

Stakeholder Facilitation for Systemic Improvements

Washington Department of Children, Youth, and Families

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I. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Public Consulting Group (PCG) would like to acknowledge the many individuals who contributed to this engagement. First, thank you to all the parents, foster parents and kin caregivers, and professional partners who engaged in these efforts by sharing your knowledge, insight, and stories regarding your experiences with the Washington Department of Children, Youth, and Families. We would also like to thank the many child welfare organizations throughout Washington who volunteered their time to distribute stakeholder engagement informational flyers to their contacts and partners to help reach as many potential participants as possible.

II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In January 2021, a [class action complaint](#) was brought against the State of Washington (WA) Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) alleging that DCYF has failed to 1) ensure children with disabilities receive the necessary child welfare services and supports to allow them to return promptly and safely to their own families and communities, and 2) develop an adequate array of placement options to support the individualized needs of children in foster care with disabilities and instead relies on harmful hotel, one-night, and out-of-state placements.¹ As a result, in June 2022, the U.S. District Court Western District of Washington at Seattle filed an Agreement and Settlement Order ([D.S. et al., v. Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families](#)) to ensure DCYF develops a plan and processes to transform child safety and well-being practices to increase placement stability for children and youth with behavioral health and developmental disabilities, their families and caregivers, as well as develop a youth and family-centered, culturally and trauma-informed system of placement supports and services.

The Agreement and Settlement Order identified eight areas of improvement to support class members.² To aid in with this, DCYF was charged with contracting with a neutral third party to gather written and live input from individuals with lived experience and professional partners in three areas of the settlement order: Kinship Engagement, Family Group Planning, and Referrals and Transitions.³ DCYF contracted with Public Consulting Group (PCG) to execute these efforts. PCG subcontracted with Think of Us to lead all young people engagement.

As a result of this stakeholder engagement, PCG and Think of Us developed the findings and recommendations listed in the below tables.

TABLE 1. PARENT, CAREGIVER, AND PROFESSIONAL PARTNER RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations	
Kinship Engagement	
Supportive Networks	<p>Parent and Caregiver:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop and implement policies and procedures to ensure kin and fictive kin are identified and engaged on the day of removal, when decisions are made, and throughout the life of the youth’s case. DCYF should bear a responsibility to strengthen its relationship with tribes and continue engagement to keep children and youth connected to their culture. DCYF should implement information collection and sharing practices and tools that gather youth and family input about themselves including their cultural, supportive, and resource needs, and allow them to make choices about their own vital social supports and placement decisions at the time of removal and on an ongoing basis. <p>Professional Partner:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based on input provided by stakeholders, PCG recommends that DCYF provides ongoing training to social workers about the resources available.

¹ [Complaint-Filed-1.29.21.pdf \(disabilityrightswa.org\)](#)

² Class action members include individuals who are or in the future will be under the age of 18, in DCYF’s placement during a dependency proceeding until the proceeding is dismissed, and one or more of the following: 1) have experienced five (5) or more placements, excluding trial return home, in-home dependencies, and temporary placements, or 2) have been referred for or are in out-of-state group care placement, or 3) have experienced a hotel or office stay in the past six (6) months, or 4) are awaiting a Children’s Long-Term Inpatient Program (CLIP) bed.

³ Stakeholders included in this outreach were to include, but was not limited to, foster and extended families, tribes, community and service providers (child welfare, mental health, developmental disabilities, and housing), school liaisons, juvenile justice representatives, assigned counsel for youth and families in child welfare, and other youth and disability advocates. The contractor was also to obtain input from a diverse group of youth, including those who identified as being LGBTQIA+, youth who come from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, youth with physical needs and neurodiversity, and are from rural, frontier, and urban areas of Washington.

<p>Resources</p>	<p>Parents and Caregivers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stakeholders recommended DCYF ensure social workers understand and implement Washington State laws. Participants voiced resources such as bus passes, gas cards, and transportation assistance would provide the most relief to parents during a reportedly stressful period. DCYF should provide resources and supports specific to supporting LGBTQIA+ young people, their families and caregivers. <p>Professional Partners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> According to the stakeholders, DCYF should continue to use the CHET, BRS, and CHIPR tools; however, a more frequent update schedule should be established to ensure all parties have the most current information. DCYF should consider allowing input from the young person in care.
<p>Communication</p>	<p>Parents and Caregivers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents and caregivers reported DCYF should improve communication frequency and quality. Respondents recommended that DCYF communicate with empathy and support. Continue positive communication practices to include communicate information on any youth or parent who is transgender and/or has different pronouns than the referral source indicates. <p>Professional Partners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professional partners recommended reengaging the practice of mutual sharing of information with partnering agencies.
<p>Family Group Planning</p>	
<p>Opportunities to Participate</p>	<p>Parents and Caregivers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> During the listening sessions, most parents responded that they would have liked the meetings to occur more often and with more notice provided. Based on the input provided by parents and caregivers, PCG recommends that decisions be made through a collaborative process with the parents, caregivers, and multidisciplinary team. DCYF should allow foster parents to attend the full shared planning meetings, as well as include child counselors. Stakeholders suggest involving young people by allowing them to voice their opinions and express their wishes, especially regarding their identify, cultural needs, and wellbeing and safety. <p>Professional Partners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based on the input obtained, PCG recommends that parents and caregivers are provided notice of upcoming court hearings. Stakeholders recommend Shared Planning Meetings occur routinely and with more than one-day notice.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professional partners recommend that DCYF develop and implement standard rules and guidelines to be implemented across all shared planning meetings.
Effectiveness	<p>Parents and Caregivers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based on the information provided, PCG recommends the parents, caregivers, and relevant multi-disciplinary team members are included in the Shared Planning Meetings. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shared planning meetings should have an assigned facilitator with an experienced family-centered, trauma-informed skillset who maintains a consistent presence through the entirety of the case. Based on the input provided by stakeholders, PCG recommends Shared Planning Meeting participants consider family and young people’s cultural needs while making decisions about services and placement. <p>Professional Partners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based on input from stakeholders, shared planning meetings should have a facilitator who has a family-centered, trauma-informed skillset and maintains a consistent presence through the entirety of the case.
Referrals and Transitions	
Communication	<p>Parents and Caregivers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> DCYF should allow young people and caregivers the opportunity to meet prior to placement. Caregivers recommend having a living document about the young person’s culture, identity, and well-being needs, informed by young people, and shared with caregivers and other relevant parties. <p>Professional Partners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professional partners recommended that social workers understand the roles and resources of partnering agencies by providing cross-agency trainings to ensure referrals and transitions are in the best interest of the child. DCYF representatives should communicate with partnering agencies timely and routinely.
Resources	<p>Parents and Caregivers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure foster parents receive sufficient information on available resources to allow their time served to be devoted towards caring for the children, rather than searching for referral agencies and other sources of assistance. Caregivers recommend providing resources consistently in every region throughout the state. Caregivers recommend providing services consistently in every region throughout the state. <p>Professional Partners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure agencies are working with counterparts and not in silos by facilitating frequent conversations and cross-agency conversations.

TABLE 2. YOUNG PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations	
How DCYF brings youth into the system	
1.1. Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide greater access to comprehensive and tailored prevention programming to parents.
1.2. Reporting and Investigations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give credence to child- and youth-reported cases of neglect and abuse and believe them when they disclose that they are unsafe. • Initiate prevention services for families who have been reported to CPS.
1.3. Removal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek and honor young people’s assessment of their own safety when making decisions about removals. • Work to expeditiously remove young people from environments where they report feeling unsafe. • In non-life-threatening situations, delay removal until a placement is identified to minimize disruptions and moves. • Communicate what is going to happen or might happen to the young person before and during removal. • Strive to place a young person quickly; if possible, have a placement identified before removal.
How DCYF places youth	
2.1 Youths’ placement needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask young people about their placement needs to better understand and consider their histories and identities when identifying potential placements. • Ask young people regularly about where they want to live and strive to place them in their preferred placement, if young people can’t be placed where they want to live, give them an explanation as to why. • Give young people options for placement and allow them to choose. • Strive to place young people with a family member or trusted adult(s) first. • Provide the necessary information and support for preferred placements to become licensed.
2.2. Placement instability and transfers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make every effort possible to reduce the number of transfers and increase placement stability. • Limit abrupt transfers to life-threatening emergencies only. • Notify young people as early as possible about an upcoming transfer. • Communicate to young people the reason behind a placement change. • Give young people the opportunity to speak to, meet, or visit prospective placements prior to transfer. • Transport young people to placements during the day, not in the middle of the night. • Ensure young people are able to pack and keep their personal belongings, and end the use of garbage bags to store belongings.
2.3 Transitions into new placements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer emotional and mental health support, including comfort items and help around grief and loss. • Facilitate activities for foster families and young people to get to know each other once a placement has begun. • Provide young people with support around transportation, clothing, and basic hygiene needs to help them settle in their new placement. • Communicate with young people’s previous and new schools to ensure smoother transitions. • Check in regularly with young people to ask if they feel safe and affirmed in their new placement, and take their concerns seriously.

