The Mockingbird Society staff and supporters always enjoy Advocacy Day.

In 2008, the Mockingbird Legislative Agenda was sponsored by Advocates for System Kids and Youth, pronounced “Ask why” and The Mockingbird Society (MBS) will sponsor Advocacy Day this day is for Foster and Homeless youth and Alumni to express to Legislatures what they would like to see changed within the child welfare system. Last year, 120 to 150 trained and informed youth were able to speak to Washington State Representatives and hear feedback about key issues in the system. This year our main focus is housing and health care. We are asking for Foster Care to 21 (HB 2002) along with the Independent Youth Housing Program (HB 1992) to be continually funded and become a policy so that it cannot be eliminated.

As you may have read already, The Foster Care to 21 program was a major bill advocated for by MBS. This program has been temporarily funded for the last three years and a majority of the youth in care who were a dependent of the state between the ages of 18 and trying to figure out your next move is horrific. Imagine being homeless at a young age. Most youth are not informed of their rights until it’s too late and their living situation is not what they would have chosen. This wouldn’t need funding. It would just need to be a mandate for the youth’s case worker to give the youth a list of their rights and have them sign a paper saying that it was given to them. This honestly is a very simple task that is vital to the youth’s best interest.

iYHp, Continued on page 3

Independent Youth Housing Program

The Independent Youth Housing Program (iYHP) offers unique and empowering services to youth transitioning out of foster care. However, without the support from the community and lawmakers, funding may soon run out.

Recently, the Youth LEAD staff from The Mockingbird Society took a trip to Pierce County Alliance in Tacoma. Region 1 was fortunate to have had the opportunity to interview the staff and a participant from iYHP. iYHP is a housing program for foster youth located in Pierce County. It was designed to prevent homelessness for foster youth who have aged out of care. This program provides case management and staff to help youth work toward becoming independent. iYHP and two other programs out of Yakima and Olympia are associated with House Bill 1922, sponsored by Representative Jamie Feder- sen. This bill is supposed to help foster youth get help with housing by providing housing stipends for former foster youth. The bill was signed by Governor Christine Gregoire and created a three-year independent youth housing program for youth who were a dependent of the state and who have aged out of care or who were a dependent of the state between the ages of 18 and 24.

This program was designed to offset the disadvantages former foster youth face in obtaining safe and affordable housing. Unfortunately, these programs only have funding until June of 2009. This is not a good thing. Personally, I love the idea of this program because it focuses on foster youth specifically. As a youth who aged out of care, I had no independent living skills and I was forced to live with my birth family, who I was only introduced to months before aging out and even though at that was not what I wanted to do. The only transitional housing programs I found in King County were homeless-based (at least one does exist but did not hear about it). I feel like iYHP is a blessing for foster youth who have aged out of care this program would not have one, nor an attorney to go to court alone or, if they cannot make it to court, their voices are unheard.

At the Foster Youth and Alumni Leadership Summit of 2008, the youth declared that every foster youth should receive written notification of their rights when they turn 12 years of age. Most youth are not informed of their rights until it’s too late and their living situation is not what they would have chosen. This wouldn’t need funding. It would just need to be a mandate for the youth’s case worker to give the youth a list of their rights and have them sign a paper saying that it was given to them. This honestly is a very simple task that is vital to the youth’s best interest.

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January 2009

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News From the Mockingbird Network

Visit us online at www.mockingbirdsociety.org or call 206-323-KIDS (5437)

Foster Care to 21

BY LEONA BILL

The Foster Care to 21 program was created by a Washington State Legislative bill that The Mockingbird Society had a great role in passing. It allows foster youth to continue to remain in care until they are 21 or have completed school. As of now it is a temporary program that the legislature authorized for 3 years. If I had this option I’d take it. Youth should look into applying for this program because 2009 might be the last year that youth will be able to have an opportunity to be in the program.

