

Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit Report



The Mockingbird Society

Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit Report

The newly appointed Secretary of the Department of Social and Health Services joined the 2009 Washington State Fourth Annual Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit, which brought together 28 youth and alumni of care from across the state. The summit, held June 27 and 28 at the Cedarbrook Leadership Center in SeaTac, was sponsored by The Mockingbird Society, with support from Casey Family Programs, the Department of Social and Health Services – Children’s Administration, the Center for Children & Youth Justice, and the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care.

Despite unanticipated budget cuts, the sponsors remained committed to ensuring the 2009 summit occurred. Ten Mockingbird staff members (two of whom are alumni of care) participated, along with individuals from every DSHS region. Every facet of the foster care system was represented: foster families, group homes, kinship placement, etc.



The Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit Group

As a special guest to the summit, Susan Dreyfus, the new DSHS Secretary, addressed the youth and affirmed her commitment to being available to foster youth, to hearing their concerns and taking seriously their recommendations for change in the child welfare system.

Overview

This year’s summit was held during the end of June to inform and impact the legislative agenda for 2010. The State Advisory Council (SAC) will take the main topics that came out of the summit, and the youth from SAC will vote on the topics that The Mockingbird Society will bring to Olympia on Youth Advocacy Day. The State Advisory Council is a statewide committee of two delegates from each region’s Mockingbird network chapter. Delegates meet on a quarterly basis and are supported by a team of community leaders, elected officials, child welfare experts, and adult alumni from foster care.

The planning for the summit took place at The Mockingbird Society headquarters in Seattle, WA with assistance from sponsors and members of the State Advisory Council. Mockingbird Network resource specialists recruited and organized delegates from across the state. Selected delegates went through an application process that included an essay, and they were required to meet two minimum criteria:

- Be current or former foster youth age 14-24
- Have an interest in participating in foster youth and alumni chapters

The Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit was a two-day event that really inspired youth to develop leadership skills and present clear ideas on how to change the foster care system. The schedule was as follows:

► **Agenda - Saturday, June 27th**

3:00 p.m. Registration
3:45 p.m. Welcome
4:00 p.m. Teambuilding
5:00 p.m. Tips to Get Your Message Out
6:00 p.m. Dinner
6:45 p.m. Leadership workshops
8:45 p.m. Free time/activities
11:00 p.m. Lights out

► **Agenda - Sunday, June 28th**

8:00 a.m. Breakfast/Energizer
8:30 a.m. Legislative/Political Overview
9:15 a.m. Review tips
9:25 a.m. Develop message
10:15 a.m. Break
11:15 a.m. Present message/Feedback
12:00 p.m. Lunch
1:00 p.m. Present to the commission
2:30 p.m. Break
2:45 p.m. Wrap-up
3:15 p.m. Closing
4:00 p.m. Summit adjourns

Day One

Tips to Get Your Message Out

Dr. Wanda Hackett gave a seminar on how to effectively develop and present a message. First, Dr. Hackett outlined how to use brainstorming techniques to develop ideas, and then how to use categorization and filtering techniques to turn the clusters of rough ideas into a working outline. After leading the group through message development, Dr. Hackett focused on the art of presentation by using a simple, effective framework: “Tell ‘em what you’re gonna tell ‘em, tell ‘em, and then tell ‘em what you told them.” The workshop went over well with the delegates. One delegate remarked that after the workshop, she was able to “[better] present herself in front of people,” while another said that she enjoyed “learning more [about] leadership.”

Leadership Workshops

After the seminar, delegates broke into their chapters to develop presentations on the qualities of leadership. Each chapter came with a different quality: Region 1 had Communication, Region 2 Commitment, Region 3 Taking Initiative, Region 4 Positive Attitude, Region 5 Problem Solving, and Region 6 Responsibility. Each region developed and presented a five-minute presentation on its topic. Delegates felt that the leadership presentations helped them to understand how to become better leaders, with one remarking that she enjoyed watching the delegates “work together, share ideas, and use their experience to teach others.”



Region 5 with Dr. Wanda Hackett, Director of The Mockingbird Family Model

Day Two

Legislative/Political Overview

Jim Theofelis, Executive Director of The Mockingbird Society, gave a short informational presentation on the current situation in the State Legislature. He went over what we have achieved in the past, including the passing of such bills as:

- Medicaid to 21, which provides foster youth health insurance to their 21st birthday,
- WA state ID cards, which provides an expedited way for social workers to acquire ID cards for foster youth who may be lacking certain documentation, Sibling Visitation, which directs the Children’s Administration to encourage adoptive parents to maintain connections with siblings who are placed separately, as well as provide means for them to do so,
- Fostering Connections, a new federal law that may allow foster youth to remain in their placements until age 21 as long as they are actively engaged in some sort of educational program, and
- Notification of Rights, which mandates that CA inform youth in care of their legal responsibilities beginning at age 12.