<p>2.4 Shelters, facilities, and group homes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work to never place young people in a shelter, facility, or group home. • Provide more tangible and intangible support to family-based placements to reduce reliance on shelters, facilities, and group homes
<p>How DCYF engages youths' families and loved ones</p>	
<p>3.1 Disconnection from siblings, loved ones, and community</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strive to place siblings together. • Provide young people with access to technology and concrete opportunities to maintain communication and stay connected. • Ensure placement providers do not prevent young people from remaining in contact with loved ones. • Support young people in nurturing relational support systems throughout their time in foster/kinship care. • Provide young people with opportunities to connect with peers who are also in foster/kinship care.
<p>3.2 Kinship Engagement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistently ask young people about kin they could live with. • Explain to young people how the information they provide about kin will be used. • Give young people a choice around which kin to involve in each decision that concerns them. • Revise requirements to allow more flexibility for kin to be a placement. • Recognize that kin caregivers require additional resources and provide them with said support.
<p>3.3. Reunification and family preservation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask and defer to young people about reunification being appropriate for them and their circumstances. • Ask and defer to young people on whether parents should be included when discussing reunification options. • Share with young people what DCYF requires parents to complete before reunification would be considered.
<p>How DCYF listens to and represents youth</p>	
<p>4.1. Youth voice and agency</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask young people what they need and want, and make efforts to center their voices and honor their requests as much as—if not more than—other stakeholders. • Provide required training on anti-adultism to judges, caseworkers, and DCYF staff. • Provide channels for young people to share their concerns, including anonymously, and provide a timely resolution. • Believe young people when they come forward with concerns and reports of harm and abuse they are experiencing in foster care. • Consult with the young person when responding to the harm and abuse they report. • Hold regular listening sessions with young people.
<p>4.2. Interactions with staff and professionals</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make it a priority for DCYF staff and placement providers to interact with young people in developmentally appropriate and trauma-responsive ways. • Hire caseworkers who listen and care, and have shared lived experiences and identities with young people. • Have more qualified and trained staff with the skills to work with trauma survivors. • Ensure staff have reasonable caseloads, sufficient time, supportive supervision, and competitive market pay to improve quality of services and reduce turnover.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluate and support the mental health and overall well-being of DCYF caseworkers. Enable access to more than one DCYF staff member, such as a caseworker and mental health specialist, so that young people are not represented or supported by only one person.
4.3. Family group planning meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invite young people to family group planning meetings and prioritize their attendance when planning logistics. Explain what each family group planning meeting is about and what decisions are being made. Provide the preparation and support young people need to attend family group planning meetings. Consider, prioritize, and respond to the perspectives and requests young people express in family group planning meetings. Respect young people's choice about whether or not to participate or speak in family group planning meetings.
4.4. Court hearings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow young people to participate in court or mediation proceedings if they choose, in a format that is comfortable for them. Provide young people with opportunities for appropriate and capable legal representation and advocacy during court hearings.
4.5. Case files	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer young people the opportunity to review, respond to, and correct the information in their case files.
How DCYF treats youth of different identities and experiences	
5.1. Disability competency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educate and train placement providers and DCYF staff to understand mental health and how it manifests emotionally, behaviorally, and socially among young people. Provide mental health education to young people so they can recognize and ask for the help they need.
5.2. Cultural competency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prioritize placing young people in placements that share their cultural and racial/ethnic identities and religion. Provide robust racial equity/cultural competency training to DCYF staff. When living in placements that don't share the same cultural, racial/ethnic, and religious identities, provide youth opportunities to stay connected to those identities and care for their specific cultural needs. Support Native youth in (re)connecting with their culture and peers. Place young people in placements that do not compromise their own religious practices or impose religious beliefs different from their own. Offer and encourage educational opportunities for placements to become more culturally competent.
5.3. 2SLGBTQIA+ competency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protect 2SLGBTQIA+ youth against queerphobia and transphobia from placement providers and DCYF staff. Place 2SLGBTQIA+ youth in safe and affirming homes and communities. Mandate required initial and ongoing 2SLGBTQIA+ training for placement providers and DCYF staff. Provide young people with expansive sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) education and opportunities to safely explore and find themselves.
5.4. Affirmation of Identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure young people feel safe to be themselves. Offer secure and non-retaliatory avenues for young people to report discrimination or mistreatment. Seek to continuously understand young people's shifting identities throughout their time in foster/kinship care.

How DCYF meet youths' needs	
6.1. Services received	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train DCYF staff on how to identify available resources and connect young people to them. • Proactively and consistently share with young people what services and resources they have at their disposal. • Provide a more expansive suite of support and services to young people that meet their specific needs. • Work to meet the needs of young people in rural or remote areas with fewer available resources.
6.2. Basic needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that stipends received by foster families are being spent to cover the basic needs of young people. • Ask young people if their basic needs are being met in their placement. • Require placement providers to give young people a regular spending allowance from the foster care stipend.
6.3. Health needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide individualized, consistent, and non-coercive mental health services and support to young people. • Preemptively inform young people of the preventative and routine physical health care services they are entitled to receive and the health insurance benefits they have. • Ensure affordability, transportation, and other concerns are not barriers to young people accessing health services. • Consider young people's preferences on what healthcare providers they want to care for them. • Follow up with young people to ensure they are keeping up with their medical and mental health needs. • Provide young people with ongoing education about and supplies for sexual health, sexual harm, self-harm, and drug-related harm reduction. • Train placement providers on the range of young people's health needs and the health issues they face.
6.4. Education needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strive to maintain the same school for young people. • Provide tutoring, credit tracking, and educational support to young people as they navigate the impact of school disruptions. • Provide young people with referrals and letters of recommendation that help secure opportunities for education post-high school. • Provide young people with college and financial aid application support, irrespective of whether or not they opt into extended foster care.
6.5. Employment and financial needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guide young people in the process of building and leading healthy financial lives. • Hold financial education sessions, including around saving, investing, and budgeting. • Provide young people with support in navigating filing taxes, particularly those earning income as independent contractors.
6.6. Housing needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inform and guide youth towards affordable housing opportunities before they become eligible so they are able to enroll as early as possible. • Provide mandatory homelessness diversion training to DCYF staff.
6.7. Aging out support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect data on the needs of aging-out youth and provide support accordingly. • Give young people timely referrals and information about the range of resources they can access, including emailed and hard copies of referrals specific to their location.

- Push against the harmful rhetoric that young people should feel bad or ashamed for receiving help and using resources from the system.
- Increase the age limit for extended foster care.
- Allow young people who age out of care to opt into extended foster care.
- Inform young people and caseworkers of the state legislation allowing young people to exit and re-enter care as many times as necessary until age 21, and create accountability mechanisms to ensure it is implemented

Detailed findings and recommendations based on stakeholders' experiences are located in the [Summary of Findings & Key Recommendations: Parent, Caregiver, and Professional Partner](#) and [Summary of Findings & Key Recommendations: Young People with Foster Care Experience](#) sections of this report. Young people findings and recommendations were found independently by Think of Us and were obtained from the Youth Engagement for the Washington State Settlement: Report of Findings and Recommendations located in Addendum A of this report.

III. STAKEHOLDER FACILITATION FOR SYSTEMIC IMPROVEMENTS: BACKGROUND

In January 2021, a [class action complaint](#) was brought against the State of Washington (WA) Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) alleging that DCYF failed to 1) ensure children with disabilities receive the necessary child welfare services and supports to allow them to return promptly and safely to their own families and communities, and 2) develop an adequate array of placement options to support the individualized needs of children in foster care with disabilities and instead relies on harmful hotel, one-night, and out-of-state placements. Class members represented in the complaint include individuals who are or in the future will be under the age of 18, in DCYF's placement during a dependency proceeding until the proceeding is dismissed, and one or more of the following: 1) have experienced five (5) or more placements, excluding trial return home, in-home dependencies, and temporary placements, or 2) have been referred for or are in out-of-state group care placement, or 3) have experienced a hotel or office stay in the past six (6) months, or 4) are awaiting a Children's Long-Term Inpatient Program (CLIP) bed.

As a result of the complaint, in June 2022, the U.S. District Court Western District of Washington at Seattle filed an Agreement and Settlement Order ([D.S. et al., v. Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families](#)) to ensure DCYF develops a plan and processes to transform child safety and well-being practices to increase placement stability for children and youth with behavioral health and developmental disabilities, their families and caregivers, as well as develop a youth and family-centered, culturally and trauma-informed system of placement supports and services. To achieve this, the Agreement and Settlement Order identified the following eight (8) areas for systemic improvement: 1) Emerging Adulthood, 2) Professional Therapeutic Foster Care, 3) HUB Home Model Program, 4) Revise Licensing Standards, 5) Kinship Engagement, 6) Family Group Planning, 7) Referrals and Transitions, and 8) Qualified Residential Treatment Programs.

To aid in these systemic improvements, DCYF was charged with contracting a neutral third party to gather written and live input from individuals with lived experience and professional partners in three areas of the settlement order: kinship engagement, family group planning, and referrals and transitions.

Stakeholders included in this outreach were to include, but were not limited to, foster and extended families, tribes, community and service providers (child welfare, mental health, developmental disabilities, and housing), school liaisons, juvenile justice representatives, assigned counsel for youth and families in child welfare, and other youth and disability advocates. The contractor was also to obtain input from a diverse group of youth, including those who identified as being LGBTQIA+, youth who come from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, youth with physical needs and neurodiversity, and are from rural, frontier, and urban areas of Washington.

DCYF contracted with Public Consulting Group (PCG) to serve as the Stakeholder Facilitator. PCG was responsible for soliciting, collecting, synthesizing, and communicating input from caregivers, biological parents, service providers, and other professional partners. PCG partnered with [Think of Us](#), who led all youth engagement efforts. PCG and Think of Us were tasked with conducting in-person and virtual focus groups (herein referred to as "listening sessions") and collecting written input via an electronic survey to gather input from stakeholders spanning all six (6) DCYF regions.

II. METHODOLOGY

PCG and Think of Us used a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods in the form of in-person and virtual listening sessions and an electronic survey to collect feedback on DCYF’s policies and practices related to kinship engagement, family group planning, and referrals and transitions from the key stakeholders identified in the settlement agreement.

PARENT, CAREGIVER, AND PROFESSIONAL PARTNERS

Outreach

PCG began its engagement efforts by determining the appropriate stakeholders with whom to engage. This included collaborating with DCYF and conducting an online search to identify individuals and organizations who represent or serve the members of the class action. Through its outreach efforts, PCG was referred to additional organizations to contact. Outreach included:

- ▶ Sending emails to 122 child welfare involved individuals and organizations across all six (6) DCYF regions.
- ▶ Holding 30 meetings with those who serve in prominent roles at local, regional, or statewide private and public child welfare organizations and tribal welfare.
 - These meetings sought to spread awareness of opportunities to inform DCYF’s system improvement plan, brainstorm how to best recruit diverse stakeholders to participate in engagement efforts, and request assistance with distributing participant materials.

