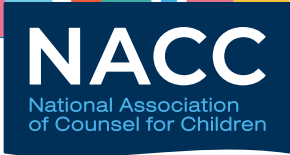


YOUR CASE, YOUR RIGHTS: YOUR GUIDE TO EXERCISING SELF-ADVOCACY



The NACC Companion Guide to Your Foster Youth Bill of Rights

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INTRODUCTION TO GUIDE AND INTENDED USE

Statement by Experts with Lived Experience in Foster Care: The Importance of Exercising Your Rights

Foster youth have rights! It's the law, *and* foster youth *are worthy* of knowing their rights and knowing how to apply them to their lives. We know because this Guide was written *by* current and former foster youth *for* foster youth. It was also developed with the input of current and former foster youth and their attorneys with their participation in surveys and focus groups to supplement our research. You can [read more here](#) about our year-long research and development process.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Guide intends to bring awareness to youth in foster care on: what to expect from an attorney, how to best engage with an attorney, and what to do if your rights are being violated. Youth in the foster care system can use this Guide alongside their state/jurisdiction's foster youth Bill of Rights (and other relevant laws, regulations, or agency policies). It will also help youth identify the people and agencies they can go to for complaints and to support accountability measures. If using a Guide like this is new, see our resource directory for a tip sheet on using how-to guides like this one. In addition to this full Guide, other resources youth can refer to in their advocacy journey include:

- The *Your Case, Your Rights: Your Guide to Exercising Self-Advocacy* [map](#) where youth can click on their state to find state-specific information;
- The *Your Case, Your Rights: Your Guide to Exercising Self-Advocacy* [Interactive Journal for Youth](#) (which aligns with this guide);
- The *Your Case, Your Rights: Your Guide to Exercising Self-Advocacy* [Interactive Journal for Youth \(lite version\)](#): This template is a more concise and accessible document for younger audiences and/or lower reading levels.
- The *Your Case, Your Rights: Your Guide to Exercising Self-Advocacy* [Brief for Attorneys](#) (which is a condensed guide specifically for attorneys to use in their practice);
- *Your Case, Your Rights: Your Guide to Exercising Self-Advocacy* video series — coming soon!

The voice of a youth in foster care is just as important as the voice of any judge, attorney, caseworker, or anyone else involved in the case and the life of the youth. Foster youth deserve to know their rights and have allies that will help get what is needed. It may feel scary, hopeless, intimidating, and overwhelming to not only learn rights, but also ensure they are being met. That's okay, and that's what this guide is about — achieving equitable change and holding professionals accountable.

Those who have a duty to support foster youth don't always know what rights foster youth have or may be overwhelmed with their job. They may even come across as uncaring or assume the youth might not know what's best because of their age or something else outside of the foster youth's control. By speaking up and seeking out legal and policy knowledge, foster youth can change what professionals recommend and how they show support.



Many foster youth are scared or have other strong feelings that come up when it comes to advocating for themselves for a number of reasons. Examples we've heard from current and foster youth include:

- It can be frustrating for a foster youth to explain their needs and retell their story over and over again with new workers and placements.
- Foster youth can experience retaliation from professionals after airing their concerns; examples include professionals that stop answering messages from the youth, refuse to follow through on requests and needs, and/or loss of privileges.
- Sometimes youth are scared to go to a different placement out of worry the new placement would be worse than where they are currently.
- At times, it's easier to run, fight, or shut down when foster youth are tired of doing things the "polite" way and not getting results.
- Youth are understandably hesitant to complain about someone who has control of their life, which can lead to ego and powerplay.

Despite all this, youth must educate themselves and exercise their rights. Consider what the cost of *not* speaking up might be; there is an impact to staying silent. **At the end of the day, no one will stand up for you like you do.** So, start asking — what rights do I have? Who can help me learn them? Who can help me apply them? What processes can be accessed to make a change? It all starts through these next steps. As you're going through this guide to apply those steps, if there's a term you don't know, feel free to use the glossary at the end.

FRAMEWORK / STEPS TO EXERCISING YOUR RIGHTS

The infographic below is a visual framework to understand the steps to exercising rights. It is our hope that foster youth will be encouraged to apply this framework as they navigate the process of exercising foster care rights from beginning to end.





