



Web survey of foster youth advisory boards in the United States



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ABSTRACT

This study administered a web survey of foster youth advisory boards (YAB) in the United States. The survey was emailed to state or private agency representatives in 50 states and the District of Columbia. A total of 49 valid surveys were completed for an overall response rate of 96%. Respondents in 47 states (96%) reported having a foster youth advisory board. There was variation in the type of boards that operated. Just under half reported relying on a single source of funding (47%). The most common features of a YAB were: 1) foster youth issues and concerns, 2) advising a state agency director, 3) youth advocacy, and 4) a youth adult partnership model of decision-making. Opportunities to discuss foster youth issues and concerns and make youth-informed policy and practice decisions were rated by respondents as representing the most beneficial aspects of facilitating a YAB. Recruitment of members and high member turnover were rated as the most challenging aspects of YAB facilitation. Study findings are discussed in the context of participatory practices in child welfare systems and the features of youth advisory boards that facilitate youth voice and representation.

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1. Introduction

Foster youth advisory boards (YAB) are youth-led advocacy and leadership programs for current and former youth in out-of-home care. Taking multiple names and forms, these boards bring together youth to discuss issues and concerns in out-of-home care and to advocate for child welfare system improvements. Originating from foster youth networks in Manchester, England and Ottawa, Canada (Andrews & Manser, 2001), the first foster youth advisory board in the United States started at a time when independent living policy, under the Title IV-E Independent Living Program of 1985, first made federal funding available to states to provide independent living services. Responding to perceived aspects of child welfare policy and practice that exclude foster youth from decision-making, a driving philosophy of foster youth advisory boards has been “nothing about us without us.” In their 1999 review of independent living programs, the U.S. General Accounting Office identified 22 states with a foster youth advisory board (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1999). Since that time, the number of states with a youth advisory board has more than doubled (Forenza & Happonen, 2015). As foster youth advisory boards expand, a critical task of research is to shed light on programs that use participatory practices to ensure foster youths’ voices, opinions, and perspectives are heard and represented in child welfare systems.

Participatory practices reflect the cornerstone of approaches seeking to redress hierarchical, professional-centered, and top down decision-making that does “to” clients rather than does “with” clients (Hegar & Hunzeker, 1988; Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, & Barth, 2012). Recognizing

that state systems and settings can support and/or hinder a client’s success, participatory practices seek to balance knowledge and decision-making between clients and professionals, empowering clients to be active agents of change as opposed to passive recipients of services. Though the benefits and challenges of implementing participatory practices with parents in child protective services are well documented (Darlington, Healy, & Feeney, 2010; Dumbrell, 2006; Gladstone et al., 2012; Kemp, Marcenko, Hoagwood, & Vesneski, 2009; Merkel-Holguin, 2004; Nixon, Burford, Quinn, & Edelbaum, 2005), less is known about participatory practices with adolescents in out-of-home care, a group that research finds is unevenly involved in case and transition planning (Courtney, Charles, Okpych, Napolitano, & Halsted, 2014; Freundlich & Avery, 2005; Geenen & Powers, 2007), poorly connected to services (Courtney, Lee, & Perez, 2011; Geenen & Powers, 2007), and unprepared for adult roles (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Dworsky, 2005; Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013; Pecora et al., 2006; Reilly, 2003). Studying the diverse forms that youth advising takes in state child welfare systems may assist the field to identify participatory approaches that effectively engage foster youth and contribute to improvements in child welfare policy and practice.

Currently, there is limited information about foster youth advisory boards in the United States. A search of online databases using the terms “foster youth advisory board,” “foster youth council,” and “foster youth leadership board” results in a small number of published work. In a review of youth participation in child welfare, Crowe (2007) describes the “trial and error” that was experienced by the earliest boards as they first partnered with state independent living programs. According to Crowe (2007), inadequate funding, limited training and support of adult coordinators, and unspecified roles of youth and adults made

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sustaining youth advisory boards a challenge in several states. Online information indicates that at least one youth advisory board (i.e. California Youth Connection) made an early decision to become an independent advocacy organization separate from the state child welfare agency. Beginning in 1999, a second wave of youth advisory boards emerged, following the passage of the Foster Care Independence Act and the first set of Child Family Service Reviews (CFSR). Collins (2004) suggests that youth advisory boards became the predominant method used by states to meet federal requirements to include foster youth in program decision-making and evaluation. Several states have subsequently received support to start and/or maintain a youth advisory board under the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. Little else is known about foster youth advisory boards or the diversity of approaches through which foster youth advising operates in the United States.

To inform greater understanding, we administered a web survey to state, private agency, and non-profit representatives of youth advisory boards in the United States. Drawing from online information and informal conversations with a range of experts, we developed 50 general questions about the history and types of youth advisory boards, and the structure of leadership, advising, and advocacy. Given that youth advisory boards have been the focus of limited research in child welfare, this descriptive study represents the first among many steps that are needed to understand the benefits and the challenges that come from foster youth advising and participatory practices with adolescents in out-of-home care.

