

2011

Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit Report



The Mockingbird Society

Building a world-class foster care system

Jim Theofelis
Executive Director
The Mockingbird Society



Dear Friends,

The 6th Annual Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit was held on June 27th through 29th. The success of this year's event further reinforces my belief in these amazing young leaders and the promise they each hold. The event demonstrates how utilizing a strength based youth development approach generates empowered and skilled individuals. It also shows how powerful the voices of youth and alumni of foster care and homeless youth are in the decision-making process.

It is a privilege to witness youth sharing their personal stories and experiences, and using these stories as a catalyst for what could be tomorrow's most significant system improvements. I want to thank our distinguished group of sponsors for their steadfast support of the Summit: Casey Family Programs; the Washington State Supreme Court Commission on Children in Foster Care; the Center for Children and Youth Justice; the Federal Court Improvement Program; and the Department of Social and Health Services.

The Mockingbird Youth Network hosted 64 young people from every corner of the state. Each of the regional chapters brought forth an idea to the Summit, which is researched, tested and honed through two full days of leadership workshops. The specific proposals covered improved policies and practices such as better integration with the mental health system to enhance response times from social workers. This is in order to improve normalization for children and youth. Really, they just want to be kids.

This year we also dedicated part of the program to reflecting on our previous accomplishments toward building a world class foster care system. It was clear that we are moving closer to the day when ALL youth can choose to remain in foster care to 21, without exception. This will ensure that they set off on the path to adulthood with stability and a safe home. Thank you to all our Legislative Champions and Advocates – who like our young people – joined us from across this state. We are deeply grateful for your dedication and ongoing support.

Thanks to each and everyone of you who supports The Mockingbird Society and helps us to remind the world that all children are OUR children. This year's Summit truly works toward the promise of system change for that five year old child who doesn't even know she will be entering it.

Sincerely



Jim Theofelis
Executive Director, The Mockingbird Society

Voices of Change

The Summit culminated with the youth presentation to the Washington State Supreme Court Commission on Children in Foster Care. Mockingbird Youth Network leaders representing every region of our state presented their proposals to the Commission. Their powerful ideas for reform are highlighted below.

ENCOURAGING TIMELY RESPONSES FROM SOCIAL WORKERS

REGION 1 NORTH > SPOKANE

By Kristina Thomason

At the Summit, our proposal called for improving the response time between social workers and youth in care. The Children's Administration policy is to respond to inquiries from youth in care within 24 hours. We surveyed 25 youth who attended the training. All reported that getting a timely response back from their social worker has been, and continues to be, an issue. Youth said they have missed out on multiple opportunities for both normal youth activities, as well as important events. We also heard from several youth who said they had not received any kind of response back at all from their social worker.

As a chapter, we felt this was unacceptable. The typical response time from our Region 1 North youth ranged anywhere from one week to three months to none at all. We chose this topic because we feel it is important not only because we should be getting responses back, but also because we want a functional relationship with our social workers.

We came together and researched our topic and it was great to see all of our different personalities come together to make an amazing presentation! I'm so proud of my chapter; without the help, commitment, flexibility, and willingness of our members we would not have had such a great presentation! The Summit was an unforgettable experience for all of us! We can't wait for next year!



FOSTER CARE TO 21

REGION 1 SOUTH > YAKIMA

By Brandy Baxley

Our proposal for the Commission this year was to extend foster care as an option to all youth to age 21. At first, our region wasn't too sure about what to say to create change. But, after going through the system reform workshop, and getting feedback from the advisors, we felt much more confident in our content, which helped us successfully present our topic.

We proposed "Foster Care to 21" so that all youth aging-out will have a better chance at having a successful life. Correen spoke about her positive experience in the Foster Care to 21 program and Stevie pointed out that 22 percent of youth in care experience homelessness. She also said that Washington could qualify for a 50 percent federal match for every dollar that the state spends if this policy were adopted. In 2011 our state opted in to this federal match for youth earning their high school diploma or GED through HB 1128. But, we would like our state to take full advantage of this match by extending foster care to 21 for all youth.

The commission was very supportive of our proposal, and while finding adequate funding remains a challenge, many members expressed their continued support for its implementation.



