most “D”/“F” grades overall, and significant numbers (40% or more) checked “D”, “F” or “did not have” as grades for “Training on Finances,” “Sex Education,” “Driver’s License Help,” and “Job Training.”

Questions related to the respondents’ placements (“Being Treated like Family” and “Placements that were a good match for you”) earned the most “C” grades—from around a third of respondents. Interviewees often explained that these “C” grades were an average of good and bad.

Respondents who identified as either LGBTQ+ or BIPOC also gave “C” average grades to services that might have helped them with any challenges related to those identities. Almost half of those who identified as LGBTQ+ rated any additional support from their social worker and/or foster parents as “D/F/Did not have.”

LGBTQ+ young adults also reported less desirable outcomes than others. They were:

- ◆ 50% more likely to have been homeless at some point
- ◆ Four times as likely to still be working on their GED
- ◆ Twice as likely to call their mental health “poor”

On the other hand, respondents who identified as BIPOC (some race or ethnicity other than “white”) reported similar outcomes to those who identified as “white.” They tended to explain that their foster parents tried to keep them connected to their culture, although not always successfully. “I was the whitest

black person I knew,” said one.

Grade Explanations and Importance

“A” and “B” grades were generally explained as being for services that were flexible and attentive to the individual. Regardless of the nature of the connection – with a social worker, non-profit, foster parent or attorney– the most successful relationships were described as conveying genuine concern: “like they were not being paid to talk to me.”

Similarly, when asked which services were most important to them, respondents affirmed the nature of the relationship; they most often named “being treated like family” within the top three. “Treated like Family” was described as inclusion in all activities, such as trips and family meals, unlimited access to food and all areas of the home, and not being introduced as a “foster” child.

In general, respondents tended to equate “important” with “successful.” For example, only 10% named a “consistent social worker” as one of their most important factors, in contrast to how they discussed the impact of social worker turn-over in the interviews. They seemed to have given up, like one who said: “My social workers weren’t a main part of my case; I didn’t care to see them because they weren’t the people helping me.” Another who called “treated as family” least important explained: “Hoping to be treated like family when you are in foster care really only sets you up for disappointment.”

Statewide Survey of Young Adults with Experience in Foster Care: Full Findings

Introduction

This study provides a perspective on child welfare systems in Washington from the viewpoint of young adults who receive services.

It incorporates elements of Participatory Action Research (PAR) in the design, development, and testing of the instruments. This report will not sit on a shelf—the PAR process will move forward to identify changes informed by these voices and improve outcomes for children, youth and young adults statewide who come into foster care.

Transforming foster care is key to addressing many current society challenges. A third of those with foster care experience drop out of high school,¹ half experience homelessness² and, nationwide, 25% are involved with the justice system within two years of leaving care. Furthermore, systemic racism is rampant; African American/Black and Native American children are 2–3 times more likely to be placed in foster care than are white children, even though the incidence of child maltreatment is the same.³

Current available data presents child welfare through an adult lens—the viewpoint of the youth is excluded. In addition, State data measures outputs only, e.g.

numbers adopted or reunified with family, but does not follow up to gauge longer term results, particularly in terms of the recipients' sense of the service.

The Mockingbird Society

Mockingbird provides a platform for the voice of youth who experience foster care and/or homelessness. Working in partnership with youth and young adults with lived experience, we change policies and perceptions so all children, youth and young adults can have a supportive home and thrive into adulthood.

Our process empowers the youth and young adults and adds authenticity to the discussion. Mockingbird's direct program participants have been instrumental in the passage of more than 50 major reforms in the Washington State child welfare system, including the enactment of Extended Foster Care and outlawing the incarceration of minors who commit non-criminal acts, such as truancy. With this study, we are expanding to include the voices to those who cannot as easily take part in our direct programs.

“Chara” entered foster care while in high school and stayed with her first foster family. They provided free access within the home and included her in all family events, including trips. They never pressured her to do or attend anything where she was uncomfortable.

Chara's foster parents regularly “check in,” and her foster mother adjusted her work schedule to provide transportation to Chara's counseling. Most notably, they accepted Chara's sexuality. “They said, ‘It doesn't change how we feel about you.’”

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“ You learn pretty quickly that foster care isn't designed to give you love and belonging – if your basic needs are met and you are safe and not being sent back to your abusive parents, you are lucky

“Evan” first entered foster care as a pre-teen. He was placed with an aunt and uncle, who provided structure and expectations for the first time.

“I’m thankful for foster care,” he says, “because I got in a better place.” But there was a lack of “understanding of who I am,” and within a few years his aunt and uncle decided they could no longer take care of him.

Evan went to a second home that “seemed like a money factory ... [there were] a lot of children ... They gave me my basics.” He remembers alarms on doors and a lock on the pantry.

For more of Evan’s story, see page 50

“ My current social worker is awesome ... She answers me right away, which is amazing.

Methodology

This study contains two parts:

- ◆219 online surveys, completed August through December 2020 by Washington-based young adults with experience in foster care. The survey asked them to “grade” various services.

- ◆63 one-on-one interviews completed October 2020–January 2021 with online respondents who agreed to further contact. The interviews explored the reasons behind survey “grades”.

The survey and interview design were developed by Mockingbird staff and participants with lived experience in foster care and/or homelessness. The instruments and process were pretested with Mockingbird participants.

The interviews were conducted by two trained senior staff, were recorded when there was consent, and were randomly reviewed. Qualitative coding was checked by youth staff with experience in foster care.

Those surveyed and interviewed were not a random sample of young adults with experience in foster care; we therefore cannot

legitimately project these results to that population.

Qualified participants were recruited through multiple direct service agencies in Washington whose clientele include those with experience in foster care. Survey respondents were sent \$15 e-gift cards. Interviewees were sent \$25 e-gift cards.

Almost half of participants were contacted through Treehouse for Kids, Washington’s leading organization providing support to those in foster care. The remainder were contacted through regional agencies and young adult shelters. Several organizations elected to receive results from a custom link where participants were able to rate their agency specifically. These are noted in Table 1. Others promoted a general survey link, including A Way Home Washington (AWHW) and members of the Washington Coalition for Homeless Youth Advocacy (WACHYA).

Most apt to be missing are those who exited foster care at younger ages, and were less likely to be still receiving support services. Rural county residents are also underrepresented.

The counties shown in Table 2 are the current residence reported; some might have moved from rural settings to population centers as they entered adulthood. The State data used for comparison includes all ages in foster care in 2015 so is not a direct equivalent; it is meant to give a general sense of the under-representation of rural counties.

Table 1: Respondent Sources

Source	% of Online Responses	% of Interviews
Treehouse, statewide	49	41
Mix of survey links statewide (WACHYA, AHW, etc.)	25	5
Youthnet, Mt. Vernon	9	8
Volunteers of America, Spokane	9	3
Community Youth Services, Olympia	8	5

Respondent Profile

Demographics

With any study, it is important to understand the characteristics of those included (see Table 3). This profile includes all online surveys.

- ◆ Just over half (57%) identified as a race/ethnicity other than only white. This is in line with State records for those who entered the State child welfare system from 2009 to 2018.⁵

- ◆ Just over a quarter (28%) self-identified as LGBTQ+. This is on par with a 2019 national study on LGBTQ youth/young adults with experience in foster care.⁶

- ◆ About half were still in school (41%) or working on their GED (11%), while 26% had dropped out, including 10% who subsequently finished their GED.

- ◆ More identified as female than male (58% vs. 38%). This is typical of survey respondents.⁷

- ◆ Almost a third (29%) had experience with the justice system. More males reported justice system experience than females (39% vs. 25%).

- ◆ Almost a quarter (24%) called their mental health “poor”. Fewer than half (42%) called it “good” or “excellent.”

- ◆ Most (60%) reported “good” or “excellent” physical health.

- ◆ The majority (65%) were age 18 to 20, or just entering adulthood.

- ◆ Over a quarter (29%) reported some disability. This was usually an Intellectual/Developmental

Disability (13%) or Delay (10%). Several volunteered their ADHD and/or PTSD diagnoses.

Foster Care Experience

The respondents are not typical of all those with experience in foster care (see Table 4).

- ◆ Most (63%) entered the system after age 10. Usually children enter foster care before age five (such as the 51% of those who entered State foster care in 2016⁸)

- ◆ Half (50%) had been in foster care for 5+ years. The state median is 15 to 18 months.⁹

- ◆ Half (52%) had been in a group home at some point. Group home placements recently peaked in the state at 12% in January 2009 and has since declined to 6%.¹⁰

- ◆ Three-quarters (73%) had been in a foster home setting with strangers at some point.

- ◆ Half (53%) experienced four or more placements. The national goal is two or fewer placements.

- ◆ Half (50%) were still in Extended Foster Care at the time of the survey.

- ◆ Few had either returned to their birth family (7%) or were adopted (7%). Therefore, most were singly transitioning to adulthood.

It is not surprising that most did not know if they had been in State or Tribal Care. The proportion acknowledging that they were in the federal system is in line with federal placements in our state.

Table 2: County Distribution

	% in Study	% In Foster Care 2016 ⁴
King	33	13
Spokane	20	12
Pierce	19	15
Snohomish	10	8
Lewis	4	2
Clark	3	6
Whatcom	3	3
Thurston	3	4
Yakima	2	6
Skagit	2	2
Other	3	28

“Eric” was an older teen when he and his siblings came into foster care. After a short stay in a group home, he and one brother settled into a three-year placement; the family is now adopting both.

Eric explains the family’s success as largely due to shared interests and, more so, to the attitude of the foster parent. They did not treat Eric and his brother “any differently than their own kids,” including taking them on trips. He continues, “They introduced us as ‘their kids’ ... We feel extremely safe and loved.”

The foster parents were transparent about expectations and gave guidelines but allowed ongoing conversation on how things would work in the home.

For more of Eric’s story, see page 36

“Malika” entered foster care as a young teen, after “bouncing around” among family members and homelessness. Her instability continued through multiple foster placements, until she finally found a “good” one, and stayed three years. Malika explains, though, that she “didn’t know what good care is” and was so used to being independent that she strained against the rules. She eventually asked for another home, where she stayed until she aged out of foster care.

For more on Malika, see page 47

“ It made everything easier having a social worker that really cared for me ... They would talk to me like a human, not some poor oppressed child. They always took time to ask how I was.

Table 3: Demographic Profile

Race/ Ethnicity Detail	%	Race/Ethnicity Net	%
White/Caucasian	51	BIPOC	59
Black/African American	24	White Only	41
Hispanic/Latinx	20	Immigrant or Refugee	
Asian/Asian-American	9	Yes	9
Multi-Cultural	9	No	88
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	5	Did not say	3
		Age	
Identify as LGBTQ+		<18	5
LGBTQ+	28	18	29
Not LBGTO+	66	19	17
No Response	7	20	18
		21	11
Gender		22	10
Female	58	23	7
Male	36	24	1
Non-binary/Genderfluid	3	25	2
Transgender	1	Justice System Experience	
		Juvenile Only	24
Current Education Level		Adult Only	1
Still in High School	23	Both	4
High School Drop Out	5	Neither	71
Working on GED	11	Physical Health	
Completed GED	10	Excellent	17
High School Degree	12	Good	43
Some College	12	Fair	33
2 Year Degree	5	Poor	7
Still in College	18	Other	1
4-year Degree+	4	Mental Health	
Personal Annual Income		Excellent	8
<\$25K	65	Good	34
\$25-<40K	9	Fair	34
\$40K-<\$60K	6	Poor	24
Do not know	20		

Table 4: Foster Care History

Age Entered	%	Care System	%
<1 year	5	Tribal	4
		Federal	6
		Neither/State	56
		Don't know	38
1-5 years	16		
6-10 years	16		
11-15 years	43	Ran from Foster Care	
16-17 years	21	Never	60
		Once	18
		2-3 Times	9
Years in Foster Care		4-5 Times	3
		6+ Times	9
		Don't know	2
		Placement Types	
Number of Placements		Home with Strangers	73
		With Family/Friends	62
		Group Home	52
		Their Own Home	37
		Siblings also in Foster Care	
Age at Exit		No Siblings in Care	53
		Siblings in Same Home	11
		Separated, enough contact	14
		Separated, not enough contact	21
		Siblings in Care Varied/ Other	7
		Where Exited	
Extended Foster Care		Birth Family	7
		Adopted	7
		Homelessness	8
		Friends/Extended Family	13
Still in EFC	50		
Previously in EFC	18	Own Housing	13
Never in EFC	33	Other	4

“ It’s hard to find a bed for a 17-year-old girl.

“Brady” entered foster care as a baby. He was with his first family for six years; although he was not happy there, he did not realize there were any alternatives.

No one had told him that the couple raising him were not his birth parents, and that he was in foster care. There were visits from social workers, but Brady did not realize that was not typical for all families.

Shortly after entering grade school, Brady began visiting another couple on weekends. After a few visits, all his clothes and belongings were packed and sent with him; his new foster mother explained that he would now live with them.

For more on Brady, see page 27

“Skylar” entered foster care as a pre-teen, with a family that was “ok at first.” However, as Skylar grew to be a teenager, she did not behave like the daughter her foster parents had imagined. They excluded her from outings with their two biological children, and the rift deepened.

Skylar tolerated the home for six years, until she came out to her foster mother about her bisexuality. Within a week, the foster mother packed Skylar’s belongings, told Skylar she was picking her up early from school for a doctor’s appointment, and then dropped her off at the child welfare office.

For more of Skylar’s story see page 34

“ I felt like she was trying to force me to get adopted.

Sibling Placement

Almost half (47%) of respondents had siblings in foster care; many of them (44% of those with siblings, or 21% of the total) reported that there was not enough contact. However, the issue is more complex than those statistics.

The interviewees described their/ siblings’ placements as shifting—siblings initially together were later parted, and siblings were sometimes reunited after temporary separate placements, when a home with more capacity could be found.

The data supports the importance of sibling contact. Those with poor mental health were more apt to report not enough contact (50% vs. 26% of those who said their mental health was good). Those who were in the same home with siblings more often said their mental health was good (24% vs. 13% of those not placed with siblings).

However, we do not know the causal relationship; children with better mental health may have been easier to keep together. Several interviewees split from siblings after initial co-placements said that it was “too much” for the foster parents. Others were moved to special treatment centers or group homes at the request of the foster parents.

In interviews, unsatisfactory sibling visitation was often explained as due to one or the other of the foster parents/guardians resisting visitation. Many times, relatives would accept

only certain siblings, and discourage contact between siblings. Also, in many cases the siblings would not share both parents, so one would be placed with relatives from the other parent. Finally, older siblings who went in and out of rehab and/or group homes had particularly hard times arranging sibling visits. A few were even barred from seeing siblings after being termed “unsafe”.

Some were able to keep/establish a relationship with siblings, if only via social media. Others were not.

- ◆ “[We were separated] because my aunt and uncle did not like me ... They stopped all communication and visits ... The state didn't really help ... they sat and watched it all happen.”
- ◆ “The social worker said, ‘It’s not up to us.’ ... I said, ‘Don’t I have rights?’ and she said, ‘We can’t control her.’”
- ◆ “It definitely damaged our relationship not being able to see each other through those really sensitive years. She is twelve now and got placed in the system when she was four. So, I missed those important years where bonding is best cause she is small.”
- ◆ “I don’t have a good biological connection. I want to be included in my family, but it’s not possible. We’re so broken.”

Adoption, Reunification and Kinship Care

Several interviewees spoke of being “pressured” into placements with family and/or adoption, which in some cases were later reversed. One said they acquiesced to reunification because “there was no other opportunity to be close to my school and friends.” Another preferred it to explaining their foster care status. A few weren’t consulted: “My social worker just said, ‘It’s time to go home.’”

In addition, many interviewees mentioned unsuccessful turns in and out of relatives’ houses. Intra-family arguments continued to play out, and/or the relatives were unprepared. However, this sample probably excludes young people successfully placed with family, as they are less apt to continue to need services. Interviewees said:

- ◆ “I hadn’t said anything because when I spoke to a relative about how I felt and how they were treating me poorly, they went back and told them and they ripped me a new one and made me feel guilty and I was the one in the wrong. So, I never spoke up about it.”
- ◆ “Family is not always a good fit. They need to ask more questions, especially for teenagers ... There need to be more questions and more training before any child gets placed anywhere.”

Interviewees who were adopted were divided as to its success. Some were educated as to the tradeoffs between adoption and transitioning to Extended Foster Care (EFC). One said, “It was really nice because we did a meeting with everyone who was helping me out ... they explained all the benefits, the pros and cons, which really helped.”

Adoptions after a lengthy foster period seemed more successful than those after a “trial period.” That did work out for one (“We just clicked”) but was a disaster for another. This second interviewee explained that, although she was uncomfortable with the woman offering to adopt her, it was “better than the group home.” She was kicked out of the house at age 18. Other comments included:

- ◆ “My case worker was like ‘We found someone who wants to adopt you.’”
- ◆ “The adoption social worker was pressuring me, and I felt like she was trying to force me to get adopted. It made me really stressed out.”
- ◆ “I really regret [my adoption] because if I had waited it out, I could be getting a lot more help ... I am twenty and I am taking care of myself. When I think about it, there are so many services that are wonderful and amazing that I could have but I can’t use because I was adopted.”

“Family is not always a good fit. They need to ask more questions, especially for teenagers.”

“Dorothea” was born with a medical condition that required several surgeries and transplants in her first few months. Her mother was unable to care for her; she was sent to a care home for medically fragile children and became a ward of the state. Dorothea was there several years before moving in with a foster family with the goal of adoption. But she returned to the facility after a year.

Even with this difficult start to life, Dorothea awarded mostly “A” grades to the services, including her social worker—the same social worker throughout her time in state care.

For more on Dorothea, see page 54

“ Youth lawyers are dope, man! ... She’s not there for the money ... She was the first person in my life that made me realize I was worth living.”

“Jasmine” entered foster care twice, first at a young age then again as a teen. The first time was “very confusing” and she has few clear memories. She does remember being told by her Jehovah’s Witness foster parents that there would be “no Christmas,” and that it was overall “traumatic.” Jasmine says now, “They were probably one of the ones who did it just for the money because they treated us like a job.”

Jasmine’s second placement was much more positive; she was able to be with all her siblings in a home with a couple they already knew.

As a teen, Jasmine has been happy with her social workers, saying they were supportive and provided her with needed information. One would ‘go the extra mile’ by bringing her coffee and checking in on her well-being—not just the “basic safety checklist.”

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Homelessness

Most (60%) participants had experienced homelessness at some point, including 9% who were homeless at the time of the survey (see Table 5). Some teens had been housed in shelters after entering care. Notably, 50% experienced homelessness before age 18 and a 32% before age 16.

Many interviewees described this homelessness as while still in the care of their biological parents. They stayed in camps, adult shelters, with friends, with “my mother’s hookups,” and in vehicles. This accounts for the high occurrence of these locations among where respondents stayed while without a home.

Relatively few (9%) “couch surfed”, which is often associated with this age group. And the 40% that had been in Transitional Housing reinforces how well this group was connected to resources.

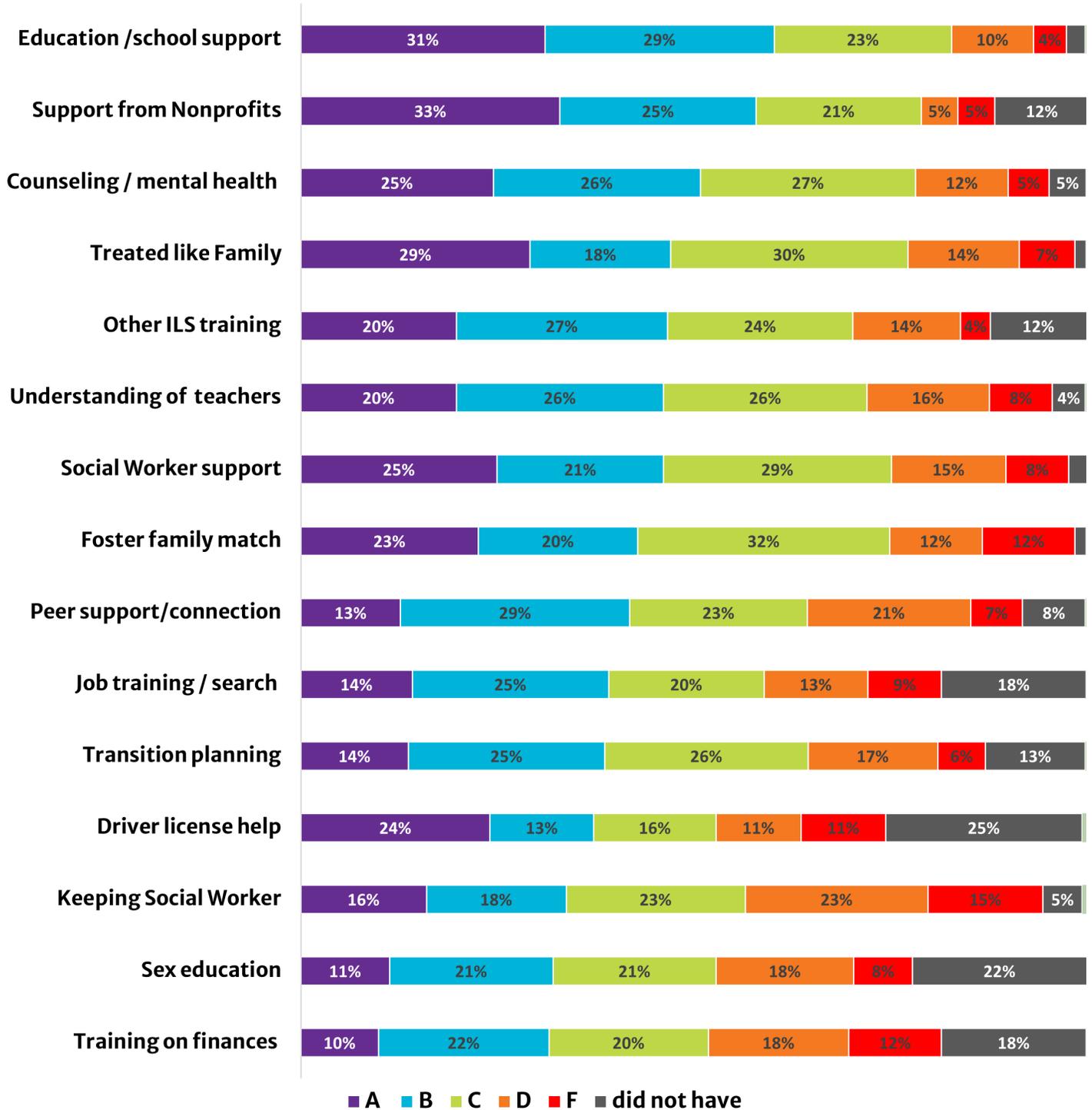
Table 5: Experience	%
Currently Experiencing Homelessness	9
Previously	51
Never	37
Rather not say	4
Age First Experienced	
<1 Year	1
1–5 Years Old	6
6–10 Years Old	9
11–15 Years Old	16
16–18 Years Old	18
19–21 Years Old	6
21–25 Years Old	0
Where Stayed	
Transitional Housing	40
Street	28
RV	24
Camp	14
Youth Shelter	14
Vehicle	14
Adult Shelter	13
Couch Surfing	9

Grades for General Services

The full “grades” for services received show that none were predominantly high or low. See Figure 1:

- ◆ The most positive grades (“A/B”) went to “Education/School Support” (60% positive), “Support from Nonprofits” (55%), and “Mental Health” (51%).
 - ◆ Several services were lacking for many, including “Help getting a Driver’s License” (26% did not have), “Sex education” (22%), and “Training on finances” and “Job training” (18% each).
 - ◆ “Keeping the same social worker” received the most “D” and “F” grades (38%).
- “Education Support” and “Support from Nonprofits” grades varied depending on the respondents’ nonprofit agency connections. That is, those who were linked to the survey through a nonprofit

Figure 1: Full Grades for General Services



were far more likely to give high grades than were those contacted through a weblink, which reached more young adults living in shelters. The various nonprofits all scored similarly; the “Education/school support” grades were not related to the number of respondents from Treehouse.

