

LEARNING FROM LIVED EXPERIENCE



YOUR CASE, YOUR RIGHTS: INVESTING IN ADVOCACY TOOLS BY AND FOR FOSTER YOUTH AND PROFESSIONALS

By [Gina Cabiddu, MSW](#)

In July 2024, NACC launched the [Your Case, Your Rights](#) project led by National Advisory Council on Children's Legal Representation (NACCLR) members with lived expertise in the child welfare system to develop and promote tools that help foster youth and child welfare professionals to exercise rights. These tools are for youth and child welfare professionals to use together, or independently, to help youth understand **AND** exercise their rights. The project includes step-by-step instructions, and hypothetical examples across various environments such as court, school, and family interactions. The project was designed to address the intricate and complex realities of advocacy. It includes learning the processes, jargon, and roles of professionals involved in a youth's life, as well as providing practical planning and tracking tools to create, implement, and ensure accountability for addressing rights violations. The need for these resources was evident as we found through our national surveys and focus groups comprised of youth with lived experience in the child welfare system. The statistics are telling: 34% did not feel worthy of having rights, just 46% knew where to go to learn more about their legal rights, and only 30% said their attorney supported them in advocating for themselves.

The development of the *Your Case, Your Rights* project was an 18-month, multi-stage process from inception to launch. It involved gathering information through surveys and focus groups, creating and revising materials based on feedback, distributing the materials through partner networks and presentations, and making ongoing updates informed by data insights.

Early on we conducted online research, and contacted NACC State Coordinators, and personal contacts to research and gather each state/territory's available literature

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LEARNING FROM LIVED EXPERIENCE — CONTINUED



(Bill of Rights, codified law, guides on how to understand rights, etc.). We also gathered qualitative data regarding what helped, and what barriers existed in accessing and exercising rights. We also questioned what should be included, and how the information should be shared. This project was fully led and developed by NACCLR team members. The *Your Case, Your Right* team, survey respondents, and focus group participants are all people with lived experience in the child welfare system and professionals who serve foster youth. Those who engaged in our surveys identified as 84% BIPOC, 40% LGBTQIA+, and 12% self-disclosed a disability. Participants provided feedback on what content should be included, real-life examples of their advocacy experiences, stylistic elements for accessibility for developmental and educational levels as well as print and digital access, interactivity for engagement, and how and where to distribute the final products for actual utilization. The *Your Case, Your Right* team compiled the information gathered through surveys, focus groups, and researching state literature and composed the information into the products described below.

- A **National Map** provides information on foster youth rights, organized by state and jurisdictional territory. It includes details on foster youth bills of rights, agency rights documents, and other identified rights for youth. A **Companion Guide** to help foster youth understand how to find and exercise their rights, what to expect from the professionals in their lives, and what steps to take when their rights are violated. It covers identifying support partners, gathering necessary documents, and understanding the pros and cons of working with different professionals.
- An **Interactive Youth Journal** template designed to help youth reflect on, brainstorm, and prepare their self-advocacy talking points and plan. It guides them in locating and tracking their rights, creating effective talking points, and ensuring accountability through various avenues.
- An **Interactive Youth Journal Lite** version, a condensed version of the interactive journal, tailored for younger audiences and those with lower reading levels to enhance accessibility.
- An **Attorney Brief** that serves as a practical tip sheet for supporting youth in advocating for their rights.
- A **Survey and Focus Group Process Overview** was developed as a model for others to replicate. This document details how the NACC team engaged youth with lived experience and foster youth attorney voices in creating and distributing the *Your Case, Your Rights* guide, website, attorney brief, and journals. It provides a high-level overview of this engagement process.

Throughout this process, there have been some lessons learned and philosophical engagements. For example, some attorneys reported balancing, professionally and internally, their desire that as a professional, a client shouldn't have to advocate but also holding that helping youth build advocacy abilities is a life skill for a client and mutually

LEARNING FROM LIVED EXPERIENCE — CONTINUED



beneficial experience. Organizationally, *Your Case, Your Rights* is a first for NACC. This is the first lived-experience-led project that delves into the capacities and partnership elements between lived-experience contractors and NACC staff. Lastly, surprising barriers arose including survey respondent scams with bots attempting to recover payment for participation and issues with states responding with information that should have been publicly available — neither of which barred us from completing the work that we set out to do.

Since the launch of the tools, the materials have been distributed through NACC and externally and will continue to be circulated during NACC's trainings and nationally via conferences and various partnerships. If you are interested in having us present this project to your organization, please reach out. We will also be presenting a member webinar with NACC in early 2025. The next steps for *Your Case, Your Rights* are the development of a video, and a social media campaign set to start in November. NACCLR has also established a workgroup to use data insights to hone and evolve these resources and distribution through the use of website traffic information and contributions from members about current rights/law changes for the website; present and share these resources through multidisciplinary avenues to implement the resources far and wide; and ongoing partnerships with other complementary NACC efforts that target system and policy reform including collaborating with the Council for Kids campaign and NACC's Training Department.

We are calling on YOU to visit the site, share the information within your networks, and provide feedback about the resources and the status in your state, as we know things change and want to keep the resources current. We are also calling on YOU to connect with us on [LinkedIn](#) and [Instagram](#). Don't forget to like, follow, and share. Feel free to reach out to us to discuss scheduling a presentation or training.

The NACCLR members that led this work included Gina Cabiddu (Project Manager 2024–present and Writing Lead); Louie Gaspar (Project Manager 2023–2024), Jade Garza (Research Lead); Kayla Powell (Survey Lead); and Parker (Communications Lead). ■