The Foster Care to 21 program has been going on since 2006 as a result of the above mentioned bill sponsored by Representative Dickerson, HB 2002. This bill allowed 50 youth per year in 2006, 2007 and 2008 (for a total of 150 available slots) to stay in foster or group care so they could participate in or complete a post high school academic or job training program and receive necessary support and transitional services, like case management by Children’s Administration, and referrals to community resources as appropriate.

While participating in the Foster Care to 21 program youth receive necessary support and transition services up to age 21. However, the Foster Care to 21 program is a three year pilot program. This means that the Foster Care to 21 program’s end date is June 30, 2009. The only way that this program may continue past this date is if the legislators extend the time that youth can enter the program and continue to fund it.

Jim Pritchard, Program Manager for Children’s Administration, said, “Those youth who are already in the Foster Care to 21 program and those that began the program before December 31, 2008 can continue in the Program until they reach 21 years of age. This will also depend on the legislature’s continued funding for this program and if youth meet the eligibility criteria, including maintaining a 2.0 grade point average. Children’s Administration will still be holding on to applications that are turned in after December 31, 2008. These applications may or may not be funded depending on the outcome of this legislative session.

There are certain criteria that the youth and case worker need to follow. The criteria as well as information about the application for this program can be found at independence.wa.gov/programs/fc21.aspx. Although the program is running for a short period of time, I believe that it would be a lot of help to a lot of youth in the future. I know this from experience because I didn’t have the opportunity that this program offers.

After I had aged out of Foster Care, I had no placement and was living on the streets. I had not finished school and had no support from my caseworker. I wasn’t even getting any support from this program. I was 18 years old, (18 years old). This was because I was in a different county from my social worker’s office. My social worker was in Snohomish County, but yet they didn’t care. I was in King County. My social worker also didn’t think I’d make it far.

Either way, I had to try and get support from the resources in Seattle. I started working with places like intermediary...
Happy New Year! With each New Year come hopes and dreams for peace and prosperity. This New Year also marks the beginning of a new legislative session in Washington State as lawmakers face a whopping $5.1 billion dollar deficit. This deficit, in the context of a national economy that is also in crisis, promises to challenge legislators, advocates, and citizens alike. The first day of session is January 12th and the last day is scheduled for April 26th.

Over the past several legislative sessions, The Mockingbird Society, other community organizations, and advocates have made great strides toward improving the quality and services of youth in foster care, particularly older youth who are “aging out” of the system. I ask you to think of an eighteen-year-old that you know and consider if this same youngster is ready to truly be “on their own.” The answer is almost always “Of course not” and we do not even expect that of most of our twenty-one-year-olds in our society.

Under the excellent leadership of several legislators in both the Washington State Senate and House, our state has recently implemented two housing programs specifically for youth who have turned age 18 and have earned their high school diploma or GED (General Educational Development). Counselors, teachers, and foster parents no longer have to “advise” youth to delay earning their GED or high school diploma in order to retain their eligibility in foster care. As a result of the $5.1 billion dollar deficit however, both of these programs are at risk to be cut, returning us to a time when kids in foster care are “transitional” out of care directly to the streets. This is unacceptable for us as a community even during bleak economic times.

I encourage you to sign up for our Advocacy Alerts so that you can participate in our advocacy efforts during the 2009 legislative session. It’s critical that private citizens join this effort to ensure your legislator and our governor know that foster kids have support from the broader community. If you want to receive our legislative updates please contact us at lauren@mockingbirdtimes.org with your contact information. Also, we invite you to join us on February 13th in Olympia for our annual Youth Advocacy Day. Providing safe, appropriate housing for youth leaving the foster care system is a major priority for The Mockingbird Society and a major component to building a world-class foster care system in Washington State.
IYHP: Give Me Back My Life by Ashleigh Rowland

My name is Ashleigh Rowland, and I am writing this as an advocate for the Independent Living Program. I have been in this program since December 2007. I have been working with the Pierce County Alliance since December 2006. This program was such a blessing for me. I was 6 months pregnant and did not know where I was going to live. I was accepted into this program and it was the best thing that could have happened to me.

I have been in foster care since 1996. My father killed my mother when I was only 2 years old. My siblings and I moved in with our grandmother where I lived until I was 16. I aged out of foster care at 18 and did not receive any transitional services from the foster care system.