- ◆ 67% of respondents with a nonprofit agency contact gave an “A” or “B” to Education Supports and 71% gave the same grades to their nonprofit contact.¹¹
- ◆ This compares to 40% and 21% of others.

“ I never received that genuine concern for my wellbeing.”

Grade Averages and Sub-Group Analysis

“Abby” went into foster care as a teen but says “I should have been in foster care from the time I was about eight.” She was raised by strict Catholic parents, where “there was always an open CPS case.”

Her parents barred the social workers from speaking with the kids and “talked themselves out of it.” She was homeschooled and did not feel there was another adult to whom she could confide.

On her 16th birthday Abby ran to a shelter for young adults and told them to call the police; she was placed in a temporary safe house, then entered the foster care system.

For more of Abby’s story, see page 37

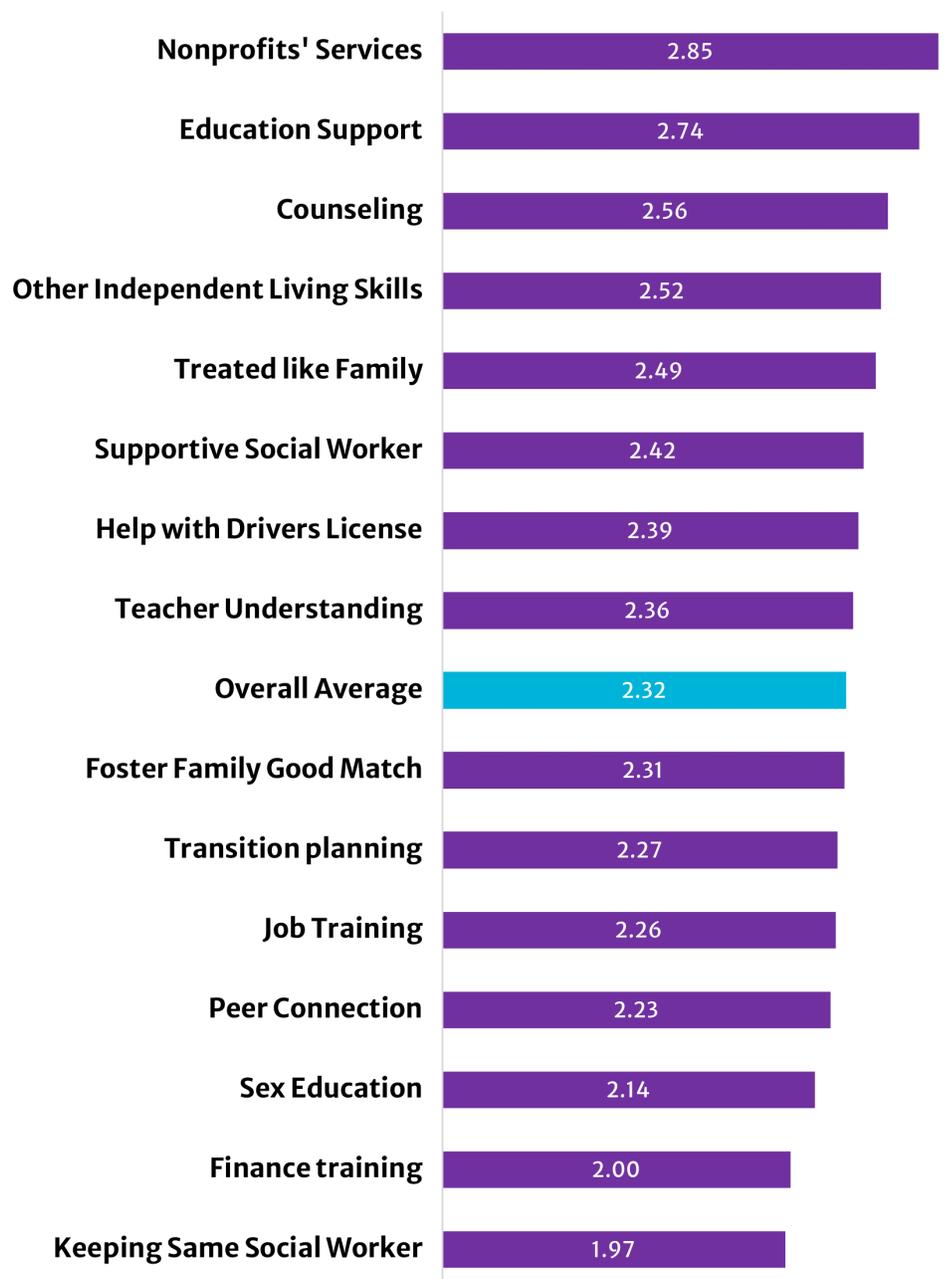
“ Every time I had a question of Youthnet, they were responsive and had an answer.

The average (mean) grades given by those who received each service were around a “C” (1.5 to 2.5, assigning “A” grades 4 points and “F” grades zero points). Education Support and Counseling were again among the highest, followed by “Other Independent Living Skills.” “Keeping the Same Social Worker”

was still at the bottom of the list, followed by “Finance Training.” See Figure 2.

Averaging all the grades for these services together, among those who received each, results in an overall average of 2.32. This overall average is useful when comparing sub-groups.

Figure 2: Average Grades for General Services



Respondents tended to not vary much in their responses; that is, few would give some “A”s and some “F”s. Averaging all their general service grades into one “overall service grade” resulted in:

- ◆ 25% who gave services an average grade of “C-” or below (1.5 or lower)
- ◆ 41% who gave services an average grade of “C” (above 1.5 but below 2.5), and
- ◆ 34% who gave services an average grade of a “B-” or better (2.5 or above)

Those giving the highest average grades were:

- ◆ Less apt to have run away (30% compared to 50% of others)
- ◆ Less likely to have experienced homelessness (48% vs. 76%)
- ◆ Mentally healthier (62% said their mental health was excellent or good, compared to 16% of those who gave the lowest grades)
- ◆ Less apt to identify as LGBTQ+ (17%, vs. 44%).

When comparing sub-group overall means, two groups stand out, between which there is a great deal of over-lap.

- ◆ Those who identified as LGBTQ+ gave the lowest overall service grades—an average of 1.97, vs. 2.46 for non-LGBTQ+.
- ◆ Those with self-described “poor” mental health gave average grades of 1.74. This compares to 2.17 and 2.8 for those who said their mental health was “fair” and “excellent/good”.

Overall average scores did not vary by other demographic factors, including gender, education level, experience with the justice system or race/ethnicity. They also did not vary much among those with different histories in foster care (years in care, age entered) except for the number of placements: in general, the more placements, the lower the average grade the respondent gave to services:

- ◆ Those with eight or more placements gave overall average grades or 1.85, compared to
- ◆ 2.28 among those with four to seven placements, and
- ◆ 2.54 among those with fewer than four placements.

We cannot know from the data the direction of the causal relationship; that is, those with better services may have not needed to be moved as often, or vice versa. Or a separate, unmeasured factor could be related to both service success and the number of placements.

Support for LGBTQ+ and Racial/ Ethnic Identities

Besides the general list of services addressed by all, those who identified as LGBTQ+ and /or a race/ ethnicity other than “white” were asked about specific challenges they faced and the services that might have assisted them with those challenges. See Figure 3.

Most did not report more than “minor” challenges in foster care due to their self-identities; in particular, almost half (48%) of those who identified as BIPOC

***“ Treehouse workers have been great ... They are a no-barrier service to young people, and you don’t see that very often ... If you have a question and they don’t know the answer, they’ll figure it out.*”**

“Felix” has stayed with the same foster family since he entered the system while in grade school. He attributes this success to his foster family treating him and the rest of their foster children “like we were a part of the family ... They included us in everything we did. If they took a trip, they would take us with them instead of putting us in respite care.”

Felix says his foster parents helped many foster children with worse behavioral concerns because they had rules, routines, and a strong church community to support the whole family. “They really cared for all the children they took in,” he summarizes.

To read more about Felix, see page 62

“ I was self-sabotaging ... When I went to juvie, I had a hot meal every night. My doors locked and I felt safe.

“Journey”—who uses they/ them pronouns—was removed from an abusive biological family while in grade school. Now a young adult and in EFC, they experienced 15 placements and nine school changes during the past decade.

Several of the failed placements were due to being placed with very religious families that, among other issues, did not accept Journey’s complex PTSD diagnoses. According to Journey, “They thought it was a sin that needed to be treated by biblical counselors”

Another religious family made them leave a therapist and see a church counselor instead, threatening to kick Journey out of the house otherwise.

For more of Journey’s story, see page 39

chose “none”. However, more LGBTQ+ said the challenges were “serious” or “overwhelming.”

When asked about services that might have helped with the challenges, many said “did not have,” particularly in terms of supports for challenges related to LGBTQ+ identities. These may be interpreted more like an “F.” Otherwise, the grades were widely spread, and again averaged as “C”s. See Figure 4.

Around half of those identifying as LGBTQ+ said that the following were a “D”, “F”, or non-existent:

- ◆ Foster parents’ support (52% “D”, “F” or nonexistent)
- ◆ Social worker support (48%)
- ◆ Support for bullying (53%)

In addition, respondents who identified as LGBTQ+ were:

- ◆ More apt than others to have experienced homelessness (74% compared to 53%)
- ◆ Four times as likely to still be working on a GED (22% vs. 5%)

- ◆ Less likely to describe their physical health as “excellent” or “good” (42% vs. 70%)

- ◆ Almost three times as likely to describe their mental health as “poor” (40% vs. 15%).

LGBTQ+ identifying interviewees spoke of blatant disdain and maltreatment, such as:

- ◆ “I went to a parent at age 17 that didn’t ‘believe’ in gay people.”
- ◆ “They [foster parents] put me down a lot.”
- ◆ “They wanted me to go to a counselor who would ‘counsel the gay out of me.’”
- ◆ “My adopted mom threw a bible at me when I told her I was bi.”

Those who identified as BIPOC gave relatively few “D/F” grades. Around half gave an “A” or “B” to:

- ◆ Foster Parent Support (51% graded this an “A” or “B”)
- ◆ Social Worker Support (50%)

BIPOC respondents also did not

Figure 3: Challenges in Foster Care Related to Self-Identity

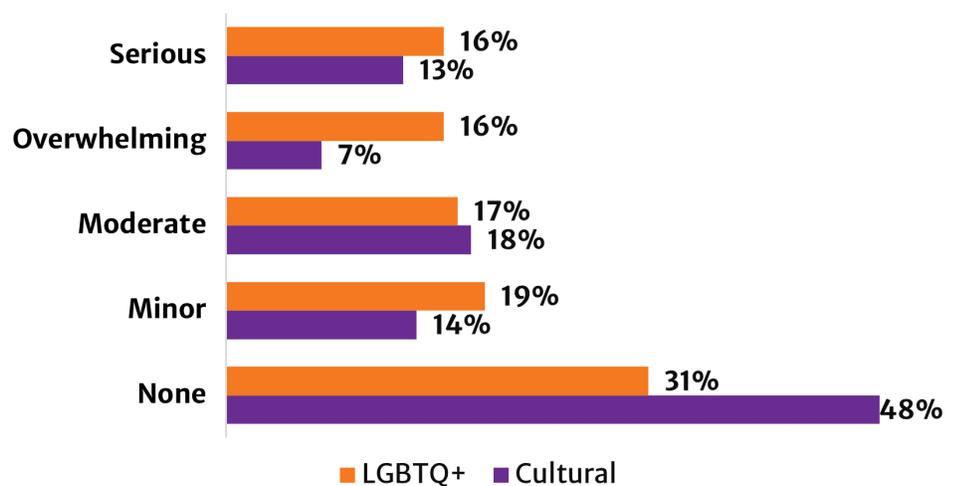
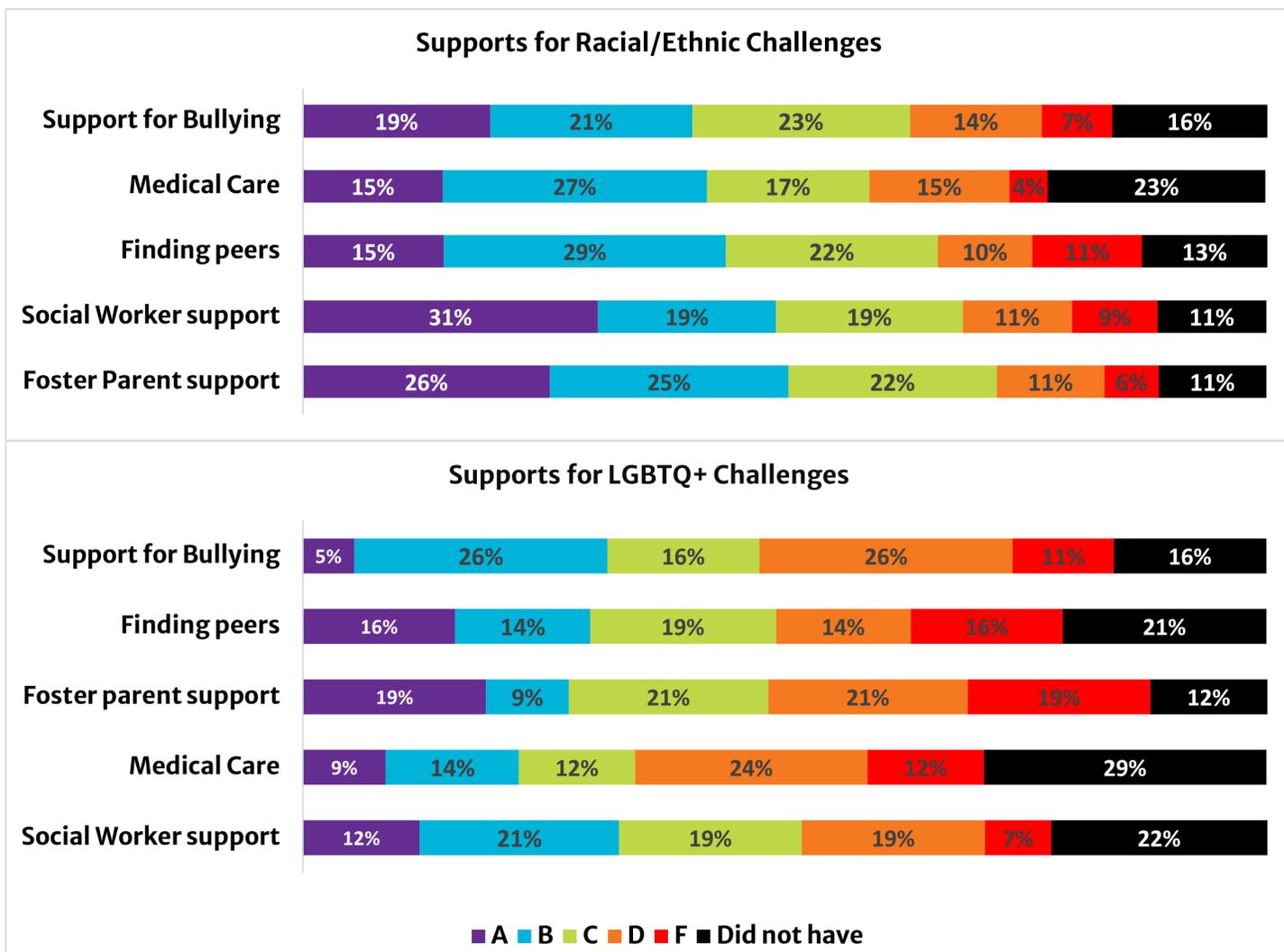


Figure 4: Grades for Services to Help with Challenges Related to Racial/Ethnic and LGBTQ+ Identity



vary significantly from others in terms of their outcomes (health, education level, or foster care history). In the interviews, many said foster parents “tried” to keep them connected to their culture, e.g. driving them to community events, or connecting them with others who shared their customs.

However, losing their cultural ties did compound the trauma of going into foster care. It was especially difficult when they were placed far from home, where the race/ethnicity mix, landscape and community were unfamiliar. At the worst, they were purposely “cut

off” from their biological family’s culture and even language.

- ◆ “Our parents are very understanding but they are not educated in our [country of origin] culture.”
- ◆ “It wasn’t bad, but it wasn’t good.”
- ◆ “I felt like the whitest black person anybody knew ... I felt so out of place.”
- ◆ “When I was younger, I was fluent in (primary language), but I had to speak English and now I don’t speak it at all.”

“ They didn’t feel like someone who was being paid to talk to me.

“Jesse” ran away from home while still in grade school and showed the police her bruises. They returned her to her mother, who threatened her so she would not reveal the truth to the CPS social worker.

Jesse resents the social workers’ lack of action because it was “pretty dang obvious that something wasn’t right.” Eventually her mother lost her home; the family lived for several years in their car, a tent encampment, and with various “hookups” of her mother’s.

Finally, Jesse’s stepfather convinced her mother to let Jesse stay with him, and she and her brother were well cared for. “I think of him as my father,” she says.

When he was diagnosed with terminal cancer, though, Jesse’s mother swore to take Jesse back, and Jesse called CPS directly. They placed her in foster care with a relative, after asking for her opinion and preferences.

For more of Jesse’s story, see page 41

“ Every time I needed [Community Youth Services] they were there to pick me up. They were amazing.

Grade Explanations

The one-on-one interviews specifically probed into the reasons for grades; that is, what prompted an “A” grade versus an “F”. Interviewees explained that many grades were a compromise among many instances, i.e., respondents with bad and good social workers might give social workers overall a “C”. Others said the grade given was based on one example.

It was striking overall that most interviewees seemed generous with their grades. For example, a young man with several horrific placements who ended up with a good family gave his placements overall a “B”. Another woman gave a “B” to “treated like family” after seven placements.

Nonprofit Agencies, including Education Support

“A” and “B” grades were generally explained as being for services that were flexible/ attentive to the individual’s needs, responsive, and included the service provider listening to the child/youth/young adult. Interviewees were impressed when anyone “went out of their way,” and/or reached out to them rather than responding after the young person initiated the contact.

Because of the number of positive scores overall, there were many comments that profiled successful nonprofit services. These included nonprofit support overall, from their specific contact agency,

education support, and Independent Living Skills (ILS) services. Service providers at such agencies sole purpose is to support the youth/young adult, without the multiple “masters” served by social workers. They also seemed to have easier access to resources and did not have to go through as many “hoops”.

- ◆ “My Youthnet worker is always there to help ... She gets it done.”
- ◆ “Every time I had a question of Youthnet they were responsive and had an answer.”
- ◆ “Treehouse workers have been great ... They are a no-barrier service to young people, and you don’t see that very often ... If you have a question and they don’t know the answer, they’ll figure it out.”
- ◆ “She didn’t feel like someone who was paid to talk to me.”
- ◆ (Of Community Youth Services) “Every time I needed them, they were there to pick me up. They were amazing.”
- ◆ (Of staff at the Y Social Impact Center) “[He] saved my life.”
- ◆ “It kinda helps when people listen.”

Besides being responsive, “A” grade education supports included easily obtained tutors, equipment (laptops in particular), extra-curricular fees, clothing allowances, and assistance with college applications and financial aid forms. Some representatives

would also help communicate with the school, having more success as an adult.

- ◆ "Treehouse was a big thing in graduating year ... I feel like without them, I would've not been able to graduate."
- ◆ "Youthnet ... helped me to get a laptop, printer, dishes, essentials."
- ◆ "I felt very confident going into college, knowing that I have support, if I need something it is okay to ask."
- ◆ "They really went out of their way to get me what I needed to be successful at school."
- ◆ "They have just been amazing when it comes to school."

Foster Parent Treatment and Matching

Two questions addressed foster parents: whether the placement was a "good match" and whether the participant was "treated like family". There were slightly more good grades (47% "A" or "B") for "treated like family" than for "good match" (43%).

Good grades for "treated like family" included when foster parents did more than provide a bed and food. They would teach life skills, include the foster child on family outings, play games, be understanding of the child's birth parents, and even refer to them as their son or daughter, instead of their "foster child" (which was especially appreciate.)

Interviewees from these types of placements expressed that they felt loved. It included some who

had family-like relationships in group homes as well as private families:

- ◆ "[Group home case manager] would greet me with a big smile and shout "Mi hijo!"
- ◆ (After being bullied at school) "He sat there and listened to me and it really made me feel like he was a parent to me."
- ◆ "She didn't let me give up on myself."
- ◆ "We did family things together, like cooking meals."
- ◆ "They included us in everything we did, if they took a trip, they would take us instead of putting us in respite care."
- ◆ "She never talked ill about my parents once."
- ◆ "They put the same amount of effort as their biological kids."
- ◆ "They wouldn't tell people that I was their foster kid, so that made me feel good."
- ◆ "I wasn't explicitly treated like someone else's kid. I wasn't a package put in their care. I wasn't a human being in their care that had a bedroom."

