

YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

EXTRA! EXTRA! Here's a SEAT... with Exceptions

by **Aliyah Zeien**

In a world where agencies constantly reiterate the importance of authentic youth engagement, we must have true inclusivity as well. I am a foster care alumnus who aged out of care in Louisiana. When I was in foster care, often times, I didn't feel heard, and I didn't feel like I had control over what happened in my case.

While in care, I met several fellow foster youths who were silenced, mistreated, neglected, and abused. Their stories and my own experiences are what ignited my passion to become a social worker and transform the system through writing, advocating, and speaking. Since aging out, I have dedicated my career to being a legislative policy advocate on state and national levels and providing social services with youth in foster care. Due to my personal and professional experiences along the way, social work has become more than just a job for me. It's a lifestyle. Throughout this article multiple techniques, testimonials, and proposed strategies will be explored that caseworkers, attorneys, and legal professionals can utilize in everyday work to ensure youth feel included, engaged, and uplifted.

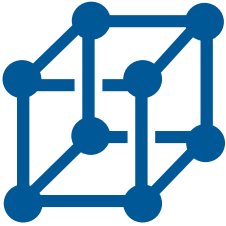
Through my own experiences as well as my direct youth engagement work, I have partnered with several former foster youth who felt they were left out of all the "good opportunities." Those "good opportunities" include national or statewide foster youth internships, shadow days or "hill day" programs, conference speaking engagements, panel sessions, or becoming a state youth advisory board member. While completing national child welfare work, I've had the opportunity to network with former foster youth from across the country, and many have shared they feel they will never get a chance to truly share their voice and impact change since they don't fit into the cookie-cutter mold that many advocacy organizations and child welfare agencies have put in place. Even when youth do get a chance to walk through the door, many stringent restrictions guide the level of impact they are allowed to make.

Although agencies and organizations develop programs with these types of opportunities, all come with visible and invisible expectations. Even if you meet all the guidelines and require-



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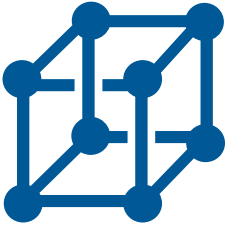
ments to obtain positions or opportunities, there are still several glass ceilings and subliminal barriers in place. In comparison to non-foster youth staff who are working on the same project, we are expected to walk a certain line to remain in high regard with agencies and continue being viewed as an asset rather than a liability. It only takes one bad day, one slip-up, one unprovoked word to go from being viewed as a professional asset to a traumatic liability. Everyone has bad days, right? However, when you're someone who already has their traumatic background and experiences aired out through the nature of their work, mistakes are seen not as just another bad day but as a counseling opportunity, a ticking time bomb, or an ongoing liability for the agency. It's as if some of the service providers who used to work with us have their own stigmas surrounding how we will behave or perform or fear that we will disrupt the typical order of procedures within systems that are aiming to be 'youth-focused.'

To truly put authentic youth engagement at the forefront of this work, we must provide the tools to our youth who want to be involved to ensure they are afforded equitable opportunities to develop professionally just like anyone else. Those tools may include strategic sharing workshops, support measures, and training.

When first starting out in the peer support/mentor area of the child welfare field in Louisiana, I struggled to adapt for several reasons. Although I was a full-time student at the time working to obtain my bachelor's in social work, when entering the agency, I was treated differently by the other staff members, referred to as an intern, and given menial paper-pushing tasks to complete. When I first began work there, I was not afforded the opportunity to complete real youth engagement activities with the foster care population in that region, which is what my job description actually outlined.

I was passionate about advocacy and making a difference. With their several years of experience in the field, my colleagues could have shared their knowledge to uplift me and help me obtain skills for future social work practice. I often felt belittled and like I didn't matter. When I finally mustered up the courage to tell my supervisor, she worked to put an end to it and held meetings to improve the work atmosphere. However, the damage to my personal image was already done. I did not feel worthy or like I belonged. After returning to the agency in a higher position, and those workers now gone, I continued to experience the imposter syndrome just like so many former foster youths who finally get a chance in the advocacy world. I struggled to adapt professionally until I was provided with adequate engagement opportunities. While this is just my story, this is the reality for so many other former foster youths who are literally just fighting for the chance to make a difference in the world, and to be valued while doing so.