STEP 1: INTERNALIZATION OF RIGHTS

Practicing Self-Empowerment Activities

When we were talking with current and foster youth about creating this guide, a common theme we heard was foster youth needed to believe they are worthy of rights and worth fighting for before they started advocating. Unfortunately, trauma can often make people feel less than valuable. Foster youth must start with understanding that advocating for their rights is part of a healing journey that occurs during and after time in care. Reflection questions and affirmations can help boost the confidence it takes to speak up. In our [interactive journal](#), we've included prompts and space to get started.

Identifying Spaces That Empower You

Self-worth is a critical foundation, and a community of support is also very helpful for exercising one's rights. Map out the people who can be a listening ear and the ones that can be counted on. While foster youth shouldn't base self-worth solely on other people's perceptions, ensuring they have support systems in their life to feel wholly valued is necessary. These people can be those involved in the case and life of foster youth and include attorneys, system professionals, statewide youth advisory boards, non-profits, national advocacy spaces with a local presence, or community and school-based organizations. Such groups can be found in the resource section of this guide. Foster youth can stay up-to-date with these services or connect to people who know these specific services to practice advocacy and community building skills and develop tailored support for a wide variety of rights.

STEP 2: KNOWING YOUR RIGHTS

Discussing Your Rights With a Trusted Person

Once trusted, accessible professionals are identified, it's crucial to have open conversations about rights. Don't be afraid to ask questions about what rights there are, how professionals can help foster youth advocate, and how the professionals that are involved in a foster youths' case are accountable. Professionals should know this information from their experience advocating for other youth or the training they received as part of their job. Examples you can ask them about your rights includes:

- What are my rights in this situation?
- Will my rights change at a different age?
- What are my legal options?
- Have you seen other youth in foster care experience this before?
 - If so, what have been effective strategies for others?
- How can you help me advocate on this issue?
- When can I expect to hear back from you? (Business Days only? Nights and weekends?)
- If I don't hear back from you, when should I reach out? (Ex. within 1 week?)



- What is the best way to reach you? (phone, text, email?)
- If I don't hear back from you, is there any alternate person in your office I can contact?
- Is there any other person or office that can assist me as well?

Using The *Your Case, Your Rights: Your Guide to Exercising Self-Advocacy* National Map

It can be daunting to know where to start finding foster care rights information. To help, we've compiled information for the U.S states. You can use the National Map to access this information. All you have to do is [pull up this webpage](#) and click on the area you are receiving services from to get relevant information, which may include laws, agency policies, or other advocacy resources. Some states have more available than others. It is important to note the difference between rights that have been put into law, versus those that are part of an agency's internal policy. Rights that are in the law are easier to enforce. However, agencies should fulfill the responsibilities they have laid out in their own protocols that are in writing as well. Having these written documents gives a foundation of knowledge and documentation to refer to when self-advocating.

*** Note: foster youth bill of rights and agency rights documents are being newly developed, passed in legislatures, and amended often. We hope to keep this map current and useful for future generations. If you find updated information about a state, territory, or jurisdiction's rights we would love to know! Send updated information to Policy@NACCchildlaw.org.*

Locating Additional Rights

The map referenced above provides a starting point for learning about foster care rights and can be supplemented by conducting further research through internet searches, consultation with attorney/professionals, and conversations with peers. To get the most relevant information, here are a few research tips:

- **Effective Internet Searches:** if you wanted to try to locate *foster youth rights in California*, you could just look up the underlined term and find results similar to what you need. In addition or as an alternative, you could also break up these terms and use a capital "AND" to ensure that your search elicits responses from the search bar that contain *all* of the key terms (e.g., foster care AND rights AND California). Putting the entire phrase in quotation marks ("*foster youth rights in California*") will only yield results that have that exact phrase, in that exact order.
- **Review Your Case Documents:** Ask for copies of your case plans, court reports, court orders, and case notes. These may have information about court orders made by the judge, what is expected from everyone involved, and upcoming important dates such as future hearings. If you see misinformation in these documents, be sure to let the attorney know right away. Also be prepared for the information to be upsetting or re-traumatizing and have a plan for how to respond accordingly.

Having Strategies to Break Down Jargon / Complex Language

Legal rights documents may contain complex language. As we developed this Guide, many lived experience experts shared that the terms used to understand their rights were difficult to understand and it helped to have support to make sense of them. Use this space to track unfamiliar terms in our interactive journal, and then ask about them when meeting with an attorney or caseworker. You can also use online resources such as legal dictionaries.