On the other hand, there were many painful stories prompted by negative grades in this area. These included placements where the rules were felt to be excessive—i.e., not being able to see friends, having limited access to food, being kept in their bedroom, and being forced to attend the foster parents' church. Several spoke of the biological children in the house enjoying privileges such as outings that excluded the foster child.

“ I felt very confident going into college, knowing that I have support. If I need something it is okay to ask

“Bailee” and her two sisters were raised in a home where the mother was addicted; both parents were eventually imprisoned.

Bailee acted out early and often, was “suspended 1000 times,” and gave up on school while in middle school.

She was “in and out of juvie at least 20 times,” explaining, “I felt like I was self-sabotaging ... when I went to juvie, I had a hot meal every night. My doors locked and I felt safe.”

For more of Bailee’s story, see page 33

“John” entered foster care as a pre-teen and primarily had one family placement. His foster parents were approachable; they did not judge or shame him but tried to understand. He also had good relationships with teachers—he was open about being in foster care and problems he faced outside of the classroom.

Even though John was involved in addiction treatment and spent time in juvenile detention, his foster parents advocated for him and he was able to be included in sports and school activities.

To read more about John, see page 53

***“ It was hard to connect to people I didn’t trust, and when I acted out, they pushed me away ... Nobody was really interested in dealing with a broken teenager.*”**

Others asserted that the foster parent were just “in it for the money.”

- ◆ “Everything else was a bed until I could get to the next one.”
- ◆ “I’ve never been treated like family in a foster home, ever. I’ve always felt like I was another paycheck. I never felt like I was truly part of a family until I started to find my own foster homes.”
- ◆ “I’ve never felt so low and so discredited as a human as when you are in a foster home ... You feel like you are an object.”
- ◆ “[My] foster parent said, ‘I give you a roof over your head, food, and water. What else do you expect of me?’”

Comments about why foster placements were or were not a “good match” covered some of the same issues, but also dealt with problems due to religious differences, LGBTQ+ youth being placed with families that were intolerant of their gender/sexual identities, and houses with rules that were hard adjustments.

Many interviewees felt the foster parents were not prepared for the reality of caring for a teenager and/or those who had experienced trauma.

- ◆ “They were more into punishing me than rewarding and the taking things away from me and holding them played into my fears of having things stolen from me.”
- ◆ “It was hard to connect to people I didn’t trust, and when I

acted out, they pushed me away ... Nobody was really interested in dealing with a broken teenager.”

- ◆ “There was a lack of understanding of who I am.”
- ◆ “I feel like any foster home you get put in, especially if you are a teenager, you get treated like a prisoner and you are not one of their own.”

Mental Health Services

Participants’ reactions to mental health services were fairly evenly distributed. Interviewees said it was usually offered but varied in effectiveness.

At times, the young person was not ready for the service, the type offered was inappropriate, or the foster family was not supportive, which made transportation difficult. Some interviewees spoke of their mental health issues being belittled and being blamed for not more quickly recovering from trauma.

Several suggested that those experiencing foster care be given more choice/say in what type of therapy they are offered, and at what point. The most positive comments came from those who found the right counselor on their own or through a foster parent.

- ◆ “I was almost bullied into taking part by my State social worker ... They thought they knew better than I did what I needed.”
- ◆ “My mental health was not [social workers’] biggest concern. Their concern was ‘am I in a safe place’ not ‘am I safe in

my head.' ... These kids are in foster care for a reason ... these reasons are not little. It's not like 'They didn't get what they wanted for Christmas.'"

- ◆ "[My foster parents] told me to 'just pray'."
- ◆ "I was grilled 24/7 on whether I needed counseling ... It felt like it was a priority rather than choice ... It was something that I did not have a say in. I wanted to be able to make that decision for myself ... It was kind of like 'You are a foster kid, so you have to be in counseling.'"
- ◆ "It was useless. Most visits were tests of 'what's wrong with me?'"
- ◆ "You just have to find it. Your case worker is going to be no help to you."

Understanding by Teachers

"Teachers' understanding" also garnered varied grades. At the best, teachers brought in extra food for the youth, let them sleep on the couch, passed along gift cards, took them shopping and/or did their laundry. At worst, teachers were inflexible with deadlines, even when the student was traumatized.

Several interviewees spoke of advocating for themselves with teachers, who were suspicious of what might be excuses to avoid assignments. This included one girl who was forced to complete homework on her "family tree," even after she explained the trauma associated with family memories. Others preferred not to

bring attention to their foster care status, and thus did not advocate for themselves with teachers.

- ◆ "They seemed to not work with me, either I was being targeted or I was a really bad kid."
- ◆ "I asked to see the counselor five times today because I'm really having a bad day and there is something going on in my foster home, not because I am trying to get out of class."
- ◆ "I never received that genuine concern for my wellbeing."
- ◆ "I had one science teacher that I could talk to about anything ... She's basically a counselor."

Transition Planning

Since so many participants were still in EFC, their comments about "transitions" concerned various points in their lives, including when they entered the system, moves from one placement to another, reunification with their biological family, and the move to EFC.

Most shifts to EFC were smooth, but some interviewees were so frustrated with foster care by age 18 that they would not consider more State involvement. A couple were kept out of EFC by what they reported were wrong assumptions about the requirements and/ or conditions.

- ◆ "All the supports I had, did what they could to explain the resources that I had in Extended Foster Care."
- ◆ "I didn't want to sign into Extended Foster Care, because every single social worker screwed me over."

“These kids are in foster care for a reason ... These reasons are not little. It's not like 'They didn't get what they wanted for Christmas.'”

"Mai" first entered foster care in grade school, after "continuous CPS cases." She was reunited with her biological family after one year, although she resisted.

She attributes the problem to her mother's culture undervaluing girls; required family therapy did not seem helpful.

Mai stayed with her biological family, because she was parenting her younger brother. But there were "fights every day ... the police were called."

After several years, a social worker "forced her" back into foster care. She entered Tribal Child Welfare due to a bureaucratic mix-up; her younger brother's father is a tribal member, not hers.

For more of Mai's story, see page 37

Amira entered foster care while in high school, after being molested by her biological father. She told a counselor at her school, then stayed at a shelter and on a friend's couch until a foster care placement was arranged. The "F"s she gave to school support reflect how her teachers treated her during that time—she cried through class with no intervention, and was told by one, "Just because you're going through stuff doesn't mean you don't have to do your homework."

Luckily for Amira, her social worker recognized her anxiety about moving into a strange home and let her interview potential foster parents. She has been so happy with the resultant foster family that, even though she is now 21, they are adopting her. "They are my family," she says.

Even with that successful result, Amira gave almost all "D" and "F" grades to the supports she received during her years in foster care.

For more of Amira's story, see page 74

“ Sometimes foster care just really sucked.

- ◆ "I wish I would have known about the health insurance because that would be a deal breaker for me."
- ◆ "It's frustrating ... I feel like things would be different if Extended Foster Care had not routed that way ... but what's unfortunate is there's no appeal process."
- ◆ "I only found out about Extended Foster Care the day I was in court with a judge having to decide."
- ◆ "If you don't go [into EFC] they don't know what to do with you."

Some who had already transitioned out of foster care felt entirely prepared, but many didn't:

- ◆ "When I turn 21, what do I do? What is my support system and what is not..? No one talked to me about that."
- ◆ "There is not enough time to plan ... I'm going to lose my housing in a year, and I don't know what I am going to do."
- ◆ "It's just they don't really prepare you to go out and live in real world without ... I don't have anybody to turn to when I am in trouble. And they don't give resources to turn to. Because when you are once out care, they drop you like a fly ... I had to learn all of that on my own ... That is pretty much every foster kid does ... We already have to grow up without parents, we shouldn't have to grow up learning everything on our own."

Peer Support

Most interviewees explained that their grades for peer support referred to informal groups, not formal programs; only a few spoke positively about special events/connections for youth in foster care.

Several wished that there had been systems in place to make peer connections more easily:

- ◆ "I would talk about how I felt and they would understand ... they wouldn't be rude and laugh."
- ◆ "I got to be around other people my age in similar situations, which was nice."
- ◆ "It was nice to see how many kids actually go through things that I went through ... I always felt like nobody gets it and no other kids my age understands, so it was really nice to be in a setting where there was kids who understood."

Social/Case Workers

Two survey questions addressed social workers, including their consistency and their support. In the one-on-one interviews, the issues often overlapped.

Most interviewees spoke of multiple social workers (generally five or more) or which one was helpful, at best. Interviewees were especially appreciative of social workers who initiated check-ins or, at least, responded quickly when the interviewee initiated contact.

Support varied widely; at the worst, interviewees did not know who

their social worker was. At the other end of the spectrum, several interviewees described social workers going out of their way, often on their own, unpaid time.

- ◆ “My current social worker is awesome. I absolutely adore her ... She answers me right away, which is amazing.”
- ◆ “He’s always there for me ... He checked in a lot; he came every month. If I had any problem, he was always there.”
- ◆ “It made everything easier having a social worker that really cared for me ... They would talk to me like a human not some poor oppressed child. They always took time to ask how I was.”

Many times, those helpful social workers were transferred or promoted, with little or no warning; such changes became part of ongoing turnover among social workers. The damage caused by turnover was compounded by most social workers’ apparently excessive workload, and, for some, perhaps degradation of their attitude toward the children/youth they were supposed to serve. Many interviewees spoke of not seeing their social worker for long stretches of time. Even when visitations were steady, many social workers were said to have pre-set priorities for the case and to not “listen” to the child/youth preferences.

The interviewee’s complaints started with CPS workers who failed to remove them quickly from situations of abuse. They continued with social workers not

being sure the caregivers were out of hearing when they checked in with the child, so the child was not free to be truthful.

Many social workers were said to ignore the interviewees’ reports of abuse in foster homes, and to downplay various other issues. There were also dozens of laments about slow social worker responses to requests for more minor needs, such as clothing vouchers, other resources, and simple information.

- ◆ “I probably had seven social workers from time I was 17 ... When I finally did feel comfortable talking to my social worker, they would be switched ... Every time just felt so impersonal, I was just a case number.”
- ◆ “They don’t take the kids side.”
- ◆ “[Social worker] was very mean to me. She didn’t listen.”
- ◆ “For a long time, at a critical point when I was trying to find out that I was being shipped back to my family, I didn’t even know who my case worker was.”
- ◆ “They were all just awful ... it was terrifying.”
- ◆ “I went through a lot of social workers and I did not see them that often ... I didn’t have the same social worker for a long time. They are always overwhelmed so they can’t do much anyway.”
- ◆ “I don’t want to feel like just another case ... I’m just a piece of paper, you’re just doing your job and checking me off and leaving.”

“ I wish I would have known about the health insurance because that would be a deal breaker for me.

“Cynthia” entered foster care while in high school after she, her mother and her younger sister were in and out of homelessness.

Her first placement failed, with “too many rules” and foster parents that expected her to attend their church “almost all week.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not religious,” she explained.

Cynthia’s first social worker was responsive to her request for a new placement, moving Cynthia quickly to a temporary home that was successful and discussing options. Cynthia said, “She actually listened to my opinion.”

After moving her to another home, the social worker even drove Cynthia to her old high school every morning to maintain stability.

For hear more about Cynthia, see page 35

“Heaven” entered foster care as a young teen. She move through several placements and shelters — “just a bed until I could get to the next one.”

She immediately felt the difference at her present home because, “They made me feel welcome ... [they] told me I could eat ‘anytime.’ It just felt like a family instead of a foster home.”

Heaven chose adoption into the family over Extended Foster Care because, “I could restart and not feel like I had to live in the past.”

For more of Heaven’s story, see page 65

“ I went through a lot of social workers and I did not see them that often ... They are always overwhelmed so they can’t do much anyway

- ◆ “They didn’t listen to me at all. They didn’t listen to me about abuse. I documented bruises and awful things family members said to me.”
- ◆ “Make sure the social workers actually care.”
- ◆ “My case worker has been more detrimental than helpful.”
- ◆ “They need more empathy. All they want to do is get rid of those cases instead of what is best for the kids.”
- ◆ “I could tell they had other things to deal with ... When I had a question it would take three months to get an answer.”
- ◆ “Social workers are not emotionally invested. I never had a good experience with any social worker. They’ve been inappropriate in many ways.”

A few interviewees blamed the structure, or the social worker’s supervisor

- ◆ “I really blame the system because they have to go through the system, they have to wait for other systems. Their job is hard too, they don’t have the resources. Most of my female workers really did try, just didn’t get the help that they needed.”
- ◆ “I’ve always had good experiences with social workers ... [But] the ‘higher ups’ are more interested in the money. They put little effort into helping foster kids.”

It was notable that very few interviewees mentioned reaching out to a social worker’s supervisor

to give feedback. Instead, the young people seemed to feel powerless to affect any change in the situation with their social worker, either by complaining, reporting their social worker, or going around them.

None mentioned the existence of the Office of the Family and Child Ombuds, about which they are supposed to be informed, and only a handful spoke of contacting their social worker’s supervisor:

- ◆ “When it’s a dire situation and you need to talk to your social worker, immediately or you need to know where to go, they are M.I.A.”

Attorneys

The online survey did not ask about attorneys but many interviewees mentioned theirs (16 out of the 63). The comments were almost all positive—even superlative. The accolades centered on youth being “heard” and included the attorneys having time to support the youth in multiple realms: talking to teachers, pressuring social workers, providing rides, advising on colleges and EFC, etc.:

- ◆ “Your attorney is always for you, they are always putting their foot out, one step ahead of yours to make sure you are covered.”
- ◆ “She got to know me. She actually listened to what I wanted and took the time to understand.”
- ◆ “You need to have an attorney who wants your voice to be heard... It was key that I had good legal representation.”

Importance of Services

To get a sense of the relative importance of the services, participants were asked to name the three most important for them, as well as the least important (see Table 6).¹³ At the top of the lists were:

- ◆ “Having foster parents/caregivers that treated you like family” (44% named this as one of the three most important, and only 2% as least important)
- ◆ “Education/school support” (39% and 5%), and;
- ◆ “Your placement within foster home that were a good match for you” (36%, and 3%).

There was also strong consensus on the relative lack of importance for sex education: only 3% named it as one of the three most important services, and 30% called it the “least important.”

Perhaps most surprising are the low importance scores for “Keeping the Same Social Worker”— only 16% named it as one of the three most important factors for them. This belies the sense one gets from interview comments.

It seems that those experiencing high social worker turnover had given up on social workers as useful supports or had just not experienced what might result from better/more consistent social workers. One interviewee said:

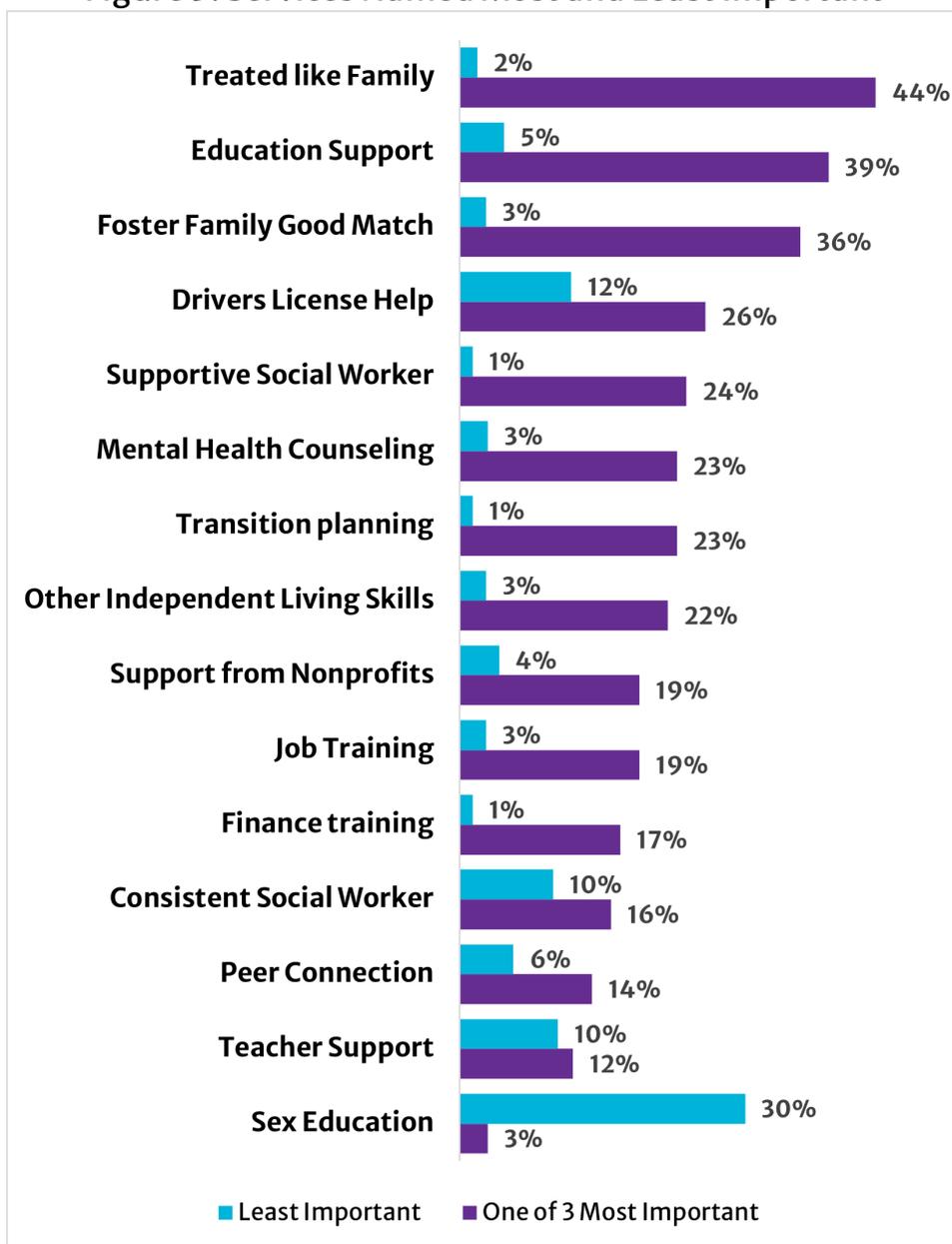
- ◆ “My social workers weren’t a main part of my case; I didn’t care to see them because they

weren’t the people helping me.”

However, among those who gave “Keeping the Same Social Worker” an “A”, 34% included it in the three most important services. This compares to only 6% of those who graded the service and “F.”

“ There need to be more questions and more training before any child gets placed anywhere.

Figure 5: Services Named Most and Least Important



“Angelica” and her siblings were in and out of foster care from the time she was a toddler. Her mother was addicted, and they were often homeless. Her younger brother was placed in a family that stayed in touch when the siblings were back with their biological mother.

When Angelica was six, the kids were permanently moved to foster care. Her brother was adopted by his earlier foster family; Angelica and her sister were periodically together but did not get along well. Her sister was also adopted. Angelica “just bounced from home to home to home to home.”

For more of Angelica’s story, see page 76

Similarly, one of the two respondents who named “treated as family” as “least important” explained:

- ◆ “You learn pretty quickly that foster care isn’t designed to give you love and belonging – if your basic needs are met and you are safe and not being sent back to your abusive parents, you are lucky. Hoping or looking for being treated like family when you are in foster care or really only sets yourself up for disappointment.”

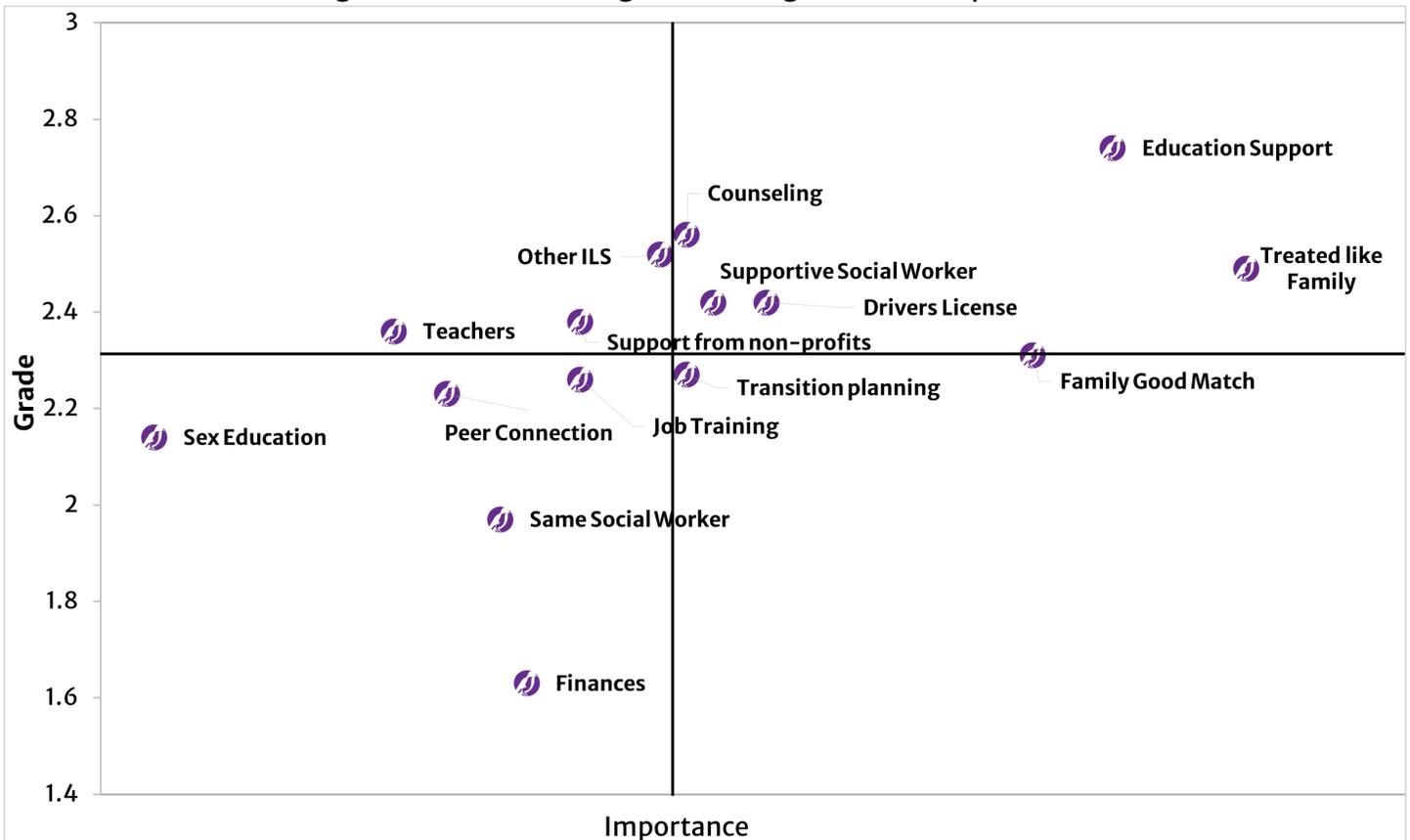
It seems that there is a strong correlation between services that received higher grades and those that were thought more important. That is, the respondents thought of “importance” more as what helped them, discounting what might have been detrimental.