Recruitment

PCG developed the listening session registration flyers for distribution identified in Table 3.

TABLE 3. RECRUITMENT ORGANIZATIONS

Professional Partner / Provider	Foster Parent and Kin Caregiver	Parent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • young people experiencing foster care, including, • youth with neurodiversity, • 2SLGBTQIA+ youth, • youth with disabilities or special needs, • BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) youth, their family, and caregivers, • independent living service providers, housing providers, • child placing agencies and residential placement providers, • organizations that serve and support parents, foster parents, and kin caregivers • organizations that support caregivers of youth with special needs and developmental disabilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • local, regional, and statewide foster parent and kin caregiver advocacy groups, • organizations that recruit, train, or license foster parents and kin caregivers, • organizations that provide ongoing support for foster parents and kinship caregivers • family rights advocacy groups • fatherhood support groups • organizations that recruit, train, license, and support caregivers for youth with developmental disabilities, • organizations that develop therapeutic and behavioral health response foster homes, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • organizations that provide education, training, resources, or support to parents, • organizations that support parents of children with developmental disabilities • organizations that focus on fatherhood support, education, training • organizations that provide direct in-home services to parents such as home visiting, or family reunification services, • organizations that provide mental, behavioral, or physical healthcare to parents • organizations that provide legal counsel to parents and kin,

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mental and behavioral health service providers, • health care service providers and managed care coordinators, • youth and parent legal counsel, • court personnel including state court administrators, juvenile, and family court staff, • youth, parent, and foster parent advocate agencies, • foster and kin caregiver service and training providers, • school liaisons and educational service district liaisons, • hospital and emergency mental health crisis care providers, • individual provider volunteers who provided their email address to PCG 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • court professionals including court administrators, juvenile and family court staff, • individual foster parents and kin caregivers who provided their individual email address to PCG 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • parent advocacy groups and parent allies, • court professionals, juvenile, and family court staff • individual parent volunteers who supplied their email address to PCG
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Most organizations preferred to distribute the listening session registration flyers and survey through their own listservs, newsletters, and social media; therefore, the distribution of recruitment materials was heavily dependent on the availability and the communication channels of the organizations who volunteered to share information with their group members and collaborative partners. DCYF also shared the recruitment materials through their relevant listservs. A list of organizations that were contacted and those who volunteered to distribute recruitment materials through their established communication channels for this project can be found in *Appendix A: Outreach Organizations*.

Inclusion Efforts

Registration materials offered listening session participants the opportunity to request accessibility accommodations and language translation services to support diverse and inclusive participation. Childcare services and dinner were offered for the evening in-person listening sessions to support parent and caregiver participation. In-person listening sessions were offered in eastern (Spokane), central (Yakima), and western (Tacoma) Washington.

Stipends were offered to parents and caregivers to encourage participation and reimburse them for their time; \$100 was offered for listening session participation and \$25 for survey participation.

Listening Sessions and Survey

A total of ten (10) 90-minute listening sessions were held, comprised of four (4) foster parent and kin caregiver (one virtual), one (1) virtual parent, and five (5) service provider and child welfare partner (two virtual) sessions. The focus of the sessions was to collect information on participants’ experiences, observations, communications, and recommendations as it relates to kinship engagement, family group planning, and referrals and transitions. A copy of the slide deck used for each listening session can be found in *Appendix B: Listening Session Presentation*.

TABLE 4. LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPATION

Group	# of In-Person Listening Session Participants	# of Virtual Listening Session Participants
Partners / Providers	8	25
Foster Parent / Kin Caregiver	1	20
Parent	N/A	8
Disability and Health Care Provider	N/A	9

The PCG facilitation team consisted of two experienced listening session facilitators, both possessing professional expertise engaging with child welfare professionals and with young people, including youth in foster care. In addition, both facilitators have experience working in both public and nonprofit organizations delivering child and family prevention and protection services as direct service practitioners, supervisors, trainers, or child welfare program managers. PCG also had at least one notetaker at each session.

In-Person Listening Sessions

Six (6) of the ten (10) listening sessions were held in-person during the week of March 20-24, 2023 throughout the state. Two (2) sessions were held per day in each city; provider sessions were held during the afternoon, while caregiver sessions were held during the late afternoon/evening. Childcare, dinner, and other accommodations, such as translation services, were offered during the registration process for each of the caregiver sessions; however, none of these services were requested.

Nine (9) participants attended the in-person listening sessions, comprised of eight (8) professional partners and one (1) foster parent. Participants representing child placing agencies, youth and parent substance use and therapeutic service providers, foster parent and kinship service providers, parent service providers, youth independent living providers attended the in-person professional partner sessions.

Virtual Listening Sessions

Four (4) separate virtual sessions were held via Zoom during the week of March 26-31, 2023, for foster parents and kin caregivers, parents, and professional partners. PCG accommodated special requests from parent advocacy groups and disability and healthcare provider professionals by facilitating individual sessions for these groups to create a “safe” space to share experiences. PCG also offered a separate virtual listening session to tribal child welfare directors; however, this session was not requested. A total of 62 participants attended the virtual sessions. Participants from a diverse range of organizations attended the virtual sessions, which can be seen in Figure 1. A full list of participant roles can be located in *Appendix C: Professional Partner Listening Session Participants*.



FIGURE 1. VIRTUAL LISTENING SESSION PROFESSIONAL PARTNER CATEGORIES

Electronic Survey

PCG conducted an electronic survey with key community partners, including biological parents, kin caregivers, foster parents, and service providers, and tribes to identify strengths, gaps, and recommendations in DCYF service delivery as it relates to kinship engagement, shared planning meetings, and referrals and transitions. A variety of question types were asked, including multiple choice, check all that apply, and open response. ‘Other’ was regularly given as an option to multiple choice questions with an optional text field giving people the opportunity to elaborate on their unique situation when the preset options did not apply. The survey platform, Qualtrics, was used to collect and analyze participants’ responses. Participants were able to complete the survey on a computer, phone, and/or tablet in either English or Spanish. All survey responses were kept confidential. The survey link was distributed by the above-mentioned outreach partners throughout the State of Washington, as well as during in-person and virtual listening sessions. The survey was open from March 10-31, 2023. Nearly 300 people took the survey (66 service providers and 225 caregivers). A copy of the survey is located in *Appendix D: Caregiver and Professional Partner Survey*.

YOUNG PEOPLE WITH FOSTER/KINSHIP EXPERIENCE⁴

Outreach

Think of Us recruited young people with foster/kinship experience to participate in listening sessions and a survey through an open call shared on social media, as well as more targeted outreach through Think of Us’ networks and via community-based organizations who serve young people in foster/kinship care across Washington. To be eligible to participate in these efforts, young people had to be 14 years of age or older and in the Washington state foster care system within the past five years.

Think of Us deployed a mixed methods approach in their work, collecting both qualitative and quantitative data from listening sessions and a survey. Specifically, Think of Us conducted four participatory

⁴ The Young People with Foster Care Experience methodology was summarized from Think of Us’s Youth Engagement for the Washington State Settlement: Report of Findings and Recommendations located in Addendum A.

listening sessions, which included three in-person sessions with young people in Eastern (Spokane), Central (Yakima), and Western (Seattle) Washington, and one listening session held via Zoom. Twenty-one young people, ages 14-26 with lived experience in the Washington child welfare system in the past five years, participated in the in-person and virtual listening sessions. A survey with both quantitative and qualitative questions was disseminated to young people statewide. 48 young people, meeting the above-mentioned eligibility criteria, responded to the survey.

Listening Sessions and Survey

The topics and questions covered in the listening sessions and survey were informed by the priorities named in the Settlement Agreement, specifically regarding systemic improvements relating to kinship engagement, family group planning, and referrals and transitions. In addition to the topics outlined in the Settlement Agreement, Think of Us hosted a co-creation meeting to identify additional lines of inquiry suggested by lived experts, state and community-based organizations in Washington state who work directly with young people in foster/kinship care, as well as representatives from DCYF. Listening session participants were also invited to add topics for discussion at the beginning of each session, and survey respondents were asked open-ended questions to share information on additional important topics.

The Think of Us listening session team was comprised of four facilitators and researchers who had a combination of lived experience in foster care, professional expertise in child welfare, training and specialization in youth-centered and trauma-responsive participatory research and facilitation, and prior crisis response or social work background. For three of the four listening sessions, a representative from PCG served as a notetaker, and a representative from Disability Rights Washington or Children's Right's attended as an observer.

ETHICAL REVIEW

The project plan, scope, and related materials, including survey questions, listening session agendas, and outreach and recruitment materials, were submitted to the Washington State Institutional Review Board (WSIRB), following approval from DCYF's Office of Innovation, Alignment and Accountability (OIAA) Research Review Committee. PCG obtained an exemption waiver for full WSIRB review for the work relating to parents, caregivers, and service providers and supporting agencies. Think of Us obtained full WSIRB approval regarding the work completed with young people.

Informed consent was obtained from each in-person and virtual listening session participant. The informed consent form was sent to all registered participants prior to the scheduled session. For participants under the age of 18, informed assent was sought along with guardian consent. Similarly, assent and guardian consent forms were sent prior to participating. An explanation of the informed consent form was provided at the beginning of each in-person and virtual listening session, allowing individuals the opportunity to ask questions and express concerns. Participants were notified that participation was voluntary and they were able to discontinue their participation at any time. Virtual session participants were given the option of turning their camera on or off during the session.

III. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS & KEY RECOMMENDATIONS: PARENT, CAREGIVER, AND PROFESSIONAL PARTNER

The detailed summary below captures the key findings and recommendations as extracted from the listening sessions and surveys. The input collected from this stakeholder engagement will be used to inform DCYF's system improvement plan in this area. A secondary list of recommendations that were provided by stakeholders can be located in *Appendix G: General Recommendations*. These general recommendations were not directly tied to one of the three focus areas but have an impact on each area and were commonly voiced.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Survey respondents were asked to share demographic information about the type of location in which they live, and to describe the youth for which they have provided care. There was a good representation of caregivers who live in rural, suburban, and urban areas, and who provide care to youth identifying as heterosexual/straight, bisexual, transgender or non-binary, and young people with physical and/or mental health challenges.

