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Washington State Supreme Court  
Commission on Children in Foster Care

ONE UNITED VOICE FOR CHANGE

# Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit REPORT

**“Going from getting to know each other  
to organizing our ideas, to presenting our ideas  
was an awesome process.”**

*-Summit Participant*

# Introduction

The **Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit** gathered together 28 youth in foster care, 18 alumni of care, and 19 allies from all of the regions across Washington State on October 7 and 8, 2006 at Cedarbrook Leadership Center in SeaTac, Washington.

The **Leadership Summit** was sponsored by Casey Family Programs and the Washington State Supreme Court Commission on Children in Foster Care (co-chaired by Supreme Court Justice Bobbe Bridge and Children's Administration Assistant Secretary Cheryl Stephani).

The goal of the two-day leadership and skill-building summit was to help current and former foster youth develop their voice, provide their unique perspective on issues, and establish regional youth-alumni groups throughout Washington State.



## Planning

The Pew Commission for Children in Foster Care developed recommendations for change within the child welfare system. One of the Pew Commission's guiding principals is that "children and their families must have an informed voice in decisions that are made about their lives." To further the Pew Commission recommendations, the Summit Planning Committee began meeting to develop an event to strengthen and promote the involvement and empowerment of youth in foster care in their own cases and in planning for their future. The Leadership Summit Planning Committee was comprised of current and former youth in foster care and community members who shared the same goal of promoting the voice of these youth.

Applicants wanting to attend the Leadership Summit were selected through an application process that included an essay and demonstration of leadership skills. Participants were chosen if they met the minimum criteria:

- Must be current or former youth in foster care aged 14–24.
- Must have an interest in forming regional youth and alumni groups.
- Allies who attended could be alumni over the age of 24 (of which there were six). They agreed to support regional groups in their communities and allow youth in foster care and alumni to be the driving voice of the Leadership Summit. Allies also supervised youth under the age of 18.

The Summit Planning Committee entrusted the basic development of the Leadership Summit agenda to the youth and alumni of care. The following list includes the key objectives for participants:

- Connect youth in foster care and alumni with one another around their common experiences of foster care, including discussion of the perceived stigma related to growing up in foster care
- Learn to use their voice effectively as advocates for themselves and for systems reform
- Establish regional youth and alumni action groups to address issues important to them
- Identify pressing issues to share and discuss with state policymakers

## SUMMIT PLANNING COMMITTEE

Casey Family Programs-Washington State Strategy

Child and Youth Advocacy Clinic,  
University of Washington School of Law

Children's Administration

Court Appointed Special Advocates of Washington State

Foster Parents Association of Washington State

Greater Seattle Alumni Network

Mockingbird Society

TeamChild

Treehouse

Washington Education Foundation

Washington State Supreme Court Commission on  
Children in Foster Care

# The Event

The voice and leadership of youth and alumni was central to the Summit—from the agenda planning to the Summit leadership training itself. Eleven of the 14 speakers, facilitators, and presenters were individuals currently or formerly in foster care. A focal point of the Summit, which underscored to participants the power of their voices, was the formal presentation to the Commission on Children in Foster Care and other state policymakers during which the Summit participants shared their ideas and recommendations for change.

**“Going from getting to know each other to organizing our ideas to presenting our ideas was an awesome process.”**

**— Summit participant**

## Agenda

### Saturday, October 7, 2006

|          |                                  |
|----------|----------------------------------|
| 10:00 am | Registration and Check-in        |
| 12:20 pm | Welcome                          |
| 1:15 pm  | What We Have in Common           |
| 3:15 pm  | Foster Youth and Alumni Movement |
| 4:35 pm  | How To Use My Voice              |
| 6:15 pm  | Adjourn                          |
| 6:45 pm  | Dinner                           |
| 7:30 pm  | Check-in                         |
| 8:00 pm  | Open Mic and Postcard Project    |

### Sunday, October 8, 2006

|          |   |
|----------|---|
| 8:30 am  | Energizer   |
| 9:00 am  | Develop Regional Groups   |
| 10:45 am | Top Regional and State Foster Care Issues                                     |
| 12:00 pm | Lunch   |
| 1:00 pm  | Presentation to the Commission on Children<br>in Foster Care and Policymakers |
| 2:45 pm  | Next Steps  |
| 3:45 pm  | Closing Statements  |
| 4:00 pm  | Adjourn   |

# What We Have in Common

The Greater Seattle Alumni Network, a group of current and former foster youth, led a brainstorming session where youth in care and alumni identified their common foster care experiences. Some of the commonalities included:

- Dark humor (foster care “funny bone”)
- Fear of the future
- Lack of permanency
- Ability to survive with lots of strength
- Inability to trust/attach

Youth in foster care and alumni observed that this workshop allowed them to build connections with one another, to discover that they were not the only one to experience the foster care system, and to learn that others from care had had similar experiences. Participants identified their shared feelings of being labeled as bad or difficult, being seen as manipulative, or pathologized (exhibiting behavior seen as associated with a mental illness instead of a natural progression in child development). All of these preconceived judgments from others are associated with the stigma of growing up in foster care. Many participants were very honest and spoke openly about their foster care experience. During these difficult and intense discussions, participants stated that the Leadership Summit was a comfortable setting and a nonjudgmental environment where people could talk openly about their experiences.

## The Postcard Project

### Exploring the Culture of Foster Care

This community art project, sponsored by Foster Care Alumni of America (FCAA), visually exhibits the thoughts of youth in foster care and alumni of care concerning their experiences in and from foster care. Through this project, youth and alumni are able to connect around their shared culture, the culture of foster care which seems to surpass racial, ethnic, religious, age, gender, and placement history. Below are postcards created at the Leadership Summit.



# Foster Youth and Alumni Movement

“I never thought that late in life I would learn why I do many things like ‘hardening.’ I remembered being taken away 50 years ago.”  
— Ally/Alumnus

Participants learned about the movement of youth and alumni of foster care, which developed when they began to meet each other and decided to work together toward some common goals. From the onset, they found incredible strength in each other—a feeling of belonging that many grew up without knowing. Current and former foster youth discovered that they shared common experiences that give them an understanding of each other across ages, location, and ethnicity.

Their shared experiences create a community of youth and alumni from foster care with a common voice. The movement of youth and alumni from foster care is the joint effort of individuals all across the United States who have spent time in foster care and who want to use their voice to make the system better for others.

## The movement has two main goals:

1. To connect with other youth and alumni from foster care through their shared experiences.
2. To transform the foster care system for their brothers and sisters in foster care.



# How To Use My Voice

Leadership Summit participants had the opportunity to discuss the importance of their voice, drawing on their personal experiences with foster care and their firsthand knowledge of what needs to be changed to make the system better for youth in care now. Youth in foster care, alumni, and their allies learned different ways to strategically share their stories and how to craft messages for different audiences. Presenters shared several different tools necessary to be an effective speaker and gave participants opportunities to develop and practice their messages with one another.

**“Learning how to use my voice, collect my thoughts, and speak in front of others was one of the most useful workshops at the Leadership Summit.”—Youth/Alumni**

Allies are individuals who join in and support youth in foster care and alumni in achieving their self-identified goals. The participants discussed how allies could be effective at supporting youth and alumni to lead while educating their community about the perspectives and opinions of those from foster care. Allies are key to bringing the voice of foster youth and alumni to the child welfare community. Allies committed to supporting regional youth in foster care and alumni groups as they return to their communities.

**“The number of youth and alumni in attendance was refreshing, especially to have a more in-depth look at the youth perspective and to hear youth speak their stories.”—Ally**

## Develop Regional Youth and Alumni Groups

The youth and alumni movement provides a framework for youth in care and alumni of care to organize themselves by connecting with one another around their shared culture, the culture of foster care, and to create change in the child welfare system using their unique perspective. Two years ago, Passion to Action, a statewide

youth and alumni advisory board was formed through Children’s Administration, with the goal of creating regional youth and alumni groups independent of Children’s Administration. That goal was realized through this Leadership Summit. Six regional youth and alumni groups were created based on DSHS regional delineations, and one existing group, the Greater Seattle Alumni Network, added new members. Each group developed a name, mission statement, membership, and made commitments to continue to meet and work to develop their group and to recruit members upon return to their regions. These groups shared their desire to make a safe place for youth in care and alumni to share their opinions, strengthen their voice, and communicate their messages with the community to create positive change in the foster care system.

**Region 1**

**U.N.I.T.E**

**Understanding Needs and Implementing Them Everyday**

“Making life better one transformation at a time.”

**Region 2**

**R2FYAC**

**Region 2 Foster Youth Action Council**

“Our voice counts. We are helping foster youth make a change.”

**Region 3**

**HEY-MAC**

**Hearing Every Youth-Making A Change!**

“It’s our life—hear our voice! We are powerful, passionate, and determined to make a change for the better of foster youth.”

**Region 4**

**Greater Seattle Alumni Network**

Voice Passion Hope Belonging and Advocacy

### **Region 5**

**Connected**

**The Connected Youth and Alumni Leaders of Tacoma**

“Connecting together to create a voice.”