This correlation is evident from scatterplots that chart the average services grades against the percentage that deemed the service as one of the three most important (see Figure 6.)

The upper right quadrant of Figure 6 shows the services that were above average in importance; for the most part, they also received above average grades. Similarly, the lower left quadrant includes services that were least apt to be termed important; they also earned the lowest average grades.

One notable outlier is “Training on finances” for which the average grade was quite a bit lower than would be expected— that is, the average grade did not follow the amount of agreement seen between importance and grades that was seen for other services.

Figure 6: Plot of Average Grades Against Net Importance



Importance of Additional Services

BIPOC (e.g., some race/ethnicity other than only “white”) and LGBTQ+ identifying respondents rated the importance of services that might help with challenges related to their identities.

Because of the short list of services addressed, they chose the single most important service and the least important. See Table 6.

Both groups reinforced the significance of foster parents:

- ◆ 37% of the BIPOC respondents named “foster parent support” as most important when dealing with cultural challenges.
- ◆ 33% of those identifying as

LGBTQ+ said the same of support related to their sexual/ gender identities.

Plots of these service grades against net importance again show a strong relationship between successful services and what is important to the respondent (see Figures 7 & 8). In this case the slight outliers were:

- ◆ “Help with Bullying” was more important for those identifying as LGBTQ+ than the average grades the service was awarded.
- ◆ “Finding Peers” was similarly out of alignment for those identifying as BIPOC.

“Sofia” entered the foster care system as a teenager. She was originally placed with her 26-year-old sister, who “kicked her out” of the house a year later.

Sofia was shuttled between various youth shelters while her social worker tried to reunite the sisters. Sofia felt discriminated against in the shelters because of her ethnicity, saying she unfairly “had the cops called” on her several times.

Sofia reports that she most needed mental health care at that point, but there was no transportation and her initial social worker did not help her with those services. Sofia stayed in school but says her IEP teacher just had her watch movies.

Sofia concludes, “I wish I could have felt they cared about me and not just their pay or another kid in their file.” Luckily, she was finally matched in a home where she says, “To me they are my parents.”

For more on Sofia, see page 47

“ I’m thankful for foster care because I got in a better place.

Table 6: Importance of Supports for Specific Challenges

	Most Important	Least Important
Among those self-identifying as a race or ethnicity other than white: N= 87	%	%
Foster Parent Support	37	14
Finding Peers	25	16
Social Worker Support	17	14
Support for Bullying	11	15
Culturally Specific Medical Care	6	34
Among those self-identifying as LGBTQ+: N= 58		
Foster Parent Support	33	10
Support for Bullying	22	14
Social Worker Support	14	14
Finding Peers	9	19
LGBTQ Specific Medical Care	9	29

“Case” went into foster care at pre-school age. He was kept with two older brothers; a younger sister was in a separate placement.

Case’s first several placements were not successful, but he does not remember those clearly. His brothers tell him of mistreatment and a lack of acceptance. Case does remember that the disruptions were sudden and not explained. He says, “They would just load us up from one place to the next without any information about where we were going.”

Fortunately, Case and his brothers were finally placed with a foster family so successful that they adopted the three brothers by the time Case was five. The family ultimately also housed and adopted the younger sister.

Case says, “I know I am fortunate.”

For more of Case’s story, see page 74

“What it really comes down to is your resilience and willingness to come back at it.”

Figure 7: Plot of Average Grades for LGBTQ+ Supports Against Importance

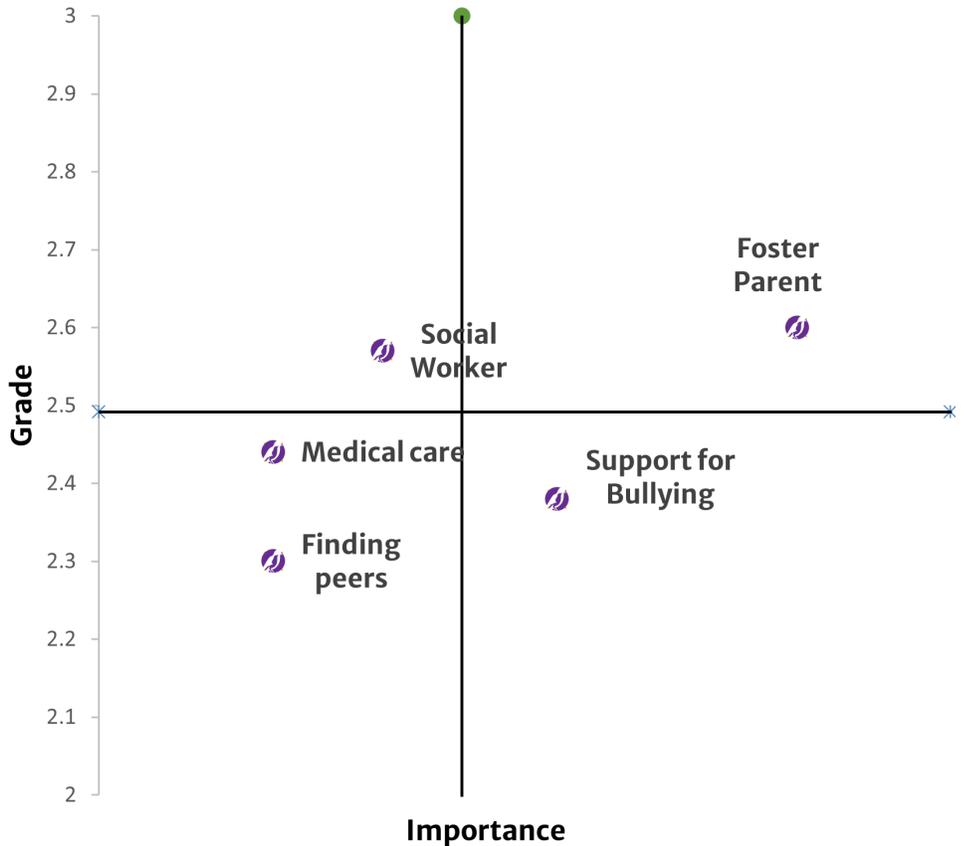
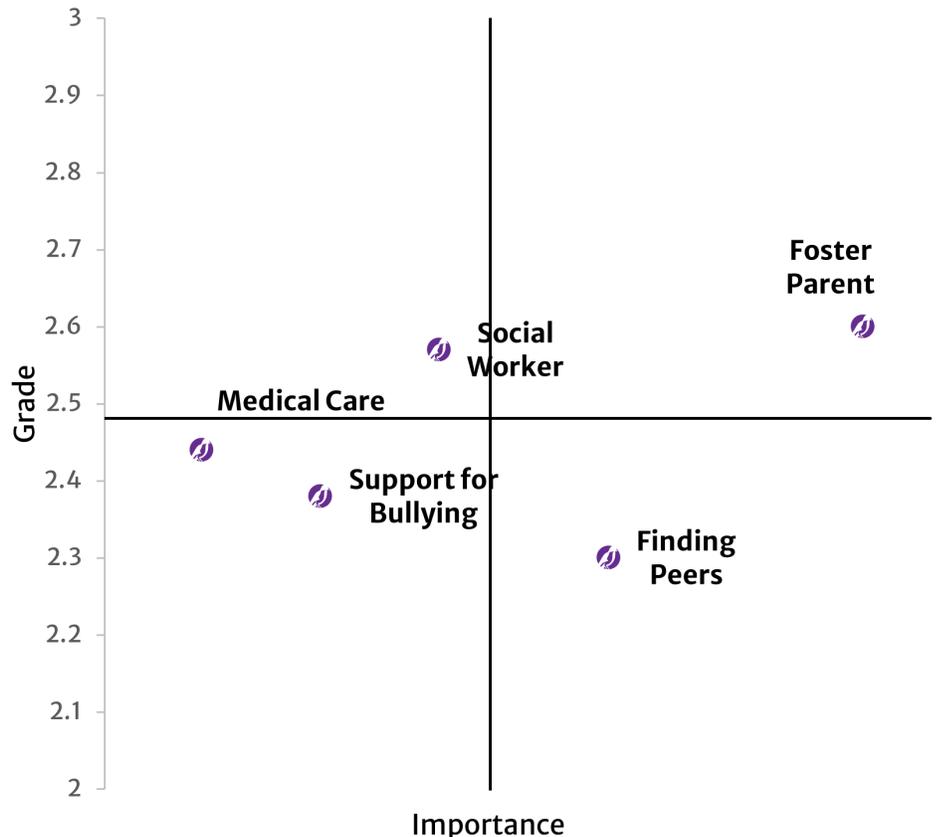


Figure 8: Plot of Average Grades for Racial/Ethnic Identity Supports Against Importance



Discussion

The issues raised here are not new. It is well-documented that the State struggles for resources and staff to successfully support those in foster care. There are insufficient foster parents, making it difficult to match cultural identities, geography, language, the needs of older children, etc.¹⁴. And excessive social worker turnover has been recognized nationwide for years.¹⁵

What is added here is an increased awareness of what it feels like to be subjected to the Child Welfare system's deficits. The legitimacy of the concerns raised is supported by the fact that most have been recognized over the years by Mockingbird's thousands of direct program through our annual issue development process and legislative advocacy efforts.

Many of the resultant Mockingbird advocacy goals have been successful, including the adoption and expansion of Extended Foster Care, more inclusive eligibility for college scholarships, help with driver's training and car insurance expenses, phasing out the use of detention of minors for non-criminal acts, and the 2021's legislation mandating attorney appointments for children in foster care starting at age eight, to be phased in by 2027.

Other issues have been raised—sometimes repeatedly—but not addressed through legislation or practice change. These include:

- ◆ Improved support for those in foster care who identify as LGBTQ+, such as efforts in 2015

and 2019 to add sensitivity training for potential foster parents, and 2018's unsuccessful advocacy to expand recruitment of LGBTQ+ foster parents and include explicit anti-discrimination language in the Washington Administrative Code (WAC).

- ◆ 2017's attempt to improve social worker retention
- ◆ Unresolved efforts to launch a mobile-friendly website/app for more easily accessible information on foster child/youth rights and resources
- ◆ 2019's request that all those who foster must receive a comprehensive core curriculum and on-going training on cultural responsiveness, crisis de-escalation, trauma-informed care and disciplinary practices, and casefile interpretation.

Considering both the results of this report and the known history of the issues, Mockingbird staff and partners have identified several areas of concerns that the State, lawmakers and advocates should prioritize.

Investigation Needs

There needs to be more clarity in how the State monitors adherence to existing policy. This includes the frequency and privacy of case worker visits with children/youth in foster care and mandates around freedom of religious practices for those in foster care. Additionally, more transparency in the State's data collection would be useful;

“Kiana” was among the respondents who gave grades ranging only “F” to a high of “C”. After entering the system as a young teen, she was first sent to a juvenile detention facility as there was no other space. Her autistic younger brother went to a foster family specifically for his special needs; they eventually dropped him off at his school with his belongings to be picked up by his social worker.

At the detention facility, Kiana reports being threatened and abused by other youth. She was transferred to a foster home that initially seemed fine, but their Christian beliefs and church community began clashing with Kiana's non-Christian faith background. She reports being “forced” to attend their church and being told that her beliefs were “nonexistent.” Kiana summarizes, “I am all about accepting different religions and different cultures, but it's a different thing if they are forcing that on you.”

The church also believed that “gay people were going to hell.” When they learned that Kiana was interested in girls, the pastor church quoted bible verses as he sprinkled holy water on her so she could “pray it away.”

Continued on page 73

“ Make sure the social workers actually care.

“Brandi” was “found in a tent” when she was a toddler and removed from her birth family. She then lived primarily with one foster family for over 10 years, although she reports being abused and was sent several times to group homes as “punishment.” After leaving that home, she experienced several foster families and group homes, as well as juvenile detention.

During all this, she recounts one positive experience in a home that felt like a family—they went camping, had chores, and she even got a dog. Because of this one home, she graded “having a foster family that was a good match for you” as a “B”.

Brandi gave an “A” to her mental health counseling, saying her counselor was someone she was “able to talk to and they actually cared and wanted to hear it, somebody that I trusted.”

She felt pressured to go, but says, “Looking back, it was a good thing, and now I know how to get the help I need today.”

To read more of Brandi’s story, see page 67

“ I only found out about Extended Foster Care the day I was in court with a judge having to decide.

published reports of federal government mandates include long-term outcome tracking, such as time in foster care, rate of reunification, etc. However, many interim outcomes —e.g. social worker turnover—impact the children and youth who are less apt to be reunified or adopted, such as the adolescents in this report.

The interviewees in this study very rarely recognized avenues of recourse, such as contacting a supervisor of the Office of Ombuds. They would be better served by an automated, regular feedback loop to track the success of services. This could be a simple, semi-annual check-in, 10-question survey that, when compiled, would illuminate consistent issues and successes.

In addition, a State-sponsored youth-informed study of this population’s opinions is advised, including follow-up subsequent to exiting. With access to full records, the State could structure a sample that was more inclusive of all those with foster care experience...”

Training/ Specialized Staffing

This study also indicates a lack of understanding of trauma-informed care. Study participants repeatedly reported being met with impatience when exhibiting the normal stresses of adolescence coupled with the impact of over a decade of trauma — before and after entering foster care.

The findings also demonstrates the specific issues faced by adolescents in care; we believe it’s necessary to institutionalize specialized social worker support. Such social workers would be better informed on adolescents’ issues such as addressing emerging sexual identities, job and finance training, and driver’s license obtainment. In addition, such social workers would be more accustomed to partnering with youth in planning their own care and promoting their self-advocacy.

Mental Health

Mental health issues related to time in foster care are also well-documented. The “C” grades reported here for mental health counseling are not sufficient to address the long-term impacts of these mental health concerns. In particular, these data illustrate the compounded mental health stresses on those who identify as LGBTQ+. Although previous efforts situation have not met with success, we must continue to work toward improvement placements and supports for this population.

The study also reconfirms what works, including the “one committed adult” described by Harvard’s Center on the Developing Child in 2015.¹⁶ It is the nature of relationships with adults that is highlighted by these voices, with any service provider or foster parent. Successful relationships were described as not “a paycheck,” and “like family” or “a friend.”

This committed style may be easier to achieve for nonprofit employees, as their scope is smaller than State case managers’ and their resources more ample. The challenge is for all those in contact with these young people to work toward that approach, and for the State to add the necessary capacity.

It is too many that a single service recipient is compelled to say: “I’ve always felt alone in the foster care system.”

Acknowledgments

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Endnotes

1. <https://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/washington-fosteryouthtransitions-2018.pdf>, page 4
2. <https://endhomelessness.org/foster-kids-and-homelessness-what-are-the-risk-factors/#.VlzCaHarSM8>
3. <https://partnersforourchildren.org/data/quickfacts>
4. <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/> The comparison data is not a precise match; i.e. children of all ages were included in the Kidscount data. However, it does give a sense of probable geographic bias in our data.
5. <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/6246-children-in-foster-care-by-race-and-hispanic-origin>
6. <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/143/3/e20174211>
7. American Psychological Association: <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2007-05931-004>
8. <https://partnersforourchildren.org/data/quickfacts>. The year chosen is close to when these participants entered.
9. <http://www.vis.pocdata.org/graphs/family-settings>
10. Ibid
11. Respondents contacted through a specific agency were asked to grade that agency by name, and the results shared with the nonprofit directly. Respondents contacted through a widely posted weblink were asked to grade “nonprofit services” in general. VOA in Spokane did not include this question for their respondents.
12. Asked after the query about finance training, “other” is meant to be apart from financial knowledge.
13. Asking respondents to rank the services was too cumbersome in pre-tests, and rating each service resulted in almost all being termed “very important,” and thus not differentiated.
14. <https://www.newamerica.org/weekly/four-ways-fix-washington-states-foster-care-system/>
15. <https://www.invw.org/2016/12/08/social-worker-churn-undercuts-washingtons-foster-care-system/>
16. <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/15/03/science-resilience>

“ It’s frustrating that you have to go through so much, just to see your family or even talk to them.

“Kaylie” entered foster care while in high school and aged out at 18 without entering EFC. She is one of the participants that did not graduate, and still faces strong challenges. She generally gave services “C” grades, which she explained as being an average of “some good, some bad.” Kaylie was assaulted in one foster home, but another made her feel she was “part of the family.” She explains, “They wouldn’t tell people that I was their foster kid, so that made me feel good.”

Kaylie switched schools twice, which contributed to her lack of a degree; she has been diagnosed with a learning disability and had an IEP. At one high school, Kaylie found some of her teachers to be willing to help and make time for her, even meeting over lunch. She also felt supported by her school and her foster parents when she was being bullied online because of her sexual identity. Finally, she had a good relationship with her therapist, with whom she worked for three years—a valuable consistency. Unfortunately, she lost the connection when she left the foster care system.

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Case Studies

This section is comprised of short narratives that profile each of the one-on-one interviews that were conducted. The names and some details have been changed/excluded to protect the participants' identities.

Sierra

“Sierra” and her two younger sisters entered foster care together when Sierra was in her early teens, escaping an abusive stepfather. They were placed with relatives of the stepfather, which was not Sierra’s choice. Sierra described this first foster family as treating the sisters as though they were “born evil” and had to have the evil “raised out of them.” When another family member across the state offered to take them in, Sierra moved; her sisters initially did not want to leave their community or proximity to their mother, feeling it would make a reunion with her even more difficult.

Her sisters did eventually join Sierra, but Sierra exited the second home as well. She felt that, as an older youth, the family did not take the time to allow her to adjust to their family habits and did not sympathize with what she had been through. They pointedly referred to the sisters as their “foster children” in public, and barred Sierra from her friends, driver’s license training, and even available training in finances. “You don’t need that,” she quoted her foster father.

Sierra’s third home has been a more successful match, in terms of parenting a teenager. She does have to help care for younger children in the house, but says the foster parent is “Good at being a mom.” Unfortunately, her previous foster home, where her sisters remain, does not allow the required visits between the siblings.

Sierra is especially negative when discussing her social workers, especially what she calls her primary caregiver, who is still across the state where she entered foster care—she is more positive the local “courtesy worker” who conducts home visits. Sierra reports that the primary social worker “never followed up,” especially when alerted that she was being kept from her sisters. She even suspects that the social worker purposely sent clothing vouchers to her past foster parents’ home, without alerting her. She adds, “Courtesy workers try to get her to do stuff for me, but she just blows it off.”

Sierra is disdainful of the schools she attended, finding the teachers unsympathetic. One school also sent notices to the wrong foster home, resulting in unexcused absences. The bright spots for Sierra were a couple of teachers and Youthnet, a local nonprofit support agency.

***“ It’s really hard to find a safe foster home when you are Trans and queer, and it really sucks.*”**

She explained “Every time I had a question for Youthnet they were responsive and had an answer, so they always helped out” with school, taxes, work questions and drivers ed—“Things that your Mom & Dad were supposed to show you.” She continues, “They were the best at getting back to me.”

Sierra is now living on her own with Extended Foster Care support, working part-time and attending college. Her take away from her years in the system is that all foster families should have to attend family therapy. She thinks this is especially true of older foster children, who are used to different parenting styles and rules, and are apt to have more trauma in their history. “They would be happier and healthier if they went into some therapy,” she finishes.

Brady

“Brady” entered foster care at eight months old. He was with his first family for six years; although he was not happy there, he did not realize there were any alternatives. No one had told him that the couple raising him were not his birth parents, and that he was in foster care. There were visits from social workers, but Brady did not know that did not happen for all families.

Shortly after entering grade school, Brady began visiting another couple on weekends. After a few such visits, all his clothes and belongings were packed and sent with him; his new foster mother explained that he would now live with them.

Luckily, Brady loved his new foster home. He calls his foster parents “Mom” and “Dad,” they teach him practical skills, keep the fridge stocked, and host family meals. “[It’s] not just some foster-type home,” he explains. “They don’t have outside care-givers; no strangers come for respite. When they are away somewhere some of their family members come. They teach us stuff, like how to fix things, [and] all about animals on the farm.”

It was not an issue for him that his foster family does not share his Native American heritage; whenever he expressed an interest in that culture, his foster parents were able to connect him with resources. In his grading, Brady gave almost all services an “A”, but it became clear that was because his foster mother advocated for him and arranged services. She organized his IEP at his school to help with his ADD diagnosis. She also realized right away that he needed counseling and knew how arrange it.

Brady is now finishing high school remotely while working full-time and will enter college in the fall. He knows that he got lucky with his second foster placement. His strongest message is for more transparency, even with young children. He feels he should have been more informed, even as a young child, or what his situation and options were, and what plans were being put into place for him.

“I don’t want to feel like just another case... I’m just a piece of paper, you’re just doing your job and checking me off and leaving.”

“ I had so many different social workers ... Always having to tell your story, having them read your folder and having preconceived ideas of who you are ... It’s a lot to deal with.

Helen

“Helen” is a young Native American woman who entered foster care as a pre-teen. She was placed in tribal foster care but later moved to a non-Native family to join her sister. Helen reported that she did not see her social worker enough while she was in care. In addition, the social worker was not responsive to Helen’s concerns about her foster placement. She said, “My experience with tribal care it was hard to get anything done quickly ... My social worker had too many cases.”

Helen felt that her second foster parents supported connecting her with the tribe and attending cultural events and activities. But she was not provided the opportunity to meet other tribal youth in foster care. Thankfully, Helen was able to access a counselor that made her feel like she was truly cared for and not just another case or patient. “It felt more like a supportive friendship than a mental health check,” Helen explains.

When she transitioned out of foster care Helen felt like she did not have a clear plan of what she was going to do or what resources she could access. She also was not confident in asking for help. She ended up being homeless, “couch surfing.”