On my own, I found out about Pierce County Alliance and the Transitional Living Program that they offered. I was accepted into that program in December 2006. I was a youth advocate and spoke about my experience and the services I received. I was able to live on my own and continue my education.

IYHP, continued from page 1

In order for us to make sure our voices are heard in Olympia, we have now have Tera Bianchi, a part-time contract lobbyist here at MBS. Her job is to advocate for the legislative agenda that was approved by MBS and the Mockingbird Network State Advisory Committee. Her job as a lobbyist includes meeting with legislators and attending work sessions, hearings, etc. during the legislative session. She represents MBS at various coalition/work group meetings like the Child Welfare Advocacy Coalition and ASK-Y.

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It is important for MBS to have a consistent presence in Olympia so our state leaders and policy makers know what issues are impacting the youth and families involved with the state foster care system. Being present gives voice to these issues.

Tera Bianchi is a member of various groups and committees including The Mockingbird Society, MBS’s networks, coalition partners such as ASK-Y & CWAC, youth advocates across the state, and our legislative champions, giving consistent and constant voice to why these issues matter.

Medicaid to 21 Program by Dianeimonique Walker

Medicaid to 21 is for youth who are out of foster care. It provides health benefits until you are 21. There are various reasons why this is a huge help for youth. Dianeimonique Walker describes in her article about this program how it works. Here is a brief description of why it is important for us to keep Medicaid to 21.

Foster youth ages 18 to 21 don’t have the same benefits as youth who are not in the foster care system. Those with parents are usually still covered under their parent’s health insurance even if they leave home. Also, there aren’t many jobs for youth ages 18 to 21 that have health insurance available. Without Medicaid to 21, these foster youth will end up with huge bills if they have a medical emergency.

Jerry Bono didn’t know anything about this program until recently when he started working at The Mockingbird Society. He is older than 21 now and never got to be a foster youth. He feels that if this program is going to come to a closure at that’s not for youth who are just exiting care. Paying for health care is an extra financial stressor youth shouldn’t have to deal with.

Medicaid to 21 is facing funding cuts due to a $1.5 billion dollar deficit. This program needs to be continued for youth who have health problems and have no way of paying the bills. It is important and will ef-fect foster youth across this state.

Heroes by Jessica McLean

I was just a girl with a trash bag but I feel like I owe them my life because they gave me the second chance. I started to feel like I meant something to the world. It was almost like they had become my parents. By helping me find housing and bills they also allowed me to focus on school.

I am now attending Western Washington University. One of the main reasons that I am even getting the chance to enjoy this opportunity is because of IYHP who helped me find scholarships to pay for my education. I now have a full ride to college and will not have to stress about making ends meet. I hope that one day I will get to influence someone the way that this program has influenced me.

My sister Lelani is a mother who is making a difference in her life by creating a healthy environment for my niece. As a foster youth, she transitioned out of care, Medicaid to 21 created a safety net for her to fall on. It was beneficial for her because she didn’t have to worry about getting help when she needed it. She only needed resources and understood how they worked.

I recently aged out of the foster care system and receive Medicaid. It’s because of IYHP that problems that need to be addressed and, if I didn’t have this option, the medical fees would be very expensive and I would have no way of paying for my health care.

It was lucky to hear about this resource through my social worker since many social workers don’t know about the program and some don’t tell the youth they have Medicaid to 21. If this program benefit comes to an end soon, I will be affected greatly. Losing my health care would not help my living in poverty.

Medicaid to 21 is facing funding cuts due to a $1.5 billion dollar deficit. This program needs to be continued for youth who have health problems and have no way of paying the bills. It is important and will effect foster youth across this state.

Community Events

Region 2

January 17th: NAACP Health Disparity Conference, 6-9 PM, South East Community Center; January 19th: Martin Luther King March; January 20: President Obama’s Inauguration at Casey Family Programs; Every Saturday: DJ dancing, 9 PM-1 AM, South East Community Center.