STEP 3: ADVOCATING FOR YOUR RIGHTS

Gathering and Documenting Evidence

The next step is to develop a plan to start collecting existing and future documentation about the specific rights violation concern. Our [interactive journal](#) has examples and steps on how to do this. The goal is to be able to clearly show and articulate the “who, what, when, where, and how” about how rights have specifically been violated.

While gathering this documentation, consider what is needed to be discreet throughout this process, especially if there are concerns about possible retaliation. Retaliation can be a real possibility, and although it should not happen, we know that is not always the case. As foster youth interact with different adults in their life, there are different levels of confidentiality that may be promised. Asking an attorney if the foster-youth / attorney relationship is protected by attorney-client privilege is a strategy to consider (this varies by state). Consider gathering and saving sensitive information in confidential ways. Consider, in advance, who to share information with and who to NOT share certain information with (especially if there are adults that monitor the foster youth closely). This is also something that can be applied in our [interactive journal](#).

While advocating for rights, there is a good chance the report will get back to key people in attempts to resolve the situation. If retaliation is experienced, maintain documentation of when and how. Safety and well-being are crucial throughout this process.

Assessing the Problem

After identifying concerns, there are a few possible next steps:

- **Advocating for a legal right that is directly written within the foster youth Bill of Rights:** This is the most direct situation because there is a clear violation of written law or policy. If it needs to be elevated to a higher level of authority, there is a greater likelihood of success.
- **Advocating for something *believed* to be a right through interpretation of the foster youth Bill of Rights:** This is when the violation is a little less clearly defined; maybe the policy is written in a vague or confusing way. Still, vague language may encompass the concern. Exercising rights doesn’t just mean “exercise your rights when they are written exactly in a way where the situation 100% matches the language written in a foster youth Bill of Rights with perfect clarity.” When reading foster youth Bill of Rights or agency rights documents, see what is written and how it can be interpreted in the context of the situation’s potential rights violations. Even if the language on rights is vague, do not dismiss the feeling of rights being violated by your interpretation. Try to align the complaint with the language within the Bill of Rights as closely as possible and then craft the argument and plan of change around that language.
- **Advocating for something *not written directly* but is important to well-being:** If the rights violation isn’t found in a Bill of Rights, it is still possible to create a self-advocacy plan. A solid starting place for this argument is that most foster youth Bill of Rights documents include the “right to respect,” “right to normalcy, safety, and well-being,” and/or other broad language about treatment in foster care and can be leveraged to raise the concern. Similarly, most agencies and courts are guided by the principle of [“best interest of the child.”](#) Try framing the concern using this language.



Preparing Your Talking Points and / or Self-Advocacy Script

Build a plan for reporting, including clearly practicing and writing important points about the concern. Our interactive journal has space to support doing this with questions to consider framing the story of what needs to be shared in a way that is factual, compelling, and makes a connection to the specific right(s) being violated. This can be done verbally, in writing, or both. This can be done with our interactive journal, a Google document, the “Notes” app on a cell phone, or a pen and paper. Regardless of which format is chosen, it is important to ensure the option used is secure and has space for adding and editing thoughts as they develop or as situations arise that need to be documented. Make sure to include as much detail as possible (such as times, dates, photos).

Practicing Self-Advocacy Directly

Advocating for Your Rights in Writing

- If the reporting format needs writing support, there is free software such as [Grammarly](#), to structure sentences, conduct spell-check, and provide general writing guidance. There are also other tools that can be used to support communications style, thinking style, and reporting methods such as [Otter AI](#) (which allows speech-to-text).
- Draft the concern in the form of a letter, an email, or even a Powerpoint. AI softwares can also help here too.
- After creating a first draft, read it again from start to finish. Make sure it answers the following:
 - What is the concern?
 - What needs to change?
 - What support would be helpful?
 - Who are the key people that need to understand and address this?

After the first draft is completed, it could be helpful to have a trusted person read it to make sure it makes sense and provide any edits or suggestions.

- FosterClub’s [Foster Youth Involved Form](#) is another useful tool that can be completed with and shared with a trusted adult.