Helen gave a particularly low grade to financial training. She eventually got connected to Youthnet and has been able to get job support and financial guidance. She feels she would have been in a better situation if she had more support and responsiveness while she was in foster care.

Rain

“Rain” lived with her grandparents for much of her early life; she entered foster care as a pre-teen after a failed reunion with her biological mother. After a few brief unsuccessful placements, Rain stayed for seven years with a veteran foster parent, along with “eight or nine” other foster children.

Rain describes her long-term foster mother as treating her like “her real daughter,” “pushing” her, and “not letting her give up on herself.” She advocates that children with issues as serious as hers be placed immediately with the more experienced foster parents, to save them passing through several unsuccessful placements before finding stability.

With a strong foster mother, Rain did not need much other support, especially at school. She also appreciated her community of extended foster brothers and sisters.

Rain’s greatest complaint was with a social worker who failed to pass on letters to and from her grandparents. It was only when her grandparents attended her high school graduation that Rain found they had been trying to reach her, and that her unanswered letters to them were never forwarded. Rain is now in Extended Foster Care, living with her boyfriend and their dog, and is enrolled in a post-high school program.

Diane

“Diane” describes herself as having been relatively lucky in foster care, although she acknowledges, “Being a foster child is not easy ... it is not a walk in the park.” She credits an early social worker, whom Diane calls “amazing ... She listened to every concern I had.” The social worker always took her out of the house during visits, for pizza or ice cream, and spent as much time as necessary.

Diane needed the social worker’s help initially, as she was first placed, as a pre-teen, across the state from her home with a family that did not accept her LGBTQ identity. She was called a “slut” by the family’s biological daughter, and the parents tried to “counsel the gay out of me.” “My self-esteem was in the shitter ... I was suicidal,” she continued. The social worker found an LGBTQ-friendly placement, where Diane flourished for years. However, after two years she was given a new social worker, whom she was told specialized in Native American youth such as her. That social worker, and most of the four that followed, were not as successful as the original assignment.

Diane is one of the survey participants that gave a “F” grade to “Keeping the same social worker”. “I had so many different social workers while in care,” she explained. “Like, over five to six years in care, I had six or seven social workers.” She continues, “A social worker is kind of the only constant in a kid’s life in foster care.” She details the impact as, “Always having to tell your story, having them read your folder and having preconceived ideas of who you are ... It’s a lot to deal with.”

Bailee

“Bailee” and her two sisters were raised in a home where the mother was addicted, and both parents were eventually imprisoned. She acted out early and often, was “suspended 1000 times,” and gave up on school while in middle school. She was “in and out of juvie at least 20 times,” explaining, “I felt like I was self-sabotaging ... when I went to juvie, I had a hot meal every night. My doors locked and I felt safe.”

After too many missed parole visits and a charge of stealing her mother’s car, Bailee was placed in a series of group homes. She chafed against the rigid rules and restrictions and kept running back home. She says of one group setting, “It was the most inhumane thing I have ever seen anyone do to a child.” She further explains, “I needed guidance from someone who wanted to help; of course, I’m going to act out ... No one wanted to just make sure I was ok.” Bailee was moved across the state to make it harder to reach home, and finally, as a teen, out of state.

She was there when her parole officer called to say, “Both your parents are going to jail. You’re a foster kid now.”

“ It felt more like a supportive friendship than a mental health check

“ I didn’t want to sign into Extended Foster Care, because every single social worker screwed me over ... People read my case file and read all this stuff about juvie and running away ... but I was a hurting kid from the time I got into foster care.

One lucky break came when Bailee’s younger sister was placed in a supportive foster home; her sister’s foster parents went to bat for Bailee many times, taking her sister to visit her, and then getting Bailee back to Washington.

Bailee was placed in a new home and went back to school. She was intimidated and overwhelmed after missing so much education. “They expected me to go to school and get good grades, but would penalize me when I didn’t,” she explained. “No one asked, ‘Why aren’t you doing well in school.’ ... No one wanted to work with me to help me succeed they just threatened me with juvie.” Just before she turned 18, Bailee moved in with relatives. Her social worker at the time, one of five in a two-year period, was no help before the transition. He did not return calls or emails and did not discuss Extended Foster Care. With little good information on EFC, she says, “I didn’t want to sign into Extended Foster Care, because every single social worker screwed me over ... People read my case file and read all this stuff about juvie and running away ... but I was a hurting kid from the time I got into foster care.”

After a series of bad decisions, bad luck and untreated trauma, Bailee was pregnant and homeless as a young adult. But her sister’s foster parents came to her aid again and signed her into EFC, getting her placed in their home and added to the case load of her sister’s social worker.

Bailee was able to form a strong bond with her sister and get her “head straight.” She finished high school, with support from Treehouse and a handful of teachers who went out of their way—even picking her up for school and bringing breakfast.

Her Treehouse support person helped her with financial aid and college applications and was “genuine.” “She didn’t feel like someone who was being paid to talk to me,” Bailee says. Bailee gave birth to a healthy baby and had just moved into her own apartment at the time of the interview.

Bailee advocates for more Family Team Decision Making (FTDM) meetings, instead of decisions being made “on the fly,” saying, “Those are vital in making sure everyone’s voice is being heard, including the child.” She also calls for more behavioral health services.

Bailee said, “[Foster children] need someone to direct them in healthy manner in how to get past resentment and frustration ... No one wanted a better life for me besides me. It’s so difficult to get by when you feel like you are all on your own. I wouldn’t wish it on anyone. That is a terrible way to grow up.”

Skylar

“Skylar” entered foster care at the start as a pre-teen, with a family that was “ok at first.” However, as Skylar moved into her teenage years, she did not behave like the daughter her foster parents had imagined.

They excluded her from outings with their two biological children, and the rift deepened.

Skylar appealed to her social worker for a new family, who just insisted “they are good people.” Skylar now says of social workers in general, “They don’t take the kids side. I was really depressed, and she didn’t do anything about it.” Skylar stayed in the unhappy home for six years in total, until she came out to her foster mother about her bisexuality. Within a week, the foster mother packed Skylar’s belongings, told Skylar she was picking her up early from school for a doctor’s appointment, and then dropped her off at the DSHS office.

Skylar’s second placement seemed to be an improvement, with the foster family even discussing adoption, but Skylar was apprehensive when the family forbade her from visiting her biological aunt. She ended up moving again to live with the aunt, which was also not ideal.

The bright spot in Skylar’s story is a teacher; Skylar says, “I could go to for anything.” The teacher even sought to become a foster parent herself to take in Skylar but was told that she could not be guaranteed her choice of placements. She and Skylar remain close; Skylar refers to the teacher as “My soul Mom.”

Skylar has struggled to pass college classes to maintain the scholarship for which she qualifies and is hesitant to risk her own funds on college when she finds the classes so difficult. She is living with her boyfriend now and looking for work, perhaps in a daycare again, which she enjoys.

Cynthia

“Cynthia” entered foster care while in high school after she, her mother and her younger sister were in and out of homelessness. Her first placement failed, with “too many rules” and foster parents that expected her to attend their church “almost all week“. “I’m sorry, I’m not religious,” she explained.

Cynthia’s first social worker was responsive to her request for a new placement, moving Cynthia quickly to a temporary home that was successful and discussing options. Cynthia said, “She actually listened to my opinion.” After moving her to another home, the social worker even drove Cynthia to her old high school every morning to maintain stability.

Unfortunately, Cynthia was not able to keep that relationship; her second social worker was also described as “amazing,” but having three social workers in one and a half years made it difficult for Cynthia to trust.

Cynthia’s current placement has worked well for her, with a foster mom and foster sisters that refer to her as their “daughter” and “sister.” Her sisters made her feel welcomed and introduced her to others at her new school. The household meets for family meals, and the foster mother is advocating for Cynthia’s wishes to stay in Extended Foster Care.

***“(Of Treehouse)
They were really on
top of it and made
sure I got exactly
what I needed for
support.***

Cynthia has a job, a car, and plans for college. However, she feels that her current social worker is pressuring her to reunite with her bio mother against her will. Cynthia attributes this to the social worker's workload "I think she just wants me off her case load."

Cynthia's advice was: "If you are trying to find a great home for children, there should always be more of an overview of who the parents are ... are they going to have outrageous rules ... Otherwise, you get thrown into someone's home and suddenly it's like 'You have to follow our rules now.'"

Eric

"Eric" was an older teen when he and his younger siblings entered the foster care system. After a short stay in a group home, he and one brother settled into a three-year placement; the family is now adopting both. Eric attributes the family's success to shared interests and the attitude of the parent. They did not treat Eric and his brother "any differently than their own kids," including taking them on trips.

He continues, "They quickly introduced us as 'their kids' to their family and friends ... We feel extremely safe, cared for and loved." The parents were transparent about expectations and gave guidelines, but allowed ongoing conversation on how things would work in the home.

Although they do not share Eric and his brother's cultural background, the foster parents have connected the two with others who share the same food, customs, and celebrations. They also have been very supportive of Eric keeping in close touch with his aunt and cousins. Eric also credits his success on several sympathetic high school teachers, who were flexible about deadlines when Eric was transitioning, and even supplied gift cards for food when Eric was in the group home.

The only "F" and "D" grades Eric gave were for the consistency and support of his social workers. He is on his 5th social worker in two and a half years. Some changes were for structural reasons – after it was clear the family could not be reunited, which was the first social worker's specialty, he and his brother were reassigned to another contact to help them through Terminating Parental Rights (TPR). Then, Eric was reassigned when he turned 18. However, in the two years since turning 18, Eric has had three more social workers, and has no idea why.

He also describes his social workers as "rushed" and "dismissive." "I never built a personal relationship with any of my social workers," he explains. "I could tell they had other things to deal with ... When I had a question it would take three months to get an answer."

Eric now has a full ride scholarship in college, and his brother has been reassured that he will be able to also get special supports even after adoption. Eric's wish for the foster care system would be that every child experiencing foster care could have as good of a placement. "My brother and I are very aware of how lucky we are," he sums.

***“ [I had] ten social workers in ten years ... They never read the file, and I had to keep telling my story over and over.*”**

Abby

“Abby” went into foster care as a teen but says “I should have been in foster care from the time I was about eight.” She was raised by strict Catholic parents, where “there was always an open CPS case.” Her parents barred the social workers from speaking with the kids and “talked themselves out of it.” She was homeschooled and did not feel there was another adult in her life in which she could confide.

On her 16th birthday Abby ran to a shelter for young adults and told them to call the police; she was placed in a temporary safe house. Unfortunately, her first placement was with friends of her parents, which she does not understand. “I said over and over where I wanted to go but no one listened to me.” When the family found out she was trans/queer, they kicked her out, saying “This is above our pay grade, we don’t want you to be transexual in our house.”

Abby moved in with relatives. She documented further abuse (bruises and quotes of their verbal violence), but her social worker did not believe her, and even made her apologize to the abusive cousins. When she turned 18, the relatives put her out of the house. She sums up, “It’s really hard to find a safe foster home when you are Trans and queer, and it really sucks.”

Fortunately, Abby had some good teachers along the way, and found a wonderful case manager at Youthnet. She advocated for herself to receive good mental health counseling; “I was adamant as soon as I got into foster care that I needed therapy and I told every single adult that ever talked to me ... I worked through a lot of my issues and I really connected.”

Abby also lauds the support from her attorney. She says, “I freaking love her ... she fostered the idea that I do something important with my life.” Abby now has accepted a full scholarship to college and plans to herself become an attorney and support children and youth experiencing foster care. She said about turning 21 the next day, “I’m really psyched.”

Mai

“Mai” first entered foster care in her early years in grade school, after “continuous CPS cases.” She was reunited with her biological family after one year, although she resisted. She attributes the problem to her mother being “old fashioned Asian,” and undervaluing girls. Required family therapy did not seem to help; Mai was afraid to be honest, in case her mother found out what was said. Mai feels that her mother convinced CPS that Mai was “the bad guy” and that no one listened to her side of the story.

After the reunification, Mai stayed with her biological family, because she had taken on the primary role of parenting her younger brother. But there were “fights every day ... the police were called.”

“(Speaking about an attorney) “I freaking love her ... She fostered the idea that I do something important with my life.”

***“ [The attorney] read my case file and got to know me. She actually listened to what I wanted and took the time to understand.*”**

When Mai reached 16, though, a social worker “forced her” back into foster care. She entered Tribal Child Welfare due to a bureaucratic mix-up; her younger brother’s father is a tribal member, not hers.

Being placed with a family from the tribe was not the cause of her culture shock, however. She was not accustomed to healthy parenting: “Wanting to eat dinner together was so new to me; my family NEVER ate dinner together.” She was used to taking care of herself, but eventually was able to bond with her foster parents—an “old lady” whom she now calls “Nana” and her daughter, who Mai calls “Mom.” They share a love of music and gardening, although when Mai came out to them as being gay, they “just laughed and said, ‘No you’re not.’”

Mai had little positive to say about social workers. Part of that stems from the years before foster care, when CPS workers failed to protect her from her abusive mother. Once in foster care, she had “ten social workers in ten years ... they never read the file, and I had to keep telling my story over and over.”

Mai also says the social workers “pushed her” to again reunite with her biological family, which she avoided with the help of an appointed attorney. Mai said, “[The attorney] read my case file and got to know me. She actually listened to what I wanted and took the time to understand.”

Mai bussed three hours a day to stay at her old high school and benefitted from Treehouse’s services. She credits Treehouse with getting her through school, as they paid for a laptop and software, which saved time. They also encouraged her to apply college. She says, “I was thinking ‘it’s just foster care and that’s it.’” Mai has just recently graduated with a 4-year college degree in social work.

Eva

When “Eva” was asked how many times she experienced homelessness, she said, “I was homeless on and off for years so it’s hard to count.”

Her mother left her in various houses when she was young; she did not know if some were foster care. By the time she entered her teens, however, CPS discovered her and two siblings living with their grandfather, and they officially entered the Child Welfare System.

Although their grandfather treated them well enough, she and her younger sister eventually agreed to transfer to the care of family friends, who were more financially stable. They were assisted by an appointed attorney, and CPS encouraged the move, because of the grandfather’s previous criminal record. Their brother stayed with their grandfather.

Eva gave her only “A” grade to her subsequent foster parents, most of the other grades she gave were “F”s. This included training in finances and other independent living skills, job and/or job search training, connecting with peers, and supports from nonprofit agencies.

“I’ve always felt alone in the foster care system,” she says.

Eva was especially harsh on her social workers, saying “I never had a good experience with a social worker ... they’ve been inappropriate in many ways.” She continues, “They are not emotionally invested ... they need more empathy.” Among other problems, she says they “downplayed” her PTSD from the years before foster care. “They said, ‘Everyone’s depressed.’” Eva found her own mental health counseling eventually, covered by her medical insurance.

Even with the lack of school and other support, Eva is taking AP classes, about to graduate from high school and applying to colleges. She transitioned to EFC and is optimistic about her future. Her main concern now is that the family’s social worker is trying to force her younger sister to be adopted by their foster parents, threatening to move the sister into another home otherwise. Eva is calling on the assistance of her attorney to support her sister.

Zacarius

“Zacarius” was living in a group home with behavioral support services at the time of the interview. He had entered the foster care system when he was a teenager along with his siblings, who were placed in separate homes. He has maintained contact with his siblings via visits coordinated by foster parents and unrestricted phone access to older siblings.

Zacarius reports that he was well supported by his social worker, counselor, and foster family. “They were just really there for me,” he explains. “It was a chaotic time. I couldn’t visit my family.” He knew they cared because they “listened” and helped him better understand what was going on. They also helped him think through decisions and arrive at different choices or options that would get him closer to the outcomes he wanted. He particularly remembers one time he was “really irritated ... [My foster dad] sat there and listened to me and it really made me feel like he was a parent to me.”

An accident and traumatic brain injury led to Zacarius’s move to the group home. He reports that staff at the home still treat him like family – one worker always greets him with a smile, and they call each other “mijo” and “Dad.” He also benefits from a transition program that helps with financial planning, cooking, and job experiences.

Journey

“Journey”—who uses they/them pronouns—was removed from an abusive family home while in grade school. Now a young adult and in EFC, they experienced 15 placements and nine school changes during the past decade.

“ I’ve never been treated like family in a foster home, ever. I’ve always felt like I was another paycheck

“(Of a social worker) He checked in a lot; he came every month. If I had any problem he was always there to support me.

Several of the failed placements were due to being placed in very religious families, that, among other issues, did not believe in the validity of Journey’s complex PTSD diagnoses. “They thought it was a sin that needed to be treated by biblical counselors,” they explain about one of the worst. Another religious family made them leave a therapist and see a church counselor instead, or Journey would be kicked from the house.

Journey gave failing grades to their foster families but marked “Foster families treating you like family” as unimportant because “you learn pretty quickly that foster care isn’t designed to give you love and belonging – if your basic needs are met and you are safe and not being sent back to your abusive parents, you are lucky. Hoping or looking for being treated like family when you are in foster care or homeless really only sets yourself up for disappointment.” They quote one foster parent as saying, “I give you a roof over your head, food and water. What else do you expect of me?”

Journey was particularly negative about their social workers, saying “My case worker has been more detrimental than helpful.” Months would go by, when Journey was waiting to see if they would be returned to their birth family and have no idea who their social worker was. Otherwise, Journey’s report of their social workers includes a long list of grievances, starting with the social worker being condescending and making no effort to remember their pronouns. At the other extreme, Journey’s social worker failed to reach out when told of Journey being sexually assaulted and needing a new place to live while their apartment was cordoned off as a crime scene.

The only “A” grade Journey awarded for various services was for Treehouse. “They are a no barrier service to young people, and you don’t see that very often,” they explain. “If you have a question and they don’t know the answer, they’ll figure it out.” Because of Treehouse, Journey graduated from high school and is now a junior in college. Undoubtedly, Journey would have graded their attorney an “A” had legal services been on the list. They did write legal services in as one of the most important needs for those experiencing foster care.

Journey also spoke of the importance of self-advocacy and resilience. “What it really comes down to is your resilience and willingness to come back at it,” they explained. “If you learn how to advocate for yourself in the right way, you can take yourself a long way.” And, although they are worried about how they will get by in a year when EFC ends, they plan to go on to law school to help other youth in the foster care system.

Stephanie

“Stephanie” entered foster care while in high school, along with several younger siblings. She was initially placed with a family member, which she calls her “worst experience in foster care.” Luckily, a neighbor was also getting a foster care license, and asked to take Stephanie and her sister. They have stayed with that family for several years, and Stephanie credits them, her support from Treehouse, and her natural resiliency for her subsequent success.

Stephanie gives no credit to her social worker. She laments that her initial social worker wrongly assumed that a placement with family would be the best option, saying, “Family is not always a good fit. They need to ask more questions, especially for teenagers ... There need to be more questions and more training before any child gets placed anywhere.”

She continues, “It’s like ‘Here’s an empty bed, you’re going here.’” Stephanie goes on to describe the social worker assigned when she turned 18 as being unresponsive—to the extent that on her online form, Stephanie entered that she had no social workers.

Stephanie feels that the lack of care in placements was especially hard on a younger brother, who is on the autism spectrum. He was pre-school age when he entered foster care, and she feels the foster families were not prepared for his needs.

She explains, “He was thrown in and a couple of days later they couldn’t handle it. He was moved from place to place ... You take a child away from the home they know as normal and move them from place to place. How is he supposed to understand and react to that?”

Stephanie herself has overcome her situation for the most part. After being two years behind in school, she caught up with classes, enrolled in Running Start and graduated from high school on time. Her Treehouse contact became “like a friend,” helped her set goals, apply to college, and navigate FAFSA. However, a new Treehouse contact was assigned when she reached 18, which she laments.

Jesse

“Jesse” ran away from home while still in grade school and showed the police her bruises. They returned her to her mother, who threatened her and her younger brother so they would not disclose the truth when the CPS social worker visited. She resents the social worker’s lack of action because it was “pretty dang obvious that something wasn’t right.” Eventually, her mother lost her home; the family lived for several years in their car, a tent encampment, and with various “hookups” of her mother’s.

***“ No one asked, ‘Why aren’t you doing well in school?’ ... No one wanted to work with me to help me succeed they just threatened me with juvie.*”**

“ You take a child away from the home they know as normal and move them from place to place. How is he supposed to understand and react to that?”

Finally, Jesse’s stepfather convinced her mother to let Jesse stay with him, and she and her brother were well cared for. “I think of him as my father,” she says. When he was diagnosed with terminal cancer, though, Jesse’s mother swore to take Jesse back and Jesse called CPS directly. They placed her in foster care with a relative, after asking for her opinion and preferences.

Jesse says she still suffers from PTSD. She was assigned counseling when she entered foster care to address grief from the death of her stepfather, but not for the trauma from years living with an abusive mother. She since has had a hard time finding the right type of therapy that is also covered by her insurance.

Jesse says of her social workers, “My mental health was not their biggest concern. Their concern was ‘am I in a safe place’ not ‘am I safe in my head.’” She thinks social workers should be better trained to recognize trauma and provide access to specialized therapy. She continues, “These kids are in foster care for a reason ... these reasons are not little. It’s not like ‘they didn’t get what they want for Christmas.’”

Jesse is now in Extended Foster Care and a junior in college; she credits most of her academic success to Treehouse.

Ezekial

“Ezekial” struggled with chronic PTSD and anger management before and after entering foster care as a teenager. They went through multiple placements, including one they felt was biased against them because of their cultural heritage. Ezekial was one of the interviewees most vitriolic about social workers, railing about their delays in supplying clothing vouchers, other assistance, and responses to questions. Ezekial reports that only “two or three” of their 11 social workers were helpful to them. At the worst, at the time of Ezekial’s transition to Extended Foster Care, the delays left Ezekial homeless for a month with no access to refills for a psychotropic prescription.

However, Ezekial did end up with a foster parent who “treats me like a human being,” including being accepting of Ezekial’s LGBTQ identity. Ezekial has also benefitted from an appointed attorney who “called out” their social workers and from consistent assistance from Treehouse. “They were really on top of it and made sure I got exactly what I needed for support,” he says of Treehouse. Ezekial graduated from an alternative high school, and started college, but was unable to stay in college due to “family issues.”

Ezekial is still living with their successful foster placement, even while on Extended Foster Care, and they feel they can now manage their PTSD and anger management issues.