For true inclusivity, we need youth with juvenile justice experience, foster care experience, and residential placement experience, and we need people who have struggled to overcome multiple challenges. Over the past five years, I have witnessed firsthand the lack of diverse perspectives in various organizational spaces and a lack of opportunities preventing youth from accessing life-changing pathways to development. We need youth with seasoning and from difficult backgrounds so they can truly uplift and assist other youth aging out who are also fighting difficult barriers. We need different and unique perspectives at the table because we can't make changes about issues we don't know about!



Cookie-cutter models and tokenization aren't helping anyone thrive or grow. How can we have authentic youth engagement and adequate data if only 20% of youth who have aged out are sharing their stories, voices, and opinions? Those 20% cannot possibly represent the needs and stories of the over 4,000 youth who age out of the system in the U.S. each year. To adequately improve our service models and regimens, we need people who have had those tough experiences to share their stories — and impact the way to re-design service delivery in the future.

There are often many seats made available, but with exceptions. How can some organizations require a semester of college experience or professional development attributes, when we know the outcomes are slim for youth aging out? Only 3% percent of foster youth even graduate college, and about 48% don't graduate high school by age 19. Does that mean they are any less deserving to be engaged than you or me? Does that make their experience any less valid? Age requirements for opportunities, such as a cutoff at age 24, have limited many youth from taking advantage of advocacy and political opportunities. Our lived experience in foster care will never expire. So why is there an age limit for certain advocacy opportunities?

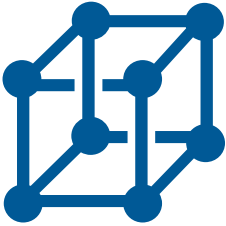
It is also important to be mindful of how youth engagement with your agency is being publicized. If you currently release photos or media regarding the projects youth have worked on, be mindful of how youth are referred to in these articles. Ensure that they are referred to by a professional title first, then foster youth second.

Many youth also want continuous support and connections. As agencies, we often preach the importance of the development of permanent connections. How about we take the step to become those permanent connections we know they need? Continue to call, check in and motivate, even after a project or workgroup has ended. Youth want to know they have more value than just spewing out their story. It's important to invest in youth so that when they leave whichever opportunity they have engaged with through your agency, they will have developed or grown in some way. No youth should leave an engagement unchanged.

As humans, for anyone who continually gives out or shares without any return investment, it can quickly lead to burnout and resentment. Sometimes youth with lived experience don't even receive a check or paid incentive for their efforts. Payment sometimes comes in the form of a gift card or commendations rather than solid compensation for the work they have done. If you would compensate any other professional speaker or consultant with a real check for their hard work and time, then why not provide this to our youth as well?

In summary, here are some key takeaways and suggestions for improvement:

- Take a long, hard look at the current requirements of your youth engagement programs, internships, or peer support positions. Are these requirements truly inclusive? Will they recruit diversified youth voices and perspectives from multiple ethnic, cultural, educational, and racial backgrounds?
- Is your work atmosphere truly welcoming and unbiased when working with the same population that may have previously been clients of the agency? Does your agency push the importance of holding all people with high regard and professional esteem?



- Do you currently have an orientation, training, and strategic sharing curriculum developed within your organization that will adequately prepare our youth on the journey from foster care to a professional career? Does this training prepare youth for public speaking and advocacy, and offer professional development?
- Does your agency offer non-judgmental supportive services for youth having difficulties transitioning into the role of an advocate or peer support professional? Does your agency currently check in on youth from previous engagements to ensure they are doing well and offer ongoing opportunities?
- Is your agency transparent about exactly what a project will entail from beginning to end?
- Does your agency adequately compensate youth with checks or direct deposits, rather than gift cards, for their hard work and time?
- Are you providing youth with tools they need to thrive well after their engagement with you ends?

If the answer to any of these questions is no, it may be time to have an in-depth look at how to redevelop how your agency approaches and uplifts authentic youth engagement.

I don't want to be considered "just a foster youth" everywhere I go. We all want to be genuinely valued as professionals. Yes, foster care is a journey that changed my entire life. I found my chosen family, and I developed strengths and resiliency that have propelled me into the social work field that I love. However, this is not everyone's story. Many age out haunted by the labels that have been placed on them and feel like they will never be good enough or smart enough to make it. Take away the labels and see people for who they are. I always say I was in foster care, but now, "I'm Aliyah the social worker, the policy advocate, the grad student." While this experience is a part of my story, it's not the only part of my identity, and it is not the only part of who I am.

In closing, redefining how we label our youth, how we engage them, and how we partner with them can truly change the entire face of advocacy and help us provoke meaningful change well into the future. ■