Advocating for Your Rights Verbally

- Once the talking points are in writing, it’s time to strengthen those speaking points for clarity and persuasiveness.
 - First, consider the setting in which this information will be delivered. Will it be in a one-on-one meeting with an attorney? During a child and family team meeting? In court?
 - Have the written talking points handy. This can help with saying everything that needs to be said and keeping on track. Take your time and don’t feel rushed.
- Use a calm, reasonable volume. It’s easy to yell, cuss, or insult people when angry (and it is normal and valid to be angry from negative interactions and when rights are being violated). However, using a calm voice and speaking at an appropriate volume makes it easier to build understanding, maintain respectful spaces, and makes the person less defensive.
- Approach conversations in a polite way (even though it can be difficult) — “please” and “thank you” can go a long way.



- After sharing a concern, actively listen to their response and note what they say they are going to do and the timeframe in which they will take that action. Write down their commitment and perhaps put them in a calendar app to have a date to follow up.

STEP 4: EXERCISING YOUR RIGHTS

Exercising one’s rights is a process and may require elevating your concern to ensure accountability. During check-ins, ask how an attorney or other case professional wants to be contacted about concerns — especially if it’s time sensitive. Do they prefer phone, text, or email? Who should be contacted if they are not available? Having a plan to address issues that may arise later builds a process as well as a relationship. The relationships are key because having multiple adults aware of and understanding of the situation can build credibility.

But when the need for elevation does arise, be prepared to answer who was contacted, how many times, and what the response was. That’s where documentation comes in handy. It is important to also document WHY elevation is needed. Is someone retaliating? Is the timeframe for a response taking too long? Before considering the need for escalation, it may be helpful to consider the below contexts:

- Expectations of response timeframes — there’s a difference between expecting a response within one hour, one day, and one week.
- Does the person being contacted know they are being reached and what’s expected of them? How do they know this?
 - If they get a missed call, perhaps it’s from a number they don’t have saved, but they’ll return a call if there’s a voicemail that accompanied for instance.

Also, be mindful people may get defensive when someone “goes above their head” to a supervisor, manager, or someone they report to. Do not let this stop you from advocating by using their own processes to meet needs! If there are concerns about pushback or retaliation, use statements such as “I was hesitant to share this because of concern about possible retaliation” to put people on notice. It is important to elevate issues to higher levels of authority when facing a lack of responsiveness, dismissiveness, or other barriers. It may feel like a negative thing or something that is discouraged, but zealous self-advocacy is extremely important; do not give up just because the first person ignores or dismisses the concern. Especially if a response is taking a lot of time, it may be worthwhile to follow up and check in on the request to ensure it is still being assessed or worked on. This could include using cell phone reminders, sticky notes on a calendar, or other reminder mechanisms. It can also be helpful to CC a supervisor in an email so there are multiple people following up on a concern and this also creates more documentation of multiple attempts of outreach.

Identifying Your Pathway for Reporting (Pros, Cons, and Strategies)

Depending on who is being worked with and their organizational hierarchy, there will be different pros, cons, and considerations for the optimal pathway to report a concern. When thinking about these different approaches, consider multiple pathways that can be used at the same time if necessary. This includes:



Social Services Options

These are the reporting options most readily available from the agency. These people may be the most connected to a foster youth's day-to-day life in the system and directly able to impact changes. However, it is important to realize that they are employees of an agency and may also have an interest and/or obligation to advocate for the best interests of the agency.