Annie

“Annie” entered foster care while in high school and had five different social workers before she transitioned to EFC. She struggled to make up schoolwork, even with good support from Treehouse. Annie reports that her high school guidance counselor—whom she terms “not a good person”—did not spend enough time with her to understand that she was not independent enough to manage online courses to replace missing credits. She graduated a year late because of her online course failure. For this reason, Annie gave “support from teachers” an “F.”

Annie also gave a low grade (“D”) to job training and job search support. She reports reaching out several times to an independent living program and not getting responses. However, even with the school and job search struggles, Annie reports that “The biggest lack of support I felt was not really feeling a connection with my social worker.”

She continues, “It was only when I turned 18 that I felt the social workers were speaking to me. They were always talking to my foster parents.” In addition, Annie says she got very little information about Extended Foster Care. She says, “No one ever really explained to me what it was ...My social worker never had a training or information ... like ‘this is the benefits.’”

Once in EFC, Annie ended up with a successful foster family that adopted her at age 21. She admits, “I had a good ending.” At the conclusion of the interview, her advice was, “Really make sure high school seniors have the information they need on Extended Foster Care, and what that program looks like.”

Harriet

“Harriet” was homeless several times and missed months of school before entering foster care as a young teen. She was placed in a home with several other foster children; the home seemed adequate, and her foster parents found her counseling. She says she had no help with school, however, other than a sympathetic middle school IEP teacher.

When old enough to work, Harriet also reports that no one helped her find employment. “My old foster family was not supportive of that AT ALL,” she explains. “They just said ‘go ahead and try’ but I had no [driver’s] license.” She concludes, “I find it odd that nobody tried to help to me.”

Harriet stayed in her first foster home for several years, until her social worker set her up to meet families that were interested in adopting.

She “clicked” with one, visited them several times, then moved to their household and was adopted. Harriet says that the social worker did not discuss any relative advantages of EFC instead; at any rate, Harriet says she “wasn’t interested.”

***“ It was only when I turned 18 that I felt the social workers were speaking to me. They were always talking to my foster parents.*”**

“(Of adopted parents) They are so understanding about everything; I don’t feel judged at all.

Harriet feels the adoption was handled well, including the social worker assuaging Harriet’s biological family. She is still in contact with her grandmother and her biological father, and says of her adopted family, “They are so understanding about everything; I don’t feel judged at all.”

Even though she is happy with her adoption and the process, Harriet is still quite negative regarding social workers. She recalls, “I got switched to so many social workers when I was in foster care. I had six social workers in two years. Half the time they wouldn’t do their monthly visits. There was only one time that my social worker came out to the house.” She summarizes, “They were never around ... I had to do everything myself ... I wouldn’t have known who to call.”

Harriet is still seeing her first mental health counselor five years later. And even with “no support” in school she caught up her classes by attending extra sessions after school and in the summer. She will be graduating from high school on time this year.

Blake

“Blake” entered foster care as a teen, and went through five placements, including shelters and group homes, before returning to live with her mother two years later. Her school-based social group was a strong support, so any placement that limited access to that group was problematic. This included kinship care and shelters and group homes with restricted hours. One extended family member was a good fit but required a change in schools; Blake opted to return to her original school and friends, even though that living situation was less satisfactory.

Blake gave her social worker a relatively positive grade (“B”). She termed the social worker “nice,” and said that she was always kept informed, if not always given choices. “It kinda helps when people listen,” Blake explains. The social worker did not get a “A” grade because of the many moves; Blake says, “I wish I had a more stable placement and did not have to worry so much about a new environment.”

Blake eventually decided that her best option was to return to her mother’s home, since it was in her school district and close to friends. Family counseling made the reconciliation possible. She finished high school and is now attending a vocational program to be a veterinarian’s assistant.

Asha

“Asha” immigrated to the United States when she while in high school and entered Federal Care as an Unaccompanied Refugee Minor. She had moved through three different countries previously. Upon reaching Washington, Asha was placed with a successful foster family, with whom she still stays four years later. “They are my family,” she says.

The foster parents found her a church that matches her beliefs and drive her to services weekly. They welcome her friends from that community, and often order food typical of her home country. The foster family even sends funds back to her birth family.

Asha has benefitted from having the same social worker for her four years in foster care, including when she transitioned from traditional foster care to Extended Foster Care. “He’s really helpful,” she raves. The social worker’s helpfulness includes being consistent in his visits, being supportive about schooling, and going out of his way to take on special favors such as helping her replace a lost green card. “He’s always there for me,” she concludes.

Asha found learning English difficult, especially as her first high school did not offer English as a Second Language (ESL) courses. Although the teachers were helpful there—“They always had to hug me”—she ultimately switched to another school with an ESL program.

Asha is now a freshman in college. Her foster parents help her with class registration and are generally encouraging when she is “stressed” about school. Asha concludes, “If you have someone to support you when you’re down, that makes you want to work hard to make them happy.”

Serah

Now a young adult and in Extended Foster Care, “Serah” has been in foster care for 10 years. She and her younger brother were originally sent 50 miles and a ferry ride away from their home to a family and neighborhood that did not match their ethnicity. Even the building environment was strange; Serah was used to density and apartments and found herself in a big house distanced from services.

The foster parents could not keep her challenging younger brother, and after he left, although she acknowledges that the foster parents tried, Serah “shut down.” She moved in with a family she knew and stayed there until her older brother reached 21 and was able to be officially responsible for her.

Serah never told her social worker that her brother quickly lost his apartment. She was homeless for several years, sleeping on friends’ couches, in a tent and in a car. She and her older brother “took care of ourselves,” although she knew she could reach him if needed. She kept her part time job and stayed in school, where she would meet up with her social worker.

Serah credits nonprofit agencies with keeping her afloat, supplying clothing vouchers and independent living skills (ILS) training.

She elaborated, “If it weren’t for Treehouse, I don’t know where I’d be ... [they] never said ‘no.’ If they didn’t have what I needed, they found other resources.”

***“ If it weren’t for Treehouse, I don’t know where I’d be ... [they] never said ‘no.’ If they didn’t have what I needed, they found other resources.*”**

“ [Foster care] made me grow up faster ... Some of my old friends ended up in jail or pregnant, but jail is not for me.

Her high school teachers and principal were also very supportive, keeping food for her in their offices, giving her rides, and even letting her stay at their homes occasionally.

Of her estimated six social worker, Serah said there was one that she “loved,” explaining, “She would even help me on her day off.” Others were said to not respond to calls, take months to get back on requests, and sometimes be just “rude ... They talk like you had no common sense ... They never wanted me to succeed.”

However, she says, “I really blame the system because they have to go through the system, they have to wait for other systems. Their job is hard too, they don’t have the resources. Most of my female workers really did try, just didn’t get the help that they needed.”

Serah has now graduated from high school and continues to work. She is not bitter about her experiences but said it all “made me grow up faster.” She continued, “Some of my old friends ended up in jail or pregnant, but jail is not for me.”

Mateo

“Mateo” immigrated to the United States mid-high school age. After transferring from California to Washington State, he was placed in the UFM program at Friends of Youth. They were able to assign him a foster family where he stayed two years, until aging out at 18. Mateo describes the Friends of Youth staff, his local school, and the foster family as “awesome.” “They didn’t judge me [and] they were very respectful of my culture and my country,” he explains.

Unfortunately, a three-year delay in Mateo’s visa meant he could not continue in EFC, even though he was assigned “great” legal help. And, although generally appreciative of his social workers, he did not find them helpful as he transitioned out. “If you don’t go into EFC, they don’t know what to do with you,” he explains. Mateo received a green card just before his 18th birthday, and, with a temporary free place to stay in the trailer of his foster family’s neighbor, was able to work two jobs and start saving.

With Mateo’s hard work, assistance from Treehouse for college and scholarship applications, and ultimately, the Passport Program, Mateo is now attending a State college. He is struggling with his finances again since his work in the restaurant industry was impacted by the COVID shutdown. Mateo is pragmatic, but still thinks wistfully of others in his foster family who had the help of Extended Foster Care and did not have to work as exhaustingly to better their situation.

Malika

When “Malika” entered foster care as a young teen, she had already “bounced around” among family members and homelessness. Her instability continued through multiple foster placements, until she finally found a “good” one and stayed three years. Malika explains, though, that she “didn’t know what good care is” and was so used to being independent that she strained against the rules. She eventually asked for another home, where she stayed until she aged out of foster care.

Malika gave good scores to many supports, including at school, getting a driver’s license, getting clothing and hair vouchers, and finding therapy. She credits Treehouse, the YMCA, and her social worker. She says, “Being a troubled teen, they were helpful.” She also explains she knew how to follow up, remind social workers of their promises, and generally be her own advocate. But it was harder as the social workers changed often and abruptly; “It was always, ‘I’m tired of this ... I’ve got to find a different job.’”

Malika continued her independent nature and left high school early to make money and prepare to support herself. She explains, “It took me years to straighten up my act. But I had to focus on myself and worry about surviving. I just worried about being independent and put school second. I had to ready myself to take care of myself.” She now works two jobs, is earning certificates in various cosmetology skills, and going through a high school completion program. She plans to run her own cosmetology business eventually.

Malika’s advocates for more transparency to foster parents who consider accepting teen age foster youth—the families should know the teenager’s background and appreciate the challenges of youth with long histories of instability. “I hate to see both parties set up,” she explains. “Know your age group and know what you can deal with.”

Sofia

“Sofia” entered the foster care system as a teenager. She was originally placed with her 26-year-old sister, who “kicked her out” of the house a year later. Sofia was shuttled between various youth shelters while her social worker tried to re-unite her with the sister.

Sofia felt discriminated against in the shelters because of her ethnicity. She “had the cops called on her” several times, including when she resisted after being “tricked” into being driven out of town to a different shelter.

Sofia reports that she most needed mental health care at that point, but there was no transportation and her initial social worker, whom she terms “super mean” did not help her get those services. Sofia stayed in school but reports that her IEP teacher just had her watch movies.

“ My mental health was not their biggest concern. Their concern was ‘am I in a safe place’ not ‘am I safe in my head.’

“ (Of prospective foster parents) Know your age group and know what you can deal with.

Sofia says, “I wish I could have felt they cared about me and not just their pay or another kid in their file.”

Luckily, Sofia was finally matched in a home where she says, “To me they are my parents.” Her new family found an education program where Sofia can earn an associate degree and finish high school. The parents were pursuing official foster parent status, but dropped the application when Sofia turned 18. They have “have never gotten any money,” she says.

Sofia’s biggest problem at this time is outstanding medical bills from DBT treatment that finally helped her with her anxiety and depression. She went into DBT after two hospitalizations earlier this year, but although her foster parents paid out of pocket initially, a confusion about what type of insurance would cover the expenses left her in debt. She has been assigned an attorney, but she says she is always relegated to the paralegal, and does not get responses. “I’m running out of resources,” she sighs.

Asher

“Asher” was in high school when he and his four other siblings entered foster care due to their biological parents’ substance abuse. The siblings were placed into different foster homes, with Asher and his brother in a home specifically for older boys. They stayed in contact with the younger siblings initially.

Asher and his brother chafed in the home, unused to the many rules and chores. Asher’s brother moved out, and the challenge of home demands and schoolwork took a toll on Asher’s mental health. Rather than receiving compassion and support, Asher describes his foster parents as, “incompatible with understanding the mental anguish I was experiencing.” They dismissed his suffering as minimal compared to their experiences growing up and punished him by withholding allowance.

The “last straw” for Asher was when his roommate began stealing his cash and personal items and the foster parents did little to intervene. Asher summarizes, “They were more into punishing me than rewarding and the taking things away from me and holding them played into my fears of having things stolen from me.” He thinks they were too much from an older generation that could not understand the current challenges of being an adolescent.

Asher ran back to his biological mother. He was almost 18 and his mother’s current residence was deemed safe by his social worker; there were also no other placements available. Eventually his mother was able to get a bigger space and many of her children returned. She helped Asher get mental health support. He says, “I was so mentally taxed, I was in a bad state of mind.”

Even though Asher struggled in foster care he did feel supported by his social worker; he was able to work with the same one for a year and a half and built trust. “It gets easier the longer you work with the same person,” he commented.

Asher also appreciated getting school supplies from Treehouse but was not aware of tutoring.

He explains that he turned down EFC because “foster care was too stressful.” Fortunately, he has been able to continue building for his future and is attending a four-year university.

Deborah

When she was in grade school and her father was arrested, “Deborah” and her four siblings went into short term care at their “Auntie and Uncle’s” house. They were soon split up, and Deborah decided to end contact with her “toxic” older siblings. She eventually moved through 15 placements, enduring abuse and sexual assault—the latter by “someone else in the house,” not her foster parents. And, although she was otherwise content with the foster parents, when they did not believe her story, she moved again to another placement. “I felt so alone,” she says.

Fortunately, Deborah ultimately received helpful services, including counseling, school supplies—from the Y Social Impact organization and Treehouse—and an attorney assigned to her when she testified at her father’s trial. And she reports that, of her many social workers, she did get “really close” to one. “But she got promoted, and I had to say goodbye,” she explains. Her attorney also became “like a friend,” even taking Deborah to her driving test. They are still in touch.

Deborah graded her social workers a “B”; she explains, “I’ve had to be more independent and reach out to the social worker ... They are good mentors, but I always have to be the one to put initiative in.” This compares to Treehouse, who “Gave me what I needed without asking.”

Deborah is now attending a State college branch, and credits all the supports she received. “Growing up in foster care wasn’t fun, but all the support they gave me helped a lot,” she says. She also appreciates that foster care removed her from a “super horrible” home situation. “All the resources and mentors I’ve had in my life have been a huge factor,” she continues.

Deborah’s advice for the system is to ensure minors in foster care are always able to speak freely and confidentially to their social workers. She describes withholding reports of abuse because foster parents were listening in, either in person or on the phone. She also says the foster care system “has to know the signs [of abuse] ... Even if you think that they are safe, you need to know that they are safe.”

***“ [Foster children] need someone to direct them in healthy manner in how to get past resentment and frustration ... It’s so difficult to get by when you feel like you are all on your own. I wouldn’t wish it on anyone. That is a terrible way to grow up.*”**

“ I’ve had to be more independent and reach out to the social worker ... They are good mentors, but I always have to be the one to put initiative in.

Evan

“Evan” entered foster care as a pre-teen. He was placed with an aunt and uncle, who provided structure for the first time in his life. “I’m thankful for foster care,” he says, “because I got in a better place.” Still, though, there was a lack of “understanding of who I am,” and his aunt and uncle decided within a few years that they were no longer able to care for him.

Evan then went to a second home that “seemed like a money factory ... [there were] a lot of children, and a bit colder than you expected ... They gave me my basics.” He remembers alarms on doors and a lock on the pantry. That placement also did not last long.

Evan’s third placement was completely successful. “They were family immediately,” he explains. “Not only did I have structure, but I had love.” He was given parties and gifts for his birthday, and support for his interests. Evan’s grades improved and he prospered. “I wasn’t explicitly treated like someone else’s kid,” he explains. “I wasn’t a package put in their care.”

Still, Evan felt an expectation to return to his biological mother. The court approved such a move, though Evan says, “The counselor knew there were problems.” He felt guilty at the thought of hurting his mother, so agreed to reunification, going to live with her and a stepfather that he called “a hoarder.” After a couple of years, and a move to a different county, he was desperate. He confided in his former foster family, who took him back immediately.

After several tense days of sleeping with a fully packed bag, and threats that he might be placed elsewhere, he was legally placed back with the old foster family. Although now in EFC and living on his own at college, he maintains contact. “They’re family,” he says.

Throughout the interview, Evan had very few positive comments about other supports, such as school support, financial training, or, especially, help from social workers. He gave an “F” grade to “Being able to keep the same social worker”—one that he liked was promoted, and others changed too often for him to form a relationship. “Throughout foster care I just had so many social workers ... you could never connect to one person and have them understand who you were,” he explains.

Evan’s situation was especially problematic as his biological mother had moved to another county so, when he returned to his previous foster family, his official social worker did not travel to see him, but a “courtesy worker” would check in perfunctorily. Evan’s transition to Extended Foster Care and college applications were all handled by himself and his foster family. “It was a pivotal point in my life and I had the newest social worker,” Evan laments.

At the end of the interview Evan concluded that what is needed for foster care is that “The child needs to be more important.”

He continued, “They are safe now’ is not enough ... you could put them in a cell, and they would be safe.” He advocates for better vetting of foster parents, and better matching between parents and children, especially as teenagers.

Susannah

Susannah entered foster care when she was 11 years old. Her younger brother was placed with an aunt and uncle, who would not accept Susannah or let her keep contact with her brother. “My aunt and uncle did not like me,” she says. “They stopped all communication and visits ... The State didn’t really help with that ... They sat and watched it happen.”

Susannah moved 19 times over a 19-month period, including group homes that left her “feeling like a prisoner,” locked in her room and needing to press a buzzer to get out. Susannah’s one stable foster family with whom she lived for four years ended with an assault. She believes the investigation and follow up were not well resolved and that the instability, trauma, and lack of transparency in the foster care system has led to her trust issues and an inability to develop nurturing relationships.

She explains, “No one views foster kids as actual children who need parents and a childhood. I never got a childhood. I was always taking care of myself and foster care has put a lot of trust issues on me because of the placement problems and always being lied to ... Foster parents say, 'We want you', then a week later, they call your caseworker [and you come home] after school with all your stuff in garbage bags.”

Susannah graduated from high school with support from Treehouse. They helped negotiate her needs in school due to her anxiety and learning disabilities. She says, "Treehouse was a big thing in graduating year ... I feel like without them, I would've not been able to graduate."

She also has been able to move out on her own with the help of EFC and was able to access household goods, along with a computer and a printer from Youthnet.

Susannah is anxious about aging out of EFC soon, saying "It's just they don't really prepare you to go out and live in the real world without having that parental support. I don't have anybody to turn to when I am in trouble. And they don't give resources to turn to. Because once you are out of care, they drop you like a fly ... I had to learn all of that on my own ... that is pretty much every foster kid does ... we've already grown up without parents, we shouldn't have to grow up to learning everything on our own."

“ Growing up in foster care wasn’t fun, but all the support they gave me helped a lot.

“ No one views foster kids as actual children who need parents and a childhood. I never got a childhood..

Ellery

“Ellery” spent three years in foster care, starting as a pre-teen. During that time, they moved from a very unsuccessful placement to one very successful, and then group homes.

Of the first home, they said, “They were just there for the money ... our beds were in the garage and there was a bad infestation.” The second, however, treated them like family, discussed consequences instead of pushing punishment, and were warm and loving. “It was the first model of a healthy relationship I had ever seen,” explained Ellery. They still stay in touch with the family eight years later.

Ellery benefited from ongoing, weekly counseling. Although Ellery appreciated their second set of foster parents, there were multiple children in the house, and counseling was a place that was “meant specifically for me ... I felt valued and understood.” Ellery continued, “I like being listened to ... I don’t always feel heard, but at least once a week I knew someone would listen to me.”

Ellery was unusual in their high grades for their social workers, explaining that the first “always listened when I called ... and not everyone listens to 12-year-olds.” A second social worker was also termed “kind” and very patient in explaining decisions and legal proceedings.

Unfortunately, even with regular counseling and a supportive social worker, Ellery became suicidal and the foster home could not provide enough supervision; Ellery moved to group care. Although the living situation was not the best, Ellery appreciated the onsite school, with individualized and small group instruction. They flourished academically.

After several years, Ellery was told by their social worker that a possible adoptive parent had been found. They met, which went well, then Ellery went to live with the single woman for six months. The match was not successful, as the adoptive parent was seldom home, showed no warmth, and was not prepared for typical teenager behavior.

In addition, the woman’s strict religious views clashed with Ellery’s open bisexuality. The parent threatened to stop the adoption but relented. Ellery felt that, although far from perfect, the adoption was better than going back to a group home. They also doubted that another adoption would be possible.

Ellery moved to a large public high school, where their grades fell. They did graduate, though, and were kicked out of the home of their adopted mother at age 18. Ellery now is employed and self-supporting.

Veronica

“Veronica” and her five siblings entered foster care when she was a pre-teen. The family had been homeless for a year; Veronica reports that her current PTSD stems from that time with her biological family.

Three of the siblings started out in the same group home and then the same foster home, but the young host parents found the demand too great.

Upon returning to the group home, two of Veronica's younger siblings were adopted together and moved to Arizona; their family help them keep in contact.

Another sister was placed with her biological father, who did not follow through with visits. Veronica just saw that sister after five years' separation. She says, "It was really hard ... I'm grateful for my counselor for walking me through that."

Veronica moved on her own through two successful foster care placements; the second set of foster parents then adopted her after a two-year process. She feels there was excessive "protocol," checking with relatives and tribal authorities and that she should have had more power in the process. Veronica feared being taken away from the family, saying she "walked on eggshells for nine months."

Veronica was lucky not only in a successful adoption, but also with her social workers. She gave them both "A" grades, explaining "They took time to listen to my voice, and you could tell they were leading with love." She continued, "It made everything easier having a social worker that really cared for me ... They would talk to me like a human not some poor oppressed child. They always took time to ask how I was."

She particularly appreciated that, when first assessed by CPS, the social worker would notice that she was uncomfortable speaking about her situation in front of her biological mom and would take her outside to talk in confidence.

Veronica also appreciated her mostly "awesome" teachers, but not the administrators who stymied her and her foster mother's 504 requests. She does lament that certain teachers would not excuse her from assignments related to family trees, or when asking the class to bring in baby pictures.

Veronica is now a junior in college, talks regularly with two siblings, and still is in contact with some of her old social workers. Her conclusion as to what is most needed in foster care is that "people in foster care have to learn that this isn't your fault."

John

"John" entered foster care as a pre-teen and primarily had one family placement. His foster parents were approachable; they did not judge or shame him but took an approach of trying to understand. He also had good relationships with his teachers—he was open about being in foster care and problems outside of the classroom.

***“(Of successful counseling)
I like being listened to ... I don't always feel heard, but at least once a week I knew someone would listen to me.***

“(Of a successful placement)

They were family immediately ... Not only did I have structure, but I had love.

Even though John was involved in addiction treatment and spent time in juvenile detention, his foster parents advocated for him and he was able to be included in sports and school activities.

Another significant support was a consistent social worker, a relationship he still has today. John explains, "From around the age of [young teen] I had one social worker and she stuck with me until I aged out. It really allows you to connect and adapt to the social worker so they can better prep you cause they kind of familiarize themselves with your behaviors and stuff like that and your actions, your likes and dislikes, so it was really cool to stay with the same social worker ... My foster parents made a statement in court, and then when I got transferred to a different side of the state, I specifically requested, regardless of me being in a different county, I want the same social worker, period. I guess it was more of the court's decision."