Mr. Theofelis emphasized the importance of remaining positive in the face of a harsh economic climate, saying that “if you’re not sitting at the table, you need to be working the table,” and reminded all of The Mockingbird Rule: “If you prepare hard, take it seriously, and make sure it comes from the heart, you will succeed.”

Develop the Message

For the rest of the morning, the delegates split into regions to work on the presentations they were going to present to the commission. Each group used the principles outlined in the Tips to Get Your Message Out seminar to develop and refine a presentation on the topic that its chapter had brought to the summit. After they were done, each chapter’s delegation did a dry run before the rest of the delegates, and received feedback on how to improve presentations.



Jim Theofelis, Executive Director of The Mockingbird Society

Members of the Commission for Children in Foster Care

Justice Bobbe Bridge, Co-Chair	Washington State Supreme Court
Randy Hart, Co-Chair	Interim Assistant Secretary DSHS/Children's Administration
Ron Hertel	Supervisor, Readiness to Learn Program, OSPI
Kelly Stockman Reid	Executive Director - Washington State CASA
Sassi Jarvela	Representing Youth in Foster Care
Rob McKenna	Washington State Attorney General
Beth Canfield	Co-Chair, Board of Directors - Foster Parents Association of Washington State
Julio V. A. Carranza	Foster Youth Alumni Representative
Chorisia Folkman	Northwest Intertribal Court System Representative
Judge Tari S. Eitzen	President, Superior Court Judges Association
Senator James Hargrove	Chair, Senate Human Services and Corrections Committee
Joanne Moore	Washington State Office of Public Defense
Mike Canfield	Co-Chair, Board of Directors - Foster Parents Association of Washington State
Jim Bamberger	Office of Civil Legal Aid
Michael Curtis	Executive Director - Center for Children & Youth Justice
Karen Castillo	Administrative Office of the Courts

Youth Delegates Report Out to The Commission for Children in Foster Care

Over the past three years topics presented to the commission during the Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit have been chosen by The State Advisory Council and commission members to be brought before State Legislators. This partnership has caused a ripple effect, and at least one law has been changed due to this work every year (WA State ID Cards, Medicaid to 21, Notification of Rights, Sibling Visitations).



Youth from across the state presented key topics from their regions to the Commission for Children in Foster Care.

Topics included:

- ▶ **Regions 1 and 6**
Surprise health and safety placement visits
- ▶ **Region 2**
Region-to-region case transfers
- ▶ **Region 3**
More control by the youth on placements
- ▶ **Region 4**
Legal representation
- ▶ **Region 5**
Foster Care to College mentoring program



The Commission for Children in Foster Care

Susan Dreyfus, Secretary of the Department of Social and Health Services

“It makes me want to do this more. It’s inspiring.”

Ben Flowers, Region 4



Mockingbird Chapter - Region 1

Regions 1 and 6: Surprise foster home visits

Regions 1 and 6 presented (separately) on the necessity of random, unannounced visits to foster homes by social workers. One delegate shared a heartbreaking story of how her home was disgusting and filthy, with trash and empty beer cans littered everywhere, and a bathroom so foul she was frightened to shower in it. She explained that when it came time for the social worker to visit, the responsibility of cleaning up the house fell to her, and so the social worker's visits actually caused her increased stress to suffer instead of holding her parents accountable. Another delegate told the commission that, growing up, she was not

aware that one is supposed to have three meals a day and lost a significant friendship to her foster parents' racist beliefs. The purpose of visits to the home by the social worker is to ensure that the foster parents are held accountable for the standard of care they provide, and announcing the visits beforehand risks allowing the parents to present a different standard than actually exists, as well as opening the youth up to retaliation in the event that he or she tells the truth about the situation in the home. One example that was brought up is when a restaurant has an inspection that restaurant does not know that it is coming: So why should a foster home when you are dealing with a youth's life?



Speak Up
Mockingbird Chapter - Region 6

Youth and alumni recommendations:

- Visits by social workers to foster homes should be unannounced, random, and frequent.
- If an unannounced visit turns up evidence of neglect or abuse, the social worker needs to act immediately to preserve the safety of the youth in care.

“I’m a leader in my group. I want my voice to be heard.”

Saundra Hunt, Region 2



ACT First - Around Community
Two Fostering Individual Rights Safely Together
Mockingbird Chapter - Region 2

Region 2: Region-to-region case transfers

Region 2 presented on the problems with CA's method for transferring foster youth between different DSHS regions. One delegate told the panel how, in the process of moving to a different region, he lost his ID and Social Security cards as well as other important personal belongings, and as a result faced difficulties registering for school and applying for jobs. Even after the transfer was completed, CA did not follow through with getting the delegate the documents he needed.

