More Precious than Gold

Background

How we meet the needs of our at-risk children and nurture their potential is a complex challenge for parents, policymakers and foster care providers. Yet, they are our children and we cannot ignore them. A commitment is needed to invest in them now. Much can be learned from what the children tell us about their experiences. They are our current resources and our future assets.

The purpose of this project was two-fold: first, to listen to the perceptions and ideas that youth currently in the foster care system have about the system and how it can be improved and second, to educate and encourage policymakers to value the input of our youth in making system improvements and changes.

This report summarizes the recommendations that resulted from three focus groups that were held with children in the foster care system during July-November 2002 in three areas of the state. Twenty-nine youth between the ages of 13 and 18 currently in either a DHHR family foster home or a specialized foster care home participated and shared their ideas about the strengths, challenges and needed improvements of the foster care system.

Recommendations

The strengths and needs of youth must be addressed quickly and respectfully in a child focused foster care system.

- Institute the use of youth development principles in policy and practice. (see reverse side) These principles recognize youth as partners in the design and implementation of policy and service delivery changes. Adherence to the principles should be monitored through evaluation processes such as satisfaction surveys and focus groups.
- Involve youth, as well as families in identifying their strengths and needs and in developing their service plans. A multi-disciplinary team approach that involves the participation of both families and children needs to be used consistently in service plan development, implementation and follow-up.
- Invest additional resources in youth leadership and empowerment programs. These programs inspire youth to create positive changes in their own lives and become responsible adults.
- Provide youth with information about the foster care system as well as their legal rights and privileges. This can begin with the development of a foster care handbook written with input from children in the system.

Weaknesses in the foster care system must be corrected so that children get the support and assistance they need.

- Schedule pre-placement visits between foster children and foster families. Ensure pertinent information is provided to the respective parties in order to minimize the stress of placement transition and make the experience successful for the child and the family.
- Support children and families during placement through responsive case management and follow through. Provide children ample opportunities to maintain connections with families and friends from their community of origin.
- Develop a sufficient availability of family care homes to care for West Virginia's youth through enhanced recruitment and retention efforts, increased reimbursement to foster parents and specialized training and support for families.

(Recommendations continued)

A forum for youth in foster care is needed on an ongoing basis so that they can share their experiences, explore the issues that affect their lives and identify common concerns on an ongoing basis.
- Develop peer support networks.
- Expand e-mentoring programs
- Provide information sharing opportunities through conferences and meetings.
- Develop newsletters and websites to keep youth connected to each other.

Youth Development Principles

1. **Adolescent Centered:** Adapts services to the adolescent rather than expecting the adolescent to adapt to the services.
2. **Community Based:** Provides local, integrated and coordinated services.
3. **Comprehensive:** Recognizes the multiple needs of youth, and ensures comprehensive services and holistic care.
4. **Collaborative:** Draws on the resources of the community, or works in coordination with other programs to provide a range of services, in-house or through interagency agreements.
5. **Egalitarian:** Provides services in an environment and a manner that enhances the self-worth and dignity of adolescents; respects their wishes and individual goals.
6. **Empowering:** Maximizes opportunities for youth involvement and self-determination in the planning and delivery of services, and fosters a sense of personal efficacy that encourages youth to want to effect changes in their lives.
7. **Inclusive:** Serves all youth, or provides and tracks referrals for those youth whom the program is unable to serve.
8. **Visible:** Accessible and Engaging: Provides services that attract youth.
9. **Flexible:** Incorporates flexibility in service provision and funding to support individualized services.
10. **Culturally Sensitive:** Works to provide culturally competent services.
11. **Family Focused:** Recognizes the pivotal role that families play in the lives of high-risk adolescents.
12. **Affirming:** Targets strengths, not deficits, of youth and their families.

Pires, S., & Silber, J. (1991) Georgetown University Child Development Center