The most difficult part of John's journey was his transition out of foster care. He gave an "F" to job training; he had few job options because of his involvement with the justice system. He explains, "It was difficult because they're like this child has a label you know that's who he is ... It's also a barrier so you have to figure out a way to get, work experience, life experience, where you're not like looked at as a liability the whole time."

John reports he was kept from Extended Foster Care because, due to his earlier substance abuse, the only option offered was an in-patient residential treatment facility. John felt his substance issues had been under control for years, and that an in-patient facility would be detrimental, so he declined EFC.

John directly attributes the lack of EFC to the homelessness he experienced for the next several years. He made desperate choices, such as sleeping under bridges and in abandoned homes. When he tried to reapply for EFC his homelessness made the process more challenging. He says now, "It's frustrating ... I feel like things would be different if Extended Foster Care had not routed that way ... but what's unfortunate is there's no appeal process."

Currently, John is enrolled in college and living with his partner and young child. His foster parents helped prepare him to navigate the challenges he faced, but he hopes that others are provided with more resources, such as job assistance for youth involved in the justice system and help after foster care to prevent homelessness.

Dorothea

"Dorothea" was born with a medical condition that required several surgeries and transplants in her first few months. Her birth mother was not able to take care of her; she was moved to a care home for medically fragile children and became a ward of the state.

Dorothea lived there for several years before moving in with a foster family with the goal of adoption. Unfortunately, the family was not a good fit and she returned to the care facility after a year.

Even with this difficult start to life, Dorothea awarded mostly “A” grades to services, including her social worker—the same social worker throughout her time in state care. Dorothea also cherished the nurses and other medical facility staff. They became her family, treating her like a “normal child,” arranging activities like board game and trips to the park and the mall, arranging her school IEP and coordinating a transfer to a school with a better special needs program. One made her “feel like a little sister.” Dorothea also appreciated teachers that helped her make up missed school.

After the first failure, Dorothea tried more foster families, but trips to the hospital made it difficult to bond. Finally, she knew she had found a good family when the Dad came to the hospital and played games. She moved in and was adopted after several years; many of the facility staff attended the celebration. Dorothea is now finishing her high school education.

Hope

“Hope,” who identifies as Black/Latinx, entered foster care with two siblings as a young teen, due to her mother’s substance abuse issues. She was first placed with a series of relatives; her most successful with a grandmother who ultimately could not take care of all three siblings. The grandmother adopted only Hope’s brother.

Other placements with aunts suffered because of family squabbles. Family members cut her off from her younger sister, with whom she is still trying to reconnect. Hope says now, “It definitely damaged our relationship not being able to see each other through those really sensitive years. She is twelve now and got placed in the system when she was four. So, I missed those important years.”

Hope ultimately was placed outside the family. As a biracial foster girl, she felt bullied at school. Her Catholic foster parents were not helpful, telling her to “just pray.” They also discouraged her cultural identity, making fun of the Black and Latinx student unions when Hope expressed interest. Social workers (four in total) were inconsistent with assistance; one talked to her alone only in her bedroom, where her foster parents could overhear. Another did help establish mental health counseling. However, Hope’s foster parents were not supportive and did not facilitate transportation.

Hope did get help at school when she reached out. She explains, “If I was like, ‘Hey I’m struggling, and I need help in this area.’ They would be like ‘There are these tools to help you get that support and extra study time.’ That was really helpful for me, just because from moving home to home and processing my own problems and trauma, it was hard to want to go to school and stay focused in school.

“They are safe now’ is not enough ... You could put them in a cell, and they would be safe.

“ People in foster care have to learn that this isn’t your fault.

I definitely had the potential; I just didn’t have the motivation.”

Hope was pressured to accept an adoption after several years in care. She felt she was only offered an option when standing with her adoptive parents in a public court. Her adopted parents subsequently were unrealistic about parenting a teenager and Hope reversed the adoption at age 18.

She says, “I wish they would have said that sooner ‘cause I would have been more comfortable in private saying, ‘I don’t want to sign it’ ... I really regret it because if I had waited it out because I could be getting a lot more help that I need now that I am not receiving ‘cause I am [over 18] and I am taking care of myself. When I think about it, there are so many services that are wonderful and amazing that I could have but I can’t use because I was adopted ... I wish I would have known about the health insurance because that would be a deal breaker for me.”

Hope finally connected with a local nonprofit that checked in often and introduced her to others with experience in foster care, including attending a weekend camp. She says, “It was nice to see how many kids actually go through things that I went through ... I always felt like nobody gets it and no other kids my age understands, so it was really nice to be in a setting where there was kids who understood.”

Hope is currently subsisting at a low-paying job, without health care.

Liza

“Liza” entered the foster care system as a young child and moved through multiple placements. One of the first was with bullying teenagers. She never was placed in a foster home that was a good match, saying “I’ve never been treated like family in a foster home, ever. I’ve always felt like I was another paycheck ... I’ve never felt so low and so discredited as a human as when in a foster home.”

None of Liza’s social workers stayed with her for more than two years. She felt the inconsistency of social workers in her life compounded the trauma of being removed from her parents, explaining, “Growing up, it was really hard for me ... that was one stable thing I had in my life ... After my first social worker switch, it was a big shock to me. It was kind of I am not a part of a family and I don’t have that stableness, that was hard for me as a kid ... You can’t just disappear from a kid’s life once you have taken them from their parents.”

Fortunately, Liza learned how to speak up for herself; “I am not shy to say that I am in foster care ... I did not want pity. I will work on it ... Something that really helped me get through high school [was] to be honest.” Liza’s self-advocacy finally led her to finding her own foster homes. A teacher and then a job supervisor allowed her to live with them to finish high school, and she “finally felt cared for.”

Liza's Independent Living Skill worker has been one of her consistent (six years!) supports while in foster care.

She has connected Liza with fun activities and introduced her to others in the same situation. Liza says, "She made me feel like I was not a foster kid, I just had support ... I feel like that they really do a really good job at their job ... I think it really helps that most [ILS workers] are younger, so it is like you have better connection with them."

Liza's transition out of traditional foster care was abrupt, but she was savvy enough to accept the option of Extended Foster Care when it was explained for the first time by the judge in court. She also gives credit to CASA for helping her with the paperwork to get into college and arrange financial aid—they even attended meetings with college counselors to make sure Liza was taking the right classes. At the time of the interview, Liza was a sophomore in college.

Jack

"Jack" himself asked a judge to remove him from his biological home, and, especially, his stepfather. His parents had often called the police, for what they termed vandalism and property damage. Jack was placed into a group home and then with a life-changing foster family.

Jack's foster mother woke him up at 4 a.m. so he could finish the year at his existing school. He transferred the next year, and initially felt unfairly treated by teachers because of his arrest record. He details, "There was one teacher who was nice, but other targeted me or I was a bad kid. They searched my backpack a lot ... One time I tried to stop a fight and the cops were called on me and I even got suspended." After the COVID shutdown he more easily finished high school online and felt more supported by the teachers.

Jack fully appreciated his social workers. He experienced little turnover (two) and keeps in touch with both. He reports being well prepared for the transition into Extended Foster Care, saying "They gave a huge book and folders. I got provided everything I needed ... I just need to find out what I want to do with it." He has benefitted from good job support with resume assistance and mock interviews. He did get hired, but unfortunately laid off at the start of the pandemic.

Jack's transition to EFC was greatly assisted when his foster mother bought a house to rent cheaply to him and a few roommates. He spent the holidays with her and the other foster children this past year.

Karina

"Karina" is a young woman who identifies as African American, though she was raised by a white aunt after being abused by her biological parents.

***“(Of two social workers) They took time to listen to my voice, and you could tell they were leading with love.*”**

“(Of an ILS contact) She made me feel like I was not a foster kid, I just had support.”

She has no relationship with her siblings, who were born later, immediately put into foster care then adopted. She says, “It’s better they not know about me.”

Karina reports that the aunt, “culturally shielded me from my black side of the family. I felt so out of place ... like the whitest Black person anybody knew.” She reports that as “the only Black person at my school,” other students would say racially ignorant or cruel things. The adults did not believe Karina’s interpretation. She comments, “You try to talk to someone about it and no one understands.”

Karina left her aunt’s house to live in several foster homes, including one where she suspected that another foster youth was being abused by the father. Karina recognized the signs but did not feel she could say anything for fear of reprisal. She also was in juvenile detention several times.

Karina gave an “F” to “keeping the same social worker,” saying she went through too many, did not see many of them, and did not have a relationship with most. “I didn’t have the same social worker for a long time. They are always overwhelmed so they can’t do much anyway”, she explains. She continues, “They never really helped. Treehouse, the YMCA, CASA, and GAL were actually concerned if I was alive and got any help. I didn’t care to see [the social workers] because they weren’t the people helping me.”

Karina gave an “A” grade to “having a supportive social worker” solely because of a strong relationship with her current contact. Karina says, “She is like my mom.” This social worker helped when Karina with school, going to her IEP meetings and advocating. The social worker also smoothed the transition to Extended Foster Care and Karina’s move into a new home. Karina was six months pregnant at the time and overwhelmed with the process.

Karina’s mental health support has also been positive. She has attended counseling since first entering foster care and has always found it easily available. “I still go to counseling and I have stayed in the parenting class because it helps me know how to help my child,” she explains. She now lives with her two children, her partner and her partner’s mother.

Karina’s take away from her foster care experience is that adults should more often listen to children: “When a kid mentions something, they don’t take it seriously ... Pay attention to the red flags.”

Cedar

“Cedar” was removed from her home when in high school. She opposed living with her grandparents because of a complicated relationship and went instead to live with a step-aunt. The step-aunt was also detrimental; one cousin stole from her, the aunt was “manic” and there was no assistance with school transportation. During this time, Cedar was

assigned multiple social workers (she estimates six or seven in a year) before she met one in person. She did not trust their judgement and kept her home life secret to avoid being moved to her grandparents. But she hoped that a social worker would “pick up clues.”

Cedar had been a good student before but entering foster care, but the turmoil took a toll on her academic success. She missed many days of school, even though she stayed with friends to get to classes more easily and to escape the stress at home. Eventually, her step-aunt kicked her out when another family member committed suicide and Cedar was blamed; Cedar asked a judge to live with her boyfriend’s family even though her social worker was not supportive of the plan.

Feeling ashamed, Cedar did not share what she was going through and received few accommodations from her teachers. However, she still passed. She also benefitted from the introduction of a tribal social worker; Cedar had been unaware of her biological mother’s tribal affiliation because her mother died when she was young. The tribal social worker connected her to tribal events and linked her to her maternal heritage.

In addition, her Youthnet case manager helped with resume building, searching for a job, getting healthcare, setting up a household and even buying her own home. Cedar appreciates that her connection at Youthnet continues to check in on her.

Iris

“Iris” entered foster care when she was 14 and was reunited with her birth parents several years later. The reunification ultimately failed.

While in foster care, Iris moved through several foster and group homes, good and bad. Her first foster mother became a cornerstone of her support system; Iris says, “She made me feel like her daughter right away” by showing affection, giving hugs, brushing her hair, telling her she was beautiful and, “never once talked ill about my parents.” Iris is still in touch.

Iris’s second placement was unsuccessful, because of religious differences and the foster mother’s negative comments about Iris’s birth parents. The placement ended with the foster mother driving erratically while yelling at Iris. Iris was able to return to the first foster family, but could not stay.

Having to switch schools was especially hard. Iris was anxious, did not easily make friends, and the curriculum was more challenging than her previous school. The only assistance offered was after school, when Iris was busy with visitations, case management appointments and counseling. Iris felt the teachers thought she was trying to slack off when she asked for help mid-day, saying, “I asked to see the counselor five times because I’m really having a bad day and there is something going on in my foster home, not because I am trying to get out of class.”

“ Something that really helped me get through high school [was] to be honest.”

Iris was finally able to transfer back to her old school but faced aggression from her previous friends who thought she had abandoned them without saying goodbye. Iris was not allowed a phone in foster care, which made it hard to stay in touch with them and her little sister.

She says, “I couldn’t call her when I missed her, it was really hard for me and her and everyone.”

There was inconsistency in Iris’s mental health care, which made counseling less effective. She reports that every time a new issue arose in her history of abuse and trauma, she was made to switch to a new “specialty” therapist without discussion or notice.

Finally, Iris’s progress was hampered by rotating social workers. She comments, “When they changed social workers it was hard for me to make a new connection.” She also thought her second social worker was too focused on reunification with her biological parents. Iris did not believe her parents’ promises to change but was returned to their care by a social worker who “just read the case file.” She adds, “The social worker believed my parents too much, and not me.”

After Iris was moved back to her biological family, she did benefit from her Community Youth Services (CYS) workers, saying “Every time I needed them, they were there to pick me up. They were amazing ... They helped me grow and cope with the decisions my parents were making. They worked with my parents as much as me and showed my parents different ways to deal with situations.”

But when the family’s case was closed and follow up services ended, the old family dynamics returned, and Iris ran away. After being put in group homes and juvenile detention, she eventually moved with her new baby to live with her grandmother in another part of the state.

When asked at the end of the interview what was the most crucial to improve in foster care services, Iris summarized, “Consistency with everything. I just wanted consistency after being removed from my house.”

Andrew

“Andrew” entered foster care as a young teen. He and his brother ran away from their first joint placement after seeing the foster parent physically abuse his biological son. Andrew felt that his social worker overemphasized her disappointment that they had run away over whether had they felt safe—which is why he gave a “D” grade to social worker support. Luckily, an aunt and uncle were able to take the brothers. The couple was expecting their second baby soon, which Andrew thought not optimal, but the aunt was a teacher and was able to provide the brothers with educational support and structure.

***“ It gets easier
the longer you
work with the same
person.***

Andrew kept the same social worker for over two years, giving “Keeping the Same Social Worker” a “B” grade. He says it “made it a bit easier, not being switched between different people so often.” Andrew also had a consistent Treehouse support worker who checked in regularly.

Andrew eventually was reunited with his birth family. He reports just being told that, “it was time to go back home” (the rationale behind the “D” grade he gave to “Transition Planning”). Unfortunately, his mother was assaulted a year later, and Andrew dropped out of school to support the family. Andrew eventually finished school and moved out on his own at age 18.

Jasmine

“Jasmine” entered foster care twice: initially at a young age, then again as a teen. The first time was “very confusing.” She was unsure of what was going on and does not have clear memories of her placements. She does remember not being able to visit a younger brother, being told by her Jehovah’s Witness foster parents that there would be “no Christmas,” and that it was overall “traumatic.” She says now, “[The first foster parents] were probably one of the ones who did it just for the money because they treated us like a job.” Her second placement was a much more positive experience; she was able to be with all her siblings in a home where they already had a relationship.

As a teen, Jasmine has been happy with her social workers, saying they have been supportive and provided her with needed information. One would ‘go the extra mile’ by bringing her coffee and checking in on her life and well-being—not just the basic safety checklist that was required. Jasmine’s current social worker has also been helpful in providing resources, connecting her to an Independent Living program and being generally responsive.

Jasmine has also felt well backed by her Independent Living Program, where she learned how to budget and find housing. Treehouse also helped immensely during high school, including getting her a laptop when classes went online and helping her figure out a new schedule. Support was not as strong for her job search; she reports her Treehouse contact simply said, “better keep looking, you’ll find one.”

Jasmine struggled with the transition into Extended Foster Care, saying “It was confusing, the whole transitional time, and an inconvenient time to have to switch over social workers.”

She adds, “I did not get a lot of warning.” Jasmine remembers being notified six months prior to transition, but then no follow up until a week prior to turning 18. She then “just signed the paperwork” because there would be a stipend, but felt like the rest of the options were unclear.

Jasmine is now attending college, but wishes she had more help with the financial aid process and had as much Treehouse support as she did while

**“ Foster kids
need more voice in
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participate in.**

in high school. She also says, “Car insurance support should get more funding. The wait list is insanely full.”

Jasmine finished the interview by saying “It would be cool if there was a youth center just for foster youth, they could go and hang out and meet other foster kids ... If their foster home is bad, they have people to talk to to get them out of that situation ... It’s an opportunity to get out of the house and go hang out with people who don’t treat you like a job.”

Felix

“Felix” has stayed with the same foster family since he entered the system while in grade school. He attributes this success to his foster family treating him and the rest of the foster children there “Like we were a part of the family ... They included us in everything we did. If they took a trip, they would take us with them instead of putting us in respite care.” He says his foster parents helped many foster children with worse behavioral concerns because they had rules, routines, and a strong church community to support the whole family. “They really cared for all the children they took in,” he summarizes.

Felix also credits Treehouse, who “Really went out of their way to get me what I needed to be successful at school.” The agency provided for extracurricular expenses and checked in often. His commitment to educational was the main reason he decided to go into Extended Foster Care instead of being adopted as his foster parents offered. He explains, “If I was adopted, I would have lost a lot of scholarships for college, so I decided to stay in EFC so I could go to school.”

Felix describes a real team experience for his transition meeting where everyone with input (his foster parents, Social Worker, IL worker and his attorney) attended. He says, “It was really nice because we did a meeting with everyone who was helping me out... They explained all the benefits, the pros and cons, which really helped me to decide between extended foster care and adoption.”

Felix’s history with social workers was not generally positive though: During his years in foster care, he estimated having six to seven. “I could never make a relationship with my case worker because they kept switching. Once I got used to one case worker, I would be given a new one and it was rough.” He was also “stressed” by his social worker at the time of his transition to EFC. He says, “The adoption social worker was pressuring me, and I felt like she was trying to force me to get adopted.”

Currently, Felix is attending a four-year private university, living in the dorms, and focused on his future goals. Overall, he feels that more consistency with social workers would have improved his experience in the foster care system, but he was paired with a good family that helped him arrive where he is today.

“ Having another person is like having a friend. If I didn’t have her, I would still be struggling.

Kaylie

“Kaylie” entered foster care at while in high school and aged out at 18 without entering EFC. She is one of the participants that did not graduate, and still faces strong challenges. She generally gave services “C” grades, which she explained as being an average of “some good, some bad.” Kaylie was assaulted in one foster home, but another made her feel she was “part of the family.” She explains, “They wouldn’t tell people that I was their foster kid, so that made me feel good.”

Kaylie switched schools twice, which contributed to her lack of a degree; she has been diagnosed with a learning disability and had an IEP. At one high school, Kaylie found some of her teachers to be willing to help and make time for her, even meeting over lunch. She also felt supported by her school and her foster parents when she was being bullied online because of her sexual identity. Finally, she had a good relationship with her therapist, with whom she worked for three years—a valuable consistency. Unfortunately, she lost the connection when she left the foster care system.

Kaylie went through five different social workers in three years; she called it “wearying” to get to know and inform each one. She was most positive about her final social worker, who checked in frequently and made sure her home was safe. However, when it came time for Kaylie to transition out of traditional foster care, she was unsure of what to do and how she was going to live on her own. She does not recall any planning for transition, she just knows she wanted “to be free of the foster care system.”

In summary, Kaylie wishes the foster care system provided better preparation for the real world with financial guidance and hopes that future foster children can be better matched in good foster homes.

Reese

“Reese” has been in and out of foster care since pre-school age. Thankfully, they have now been in the same foster home for over 10 years. Reese says this foster mother has always “treated me like family” and has “not given up on me.”

The foster mother has helped with financial planning, explained transition options, and accepted Reese’s gender identity, even though there has been “awkwardness” at times. Reese says, “I feel like I’m doing so good because I have been with the same family.”

Reese also appreciates their current social worker, saying, “We talk once a month on the phone and have a great relationship. I feel like she has been one of the most helpful social workers I’ve had ... She knows how to help me. She doesn’t push me into doing things—she just asks and gives advice.”

“ Treehouse, the YMCA, CASA, and GAL were actually concerned if I was alive and got any help.

“ They included us in everything. If they took a trip, they would take us with them instead of putting us in respite care.

This is an improvement from the previous social workers who were “constantly changing” and often not responsive. Reese estimates they have had six to ten social workers during their time in care saying, “There was a lack of stability that I wish I had while in foster care.”

Reese was pleased with the help they had transitioning into Extended Foster Care, by their social worker and foster mother. They say, “I got a lot of information. We talked about it for weeks, heading into 18. The monthly visits were 90% [transition] information and questions we had. My social worker told us everything and didn’t rush it. It was nice.” They only wish there had been more training on finances—they got information and packets, but little explanation and not enough time to digest the information.

At the interview conclusion, Reese acknowledged that they were lucky with their placement. Their wish for others is for more therapeutic supports to improve relationships and family dynamics.

Chara

“Chara” entered foster care while in high school; she is still with her original foster family. They have made her feel welcome by providing free access in the home, taking her on trips, and including her in all family events. They have also never pressured her to do or attend anything where she is not comfortable and supported her culturally. “After they saw my country flag on my Facebook, they bought me my own flag to have in the home the first week I lived here,” Chara illustrates. They also try to provide familiar foods and respect her religious beliefs.

Her foster parents have regularly “checked in” with Chara, and her foster mother adjusted her work schedule to provide transportation to Chara’s counseling appointments. Most notably, they have accepted Chara’s sexuality. Chara says, “When I came out as bi-sexual, they were really supportive of that. They said, ‘It doesn’t change how we feel about you. You are still the same person.’”

Chara has appreciated consistent support from her social worker, who has also been with her since she entered foster care. Chara describes her social worker as responsive, saying, “Whenever an issue would come up, I would text her and she would get back to me in one or two days.

And it was always helpful, she had my back and was never judgmental about anything.”

Chara has had opportunities to engage with other foster children found it hard to connect because many are guarded and do not want to share some of the harsh realities they face. “It’s kind of hard to talk with other foster kids about why they are in foster care,” Chara adds.

Chara’s greatest issue has involved her biological family’s legal situation. She would like better access to information; most information comes third hand from CASA to her social worker and then to her.

Chara has just transitioned to Extended Foster Care, while staying with the same family. She felt that “all the supports I had did what they could to explain the resources that I had in Extended Foster Care.” At the time of the interview, Chara was just finishing her high school, working two jobs, and applying to colleges.

Heaven

“Heaven” entered foster care as a young teen. She moved through several 14-day placements and shelters before her current home. She describes her previous placements as “just a bed until I could get to the next one.” She immediately felt the difference at her present home because, “They made me feel welcome ... [they] told me I could eat ‘anytime’ it just felt like a family instead of a foster home.”