MAINTAINING SIBLING CONNECTIONS

REGION 2 NORTH > EVERETT

By Janell Braxton

H.E.Y.M.A.C. (Hearing Every Youth Make a Change) focused its presentation on the importance of maintaining sibling connections. Siblings are not always allowed to be placed together in a foster home or even in close proximity to one another. Children's Administration is responsible for making reasonable efforts to keep siblings connected. The Child Welfare Information Gateway states "sibling relationships are emotionally powerful and critically important not only in childhood but over the course of a lifetime. Siblings form a child's first peer group, and children learn social skills, particularly in managing conflict, from negotiating with brothers and sisters. Sibling relationships can provide a significant source of continuity throughout a child's lifetime and are likely to be the longest relationships that most people experience."

What we proposed is that Children's Administration put more emphasis on keeping siblings connected when placing them together is not possible. Whether it's a phone call or monthly visitations, some form of healthy sibling connection is critical for all children as they grow up, but especially for children entering foster care. Our group asked the Commission to really consider the importance of sibling bonds. We asked, "Why would you want to strip children in foster care from what is often their only remaining family connection?" We recommended placing siblings in the same homes, or at least the same schools whenever possible. When children are placed separately, the connection can be maintained by facilitating monthly or weekly phone calls, creating connections via Facebook, e-mails, mail or just visitations. We recommended this because we feel that it is a necessary demand to keep that sacred bond between siblings when growing up and learning about relationships. And, stronger sibling connections would make living in the foster care system a little easier to live through.



PROTECTING YOUTH FROM MENTAL ABUSE

REGION 2 SOUTH > SEATTLE

By Sam Martin

We presented the topic of mental abuse to the Commission. Under Washington State law (RCW 74.34.020) mental abuse includes, but is not limited to, coercion, harassment, inappropriately isolating a vulnerable adult from family, friends, or regular activity, and verbal assault that includes ridiculing, intimidating, yelling, or swearing.

Currently this statute appears only to address adults who are being mentally abused. We found no statutes or policies pertaining to youth, leaving those exposed to mental abuse without adequate support to address its detrimental effect. As young people who have survived the foster care system, and who know what many of us have suffered, we felt the reality and the weight of this heavy topic. And, we believe it is up to the guardians of youth in care to ensure that children and youth are in a nurturing home that allows for growth and development.



Our solutions asked for a system-wide recognition of mental abuse and its effect on children and youth, including:

- The courts – to ensure that they fully understand mental abuse and consider it in child dependency hearings
- Social workers – so they can be properly trained to recognize mental abuse, and
- Mental health providers and institutions – to better evaluate and help provide treatment to affected youth.

Too many young people end up in not only a physically unsafe home, but also a mentally unsafe home. In my own experience, I can tell you that the effects of mental abuse are everlasting. We want young people to be built up, not torn down before they even have a chance in life.

PROMOTING “NORMAL” TEENAGE EXPERIENCES: Asking for Permission for 3 Night Stays While a Background Check is Being Processed

REGION 3 NORTH > TACOMA

By Kaitlin Williamson

While at the Summit we raised the issue of the rules around overnight stays and how the current situation makes it hard to have a normal teenage experience. The current policy states that youth in foster care are allowed to stay the night at a friend's house for ONE night. Anything beyond that requires a background check of the host. Some background checks take up to six months to complete, which makes planning any extended recreational, educational or extra-curricular activity extremely difficult. In our presentation to the Washington State Supreme Court Commission on Children in Foster Care, we gave examples of athletes who could not participate in training camps, or youth who could not attend gatherings for important life moments due to the current extended lag time for background check approval. We proposed allowing youth to stay three nights while the background check is being processed. This would allow youth in care to participate in many “normal” activities. And, it has the bonus of providing more opportunities for respite for care providers.

We understand that safety is part of the thinking behind the initial rule, but perhaps policymakers did not understand the length of time it takes to gain approval. We are hoping to change the policy and make our experience in foster care just a little more like the life of any teenager growing up.



