During adolescence, youth should have experiences that contribute to their development into successful adults. These experiences lead to the development of personal identity, and youth need support while developing answers to the questions “Who am I?” and “What is my place in the world?” Safe opportunities to explore one’s identity may occur by joining school clubs, attending local events held by community organizations, going to summer camps, participating in religious groups, developing relationships with friends and mentors, and more. For any adolescent, developing identity is a complex – yet crucial – process.

Involvement with the foster care system impacts youths’ path of identity exploration and development. Some experiences in foster care—such as placement moves that may result in changing schools or caseworkers—can disrupt a youth’s life, including their developing sense of self. Within this already vulnerable group of young people, some youth need specific supports to fully explore and develop certain dimensions of their identity such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

Connecticut DCF has made vast improvements in recent years that have increased positive outcomes for youth and their families. More youth now remain at home instead of entering foster care; when youth must be removed, they are increasingly placed with relatives and are less likely to be placed into a group or residential placement.

Yet, additional work remains. On any given day, there are roughly 4,000 children in Connecticut’s foster care system. In Fiscal Year 2018, 37 percent (over 1,500) of youth in Connecticut foster care are 13 years of age or older. A majority of youth experience three or more placement changes since their most recent entrance into foster care.
Adolescents in foster care are less likely to return home or to be adopted than children of younger ages. Moreover, adolescents are the least likely age group to achieve permanency within 18 months of residing in foster care. This instability means that adolescents in foster care face an increased risk for adverse outcomes and need enhanced support during this critical developmental period.

Connecticut Voices for Children conducted voluntary, informal surveys and discussions with youth across the state from the DCF Youth Advisory Boards. Responses from these discussions offer a look into how some youth feel foster care has influenced their identity development. Youth reported:

**Feeling disconnected from their schools and community.**
Several of the survey responses revealed that youth did not feel connected to their current schools and communities—this was especially true for youth who had had three or more placement changes.

**The importance of having freedom to be oneself.**
Like most adolescents, youth wished to have the freedom to wear the clothes that matched parts of their identity and participate in the activities they enjoyed.

**The need for support in identity exploration.**
Youth highlighted the importance of having caregiver support when exploring different facets of their identity including spirituality, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

To support this developmental process effectively, Connecticut must dedicate sufficient resources to better serve the unique needs of adolescents and implement strong processes to adequately assess, protect, and support the identity development of adolescents living in foster care.

"Whatever we share with [foster parents], they should accept us no matter what."
-Connecticut foster youth, age 17
As a result, Connecticut Voices for Children has developed a series of policy recommendations based on a scan of current DCF policy and best practices in other states, integrating youth voice and state-collected data.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Update the current Adolescent Bill of Rights and Expectations to incorporate protections and supports for identity development and implement a process for all adolescents to receive and be explained these rights.

- This includes placing an emphasis on cultural awareness, social and peer inclusion, and community inclusion as a part of normalcy. This update should also represent youth voice by including additional recommendations current or former foster youth may have.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Bolster the protections for youth who identify as LGBTQ and implement programs to support the identity development of these youth.

- We recommend that DCF strengthen existing protections for LGBTQ youth specifically to include provision regarding identity disclosure sensitivity, identity pronoun and preferences, and responsive placement considerations and case planning.
- We also recommend that Connecticut require that DCF staff and youth caregivers receive training specifically about LGBTQ identities that prepare them with the knowledge and resources necessary to support LGBTQ youth.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Work to improve the assessment and support of identity development of all adolescents who reside in foster care.

- Connecticut Voices for Children recommends that DCF implement a tool to assess adolescent needs inclusive of identity development. In addition, we recommend that DCF, with support from the state legislature, commit further resources to recruit and train a diverse group of foster parents specifically for adolescents. Lastly, we support the implementation of mutual information sharing prior to moving into a new placement.

READ THE FULL REPORT AT:

www.ctvoices.org/youthatcapitol8

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