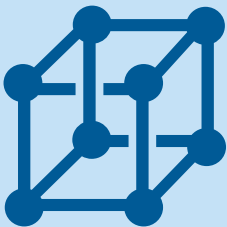


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YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

“If You Really Have No One, You Should Definitely Have an Attorney”

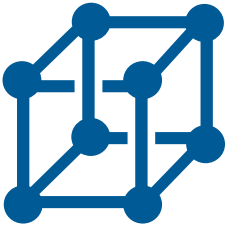
by Johnathan Hamilton

When I entered care, I didn't know I had a right to a lawyer. Initially I went to meetings surrounding my case with no support. I didn't know what to do or say most of the time. I felt like I was going along with everything that was happening because I didn't have a choice. It was quite frustrating and had me feeling hopeless. What's interesting is that my parents had an attorney and he was very active in making sure my parents had their voice heard and their wishes taken into account. I didn't meet my attorney until about a month after entering care, and didn't feel that same level of investment.

Once I met my attorney, she was dismissive. She wasn't completely rude and outright disrespectful, but in my opinion, she was worse than that — she would talk to me, I would express my feelings about events that were going on in my life, and all of that would disappear in the courtroom. Anything that I asked she barely made an effort to fix, and I would be left feeling betrayed and useless. In fact, she was intent at first on “reunifying” me with my family, even though I was whole-heartedly fighting that. There was one time when my DHS worker was telling me about how they were going to place me in an RTF (residential treatment facility), and of course I knew nothing about what that was and meant. I asked my child advocate attorney and she told me: “It's like a college. It's a big campus where you can go to school. You'll be around people your age. And you'll be able to receive therapy.” I spent almost two years in hell. Obviously, the RTF wasn't anything like college. It wasn't like anything but a piece of trash that I had to endure because of my lawyer lying to me.

I will say my attorney was good at not letting me be completely disregarded. She did speak up for me when facility members, court staff, and my parents got out of line in terms of what they said or did. It's strange because at first, I hated her and saw her as just another flawed part of the system — there to do what the system does best which

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was give me a little hope and then let me down. But over time, she started actually listening to me and advocating for me. I'm not sure if it's because I was getting older and better at articulating what I wanted. I'm not sure if she could see between the lines and understand that a lot wasn't on me. Maybe she was genuine and felt bad about the direction my life was going in with influence from the system. I honestly don't know. One day she just changed and seemed more concerned about me. She would check up on me more often. She actually picked up the phone when I called. She explained to me the things I didn't understand involving my case. There were times where I've had a crisis and been in dire situations and she told me to contact her whenever I was having more trouble, and for the most part I've been and felt safe because of it.

I feel like knowing I have a right to an attorney and connecting with them in the first place can have a huge impact on a person's well-being. Imagine if I knew I had an attorney when my parents showed up to all the initial meetings; or better yet, imagine my attorney actually being there as a supportive and productive adult. It would have made all the difference from the beginning.

I fear if I didn't have an attorney, I don't know where I'd be. I've had two attorneys throughout my journey, excluding stand-ins, and both have driven me on a lighter path. Honestly, I feel in my heart that my attorneys have backed me up more than any blood family that I've had. One memory I have of my attorney (the one who I've mostly been referring to) was when I was newly placed in a group home, and she was laser focused on getting me Christmas presents and getting me into school as soon as possible. I have to admit that was a good feeling; I didn't even expect to get presents, and I did. I've been through much that isn't best handled alone. Without family, friends, and supportive adults. When you lack so much, who is going to help you? And let me be real: being in the system, living in America, being Black, having trauma, etc. — I'm dealing with a lot of things. I can find myself in places no one wants to be. If you really have no one, you should definitely have an attorney. ■