ADVOCACY FOR TEEN PARENTS IN FOSTER CARE

REGION 3 SOUTH > OLYMPIA

By Rosalee Warren and Joseph Ollom

As Olympia chapter members we were super excited to be able to present our topic regarding pregnant and parenting foster youth to the Washington State Supreme Court Commission on Children in Foster Care. This is an important issue because it affects a significant number of youth in



care, and is an issue of respecting rights and supporting healthy families. According to a 2007 study conducted by the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall, 48 percent of teenage girls in care experience pregnancy by the age of 19, and are over twice as likely to have a child while in care as their peers from intact families. We spoke to six parents who are or were pregnant or parenting while in foster care and they all said that they were not given adequate resources to make informed decisions. In addition, proper support was not provided in order to reach their full potential. We propose making a taskforce composed of pregnant and parenting youth and alumni of foster care and relevant stakeholders to create a plan for improving outcomes for pregnant

and parenting youth in care, and to reduce pregnancies among foster youth.

The 2011 Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit was an awesome experience. Chapter member Joe Ollom said the biggest thing he took from the Summit was: "Hearing how powerful personal stories can affect powerful leaders and others to make powerful change." Members of the Commission said that they have already made plans to create a workgroup to address our Summit topic, which we are very excited about! We want to give a special "Thank You" to everyone that helped make the Summit possible.

The Voice of Leadership

2011 marks the second year of our Leadership Essay Contest. The winner spends a day with Assistant Secretary Denise Revels Robinson of Children's Administration

TREAT ME WITH EQUALITY

FOSTER YOUTH AND ALUMNI LEADERSHIP SUMMIT ESSAY CONTEST WINNER

By Stevie Atkins

As a student at Yakima Valley Community College (YVCC) I have grown to a greater level of maturity and recently was told about the Summit. I had the opportunity to attend this year's Youth Advocacy Day and was just blown away about how many young foster youth are so involved with understanding their rights. I also would like to have the opportunity to tell anyone who will listen to my point of view on how to make the foster care system better for our future generations. And, also work for a better life for youth in foster care who grow out of the home and are expected to live independently. It's important to know what kind of resources are out there to help former foster youth and I am willing to help in any way that I can.

I'm getting to the age where I'm too old to receive any benefits because I wasn't involved with certain programs that are provided by the state. I didn't know anything about these programs (Independent Youth Housing or Foster Care to 21) until I was 20 years old.

I regret not going back to school sooner. Maybe this was because I was in a tribal foster care system. I never saw my social worker. I'm not sure why this was the case, but I would have liked to have seen her more often. I would've liked her to have told me about the program options that were available to me when I left my foster parents as a young adult.

I would like to see the state laws and tribal laws come together, so tribal youth can be treated with equality in the foster care system. I also would like to see the age limits increased for certain scholarships for former foster youth. Because at the age of 23, I still feel like I need these benefits, as I'm still growing into being an adult.

Leadership means to stand up for what you believe in and what you think is right. You don't have to be ahead of everyone, but standing with other people that feel the same way you feel. Trying to make life better for foster youth is one big step to leadership because I know when I was in high school I was too ashamed to step-up. Now that I'm in college I wish I would have been more open about my identity. I'm no longer ashamed and will tell anyone that I was a former foster youth and it has made me who I am today.



FIGHT FOR OUR FUTURE

FOSTER YOUTH AND ALUMNI LEADERSHIP SUMMIT ESSAY CONTEST RUNNER-UP

By Ryan Cummings

Why do you think that you should go to the leadership summit?

I know that I should go to the 2011 Mockingbird Society Leadership Summit. Last year I attended with Region Six Youth Network Chapter members and had the honor of speaking in front of the Washington State Supreme Court Commission on Foster Care, along with my fellow brothers and sisters of care.



I honestly have to say that the leadership experience I gained was beneficial for me in every way. While at the Summit I realized that the foster care system was not a lost cause and that there were people who cared and were fighting to make it better. With that knowledge in mind I realized I wanted, no needed, to do more.

The inspirational effect of sitting in front of so many accepting peers, who all wanted the same thing, was life changing. What I gained from the Summit I would not give up for anything. I realized that it was not enough to be a part of The Mockingbird Society or Passion to Action – I needed to get involved in – participate in – advocating for change in the foster care system.

What would you tell a state policy maker about how to make the foster care system better?

I would tell them to fight for the future of our country. I would tell them to stop cutting all the money out of the programs and budget that pay for foster care, healthcare, GAU (General Assistance Program) and the real stuff that actually supports citizens.