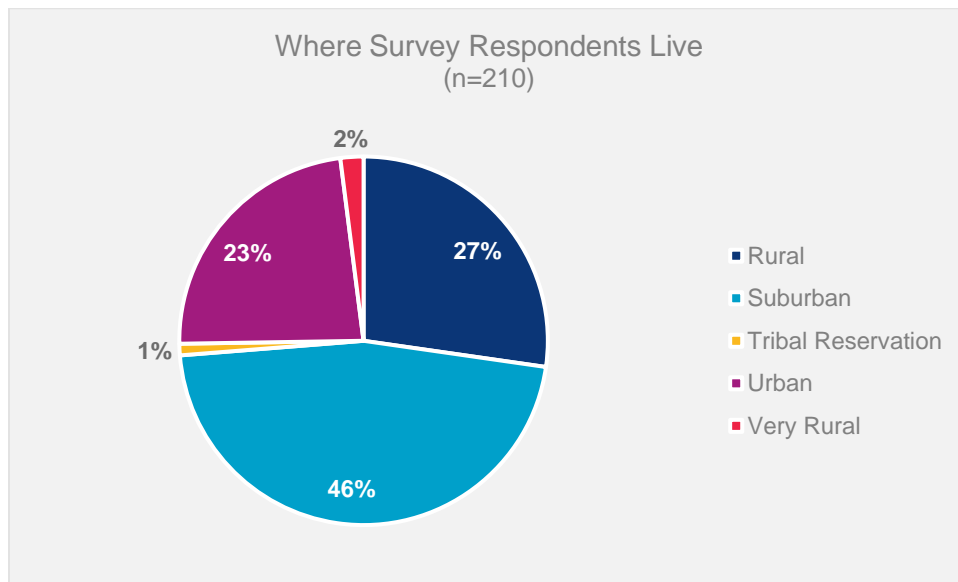


FIGURE 2. RESPONDENT GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION

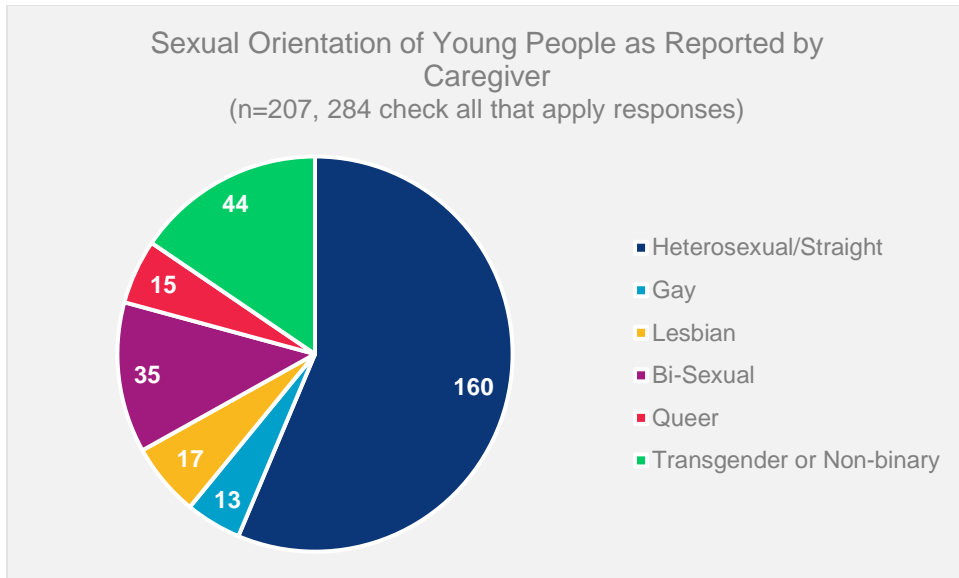


FIGURE 3. SEXUAL ORIENTATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE AS REPORTED BY CAREGIVER

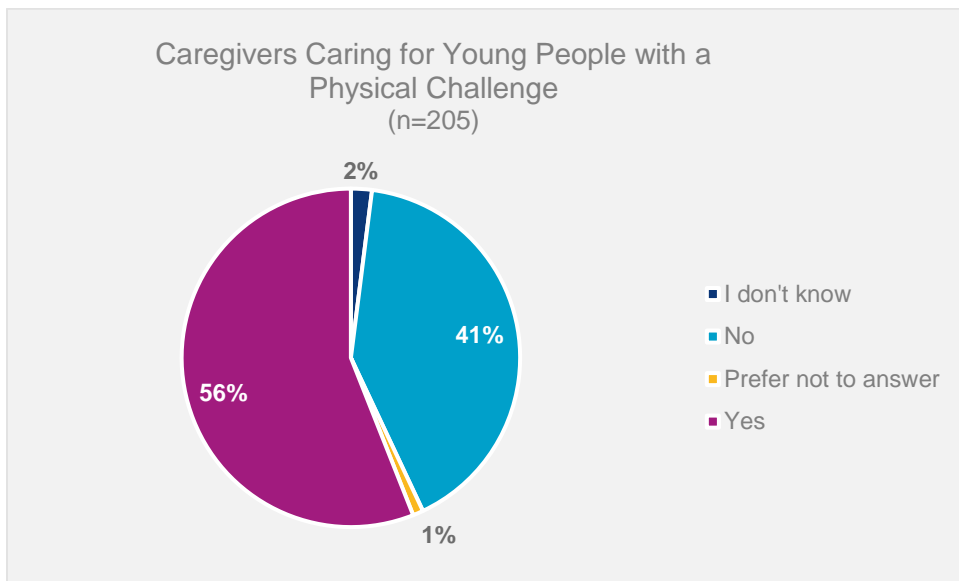


FIGURE 4. CAREGIVERS CARING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH A PHYSICAL CHALLENGE

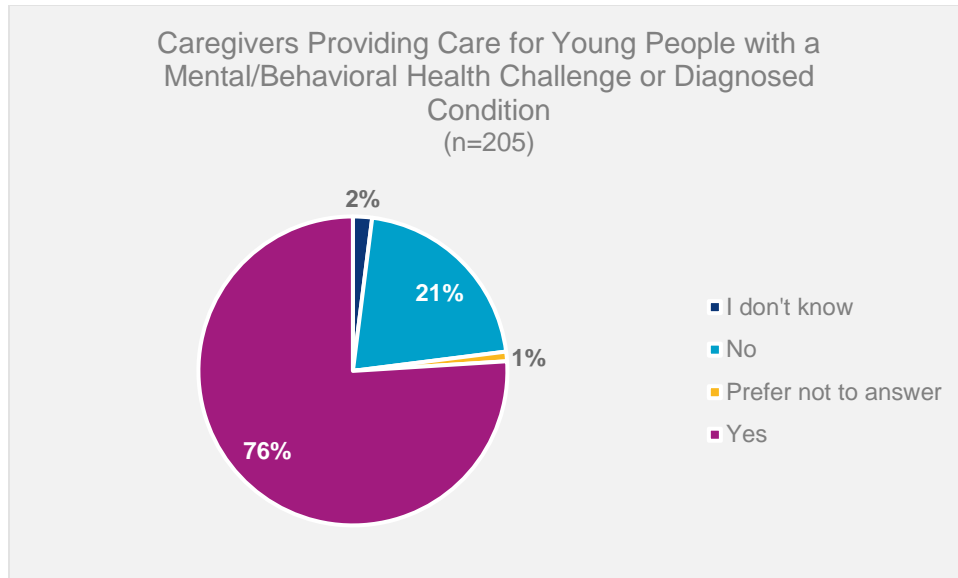


FIGURE 5. CAREGIVERS PROVIDING CARE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH A MENTAL/BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CHALLENGE OR DIAGNOSED CONDITION