Heaven chose adoption into the family over Extended Foster Care even though the option was explained. She explains, “I could restart and not feel like I had to live in the past.” The adoption process was drawn out and stressful mostly because of her birth parents, whom she called “toxic.”

The consistency of Heaven’s social worker has been key; they worked together entire time she was in care. “I had abandonment issues, obviously, so it was beneficial to me because I didn’t have to get to know another person. I felt kind of safe around her which was great,” Heaven says. However, Heaven felt the social worker more focused on a safety checklist than Heaven’s well-being. Heaven says, “When she would come for a home visit, it wasn’t for very long. There were no personal discussions. It was, ‘Are you being beaten, are you okay?’ and then leave.”

Heaven did report that, “My mental health was put first, and they always made sure if I needed therapy, I could get that. If I needed help going to it, like having rides, someone would provide it for me, whether it was a social worker or just a friend to take me there.” She could not say the same about academic services; she became aware of Treehouse only as she was being adopted and no longer eligible. However, with family support, Heaven ended up in honors classes by her senior year. She now lives with her adopted family and plans to go to school to become a nail technician.

Arianna

“Arianna” entered the system first as a young child and was in “on and off my whole life.” The placements were “too many to count,” in settings from kinship care and foster homes to group homes. She gave nothing higher than a “C” grade to any of the supports she received while in foster care.

Throughout Arianna felt there were only two families concerned with her well-being; others treated her “as a paycheck.”

***“ They wouldn’t tell people that I was their foster kid, so that made me feel good.*”**

She reported foster homes where she was not allowed to have toys, was only allowed to sit on her bed and had her personal things taken away from her and given to the foster parent's children. Arianna also had younger siblings in foster care and was allowed contact only during visitation; she and her siblings could not have cell phones or electronic devices to communicate. Even when Arianna turned 18, she was denied access to her siblings by the siblings' foster parents. Arianna's shifting social workers would promise to "look into that," but not manage any change.

Arianna also found significant hardship around acceptance for her cultural and sexual identity. She was disconnected from her ethnic culture—offered only "foreign food," not allowed to celebrate her holidays and pressured to speak English. She explained, "When I was younger, I was fluent [in my native language] ... Now I don't speak it at all ... We were lucky when we were placed with family, but other than that there was no [cultural] support."

When Arianna came out as a lesbian, she felt pressured to suppress her identity, remembering that it was frowned upon and "not okay" for some families. The social worker advised, "Just do what they say and there is no issue," but she felt that "that just made it a bigger issue."

Arianna also wished there could have been more follow up around her educational needs. When she was in a technical school, she sought out tutoring help from her local support agency but got no response. She found her own tutor through her school and eventually became a tutor herself.

Arianna was able to find some assistance as she got older and transitioned into Extended Foster Care, but wishes she had more guidance around "real life common sense" things like knowing about renter's insurance, job training and financial management. A lot of information was provided, but not explained. She says, "They just sent me a link on affordable housing, but I do not know what to do with this information, and it was a link to just more links ... They have a lot of resources but ... there are so many steps to be able to get it."

Arianna's final advice it to provide more stability in the social worker role. She also wants the system to "try placing children with their ethnicity or culture so they are not kept from it" because "when you are kept from your own culture, you don't want to learn about another one."

***“ I feel like I’m
doing so good
because I have been
with the same
family***

Clara

“Clara” entered foster care as an older teen and moved multiple times to different group homes before turning 18; she found the homes had “a lot of rules.” She also struggled with the behavior of other youth and staff and had a hard time at school.

“ It just felt like a family instead of a foster home.

“I was always going to different group homes and I would be out of school for a long time because I was trying to figure out a way to get to school because the place I was living was far from my school. My grades were bad because I was not in school, I got caught up but it was hard when you are gone from school a long time.”

Some teachers were helpful, and Clara did have one supportive social worker who would understand and try to get her moved somewhere safe. They shared a race/culture connection, and the social worker checked in regularly and even attended Clara’s high school graduation. Unfortunately, “They told me I had to switch because her case was full.” Subsequent social workers have not been as understanding. Clara says, “The group homes, there were bad things happening there and I would run and she [previous social worker] would understand why, but this social worker would yell at me.”

Clara has also found little follow up from her current social worker when she tries to access other supports, including counseling. Clara says, “They always talked about it to me, and I agreed to do it, but they never sent me to the counselor. And I didn’t know what to do.” In addition, the social worker has not responded to Clara’s Treehouse contact’s inquiry about Clara’s stipend money.

Now that Clara is over 18, her current group home allows more freedom. She says, “I can get a job here. The other foster home, I could not go anywhere.” Her attorney was able to explain Extended Foster Care option and helped her complete her housing application. She is taking a driver’s education course that was paid for by Treehouse and plans to apply for cosmetology school.

Brandi

“Brandi” was “found in a tent” when she was a toddler and removed from her birth family. She then lived primarily with one foster family for over 10 years, although she reports being abused and was sent several times to group homes as a “punishment.” After leaving that home, she experienced several foster families and group homes, as well as juvenile detention. During all this, she recounts one positive experience in a home that felt like a family—they went camping, had chores, and she even got a dog. Because of this one home, she graded “having a foster family that was a good match for you” as a “B”.

Brandi gave an “A” to her mental health counseling, saying her counselor was someone she was “able to talk to and they actually cared and wanted to hear it, somebody that I trusted.”

She felt pressured to go, but says, “Looking back, it was a good thing, and now I know how to get the help I need today.”

“ When she would come for a home visit, it wasn’t for very long. There were no personal discussions. It was, ‘Are you being beaten, are you okay?’ and then leave.

Brandi’s contact at Community Youth Services (CYS) has also been critical for her. She says, “Every time I had a problem, I was able to call her, and she would answer. It almost didn’t feel like she was a worker, [but] more like a mom or a sister.” The CYS contact would drive Britney an hour away to visit her father in the hospital, would take her shopping or out to eat and was always available. CYS also allowed her to connect with peers via support and social groups.

Brandi’s social workers are a different story. She gave their consistency a “D”, saying, “My social worker always changes. I have literally been through five this year ... The one I have right now, she doesn’t reply. It’s so hard to get a hold of her.” Her courtesy worker has been more consistent and visits monthly.

Brandi is worried about her eminent transition out of Extended Foster Care. She says, “Nobody’s really talked to me. I don’t have a goal. If my boyfriend and I were to get into a fight I don’t know where I would go from here.” She has recently connected with the Disabilities office in her region and plans to work with them to get more services.

Dawn

“Dawn” says she “grew up at the age of six. I had no family, and I was pretty much on my own ... I felt like I had everything and did not need anyone.” When threatened with foster care as a young teen, she opted to live with an older sibling as she “could handle it on her own.” She ended up in the foster care system by the end of the year.

Thankfully, Dawn was placed with a foster family that matched her needs and personality. She and her foster mother relate well, and Dawn appreciates having both a mother and father in the home. She even values the church community, which is rare among the interviewees. Dawn’s foster mother has supplemented the social worker by assisting with education, employment, and financial training.

When Dawn was hearing comments about “Being sent back to the border” from other high school students, her foster mother assured her of her citizenship and that she belonged in this country.

The lowest grade Dawn gave was for “keeping the same social worker.” In the four years Dawn has been in foster care she has estimates having six, but still gave the consistency a “C”. She says, “Mainly my social workers were never permanent, they were just fillers, so I never really had a connection with them.”

Dawn did find one social worker supportive, trustworthy, and responsive to her needs, including meeting outside of her work hours.

The social worker would check that her needs were being met, including helping with Dawn’s resume, conducting mock interviews, checking grades, and advising how to stay on top of school.

Dawn was heartbroken when her social worker was promoted, saying “I remember just crying no one is going to treat me the way you do.” She reports that other social workers, “just wanted to do their job.”

Dawn also benefitted from Treehouse services, including their staff explaining Extended Foster Care. Dawn says, “I didn’t go to the court date, I just signed a paper.” Dawn sums up Treehouse by saying, “Everyone is always there to make sure I am continuing and doing well in my education and in the work force.”

Dawn is currently she is taking a year off from school and then plans to study cosmetology. When asked what most needed to change in the foster care system, she spoke again about the instability of her social workers, saying, “It’s the first connection you meet when you are broken down and you just feel like you have no one. That’s going to be the only person that you are going to trust ... I feel like the first person you get, you should at least get a three year period.”

She continues “If I still had [her favorite social worker], I would probably be in a totally different mindset and vision of life.”

Axel

“Axel” was an unusual participant in this study in that he benefited from both a consistent (five years!) supportive foster family and social worker—he awarded “A” grades to all questions about both.

Axel says of his foster family, “They treated me like a normal person in the family. I got to do everything with them. I did not feel excluded from anything.” This included camping trips, spending Christmas with their extended family, and participating in household chores. But he says the key was that “I mostly felt like a family member because of how long I stayed.”

The family was also crucial to his mental health management, advocating for him when he was on “12 medications at one time; they did not mix well.” Axel explains, “I felt like I was on too many medications and it made everything more difficult. There were too many doctors in the process ... I could not focus on school because they kept switching medications.”

The only downside to his family placement was his distance from his sisters. He says, “We saw each other once a month. Because of that I don’t know my sister really, her favorite color or thing to do.” Axel wishes that visitations would have been more of a priority and more frequent.

Axel’s social worker helped him with a range of issues, from attaining a State identification and a driver’s license to quickly getting him moved to a program for minors when he as mistakenly sent to an adult behavioral health inpatient facility.

But even with an involved social worker, Axel wishes his transition into Extended Foster Care had been handled better.

***“ My mental health was put first, and they always made sure if I needed therapy, I could get that.*”**

Before the move, he knew nothing about financial matters like budgeting, housing, and job support. “They did not teach me anything,” he sums up.

Since entering EFC, Axel has received ILS services from the Y, but the switch to EFC has left him out of contact with his new social worker. He says, “Right now I am really confused. Since I turned into an adult so many things have switched.” Thankfully, Axel’s former foster family is still in contact and helped manage his transition to his own apartment. He is now living there with his girlfriend, looking for a job and expecting a baby in this coming year. He is also taking only one medication regularly.

In summary, Axel says “Put a focus on therapy and figure out how to better yourself.” He also hopes that youth who are having a hard time in foster care can avoid the medications he experienced.

Kiana

“Kiana” was among the respondents giving grades ranging only from “F” to a high of “C”. After entering the system as a young teen, she was first sent to a juvenile detention facility as there was no other space. Her autistic younger brother went to a foster family specifically for his special needs; they eventually dropped him off at his school with his belongings to be picked up by his social worker.

At the detention facility, Kiana reports being threatened and abused by other youth. She was transferred to a foster home that initially seemed fine, but their Christian beliefs and church community began clashing with Kiana’s non-Christian faith background. She reports being “forced” to attend their church and being told that her beliefs were “nonexistent.” Kiana summarizes, “I am all about accepting different religions and different cultures, but it’s a different thing if they are forcing that on you.”

The church also believed that “gay people were going to hell.” When they learned that Kiana was interested in girls, the pastor church quoted bible verses as he sprinkled holy water on her so she could “pray it away.” The foster parents also undermined her sexual identity by telling her about boys she might like and how she could eventually find a husband. Finally, other aspects of her ethnic background were ridiculed; the foster mother called Kiana’s behaviors “typical for your people. They are super abusive.” Her foster sister called Kiana her “slave.”

During this time, Kiana reports that she “never even saw” her social worker. When social workers were involved, they were not helpful, such as responding to a request for job search help with the comment, “You don’t know how to build a resume?” Kiana was also one of the few who did not find their attorney supportive. Her attorney did not agree with Kiana’s preference to move closer to her mother’s family and demanded quick and uninformed decisions of Kiana.

***“ I just always
felt like I was being
attacked.***

Kiana says of the attorney, “She antagonized me and made me cry ... I was a kid put in these adult situations and I had to make a choice which was not the best. I had to answer questions that I did not know the answer to, like where I wanted to live, if I wanted to see my dad, what services I had to do.” She summarizes, “I feel like kids in the foster care system need a lawyer that is suitable for their age group and what they are going through.”

Kiana was offered support from Treehouse and at school, but say, “I never really like talking about it because it’s embarrassing to me. Sometimes I would talk about it, but I didn’t like using it as an excuse. I buried myself in schoolwork, but I still struggled because I was not mentally there.”

Eventually, Kiana and her brother went into separate kinship care with different sides of their family. Kiana was adopted as a teenager, explaining that Extended Foster Care was “not a good option.” She feels now that more stable adults in her life and better mental health support would have helped her not feel so alone making life choices.

At the end of the online survey she wrote, “Families that take in foster kids need to be evaluated better, if they are only doing it for the check, they were not being caring towards foster children and supportive of their culture. Foster children need to be listened to better when they are having difficulties in a foster home.”

Krystal

“Krystal” is the oldest of four siblings who entered foster care when she was 12. No one could take all the siblings, so Krystal moved several times – to overnight stays, group homes and foster families, some of which she found on her own. Her younger brothers were able to remain primarily with one foster family, but Krystal could stay with them only occasionally.

Krystal ended up having limited then no contact with her siblings because their social worker felt like she had too much influence over them—that she played the “mom” role and undermined their foster parents. Krystal thinks the lack of connection was detrimental for all of them and that their social worker and foster parents should have listened to her insights about her sibling’s needs and behaviors. She says, “It’s frustrating that you have to go through so much, just to see your family or even talk to them.”

After “six to eight” placements, Krystal never found a foster family that was a good fit—in the online survey, she gave “foster family was a good match” and “F”. In the interview, she explained that most were in it for themselves. She would last about a year with each foster family and then something would make the foster parents uncomfortable; often it was Krystal’s contact with her parents. Krystal says that most of foster families wanted her cut contact with her parents, which she would not do.

“(Of her first social worker) It’s the first connection you meet when you are broken down and you just feel like you have no one. That’s going to be the only person that you are going to trust ... I feel like the first person you get, you should at least get a three year period.

“ I really regret it because if I had waited it out I could be getting a lot more help that I need now that I am not receiving cause I am twenty and I am taking care of myself. When I think about it, there are so many services that are wonderful and amazing that I could have but I can’t use because I was adopted.

She sums up, “I don’t really want to forget that I have them [my own] as parents, and a lot of placements wanted that.” As the eldest, Krystal was sent back to live with father several times as “trial runs” but after the third time Krystal insisted that she not to be put in that situation again.

Mental health counseling was mandated, but after trying three different agencies she found the trauma of retelling her experiences too overwhelming to be therapeutic. She also describes the counseling as “tests of ‘what’s wrong with me?’” Krystal would have enjoyed being able to connect with other peers in foster care but found most others too guarded to share or be honest about their experiences. She also wishes she had more training in finances—she was one of the few that names “financial training” as one of the “most important” services for those in foster care but could not grade the services because she “had none.”

Krystal was able to get the support she needed at school and gave “education support” an “A” grade. She found it most effective to have her Youthnet contact or social worker come with her to talk to teachers, otherwise, “If you’re in care, they kind of push you off.” Youthnet was also “always willing to help,” including with job support, including resumes, job searches and other resources. They checked in on her work status and school progress. Youthnet in particular “gets it done” instead of redirecting.

Krystal is now in Extended Foster Care and taking college classes. Her recommendation for changes in the foster care system is “include family visits no matter what. That’s all we have in the system.” She also believes that support services (particularly counseling) should not be mandatory, adding, “Foster kids need more voice in their decisions about what they participate in.”

Evelyn

“Evelyn” entered foster care when she was 17. After two “emergency” placements, she and her four younger siblings were placed together with a single foster mother. She is now in Extended Foster Care and on her own, but visits her siblings in the home when she has transportation.

Evelyn gave multiple “B” grades in the online survey, making her one of the higher scorers. This includes social workers; she has had two during her time in care and found them both helpful. Her first social worker supported her through her court appearance when she was having a panic attack about seeing her parents. Her current social worker has helped navigate resources and connecting her to other programs. She also has an independent living worker who checks in regularly; Evelyn finds this contact reassuring even if no specific resources are needed.

Evelyn’s “B” grade to “the availability of mental health care” was due to the accessibility and the success of her current counselor.

“They put it out there for me,” she explains. “Even saying if I ever felt the need to take medicine, I could be evaluated for that ... It was really helpful to know that I had that stuff.” Her foster mom ultimately found her a counselor; Evelyn calls the counselor “a good listener. But she also gives good feedback.”

The lowest grade Evelyn gave on the survey was a “D” for her transition to EFC. But her “rushed” sense of the process may be due to her situation at the time. She explains, “It was difficult for me, at the time I was struggling with other stuff. I was getting overly stressed out about a lot of things. It was a lot of pressure. I wasn’t mentally prepared to take it all in.”

Other relatively low grades (“C”) were for finding peers and for support for her gender identity. Most of these issues occurred before she entered foster care, due to the reactions of her friends and extended family. Her only complaint while in foster care was that her foster mother shared her sexual identity with others without Evelyn’s permission.

Evelyn switched to a new high school upon entering foster care and has found school staff helpful in terms of academics. The new social setting is more problematic. She says, “I never found people on my own. At my old school there was a [ethnic] group.” She will graduate on time this year.

Matthew

“Matthew” is young adult man who lives in a group home with behavioral support services. He has been diagnosed with an Intellectual and Developmental Disability and reports suffering from anxiety and depression. Matthew entered foster care as a young child and has experienced over 20 placements.

Matthew described several instances of abuse and neglect by foster parents and other foster children. He would report abuse to school staff, or they would notice marks on his body. He switched schools too often to stabilize and summarizes, “It messed up my education completely ... I still think about it to this day. I wish I never moved a lot, then I would be in a school that I can actually do good.”

With Matthew’s current living situation and services, he is doing better at academics and working on his behavior. He also recounts a very positive relationship with his social worker. She does “more than her job,” by recognizing his hard work and accomplishments, and he appreciates the rewards, such as her taking him out to activities and meals. He says, “that recognition for when you're trying to do really well ... It feels like I'm always being noticed it's kind of a good feeling inside.”

At the time of the interview, Matthew’s Independent Living Skills worker and his mental health counselor were virtually inaccessible during the Covid-19 pandemic situation, which left him very frustrated. However, the staff at the group home helped him work on his feelings and he is focusing on completing his education.

***“ If I still had [her favorite social worker], I would probably be in a totally different mindset and vision of life.*”**

Amira

“Amira” entered foster care while in high school, after being molested by her biological father. She told a counselor at her school, then stayed at a shelter and on a friend’s couch until a foster care placement was arranged. The “F”s she gave to school support reflect how her teachers treated her during that time—she cried through class with no intervention, and was told by one, “Just because you’re going through stuff doesn’t mean you don’t have to do your homework.” Luckily for Amira, her social worker recognized her anxiety about moving into a strange home and let her interview potential foster parents. She has been so happy with the resultant foster family that, at age 21, they are adopting her. “They are my family,” she says.

Even with that successful result, Amira gave the supports she received during her years in foster care almost all “D” and “F” grades, including learning training on finances, other independent living skills, job training and transition planning. She did have a healthy placement, but, because she was relatively old when she moved to foster care, and her foster parents had young children in the house that were more time consuming, the family could not meet all of Amira’s needs.

Although Amira is of Muslim heritage, she describes sharing the challenges of not sharing a culture with her foster family as only “minor”. The difference in their skin color did make strangers question the family’s relationship, as they would not have done with a foster child with lighter skin. Amira was able to talk to her foster parents to be assured that they loved her no less because she didn’t look like she could be their biological daughter. Amira does not wish for more contact with her biological culture, “I’m just American,” she explains.

When summing up what is needed most in foster care, Amira said, “Make sure the social workers actually care.”

Case

“Case” went into foster care at pre-school age. He was kept with two older brothers; a younger sister was in a separate placement. Case’s first several placements were not successful, but he does not remember those clearly. His brothers tell him of mistreatment and a lack of acceptance. Case does remember that the disruptions were sudden and not explained. He says, “They would just load us up from one place to the next without any information about where we were going.”

Fortunately, Case and his brothers were finally placed with a foster family so successful that they adopted the three brothers by the time Case was five. The family ultimately also housed and adopted the younger sister.

Case says, “I know I am fortunate.” He graduated from the University of Washington last year and found a good job with advancement potential.

“ Right now I am really confused. Since I turned into an adult so many things have switched.

Case credits the fact that he was so young during the roughest years, and that he was kept with his older brothers. His other siblings struggle more now with mental health. “They remember more,” he explains.

Case advocates for more mental health services and “actually understanding people’s needs.” He concludes, “Behavioral health is a very important factor ... They need to address trauma from a young age.”

Angelica

“Angelica” and her siblings were in and out of foster care from the time she was pre-school age. Her mother struggled with heroin addiction, and they were often homeless. During this period, her younger brother was placed successfully placed in a family that stayed in touch when the siblings were back with their biological mother. When Angelica was six, the siblings were permanently moved to foster care. Her brother was adopted by his earlier foster family; Angelica and her sister were periodically together but did not get along well. Eventually, her sister was also adopted.

Angelica says “I just bounced from home to home to home to home.” She further explains, “It was hard to connect to people I didn’t trust, and when I acted out, they pushed me away ... I’ve never had a foster home that was very invested in me. Not more than a bed.” She describes homes that clearly favored younger biological children, taking the younger children out to dinner and leaving Angelica locked out of the house till they returned. She feels that the foster parents were not committed to fostering, but “They wanted to look good in their friend’s eyes.” Angelica says that her social workers did not believe her but treated her “like a criminal ... Nobody wanted to know what really happened.”

During this time, Angelica often traveled hours a day to stay at the same school. She reports, “They were super helpful ... I had one science teacher that I could talk to about anything ... She’s basically a counselor to me.” The teachers allowed Angelica a safe retreat in their classroom when she was bullied and allowed extra time on assignments when her home situation was particularly volatile. She received tutoring from Treehouse and the school.

And after one bad experience with a mental health counselor who betrayed her trust and “scared away a couple of potential adoptive parents,” Angelica has benefited from one steady counselor. She gives no credit to her social workers, about whom she says, “I’ve had so many social workers I can’t count them on my fingers and toes.”

Eventually, Angelica got close to her boyfriend’s family, who believed her accounts of mental abuse from her foster family. After a suicide attempt, her boyfriend’s grandmother provided a home, which she says has been an adjustment “in a good way.” Angelica graduated on time from high school and is now attending community college.

***“ I feel like kids in the foster care system need a lawyer that is suitable for their age group and what they are going through.*”**