Our government is failing, miserably. We have two options left right now, or our country is going to fall apart. We either need to start cutting defense spending or we need to raise taxes on the rich. Maybe we need to do both, but one thing is sure: If we don't do something, and soon, all hell is going to break loose. As long as we stand divided (the Republicans controlling the House and the Democrats controlling the Senate) we are doomed. We need to literally put aside our differences and figure out how we are going to keep this country from failing. The last United States government shutdown was back in 1995 and 1996 and it cost the country nearly \$4 billion. Our economy could not handle another shut down, nor could its citizens or the families of the men and women away at war. I know and understand that there are a lot of political aspects that need to be taken into consideration, but that just needs to be brushed aside for now until we come up with a plan.

What does leadership mean to you and how do you see yourself as a leader?

Leadership means a lot to me. It means being able to stand up even against the odds and fighting for what you believe in. It means that you value your success not by what you own, but by what you have achieved. I see myself as a leader because I believe in and am willing to fight for positive change. Whether the issue at hand is the foster care system or our right to freedom of speech. It is time for the common man and woman to rise up from out of the shadows and use the gift that was given to almost all of us at birth. Our voice. As Elie Wiesel once said, "We must whisper, we must shout, we must not be silent."

Individual Development and Systems Reform

INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP FOR 2011 SUMMIT

By Deonate Cruz

On the second day of the Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit, attendees participated in an Individual Development workshop facilitated by Dr. Wanda Hackett, an internal organizational development expert. Each participant took a communication style test beforehand that assigned everyone a color that represented how they communicate and work together with others. There are four different colors and each one represents a dominant communication trait. Brown represents individuals who are straight to the point, and always want to take action; green represents analytical individuals and people who work well with data and plans; red represents those who are creative, “arts and crafts” types, while blue represents those that are very social and like to work and interact with others. During the second day of The Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit, we were able to utilize these color traits within the Individual Development workshop. The goal of the workshop was to display to the participants what each color stands for and show the importance of implementing each color into the everyday tasks that we do.

In the beginning of the workshop, the participants were brought together and then divided into four groups that consisted of each of the individual four colors. Then Dr. Hackett gave a very detailed presentation that stressed the nature of each individual color. Then there was a team building exercise. Each group was lead by two network representatives. The exercise consisted of each group forming a circle, and then someone within the group throws a ball across the circle to someone. The person had to say the person’s name before they threw it, after you threw the ball to that person, you had to maintain that same order in every round. The object of the game was to lower your team’s time to the lowest possible time by working and planning together. If your team dropped the ball then they had to add two seconds onto their time as a penalty.

Eventually after getting used to tossing one ball around, the team leaders had to integrate another ball into their exercise. Then the teams had to time each round, and report at the end their lowest time for one and two balls, and share which strategy worked best. Every group had a different strategy as well as different times. Despite that everyone in the workshop worked together to build teamwork and individual leadership.

In conclusion, the Individual Development workshop helped youth recognize and develop effective ways to communicate with others. This also helped make youth more effective presenters during the report out to the Commission, and it will continue to help them as they develop as advocates, leaders and community members.



Individual Development and Systems Reform

THE SYSTEM REFORM WORKSHOP

By Amanda Bevington

The Summit is a great time to get experience presenting in front of policy-makers, and most importantly to be able to get their feedback as well. It's a time to make a difference in the system, it's a time for youth to put their foot down and say enough is enough. It's a time for leaders to step up and take control. The System Reform workshop at this year's Summit brought youth and policy insiders together to help Chapters improve their policy proposals and presentations ahead of their report out to the Commission. Each region worked really hard over the past few months to develop proposals that will help current and future generations of youth in care.

Each region was given a day to practice and go over their parts for their presentation with the advisers. They talked within their groups, brainstormed ideas and assigned roles for the workshop presentations.

Each region was given four minutes to present their topic and four minutes for the advisers to give feedback to the group. Advisers provided constructive comments highlighting the strengths of each chapter's topic as well as areas where they can improve.

The advisers that attended the workshop included Erin Shea-McCann and Casey Trupin from Columbia Legal Services, Laurie Lippold from Children's Home Society, Samantha Casne from House Speaker Frank Chopp's Office, Rick Butt from Children's Administration, and many others.

Thanks in large part to the feedback provided by the advisers, youth left the workshop ready for their report out to the Commission the following day. I remember getting goose bumps just listening to all the youth effectively articulate how the foster care system needs to change. It was an incredible feeling to be surrounded by true leaders.