### **Region 6**

**Raise Your Voice**

“Committed today for change tomorrow.”

### **Region 6**

**Y.E.L.L.**

**Youth and Excellence Leadership Link**

“Committed today for change tomorrow.”

## **State and Regional Foster Care Recommendations**

The Commission on Children in Foster Care as well as Representative Mary Helen Roberts, Vice-Chair of the House Committee on Children and Family Services, and Kari Burrell, Executive Policy Advisor, Governor’s Executive Policy Office attended the Leadership Summit to hear the concerns and recommendations for change from youth in foster care and alumni. Participants identified the top issues they believe need to change in the foster care system, and representatives from each regional group addressed the panel of policymakers with the following recommendations:

### **1. Strengthen Transition and Independent Living Supports and Services**

Three groups shared that youth in foster care feel afraid of the unknown, not knowing what to expect when leaving care. Some alumni were forced to leave care without having learned the basic skills necessary to care for themselves on their own. Participants felt

they received lots of mental health counseling while in care, but after emancipation, they had no way to continue on medications or treatment since they lost Medicaid coverage. Youth in foster care need the same things from the state that other youth need when they leave their birth home for the first time—more than just a place to stay at night.

## Recommendations

- A. Mandatory independent living skills should be taught to youth before transitioning from care.
- B. Some services need to continue when youth exit care including medical coverage.
- C. More information should be provided about college scholarships.

### 2. Keep Siblings Together in Care

Three groups shared their insights regarding the positive effects of keeping siblings together. Many youth and alumni have stronger bonds with siblings than with their parents. Youth in care and alumni felt that their family and their best friends were taken away when siblings were not placed together. Foster home placements would be more stable if siblings were placed together. Youth would be less stressed if they did not have to worry about where their siblings were and if they were okay. Participants shared that they were not placed together, and many did not know where their siblings were and had not seen them for years.

## Recommendations

- A. Mandatory sibling placements together.
- B. Court ordered sibling visits, when not placed together.
- C. Phone cards should be provided to youth in care so they are able to stay in touch with their siblings if they are not placed together.
- D. Every youth in care should be given their sibling contact information every time they move, if they are separated from one another.

### 3. Keep Youth Connected to Their Culture

Although none of the groups chose to present to the Commission on this topic, they did identify this as an important issue. Participants felt they were unable to stay connected to their culture or to express their cultural values in care, especially if that differed from the culture of their foster homes.

## Recommendations

- A. Social workers, foster parents, and CASAs need more training on a wide variety of different cultures.
- B. Youth need opportunities to connect with their culture in a safe environment.

## Next Steps

Participants were empowered by the opportunity to share their thoughts, ideas, and solutions to state policymakers. They felt honored to connect with people who could make change happen, and who were clearly willing to listen.

Following their presentation to the Commission, the seven regional groups finalized their action plans including logistics of their next meetings once they return to their communities, how to maintain contact with one another, and roles and responsibilities for each member. Each participant wrote a commitment he or she would make to the group that would be mailed by a planning committee member one week later. Many participants shared that they wished the Leadership Summit would continue every year.

The sponsoring organizations addressed the participants. Casey Family Programs committed to helping sponsor another Leadership Summit next year. It is the intention of the Commission on Children in Foster Care to add two new members on the Commission—a youth in care and an alumnus of care—and is prepared to offer technical assistance to the regional groups. Assistant Secretary Cheryl

Stephani vowed to attend regional group meetings when invited, to stay connected with the groups, and to help facilitate collaborations between the regional groups and Children's Administration.

## Outcomes

As a result of the youth and alumni recommendations to the panel of policymakers, Representative Mary Helen Roberts will be sponsoring a bill to extend Medicaid to age 21 for foster youth emancipating out of care.

There is now a substantive base of youth in care and alumni poised to bring their expertise and experience in foster care to the child welfare community within Washington State and beyond. The seven regional youth and alumni groups are all focused on building connections with one another and developing their voice, and they are intent on creating change in the child welfare system. Representatives from these groups will reconvene in 2007 and in the interim will be reporting to the Commission on their progress.



# Appendix A

## Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit Evaluation

Thirty-nine participants completed an evaluation of the Leadership Summit. Of the respondents, thirty-eight felt their expectations of the Leadership Summit were met. Participants loved the facilities and the food at Cedarbrook Leadership Center. Some shared it was the best place they had ever stayed.

What follows is a summary of the responses provided by participants on the evaluation. Participants gave ratings on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being excellent and 1 being poor.

