EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FINDING YOUR VOICE:
SUPPORTING THE SELF-ADVOCACY OF YOUTH IN THE CARE OF
THE CONNECTICUT DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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Learning how to voice concerns, assert rights, and challenge harmful systems is a difficult and necessary part of youth development. Self-advocacy is the skillset that helps individuals navigate the space between personal identity and society. It is a skillset by which individuals identify their wishes, strengths, needs and rights; understand the systems they exist in; and understand when and how to challenge those systems when their needs are not met or their rights are violated.

Youth rely on the adult caregivers and support systems in their lives to both show and tell them how to use self-advocacy in everyday and complex situations, however, adults are often skeptical of a young person’s ability to understand their own needs, and can undermine a child’s self-advocacy, doing what they think is best rather than what the youth wishes.

Self-advocacy is especially important for people belonging to marginalized groups—such as people with developmental or intellectual disabilities, people with learning disabilities, people of color, and, we argue, youth in foster care—due to the oppressive nature or historical failings of the systems that serve them.

Adolescents who grow up in the foster care system can face a number of barriers to their development; removal from home, separations from communities and supports, and changes in placement and social workers are a few hurdles that youth in care may have to overcome in their journey to find their voice. Providing youth in foster care with tools and strategies to advocate for their needs and structuring child welfare processes to create space for youth self-advocacy and respond to youth self-advocacy are critical to ensure that youth in the child welfare system can meet their goals.

National literature about self-advocacy of youth in foster care is limited, so Connecticut Voice for Children extends literature examining self-advocacy of youth with learning disabilities to create a framework for understanding how youth in Connecticut’s foster care system can advocate for themselves within the child welfare system. We conducted a scan of the Department of Children and Families’ policy to find avenues for supporting and training youth advocacy. Some important existing policy and tools include:

- **Youth Advisory Boards (YABs):** YABs are small convenings of youth organized by a local coordinator in each of the area offices and a statewide coordinator at the central office. At YAB meetings, youth in DCF care are able to share their insights and thoughts on DCF policy and practice and make suggestions for improvement.
- **SpeakUp Handbook:** A guide created by the Center for Children’s Advocacy that covers the right of youth in care. The booklet also informs youth of the responsibilities of those that care for them and different ways they can participate in decisions that affect them.
- **Child and Family Permanency Teaming:** Permanency teaming is the intentional work, by DCF, to actively involve the social supports of the youth “in the process of engaging, assessing, and planning for the child’s best interests in order to achieve safety, permanency, health and learning.”
In our research, Connecticut Voices for Children collected and utilized four types of data: a youth survey, youth focus groups, DCF staff interviews, and analysis of quantitative systems data provided by DCF and the Juan F. Federal Court Monitor’s Office. We utilized this mixed methodology in order to create a robust empirical basis to demonstrate that youth in foster care have better experiences and outcomes when their self-advocacy is meaningful and to understand the ways in which youth in DCF care are supported in their advocacy, as well as the systemic barriers they face. Our analyses across these combinations of both qualitative and quantitative data from youth and the adults that support youth identified four major themes:

**The importance of self-advocacy for youth in care.**
- 82 percent of youth surveyed indicated that it is important to them to be able to advocate for their needs.
- Across all measured domains of youth’s needs—educational needs, medical and dental health needs, and behavioral health needs—youth’s needs were more likely to be met when youth participated in their case planning processes.
- However, most youth do not participate in the case planning process. Almost 90 percent of DCF offices had less than 40 percent of youth attend the meetings in which youth’s needs are identified and goals are set to meet those needs.

**Trusted relationships are vital to youth advocacy.**
- Youth who felt comfortable advocating for their own needs also indicated appreciating having someone they trust present when voicing their concerns.
- 87 percent of youth indicated that they felt more comfortable voicing concerns when with their social worker, and DCF staff interviewed indicated that the youth in their care come to them with needs, problems, and grievances.
- When parents attend case planning meetings, youth’s behavioral needs are more likely to be met.
- However, not all youth have similar access to the trusted relationships that support their self-advocacy. Less than half of youth ages 13-17 and just over 50 percent of Hispanic youth engage in what their case plans determine to be regular enough visits to maintain connections with parents.

**DCF has great tools for teaching and supporting self-advocacy, but these tools are not accessible to all youth.**
- Only 47 percent of youth surveyed had heard of the SpeakUp book, but all those youth indicated that the information in the book was useful.
- Not all DCF regions have regular YAB meetings, and many YABs are not accessible for youth with disabilities or verbal delays.

**Youth in care face systemic barriers to receiving the tools and support they need to self-advocate.**
- When youth do not feel that their needs are being met, youth and staff reported that it could result in acting out or self-injurious behaviors.
- Stability in social worker is a critical component of helping youth self-advocate. As the number of social workers a youth had during their time in care increased, youths’ comfort with self-advocacy decreased. Over half of youth indicated that they wanted to have more time with their social worker.
- Stability in foster placements is also an important component for self-advocacy. Youth who experienced a greater number of moves (6 or more) placed less importance on self-advocacy.
After conducting a policy scan of the current policy in DCF, looking to other states for best practices, and analyzing our data, Connecticut Voices for Children developed a series of policy recommendations integrating youth voice and collected data. Broadly, we propose:

- DCF promotes awareness of YABs throughout the department, ensures that YABs meet monthly, and coordinates transportation for youth.
- DCF lessens the workload of YAB coordinators and ensures that adolescent specialists are present in every region.
- DCF utilizes technology to facilitate youth and trusted others attending ACR meetings.
- DCF schedules meetings at a time and in a location accessible to youth, their families, and their lawyers.
- DCF develops a course to teach youth how to advocate in their ACR meetings with a focus on giving youth progressive control over leading and reporting in their case planning.
- DCF creates accessible standardized trainings for social workers regarding topics like the SpeakUp handbook, YABs, youth rights, and other youth advocacy tools.
- DCF makes SpeakUp books accessible to youth’s lawyers.
- DCF creates a position for a Youth Ombudsman.
- DCF utilizes a Universal Design for Accessibility framework to ensure all youth have self-advocacy tools and opportunities.

- The Connecticut General Assembly passes a bill that requires social workers to review the SpeakUp tools and adolescent services with youth when youth receive bills of rights.
- The Executive Branch bring together agencies serving youth in foster care—including the courts, the education system, and others—to discuss how youth are taught and supported in self-advocacy across systems.
- The Judicial Branch collect data on youth participating in Child Protective Services hearings and work to ensure that youth are invited to these hearings.
- The Connecticut General Assembly passes a bill making it mandatory that adolescent youth ACR and permanency teaming meetings occur outside of work and school hours.
- The Connecticut General Assembly passes a bill mandating that DCF must offer to schedule meetings in a location accessible to youth and fund necessary social worker overtime.
- The Connecticut General Assembly passes a bill to ensure youth in care aged 18 and over can access legal representation and provide funding so that Public Defenders can provide this representation.

For more information on our research and recommendations, read the full report at www.ctvoices.org