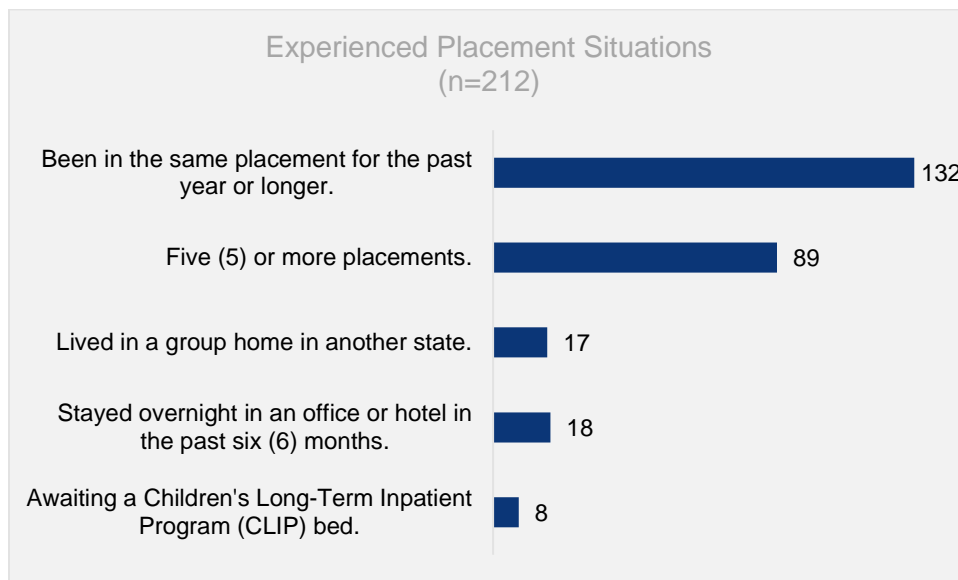


FIGURE 6. EXPERIENCED PLACEMENT SITUATIONS

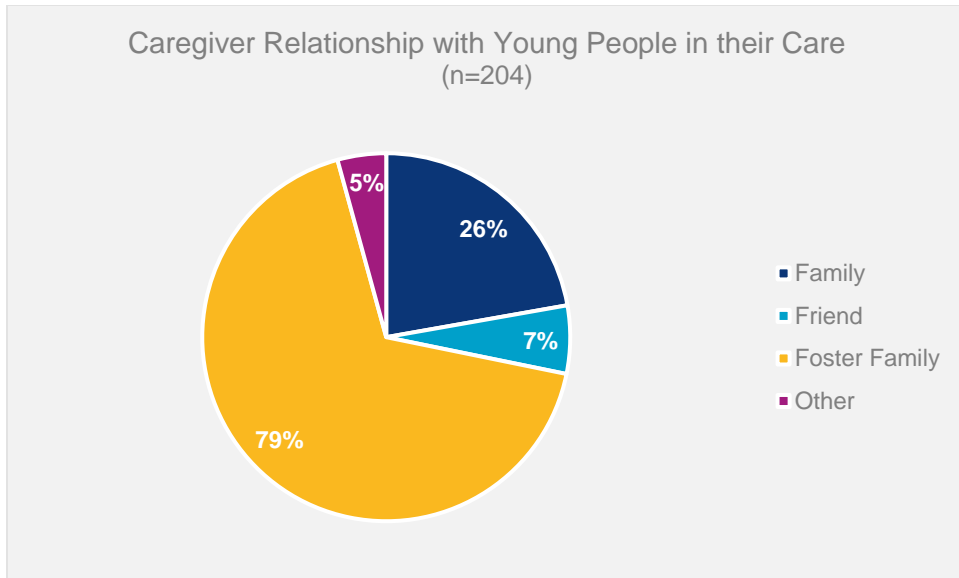


FIGURE 7. CAREGIVER RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN THEIR CARE

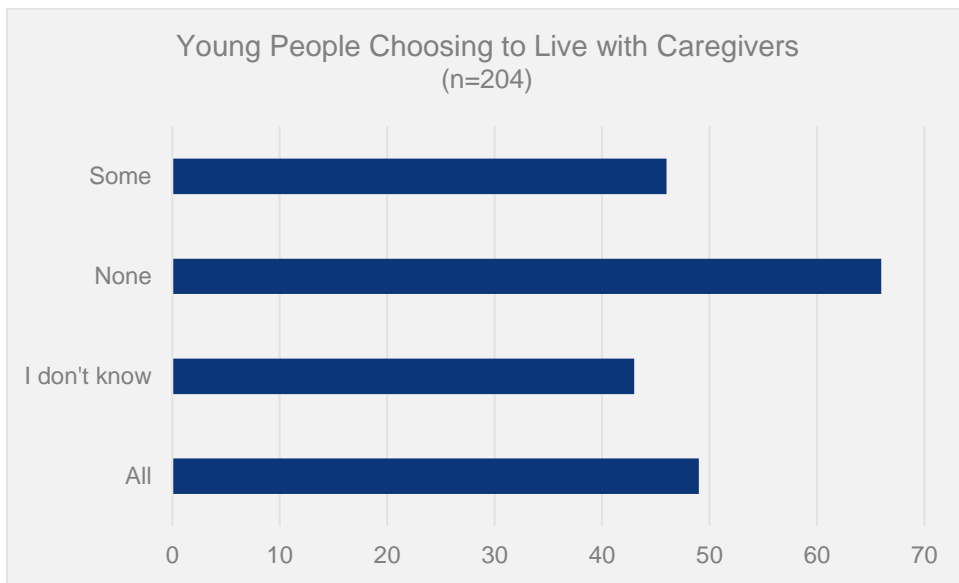


FIGURE 8. YOUNG PEOPLE CHOOSING TO LIVE WITH CAREGIVERS

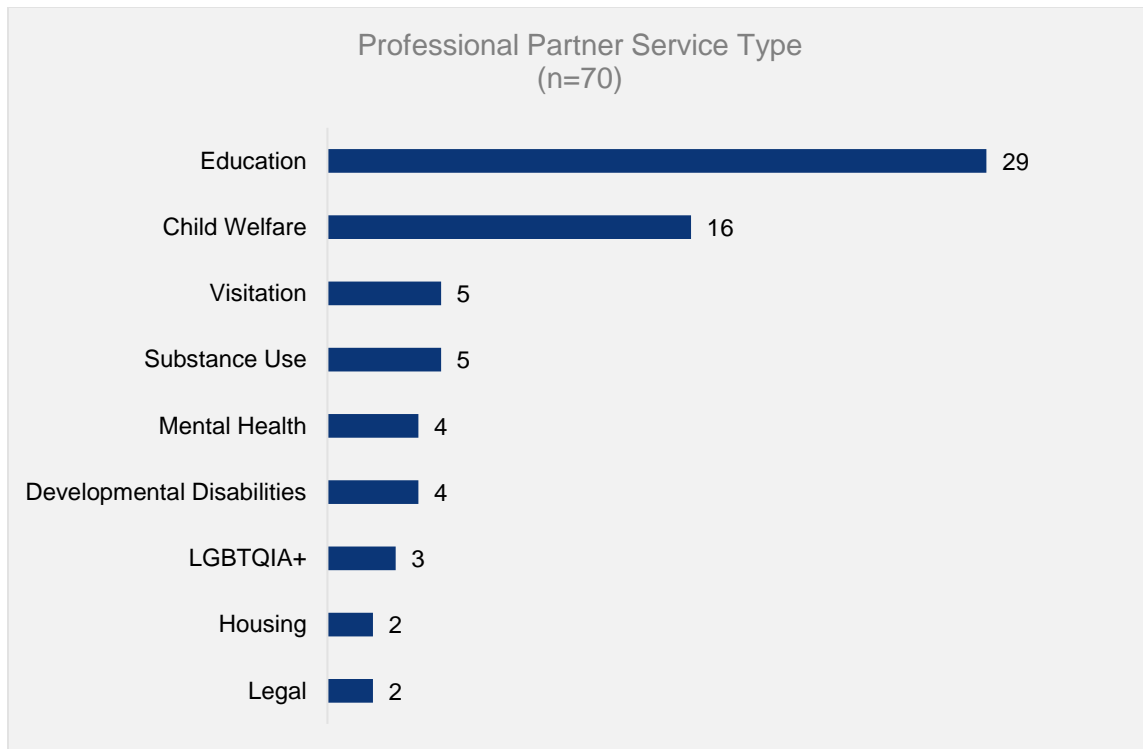


FIGURE 9. PROFESSIONAL PARTNER SERVICE TYPES

KINSHIP ENGAGEMENT

Pursuant to the Settlement Agreement, DCYF must “establish a statewide Kinship Engagement Unit that includes a family finding model to identify and engage Class Members’ extended family members and friends to support families in safely reunifying or staying together.” Parent, caregiver, and professional partner listening session and survey participants were provided an opportunity to explain the process by which they established a supportive network for the youth, access resources, and rely on communication.

Supportive Networks

Parents and Caregivers

Finding #1: The opportunity to establish a supportive network was often delayed because DCYF either established a list of kin or kinship placement options without input from biological parents or waited a long period of time before searching for other relatives, sometimes waiting until a termination of parental rights hearing is scheduled.

“One year had passed before she was permitted to care for children in her family that were removed from their parents.”

Recommendation #1: Develop and implement policies and procedures to ensure kin and fictive kin are identified and engaged on the day of removal, when decisions are made, and throughout the life of the youth’s case.

Finding #2: DCYF provided caregivers with inadequate information about the young person’s relatives and culture. Multiple foster parents reported conducting their own research to find relatives, tribal and cultural supports for the children in their care.

“DCYF did not take into consideration the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) and placed her Native American niece with a non-Indian family, despite her desire to care for her niece.”

“I am native American and there are a lot of celebrations throughout the year, it was hard to contact the case worker to let them know what we celebrate and how. It was hard to schedule something around their birthday or holidays to celebrate them with the case worker.”

Recommendation #2: DCYF should bear a responsibility to strengthen its relationship with tribes and continue engagement to keep children and youth connected to their culture.

Finding #3: According to survey respondents, DCYF does not always allow other trusted kin to be involved throughout the life of the case.

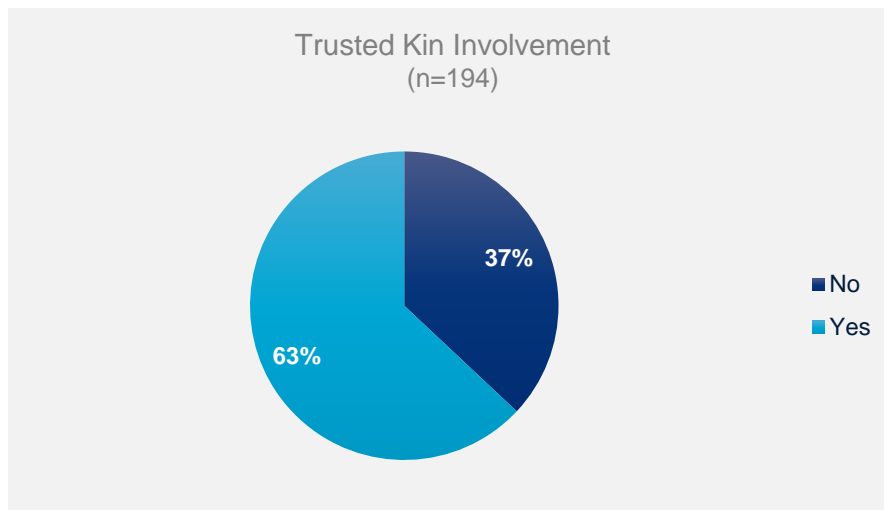


FIGURE 10. TRUSTED KIN INVOLVEMENT

Recommendation #3: Participants indicated that DCYF should implement information collection and sharing practices and tools that gather youth and family input about themselves including their cultural, supportive, and resource needs, and allow them to make choices about their own vital social supports and placement decisions at the time of removal and on an ongoing basis.