Youth and alumni recommendations:

- Different regional offices need to coordinate transfers much more effectively.
- Ensure that before youth exit one Region they have all the necessary documents and private belongings in hand.

“Once you hear others’ stories, you find that you have someone to relate to.”

Gabby Knight, Region 5



HEYMAC - Hearing Every Youth
Making A Change
Mockingbird Chapter - Region 3

Region 3: Youth voice in placement decisions

Region 3 explained that it is important to have the youth's voice with placement decisions. One delegate shared how he was placed with a family that smoked cigarettes in the house, and that made him feel uncomfortable. He said that he did not get along with the family, and that if he had had the opportunity to interview or even meet the family before he was placed, he may have been able to avoid an unpleasant experience on both sides of the equation by making clear his needs and what he was comfortable with. Although there is a shortage of placements that does not mean that the correct course of action is to jam foster youth into the first placement that opens up, with no consideration of whether the youth would be a good fit with that family.

Youth and alumni recommendations:

- Youth should be allowed to meet with potential placements before they are placed, and get an idea of whether or not they would be a good fit for that placement.
- Youth should be more involved in the decision-making process as regards placement.
- The Mockingbird Family Model should be the model that is followed. This would allow the youth to meet their foster parents in the Hub home before going into the foster parent's home.

“I learned that I could help make a difference in the system”

Alexis Holland,
Region 6

Region 4: Adequate legal representation for foster youth

Region 4 presented the need for adequate legal representation for foster youth in dependency cases. When starting out their presentation, Region 4 asked the commission members if they had children and if they would send their own children to court without an attorney. Not a single hand went up. Currently in some regions, a youth 12 or older can ask for an attorney. However, this attorney usually has a large caseload and many times meets with the youth only a couple of minutes before they are to go into court. Most youth enter the courtroom without an attorney.



Region 4 for Change, Mockingbird Chapter - Region 4

Youth and alumni recommendations:

- Foster youth should be entitled to attorneys to represent them in dependency cases.
- These attorneys should have manageable caseloads, they should be knowledgeable about dependency law and the foster system, and they should be trained to communicate effectively with youth clients.

“This is my fourth year. I enjoy seeing all the new people coming out of their shell and discovering their voice.”

Sassi Ellsworth, Region 3



Mockingbird Chapter - Region 5

Region 5: Foster Care to College program

Region 5 did not champion a policy change, but instead asked that greater support be given to the Foster Care to College program. They explained how the program had affected many of their lives personally and profoundly, and pointed out the importance of a college education to the future of all youth.

Youth and alumni recommendations

- The Foster Care to College program should receive additional funding and support.

Pre-Post Survey Results

The delegates from the summit completed a pre- and post-survey related to the event. Survey results showed that 54% of respondents reported improvements in at least one target area.

- 25% of the respondents reported an improvement in their ability to share their story to positively advocate for themselves;
- 39% of the respondents reported an improvement in their connection with other foster youth;
- 54% of the respondents reported an improvement in their understanding on how to present a topic to a large group in an effective and dynamic way; and
- 32% of the respondents reported an improvement in their ability to share their story to help transform the foster care system.

Closing

The Fourth Annual Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit was a resounding success. Even in the face of budget reductions, delegates were able to develop a powerful message and deliver that message to policymakers and other stakeholders. Youth who came to the summit had the opportunity to come together through the framework of The Mockingbird Network. This framework is a statewide initiative bringing together youth and alumni of foster and kinship care, with a vision to develop individual leaders, engage and strengthen communities, and reform the foster care system. As a result, youth are finding their voices, realizing their potential as strong and productive citizens, and leaving their mark on a child welfare system in need of change.



Justice Bobbe Bridge
CCYJ President and CEO

“I came here to learn how to use my voice and I have passion for wanting to help foster youth, so coming here gives me more motivation.”

Josie, Region 1

“I think every kid deserves a good family, and if the state says that you’re my kids, then we need to do a good job.”

Rep. Mary Helen Roberts

Sincere thanks to our generous Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit sponsors:

Court Appointed Special Advocates · Casey Family Programs · Center for Children & Youth Justice · Children's Administration
Commission on Children in Foster Care · Youth/Alumni Delegates · Mockingbird Society · Burton Snowboards · Chill



**Prepared by
The Mockingbird Network Reporters:**

Ian Grant
Jerry Bobo
Ashlie Lanier
Christina Koshney
Leona Bill
Diamonique Bill

With assistance from:

Norris West
Communications Director
Casey Family Programs