1. How would you rate this leadership summit overall?  
Participants responded with an average answer of 4.70.
2. Was the structure of the leadership summit helpful to you?  
Participants responded with an average of 4.44.

Those who gave the summit the highest score reflected the following trends on their evaluations:

### Connections

Participants explained they enjoyed hearing from other foster youth and alumni of care. They felt safe and felt no one was judging them because of their past. They learned that they had a lot in common with one another and forged relationships they believe will continue into the future.

### Voice

Participants shared they that they learned how to find and use their voice. One participant wrote, “[The Leadership Summit] made me realize that I do have a voice and that I can stand up for what I want.” The voice development workshop facilitators were praised for their PREP model and other voice development skills learned during that session. Participants felt, some for the first time, that their voice mattered.

## Panel with Policymakers

Participants were empowered by the opportunity to share their thoughts ideas and solutions to state policy makers. They felt it was amazing to connect with people who could make change happen. Participants who gave lower ratings felt that the workshops were too long, had too much talking and not enough interaction between participants. Others felt that the youth needed more time to develop their messages to the state policy makers.

### What did you find most useful about the leadership summit?

All the different workshops were identified by one or more participants as useful. The most recurring aspects of the leadership summit classified as useful were:

1. Any opportunity the foster youth and alumni had to connect, hear each other's frustrations ideas and feelings, discuss the culture of growing up in foster care, and build relationships.
2. Brainstorming sessions focused on fixing the system. Learning that voicing and sharing opinions can help make a difference.
3. The number of youth and alumni present, providing an opportunity to take a more in-depth look through a youth perspective. It was refreshing to hear directly from youth and to hear them speak their stories.
4. Gathering groups together and discussing group development to create a network.
5. The participation of policymakers. Participants shared that it was important to let policymakers hear directly from youth, alumni, and allies. The chance to talk with the Commission was empowering.
6. Learning how to use one's voice to speak in front of others with the prep model. Learning how to collect thoughts.
7. Being heard.
8. Receiving encouragement.
9. Comfortable setting and nonjudgmental environment, where we could talk safely and openly about our experiences.
10. Gaining hope that things can be changed.

### **What did you find least useful? What could be improved?**

The main areas that participants felt needed improvement included the following:

1. The workshops seemed to be too long, with not enough engaging activities, but too much lecture style.
2. Need to increase time to have voice heard; this could be solved by having a storytime session in which people who want to can share when and how they want to.
3. Participants felt they needed more social bonding time with one another.
4. More time for preparation of youth voice development for discussion with the commission.
5. Better preparation for open mic; better sound equipment.
6. Less adult and ally voice/opinion.
7. There were a few who did not seem invested.
8. Too much repetition.

### **Identify 3 ways that you plan to use the knowledge and skills you gained from the leadership summit in your community?**

Participants identified the following actions:

#### **Groups**

- Working with their regional group and attending meetings; recruiting youth, alumni, and allies to become group members and market the group to their communities
- Connecting with other foster youth and alumni to use as support
- Assisting in supporting youth and alumni as an ally, and educating others at work

#### **Educate**

- Informing allies and policymakers about what occurs in foster care
- Educating schools, community, foster parents, social workers, and ILPs about the our perspective of the foster care system
- Talking to other people to get them involved

- Telling others of connections and groups out there that can help them
- Talking to local legislators about needed changes
- Starting a mentoring program

### Personal Growth

- Not caring what other people think of me
- Using my voice (our voices matter)
- Gaining self-confidence and helping others build their own

### Confidence

- Being more assertive
- Inspiring others to succeed
- Being more confident with my voice when going out and talking to the community and other people/foster youth

### Leadership

- Being a more confident leader at school, home, and in every day life

### Advocacy

- Using my voice in appropriate ways.
- Using the prep model for strategic sharing.
- Helping other youth to realize that they have a voice
- Helping people to find happiness.



For the next question, the participants gave ratings on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being excellent and 1 being poor.

**Did this Leadership Summit provide you with opportunities to:**

- Connect and share with other foster youth and alumni?  
4.85
- Identify issues that you want addressed or changed in the foster care system?  
4.67
- Develop your voice and articulate your concerns to policy-makers?  
4.59
- Develop and use your leadership skills?  
4.67

**Please give us any other feedback you have about the Leadership Summit.**

- “I loved it!”
- “This conference was really awesome. It’s not that often that I can tap into my emotions as a foster youth.”
- “I had a blast here, it has been a very positive experience and look forward to doing it again.”
- “It was the best conference I have ever been to! Thank you!”
- “It was great. I hope more is too come.”





## **SUMMIT PLANNING COMMITTEE**

Casey Family Programs-Washington State Strategy  
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