- **I Want to Advocate to The Caregiver / Foster Parent / Resource Parent**
 - *How to Do This:* Talk in person, call, text, email, video conference, or write a letter.
 - *How This Could Be Effective:* This person often has the most contact with the foster youth as they reside together and hopefully should be physically accessible.
 - *Potential Barriers:* Understandably, speaking with this person can be uncomfortable if they are the source of the concern. Some may be open to changing if the ask is framed a certain way, while others may not be open to changing at all. Additionally, it could be scary to ask for help for fear of retaliation, such as taking away privileges, applying discipline, or generally dismissing needs.
- **With the Social Worker / Case Manager**
 - *How to Do This:* Talk in person, call, text, email, video conference, or write a letter. It is often best to know the case manager's preferred communications methods — particularly if they are more responsive to a certain form of communications (e.g., text, calls, email).
 - *How This Could Be Effective:* case managers are expected to see foster youth in person on a regular basis and are meant to be the first line of contact provided by the agency. Case managers also may have access to agency resources, contacts, and systems that can help to address some concrete needs (e.g., access or knowledge about agency/community funds and access to tangible resources such as technology or bus passes).
 - *Potential Barriers:* case managers can be hard to get a hold of because they often have many responsibilities and other youth they work with. It can be scary to ask caseworkers for help or bring up a problem when they have a lot of control over the foster youth's case and life. Some risks may include lack of encouragement or support moving forward with the complaint or a general dismissal of feelings.
- **With the Social Worker / Case Managers' Supervisor**
 - *How to Do This:* If the social worker / case manager isn't responding, is on vacation, or perhaps because they are the source of the concern, the supervisor's contact information can be found on their business card, in the out-of-office email response the assigned social worker puts in their email, by Googling their name and agency they work for, or by calling the local child welfare office.
 - *How This Could Be Effective:* This could correct a case manager who is doing something wrong. Supervisors might have some knowledge about the foster youth's case and can provide coverage while the case manager is unavailable. Supervisors may also have some additional authority to address or solve concerns, or ideas about how to do so.
 - *Potential Barriers:* The supervisor may protect their staff member or "side with them." They could withhold information for fear of being sued or reprimanded, or the foster youth's social worker could potentially retaliate if they discover someone went to their boss.



Legal System Options

Violations of rights can be addressed with people and processes that exist specifically to protect legal rights. Unfortunately, not all states / territories have guaranteed attorneys for foster youth so in addition to the *Your Case, Your Rights: Your Guide to Exercising Self-Advocacy* map, we also encourage the use of the [Counsel for Kids site](#) that shows which states do / and do not guarantee legal representation.

- **With An Attorney / GAL**

- *How to Do This:* Attorney's contact information can be found on their business card, by asking the caregiver or case manager, or calling the local courthouse where the foster youth's case is heard and requesting the attorney's information.
- *How This Could Be Effective:* The attorney is the only person in the case that represents the foster youth and their wants and needs directly. Depending on the state, some attorneys are "client-directed" meaning they have an ethical duty to advocate for what they want. Other attorneys are "best interest," meaning they must listen to what the foster youth wants but ultimately can make recommendations for what the attorney thinks is best. Ask the attorney to explain the rules of client confidentiality for your jurisdiction. If confidentiality is protected, it may allow more honest, private conversations. Attorneys should know the relevant rights of foster youth and explain what that information means in ways that are understandable. They can bring concerns to the attention of a judge if needed — either orally while in court, or by filing a written motion (see [glossary](#)). If the judge does not agree, the attorney may be able to file an appeal, which is a way of bringing the issue to a judge with more authority. They can also give advice on respectful, productive ways to communicate that helps people listen and understand better.
- *Potential Barriers:* Attorneys that work for the state often have high caseloads making it hard to get ahold of them and hold them accountable — similar to the social worker/case manager. If the attorney can not be contacted, you can reach out to their supervisor or the judge the work with.

- **Within a Court Proceeding**

- *How to Do This:* If a court hearing is held to address the concern, consider attending to be seen and heard directly either in person or by requesting to attend virtually or by phone.
- *How This Could Be Effective:* Participating in court lets people hear what is being said first hand and allows for the opportunity to immediately correct misinformation and to be heard unfiltered.
- *Potential Barriers:* Transportation to court can be a barrier, depending on the time of day and scheduling. Ask for court to be scheduled at a date and time that can be attended, like when schools are closed for teacher conferences or spring break. In some states, like Georgia for example, transportation services may be required to support engagement.

- **Through the State / Jurisdiction's Ombudsperson's Office**

- *How to Do This:* The office of the ombudsperson often has multiple options for reporting — through phone, email, and oftentimes a website form that can be filled out directly to let them know about the complaint.
- *How This Could Be Effective:* Ombuds offices typically are tasked with conducting timely investigations on requests made. They are trained to read and interpret the law and policy to see if and how rights are being violated. They are also well positioned to address systemic problems that are impacting many people in a jurisdiction.



- *Potential Barriers:* Not all states/jurisdictions have ombuds offices and some ombuds offices are through the child welfare agency while others are independent agencies. Both can be good resources, but an ombuds office under the agency might possess slight pro-agency bias, while independent agencies can have more neutrality. A few states have ombuds offices that do not specialize in child welfare, but they address the concerns of all governmental agencies, including children's services. Knowing the specifics of your state or jurisdictional ombuds office can help to better understand this reporting mechanism. Keep in mind, ombuds offices have discretion about what complaints they do and do not investigate.