Before I worked at The Mockingbird Society, I couldn't name a single youth that had met with a legislator or attended a bill signing with the Governor. Thanks to The Mockingbird Society and workshops like this one, I have lost count of how many youth have been able to experience that feeling. It's a great feeling to know that you are changing lives for other youth.

I would like to give a special thanks to all the advisers that took time to attend the 2011 Summit and provide feedback for our proposals. It meant a lot to the youth to see adults care as much as they do.



Children's Administration Chief Hears Youth

RESPECTFUL, PREPARED, AND HEARD

An Interview with Assistant Secretary Denise Revels Robinson

By David Buck

This year's leadership Summit was a powerful one. The big emphasis this year was on normalcy, which included ideas such as the importance of timely responses from social workers and strengthening sibling connections. Essentially, improving things so youth in foster care can be like any other kids their age. The determination and preparation of The Mockingbird Youth Network's chapters showed through in their presentations to the Commission.

I spoke personally with Children's Administration Assistant Secretary Denise Revels Robinson about her thoughts on the ideas put forth at the Summit. She expressed how remarkable it was that the youth had developed such refined messages for the commission. Denise said, "I was impressed with how prepared they are. I think all of the issues touch us very deeply and we take them very seriously." In addition she said that they (CA) listen very carefully to what the youth say, and she agreed that the goal is to try to achieve as much normalcy as possible.

Denise said her team always begins by asking themselves what they can quickly address to improve things. And, how to prioritize the issues that are more complex such as adequate mental health services or extended overnight stays. The impact of the topics presented at the Summit was so great, she immediately began working with her CA team on a plan to increase the response times of social workers. This was a direct result from hearing the Spokane chapter talk about how important it is to participate in normal teenage activities such as Senior Prom or driver's training. She said the department understands youth need a functional relationship with their social workers to achieve those goals and gain permission to participate in these activities. She said when Becky Smith, Washington State Specialist returned from the Summit, they also talked as a team, and as a first step, asked social workers to update their voicemail regularly, and put the general number for the regional office on their voicemail as a back-up.

Assistant Secretary Revels Robinson said what is really important to continue the conversation between social workers and youth. That she starts with the assumption that "everyone wants to do and



Denise Revels Robinson
Assistant Secretary
DAS Children's Administration

give their best.” It was exciting to hear her ask The Mockingbird Society for ideas on how best to follow-up beyond the Summit. She seemed very open to our ideas about work groups or meeting opportunities that might include social workers and youth representatives at times throughout the year.

I asked her what advice she would give. Here is what she said: “First of all, I have to say, that they (Mockingbird Youth) do an outstanding job. The courage they demonstrate – they articulate – what their concerns are. I encourage them to continue to be that voice. Respectful, prepared, and able to describe concerns, so they can be heard.” She continued: “I would like to hear what is working well, so we can try to duplicate those things that are working. I believe it is those things that will help us move forward from a place of strength.”

I also think it’s important to note her commitment to the youth voice and I thank her for taking time out of her busy schedule to speak with me. So I say thank you to Denise Revels Robinson on behalf of the Mockingbird Network. We also say a special thank you to Becky Smith, Interim Field Director, CA, who was at the Leadership Summit on behalf of Denise Revels Robinson. The words of the Mockingbird Youth Network are making their mark on Washington State’s child welfare system, and we look forward to seeing Denise Revels Robinson and Becky Smith at future Youth Advocacy Days and Leadership Summits – and continued dialogue throughout the year.



Becky Smith
Interim Field Director
DSHS Children's Administration

Praise for the 2011 Annual Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit



“

Hearing this stuff is difficult, because you want these youth to have the same kinds of experiences your own kids get. Hearing that they often don't get a phone call returned from a social worker for a month means that they can't go on field trips, or stay over at a friend's house, or other things you and I take for granted our kids can do, because we can make decisions on the spot.

”

– Representative Ross Hunter (D-48)



“

The 2011 Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit was a resounding success. By listening closely to the needs and ideas of youth and alumni of foster and kinship care - together we are able to improve the child welfare system.

”

– Justice Bobbe Bridge, Co-Chair, Washington State Supreme Court Commission on Children in Foster Care, Center for Child and Youth Justice President and CEO

“

We all take very seriously the input that we receive directly from the youth. It is a wonderful opportunity to hear directly from them. We are always impressed with how prepared the youth representatives are. All of the issues touch us very deeply and we take them very seriously. We look forward to working with youth representatives to discuss their recommendations further in order to determine next steps for implementation.