Region 3

3rd Friday of every month: Foster Parent Support Group, 6-9 PM, Bethel Assembly of God Church, Sedro Woolley, potluck dinner.

Region 5

January 21st: Volunteering with My Sister’s Pantry, 5-7 PM, First United Methodist Church, 621 Tacoma Ave. Dinner is provided for all volunteers. www.mysisterspantry.org

Every Thursday: Independent Living Skills Life Group, 3-5 PM, Pierce County Alliance. Various activities. Contact Nick at 253.502.5494 for weekly schedules or more information.
**Leave Me Unlabeled**

**Josephine Tooney**

Only I can judge me, you don’t have permission, all you see is that label
You don’t know me
I am
Loud, blunt
compassionate
Helpful
Opinionated
but also I am
a foster kid not a statistic
a teenage girl but not pregnant
I am like a book one cover so many pages
a label cannot explain me
because
I am a story without a title
with a label I lose my identity, my uniqueness
a label, a judgment takes away everything that is me
everything that is who I am
please don’t take that away from me
take time to listen before you judge
but no matter what permission will always be me
it’s your loss if you try and label me

I am
DANIELLE JONES
I am funny and talented
I wonder how my life will turn out
I hear I hear screaming
I see fright
I want this all to HAULT!!
I am scared
I pretend I am Loved
I feel Hatred soaring over me like a thick (smoggy) cloud
I touch the wall – it is cold with war
I worry this will never end
I cry when I see people die
I am scared
I understand that this is happening for a reason but WHY!!
I say I am not alone but… the hate comes back
I dream I am not even hear I am LOVED
There is no Violence, Drugs, abuse or WAR
I hope that someday this will all end
I AM SCARED

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**Get Published ~ Get Paid!**

We are looking for articles, poetry, artwork and photography from our young readers who have experience in the foster care system and/or with homelessness. If you want to be published in the Mockingbird Times, contact us at 206-323-5437 or via email at kara@mockingbirdsoccy.org.

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**Region 3: Chapter in Skagit County**

Region 3 Chapter in Skagit County. HE.Y.M.A.C. means Hearing Every Youth Making A Change which is exactly what Region 3 is planning to do. December 11th was the date of H.E.Y.M.A.C.’s first official meeting, and boy, was it a kickoff! Plans were made for individual, community, and system development. As a group, we plan to develop ourselves and strengthen our bonds by throwing a video game party. As for community development, our first act is to volunteer with the local elderly. Finally, on the system level, we plan on getting more involved with foster parent mentoring. Hopes for new members are high, but the bright future for our blossoming group is blinding.

Sassi Jarvela, Youth Leader for Region 3 H.E.Y.M.A.C.

**Region 5: Chapter in Pierce County**

Last month we hosted our region’s Chapter Kickoff, which was a big success. Several youth were in attendance, as well as some staff from the Pierce County Alliance; our foundation is growing! Melissa Seville, Nick Ruff, and I facilitated a conversation in which we talked about the Mockingbird Network, things we would want to advocate to change it in the foster care system, and the upcoming Youth Advocacy Day in Olympia. We also played a pin-the-tail on the donkey game in which one youth was blindfolded and each other person would give them one direction at a time, and the donkey poster was constantly moved. It was a good way to represent the foster care system in the way that the youth were constantly confused and being mislead, like many youth in foster care. We also had a wide selection of hearty snacks for the youth to choose from.

We are all very excited for our next meeting in January and I look forward to our growing membership.

K. C. Overton, Youth Leader for Region 5

**Region 6: Speak Up Chapter in Clark County**

So far, Speak Up has been building a strong foundation for the chapter, such as how will our meetings be organized and what positions we want people to do, like having different people lead different community events. We have also been spending our time deciding on our focus which is to educate the public about foster care. With this we are currently determining ways to get the word out to the community and possible future members. We just started making brochures and will possibly have shirts and/or buttons in the future. With a hope for new members, our next month’s meeting will be used to get to know each other better for better communication in the future.

Robert Parker, Youth Leader for Region 6 SPEAK UP!