Additional Support Options

There are other reporting options which can be used to support self-advocacy planning and execution.

● Through Your School

- *How to Do This:* Reach out to a trusted adult such as a school counselor, school social worker, guidance counselor, school resource officer, front desk administrative staff, principal, or other adult in power to ask them about for support to exercise rights. They can help find information, what the process is, and who to contact (and may have specific knowledge focused on education-related rights).
- *How This Could Be Effective:* Since foster youth are in school for so much of the day, these are consistent people to go to for support in a space away from home.
- *Potential Barriers:* School staff may have limitations on bandwidth, expertise, or they may widely vary in how supportive they are. They also may not have direct authority over the necessary issue at-hand, unless it is education-related. These people are also likely mandated reporters, which means they are required to make a report to the child welfare hotline if they suspect or abuse neglect. This is important to keep in mind when sharing with them.

● Social Support Systems

- *How to Do This:* Reach out to a trusted adult such as (but not limited to) a family member, family friend, or court appointed special advocate (CASA), coach, mentor, religious support system, or other trusted person and inform them of the concern.
- *How This Could Be Effective:* Leaning into a support system can be beneficial when looking for the safest-feeling space to be able to share thoughts, feelings, and situations. These people can be helpful to go to for empowerment, to practice self-advocacy with, to run talking points by, and anything else that feels comfortable and makes sense. They also may be in a position where they are willing to help advocate or offer support if faced with retaliation or general dismissal of needs.
- *Potential Barriers:* These people do not have any direct authority on decisions made in the same way group home / resource parent / placement do. Since they are passionate, they may have ideas and good intentions about how to help. Clearly communicate what is wanted and needed from them so they don't try to take matters into their own hands too much. Keep in mind, depending on their job, this person could be a mandated reporter, which means they are required to make a report to the child welfare hotline if they suspect or abuse neglect.



- **Through an Advocacy Organization**
 - *How to Do This:* There are organizations that focus on creating laws about foster care rights, educating people on foster care rights, and helping access and use them. Some of these organizations include national non-profits (such as [FosterClub](#) and [National Foster Youth Institute](#)), national boards (such as [Foster Care Policy Alumni Council](#)), statewide or local advocacy non-profits (such as [The Mockingbird Society](#) in Washington, [Youth Shine](#) in Florida, or [California Youth Connection](#)) or local advocacy boards from the agency (such as the [DC Keeping Families Together Lived Experience Advisory Council](#)). These organizations can be contacted by Googling them and using their “contact” tab to speak with someone or look at their website for resources. Attorney, case workers, and school staff can also provide information about foster care advocacy organizations for these and other resources.
 - *How This Could Be Effective:* These organizations may know current laws and rights for foster youth and are often operated or supported by former foster youth who are passionate about serving their community and youth in care. Even if they are not able to address the individual issue, they may be able to provide a referral.
 - *Potential Barriers:* Depending on jurisdiction, there might not be a local group like this that is knowledgeable, accessible, or easy to get a hold of. Also, these groups do not have any decision-making authority on the life of a foster youth. Some advocacy organizations only work at the systemic level and will not get involved in individual issues.

STEP 5: USING YOUR CASE-LEVEL ADVOCACY TO INFORM SYSTEMS-LEVEL CHANGE

Now that you’ve advocated for foster care rights, others should hear about it! You can use your experience to help others, change laws, and even get paid.

- Some advocacy agencies offer stipends for people to share their experiences. You can [reach out to local advocacy agencies](#) to get involved.
- You can make a career out of being a voice for others — as a social worker, attorney, judge, counselor, or any type of helping profession. Perhaps you are inspired by someone who made a difference in your life or simply driven to become the person you wish you had advocating for you. As a foster youth, there are many scholarships and financial opportunities to pursue training and education so you can carry the advocacy forward! You could contact the [National Association of Counsel for Children’s National Advisory Council on Children’s Legal Representation](#) — all of whom were in foster care and work to support foster youth professionally to learn how these former foster youth have done this themselves.
- You can also reach out to your local government officials so they can hear your experience as a foster youth that can even be used to create or change laws that impact you and other foster kids. You can find your government representatives by asking trusted adults or googling your county council, house, senate, and congress representative for the city you live in and finding their contact information. At the federal level, you can also contact the [Congressional Caucus on Foster Youth](#) and [Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute](#).