Professional Partners

Finding #4: Professional partners enhance connectedness to families and extended family members by involving young people, families, and social supports in the delivery of services through a variety of ways, including, such as implementing policies empowering young people to provide input, explore service options, and express their needs and goals, inviting parents and guardians to participate in the assessment process, and promoting person-centered planning that includes the young person’s family. Some participants indicated that DCYF supports these enhancement efforts by connecting professional partners to Parent Allies and providing parent contact information to the professional partner agencies.

However, it was also noted by survey respondents that DCYF does not always provide assistance to professional partners to engage families as social workers may be unaware of the array of available resources; therefore, connections are not established.

Assistance provided by DCYF to engage families “varies from almost nothing to support in home.”

“SOME social workers are on the ball with helping us with background information on children or parents to help better serve our families.”

Recommendation #4: Based on input provided by stakeholders, PCG recommends that DCYF provides ongoing training to social workers about the resources available.

Resources

Parents and Caregivers

Finding #5: Parents reported during listening sessions that DCYF often missed opportunities to provide time sensitive information regarding parental rights. This sometimes led to parents learning of important policies after deadlines passed. Examples included parents not knowing findings that led to the child’s removal could be disputed, parents right to remain with their children while in a facility, and the ability to identify DCYF as a payor child care subsidy.

“I didn’t know that after five years of having your case closed, you could get a letter that allows you to work again in the schools...”

Recommendation #5: Stakeholders recommended that DCYF:

- ▶ Ensure social workers are equipped with an ongoing understanding of Washington state laws that impact youth and sibling placements.
- ▶ Ensure social workers and decisionmakers implement Washington state laws into practice.
- ▶ Should carry out a consistent interpretation of Washington Administrative Code (WAC) and Revised Code of Washington (RCW).

Finding #6: Only a quarter of respondents indicated getting sufficient support and resources from DCYF to help care for the youth. Additionally, nearly 70% of parents and caregivers reported that DCYF did not assist them when confronted with challenges in accessing resources and support.

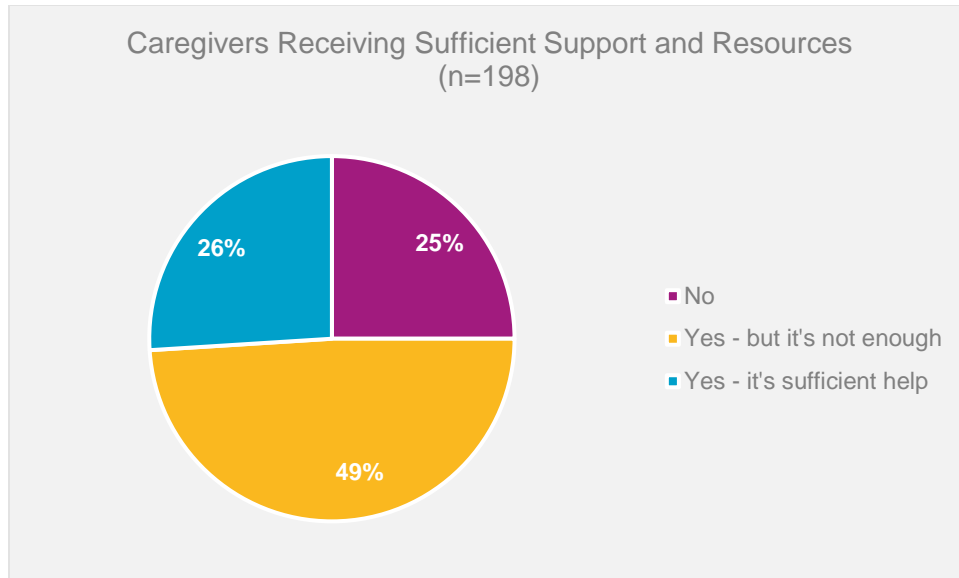


FIGURE 11. CAREGIVERS RECEIVING SUFFICIENT SUPPORT AND RESOURCES

Recommendation #6: Participants voiced resources such as bus passes, gas cards, and transportation assistance would provide the most relief to parents during a reportedly stressful period. In addition, according to participants, DCYF should provide parents, caregivers, and professional partners with information on local programs that assist with food, housing, clothing, and childcare needs. DCYF can also provide more communication about services offered in rural communities, particularly when transportation and logistics present a barriers. To ensure children remain in kinship care as often as possible, resources and concrete supports should be provided to family members as equally as provided to non-kinship caregivers. Finally, DCYF should provide resources and supports specific to supporting LGBTQIA+ young people, their families and caregivers.

Professional Partners

Finding #7: The Child Information/Placement Referral (CHIPR), Child Health and Education Tracking (CHET), and Behavioral Rehabilitation Services (BRS) tools were all identified by professional partners as useful. However, the CHIPR and CHET were often missing information or contained dated information.

"I don't think social workers or placement people just lie about the kids but most foster parents may get a CHIPR and need a bit more information. Often, there is lack of knowledge about the family and child themselves. New social workers may not have all the information."

Recommendation #7: According to the stakeholders, DCYF should continue to use the CHET, BRS, and CHIPR tools; however, a more frequent update schedule should be established to ensure all parties have the most current information. In addition, DCYF should consider allowing input from the young person in care.

Communication

Parents and Caregivers

Finding #8: Over half of survey respondents stated that the frequency in which they communicate with DCYF is insufficient. In addition, DCYF social workers use a wide array of communication methods, such as phone, email, texts, and in-person visits. Below are examples of communication challenges noted by

stakeholders. (Please note: DCYF case workers/social workers experience high turnover rates and carry high caseloads, which could be the cause of intermittent contact.)

- ▶ DCYF took several days to one week to return phone calls.
- ▶ Case information is often conveyed inaccurately or even lost as a result of the case being shifted to multiple case workers/social workers throughout its duration.
- ▶ Emails are often left unanswered.

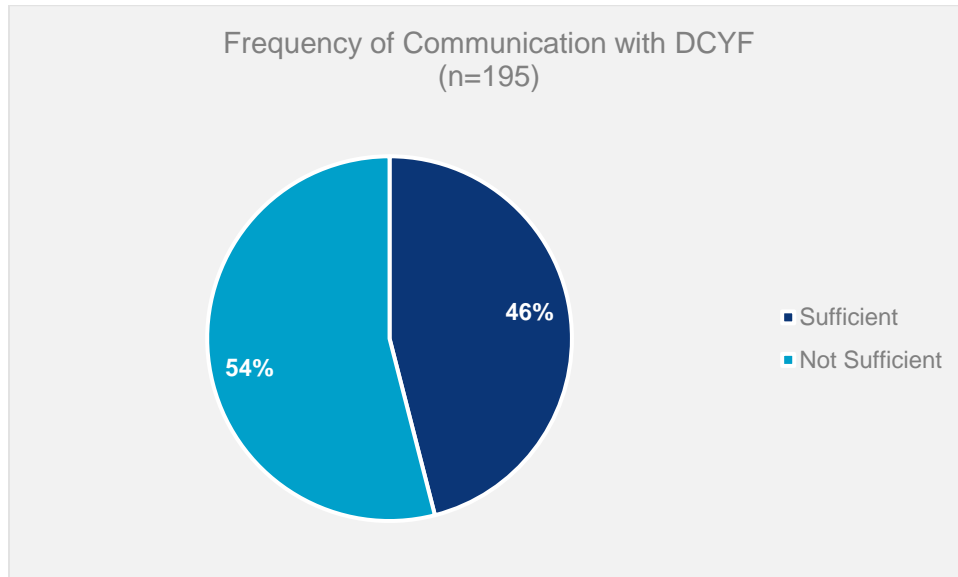


FIGURE 12. FREQUENCY OF COMMUNICATION WITH DCYF

Recommendation #8: Parents and caregivers reported the following ways to improve communication frequency, and how to improve the quality of communication. DCYF should:

- ▶ Return parent and caregiver texts, call, and emails within 24-48 hours
- ▶ Conduct weekly, bi-weekly, and/or monthly check-ins with parents and caregivers
- ▶ Provide transparent, open, and detailed responses and information
- ▶ Provide court date information and links with advanced notice

Finding #9: Caregivers expressed a distrust of DCYF and felt decisions concerning the children may be rushed or not thoroughly considered because insufficient information is passed along.

"The only reason I did this group is because of the confidence of anonymity to the department. I will NOT risk my child begin removed by speaking up with the department directly."

Recommendation #9: Respondents recommended that DCYF communicate with empathy, support, and in a respectful tone. In addition, allow time for face-to-face meetings with parents, caregivers, and partners to discuss the needs of the youth, and identify collaborative approaches to support the youth in their placement. Finally, DCYF should provide foster parents with a DCYF social worker or other support person who can offer continued support, tools, referral resources, and timely responses to questions.

Finding #10: Parents and caregivers pointedly expressed areas that included positive communication practices. Multiple parents reported having good communication, engagement, and relationships with the

foster parents and expressed gratitude for the care they provided their children. Parents also reported having the ability to share religious preferences and family traditions with foster parents.

Recommendation #10: Continue positive communication practices to include communicating information on any youth or parent who is transgender and/or has different pronouns than the referral source indicates.

Professional Partners

Finding #11: Professional partners reported that DCYF social workers do their best to communicate but seem to carry large caseloads which cause slow response times. Particularly, they experience gaps in communication as a result of staff turnover. They expressed communication is at times frustrating when they learn about appointments after they have passed and expectations at a later date. In the past, agencies and DCYF engaged in a mutual sharing of information and maintained a common understanding the other's role, but the efforts to continue this practice were ended.

Recommendations #11: Professional partners recommended the practice of a mutual sharing of information should be reengaged. The following strategies for communication should be utilized by both professional partners and DCYF:

- ▶ Direct communication with the social worker or supervisory staff
- ▶ Send emails or schedule meetings, based upon a problem arising
- ▶ Routine communication through phone calls, email, meetings and staff meetings
- ▶ Streamline need for release of information
- ▶ Provide information that may not be outlined in a records request.
- ▶ Provide more timely updates on placement changes.