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- Denise Revels Robinson, Co-Chair, Washington State Supreme Court Commission on Children in Foster Care; Assistant Secretary Children’s Administration

“

The leadership shown by the youth and alumni of foster care provides a constant reminder of why their voices must be heard. Their voices helped provide the inspiration for the Fostering Connections Act, and I look to The Mockingbird Society to bring the personal experiences of children, youth and families to bear on system reform.

”

– Congressman Jim McDermott (WA-7)



Youth Leaders Give Summit "A" Grades

2011 SUMMIT SURVEY RESULTS

Sixty-four youth and alumni of foster care from across the state of Washington attended the 2011 Youth Leadership Summit. Of those in attendance, 51 surveys were completed – a response rate of approximately 80%:

- 92% of youth/alumni respondents reported an increased sense of connection with the foster youth community.
- 90% of youth/alumni respondents reported feeling comfortable sharing their story to positively transform the foster care system.
- 96% of youth/alumni respondents reported feeling comfortable seeking support from community leaders when advocating for a specific issue.
- 96% of youth/alumni respondents reported that they place great value in giving back to their communities.
- 88% of youth/alumni respondents reported they felt they acted as a leader at the Summit.

Sincere thanks to our generous Alumni
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The Mockingbird Society

Building a world-class foster care system



Washington State
Department of Social
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CA Children's Administration



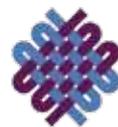
casey family programs.



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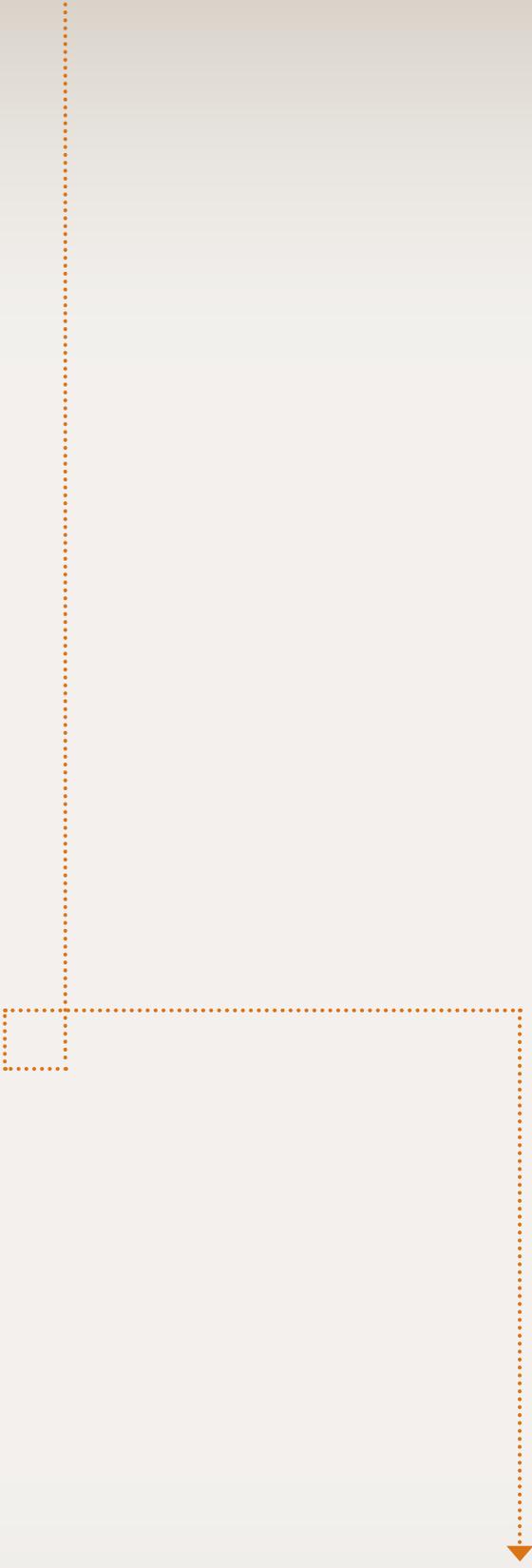
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