APPENDIX

Glossary

- **Child & Family Team Meeting (CFTM):** These are held usually semi-regularly (e.g., quarterly) and/or at key decision points for children and older youth who are in out-of-home care. A few examples of when these meetings are called can include needing to move to a different home; when a different goal is being considered for your future, or before your first permanency hearing before the court. (Note: this may have a different term that is used specifically by your state/jurisdiction, such as FTDMs/family team decision meetings.)
- **Foster Youth Bill of Rights:** Foster Children Bill of Rights are designed to inform foster children and foster parents of their rights within the child welfare system. Many children's bills of rights provide that they must be posted in a place where children will see them and include provisions requiring foster children to be informed about why they are in foster care and how the process will proceed. In addition, participation in extracurricular or community activities, efforts to maintain educational stability, access to guardians ad litem, access to mental, behavioral and physical health care, and access to or communication with siblings and family members are major features of the foster children's bill of rights.
- **Grievance:** Grievances are formal complaints or accusations of a violation. A grievance may be related to unfair or inhumane treatment, lack of respect, lack of rights being met, or a specific violation of rights.
- **Motion:** A motion is a formal request made by any party for a desired ruling, order, or judgment in court. The party that makes the motion is known as the movant. A motion can be written or spoken, as the relevant rules require. Various motions can be made throughout a proceeding, but only after the initial complaint has been filed.
- **Ombudsman:** Children's Ombudsman Offices, also known in some jurisdictions as Office of the Child Advocate, have been established at the state level to provide oversight of children's services. The purpose, responsibilities and duties of the Children's Ombudsman Office vary by state. In general, these offices exist to:
 - Handle and investigate complaints from citizens and families related to government services for children and families — this may include child protective services, foster care, adoption, and juvenile justice services.
 - Provide a system accountability mechanism by recommending system-wide improvements to benefit children and families — often in the form of annual reports to the Legislature, Governor, and public.
 - Protect the interests and rights of children and families — both individually and system-wide.
 - Monitor programs, placements, and departments responsible for providing children's services — which may include inspecting state facilities and institutions.
- **Retaliation:** When a person or an institution takes an adverse action against an individual either in response to the exercise of a protected activity or to deter or prevent protected activity in the future.



Additional Helpful Resources for Exercising Your Rights

Advocacy Groups List

<https://www.fosterclub.com/youth-alumni-groups>

https://web.archive.org/web/20231003214854/https://www.childwelfare.gov/organizations/?CWIGFunctionsaction=rols:main.dspList&rolType=Custom&RS_ID=160

Fact Sheet for How to Use a How-to Guide

<https://cwig-prod-prod-drupal-s3fs-us-east-1.s3.amazonaws.com/public/documents/youth.pdf?VersionId=P3YaYFFsb25w2OtivXwE2FkeiNnqINOP>

From Complaint to Resolution: Understanding the Child Welfare Grievance Process

https://cwig-prod-prod-drupal-s3fs-us-east-1.s3.amazonaws.com/public/documents/cw_grievance.pdf

Ombuds Terms and Some Contacts

https://www.fosterclub.com/search?search_api_fulltext=Ombudsman#

Foster Youth Involved Form

A form for foster youth to use for getting involved in their case:

<https://store.fosterclub.com/foster-youth-involved-form-free-download/>

Tips & Tools for Providing High-Quality Legal Representation to Children and Parents in Child Welfare Proceedings In-Court

This guide provides discussion, tips, and tools to enhance in-court advocacy:

<https://familyjusticeinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/48/2022/01/in-court-advocacy.pdf>

Tips & Tools for Providing High-Quality Legal Representation to Children and Parents in Child Welfare Proceedings Outside of Court

https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/child_law/out-of-court-advocacy.pdf

American Bar Association Tips for In-Court Advocacy

This document describes fundamental attributes of quality legal representation for parents and children in child welfare proceedings, beyond presumed competency and knowledge of the law, rules of procedure, and negotiation and trial skills.

https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/child_law/in-court-advocacy.pdf

National Association of Counsel for Children's Recommendations for Legal Representation of Children and Youth in Neglect and Abuse Proceedings

<https://NACCchildlaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/NACC-Recommendations-Final.pdf> ■