FAMILY GROUP PLANNING

According to DCYF policy, shared planning meetings are used to engage parents, children and youth, caregivers, relatives, fictive kin, natural supports, and others, as appropriate, in the development of a plan that prioritizes child safety and meets the support and service needs of the parents, children and youth, and caregivers. These meetings should provide an opportunity for information sharing, case plans to be developed, and decisions to be made that will support the safety, permanency, and well-being of children. The Agreement outlines that DCYF will review shared planning meeting policies and practices for areas of improvement.

Opportunities to Participate

Parents and Caregivers

Finding #12: Some parents and caregivers reported receiving short notice (1-2 days) about a scheduled Shared Planning Meeting, which created barriers to attendance and participation. In addition, these meetings are reported to take place during the morning and afternoon hours, either in person at the DCYF office or virtually. The frequency of the Shared Planning Meetings also varied most occurring once every six (6) months.

“In the process of getting my son, the department requirements made me lose 4 jobs and we became homeless in the process.”

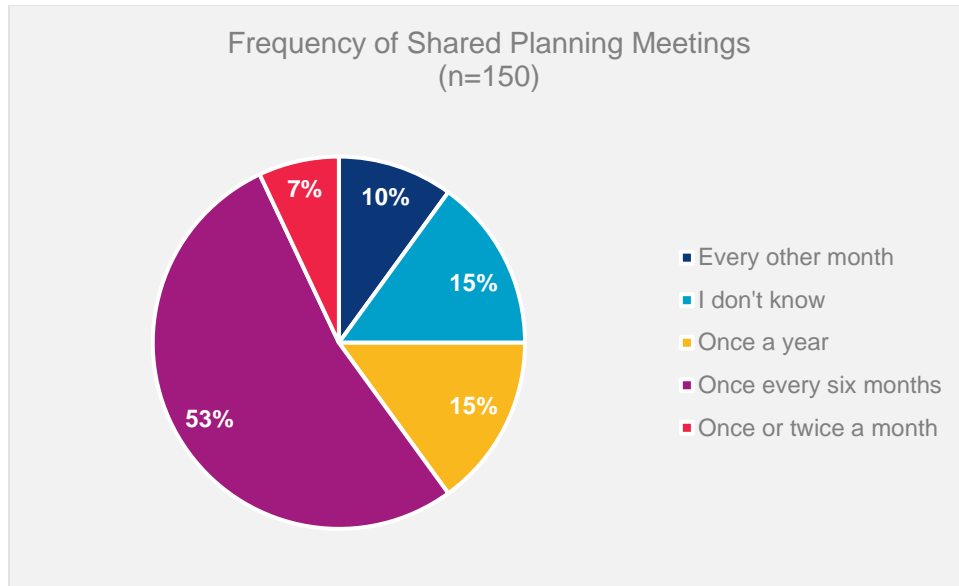


FIGURE 13. FREQUENCY OF SHARED PLANNING MEETINGS

Recommendation #12: During the listening sessions, most parents responded that they would have liked the meetings to occur more often and with more notice provided.

Finding #13: Parents and caregivers stated decisions are often made in advance of the Shared Planning Meetings, rather than using the time to engage in multidisciplinary discussions concerning the youth and their needs.

Recommendation #13: Based on the input provided by parents and caregivers, PCG recommends that decisions be made through a collaborative process with the parents, caregivers, and multidisciplinary team.

Finding #14: Generally, parents viewed the Shared Planning meetings as being a good use of time when all parties were present. Multiple foster parents reported feeling unsupported by the state and explained they are asked to leave the shared planning meeting if the biological parent is not present or after they provide their update. (Note: Professional partners also reported that foster parents are sometimes asked to leave the meeting.)

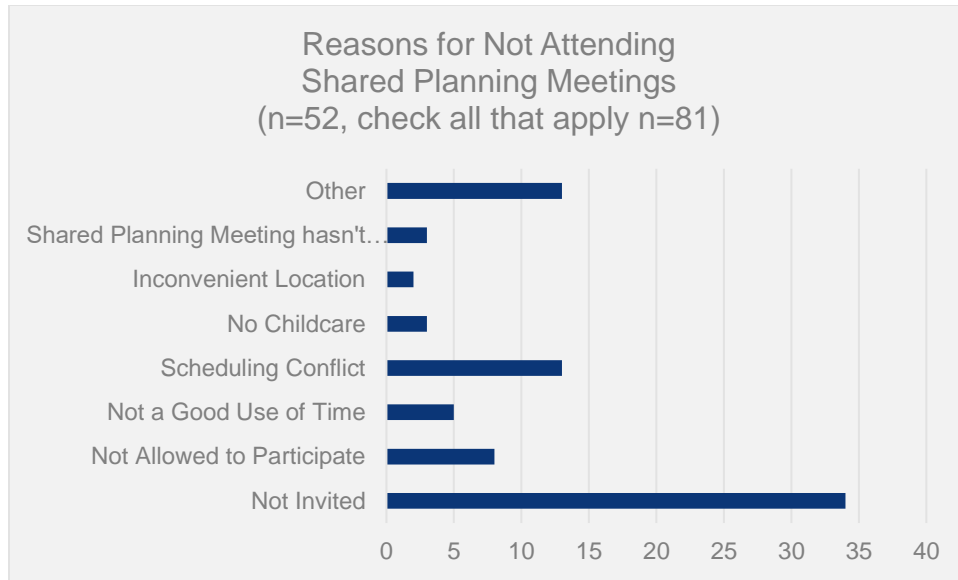


FIGURE 14. REASONS FOR NOT ATTENDING A SHARED PLANNING MEETING

Recommendation #14: DCYF should allow foster parents to attend the full shared planning meetings, as well as include child counselors. Additionally, stakeholders suggested involving young people by allowing them to voice their opinions and express their wishes, especially regarding their identity, cultural needs, and wellbeing and safety.

Finding #15: Parents and caregivers are not routinely provided notice regarding upcoming court hearings.

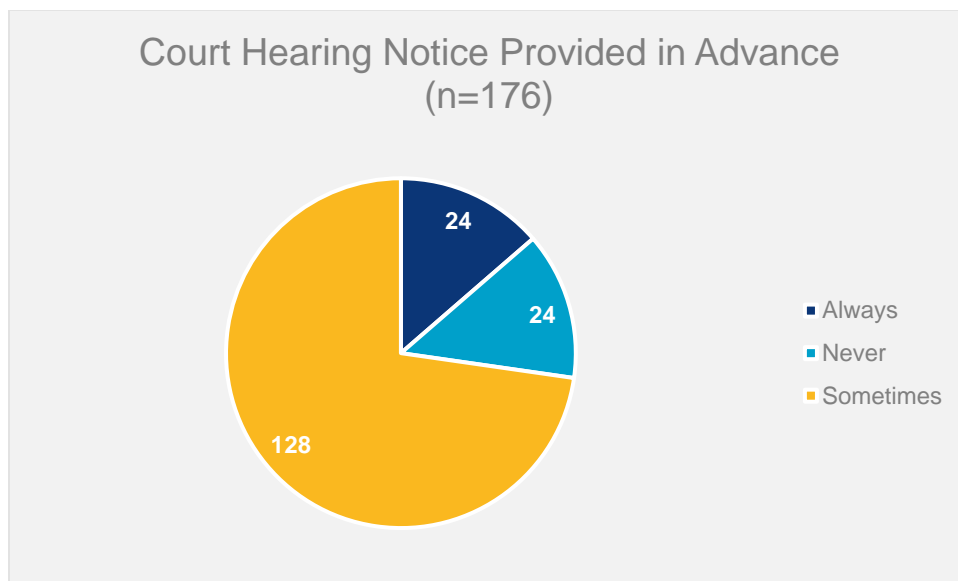


FIGURE 15. COURT HEARING NOTICE PROVIDED IN ADVANCE

Recommendation #15: Based on the input obtained, PCG recommends that parents and caregivers are provided notice of upcoming court hearings.

Professional Partners

Finding #16: Some, but not all, of the professional partners provide representation in Shared Planning Meetings. Those who do not attend the meetings stated they were not informed of the meeting date and time or the meetings do not occur.

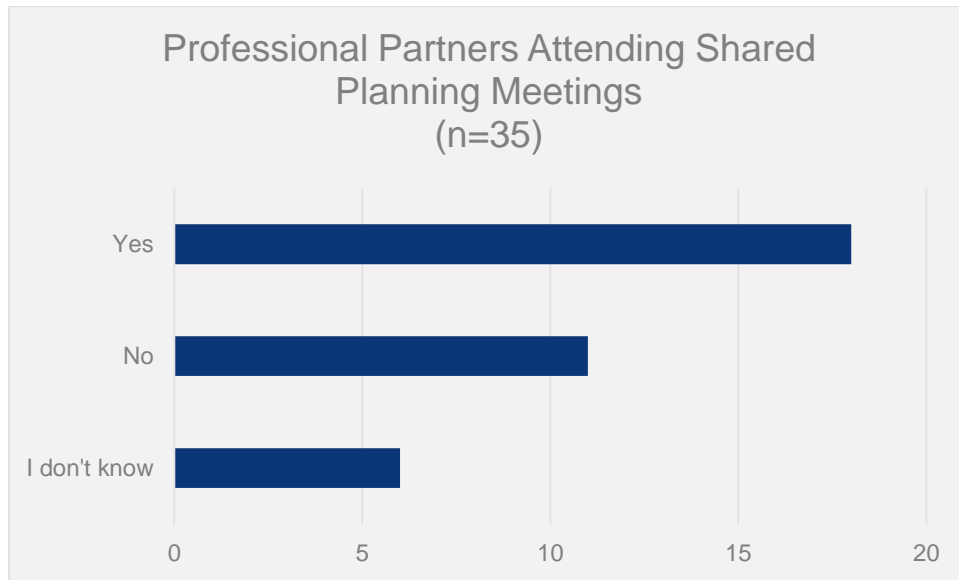


FIGURE 16. PROFESSIONAL PARTNERS ATTENDING SHARED PLANNING MEETINGS

Recommendation #16: Stakeholders recommend Shared Planning Meetings occur routinely and with more than one-day notice.