2. Background

In 2014, there were 109,547 youth, between the ages of 14 and 20, placed in child welfare systems across the United States (U.S. DHHS, 2015). This represents 26% of all children in out-of-home care. Each year, approximately 10% of youth age out of child welfare systems at the age of 18 and make the transition to adulthood. These youth represent one of the most socially isolated and disconnected groups of young adults in the United States (Barth, 1990; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2007; Dworsky, 2005; Dworsky et al., 2013; Keller, Salazar, & Courtney, 2010; McMillen et al., 2004; McMillen et al., 2005; Pecora et al., 2006; Pecora, Jensen, Romanelli, Jackson, & Ortiz, 2009; Reilly, 2003). Despite the expansion of federal independent living policy during the past three decades, our understanding of how to support more positive pathways to adulthood remains underdeveloped (Courtney, Zinn, Johnson, & Malm, 2011; Courtney, Zinn, Koralek, & Bess, 2011; Courtney, Zinn, Zielewski, Bess, & Malm, 2008; Montgomery, Donkoh, & Underhill, 2006). The dominant philosophy of U.S. policy seeks to end foster youths' dependence on the state (Courtney, 2009). A growing body of research nevertheless identifies the ways that child welfare policy and practice approaches may unintentionally contribute to isolation in adulthood and a diminished ability to manage adult roles independently (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Gomez, Ryan, Norton, Jones, & Galán-Cisneros, 2015; Hyde & Kammerer, 2009; Kools, 1997; Krebs, Pitcoff, & Shalof, 2013; Samuels, 2009; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). The knowledge that comes from foster youths' perspectives and experiences in out-of-home care may therefore provide valuable insights for making youth-informed changes to child welfare policies and programs.

Participatory practices with young people are increasingly considered as "best practices" in a range of disciplines such as nursing (Runeson, Hallestrom, Elander, & Hermeren, 2002), disability and rehabilitation (Franklin & Sloper, 2009), education (Johnny, 2006; Kirschner, 2007), mental health (Coates & Howe, 2014; James, 2007), and juvenile justice (Butts, Bazemore, & Meroe, 2010). Called multiple names, including youth participation, youth engagement, youth leadership, youth voice, youth governance, and youth organizing, at the core of each is the idea that young people offer legitimate sources of information and hold valuable insights for policy and program decision-making (Checkoway, 2011; Richards-Schuster, 2012). A growing collection of studies finds

participation in programs that offer youth opportunities to be included as partners and participants increases developmental assets in leadership, responsibility, belonging, and agency (Larson & Hansen, 2005; Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005; Mitra, 2008; Pearce & Larson, 2006; Powers & Tiffany, 2006). For maltreated youth in out-of-home care, opportunities to share experiences with supportive peers and adults may also facilitate healing (Ginwright, 2010) and unite foster youth around a common purpose of improving child welfare systems and settings.

Participatory practices are not without criticisms from researchers and scholars (Kwon, 2013; Matthews, 2001; Taft & Gordon, 2013). Though emphasizing a commitment to engage youth people, not all approaches equally engage youth and adults in meaningful ways (Hart, 1992; Matthews & Limb, 2003; Richards-Schuster, 2012; Taft & Gordon, 2013). Young people may express a desire to be involved in program planning and decision making, but only consulted long after programs have been developed (Crowe, 2007). Adults may feel an urge to jump in and make decisions for youth rather than to let learning processes unfold. The few guidelines that exist to guide youth and adult partnerships may mean that programs of all types have difficulty engaging youth and adults with one another (Camino, 2005; Martin, Pittman, Ferber, & McMahon, 2007). Discerning how effective partnerships are mobilized and sustained may offer critical information to states as federal requirements for youth involvement in case and transition plans expand.

According to Crowe (2007), foster youth advisory boards represent the earliest form of participatory practices with foster youth in the United States. These early youth empowerment programs were designed to build on the assets of youth through a focus on active participation, mastery of experiences, and positive relationships (Morton & Montgomery, 2011). To the extent that foster youth advisory boards provide youth with opportunities to access child welfare administrators and policymakers, they may also represent an effective way to make youth-informed political and organizational changes in child welfare systems. In a report tracing the history of legislation passed in California to extend the age that foster youth may remain in foster care from age 18 to age 21, Mosley and Courtney (2012) describe the ways that a long-standing relationship between members of California Youth Connection (CYC) and California state representatives cultivated greater awareness of foster youths' needs and turned policymakers into champions of legislative reforms aimed at better supporting the transition that foster youth make to adulthood. More recently, Florida state representatives credit the visits made by foster youth advisory board members of Florida's Youth Shine for spearheading the passage of legislation that made normalcy a legal right of foster youth in the state of Florida (Fletcher, 2013). In each case advocacy grounded in the lived experiences of foster youth and implemented through political networks and persistence generated awareness about foster care and a need for system-wide reforms.

Less is known about how similar or different foster youth advisory boards in other states are to the models in California or Florida. Given that a defining feature of youth advisory boards is the involvement of youth as partners and participants in program decision-making, the role, structure, and forms of youth advising vary from state to state (Martin et al., 2007). In Alaska, members of the foster youth advisory board, Facing Foster Care in Alaska, operate a single state foster youth advisory board whereas members of Iowa's Achieving Maximum Potential (A.M.P.) operate a state youth advisory board in conjunction with chapters in numerous counties of the state. Some youth advisory boards such as the Illinois State Youth Advisory Board (SYAB) have a formal partnership with the state child welfare agency whereas other youth advisory boards such as Georgia's EmpowerMENT operate independently from the state child welfare system. Though variation may be the norm, it could also be that a set of similar features exist since national organizations such as the National Resource Center on Youth Development (NRCYD) and the Foster Care Alumni of America have provided assistance with youth advisory board development and training.

Motivated by a desire to understand the similarities and differences within and across foster youth advisory boards in the United States, this

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