Finding #17: Professional partners state that Shared Planning Meetings work well when there is a trained and prepared facilitator and who allows open communication from all representatives in the room.

Recommendation #17: Professional partners recommend that DCYF develop and implement standard rules and guidelines to be implemented across all shared planning meetings. Each meeting should have clearly defined target items for discussion, goals to accomplish, and tasks to consider. In addition, each shared planning meeting should have an assigned facilitator with an experienced family-centered, trauma-informed skillset who maintains a consistent presence through the entirety of the case.

Effectiveness

Parents and Caregivers

Finding #18: An array of topics are discussed during the shared planning meetings.

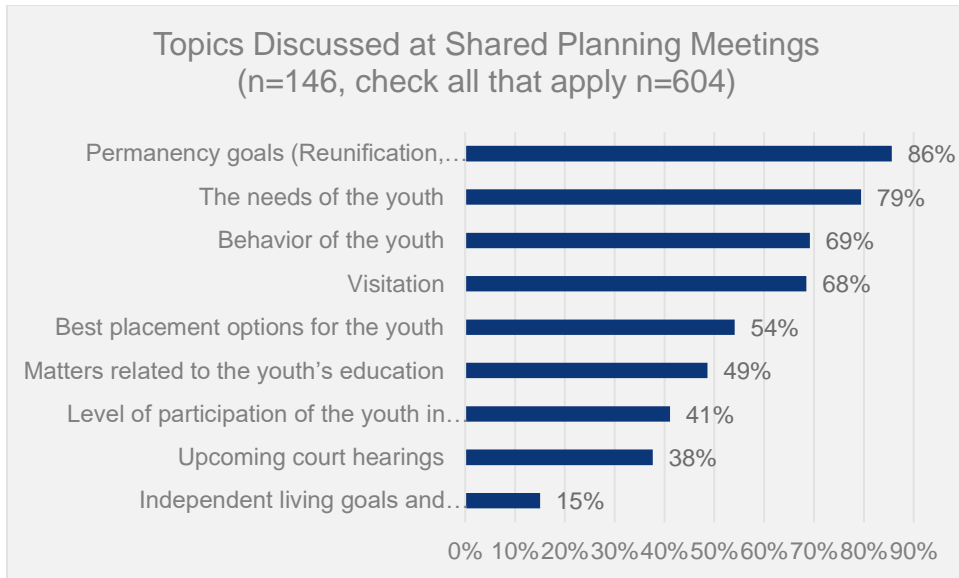


FIGURE 17. TOPICS DISCUSSED AT SHARED PLANNING MEETINGS

Recommendation #18: Based on the information provided, PCG recommends the parents, caregivers, and relevant multi-disciplinary team members are included in the Shared Planning Meetings.

Finding #19: Some parents expressed feelings of being isolated or judged during the Shared Planning Meetings.

“I started feeling betrayed and lied to.”

“I remember feeling intimidated and alone.”

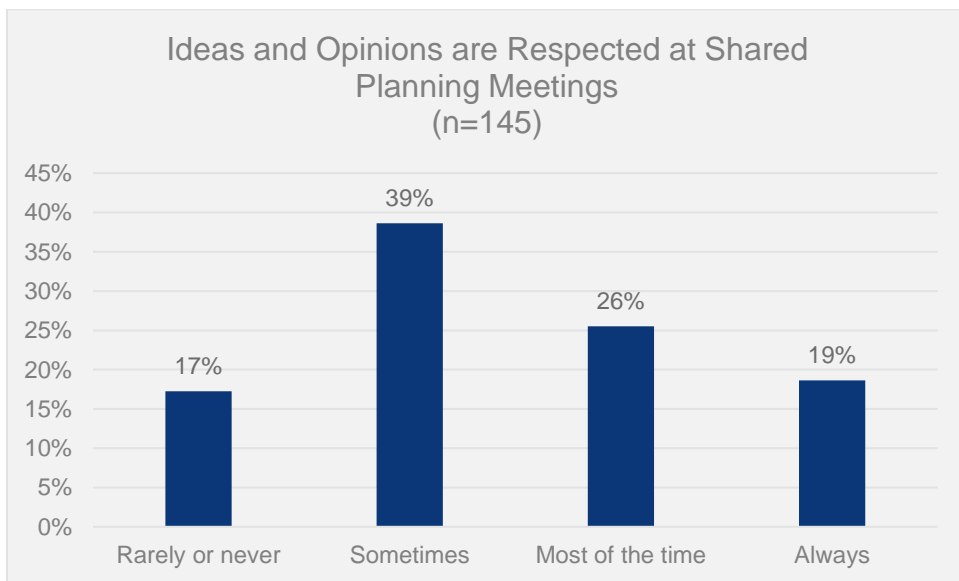


FIGURE 18. IDEAS AND OPINIONS ARE RESPECTED AT SHARED PLANNING MEETINGS

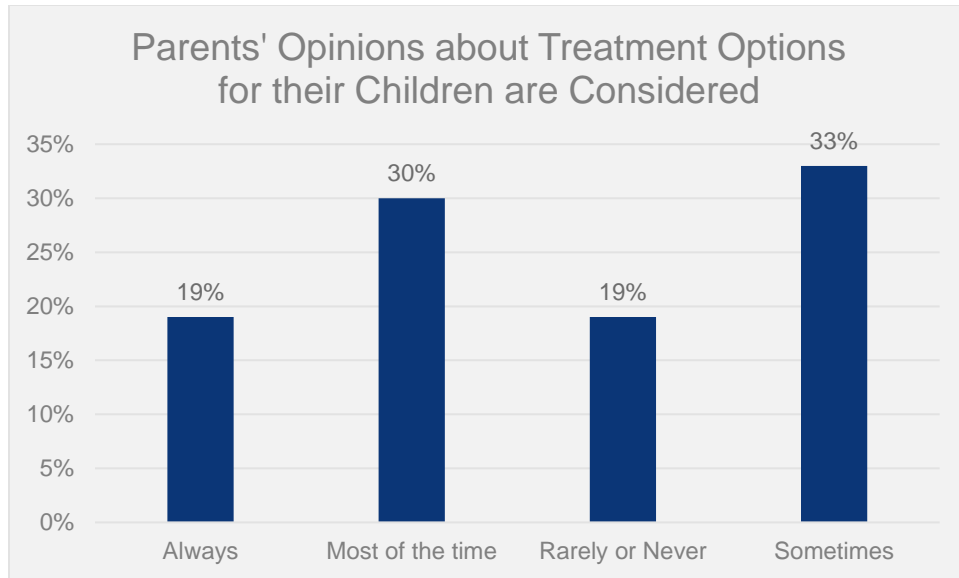


FIGURE 19. PARENTS' OPTIONS ABOUT TREATMENT OPTIONS FOR THEIR CHILDREN ARE CONSIDERED

Recommendation #19: Shared planning meetings should have an assigned facilitator with an experienced family-centered, trauma-informed skillset who maintains a consistent presence through the entirety of the case.

Finding #20: Parents and caregivers indicated their cultural preferences were considered and respected always or most of the time.

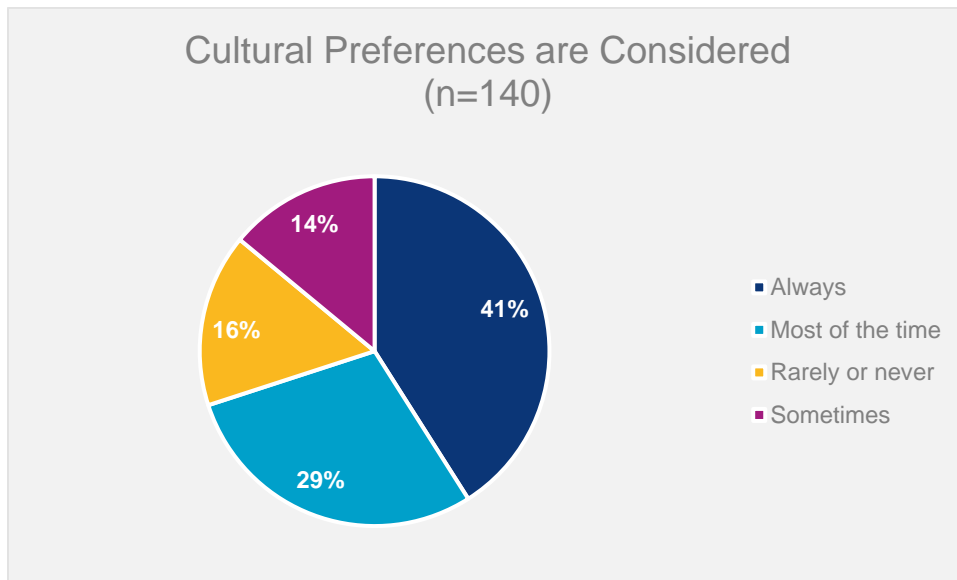


FIGURE 20. CULTURAL PREFERENCES ARE CONSIDERED AT SHARED PLANNING MEETINGS

Recommendation #20: Based on the input provided by stakeholders, PCG recommends Shared Planning Meeting participants consider family and young people's cultural needs while making decisions about services and placement.

Professional Partners

Finding #21: Some professional partners do not always feel heard when providing their perspective.

“It really depends on the social worker. Some are really open to suggestions. From a systemic standpoint, it isn’t encouraged.”

“A lot of social workers don’t have the training or education. They are making medical decisions outside of their expertise. They will ignore the professionals at times. It comes down to how is the supervisor in the room.”

Recommendation #21: Based on input from stakeholders, shared planning meetings should have a facilitator who has a family-centered, trauma-informed skillset and maintains a consistent presence through the entirety of the case. Professional partners that are not typically represented during shared planning meetings that could enhance engagement include school supports, transition supports, and visitation supervisors.

REFERRALS AND TRANSITIONS

Pursuant to the Agreement, DCYF will develop trauma-informed, culturally responsive and LGBTQIA+ affirming referral and transition protocols in response to input from individuals with lived experience and other stakeholder feedback.

Communication

Parents and Caregivers

Finding #22: Caregivers do not always have the opportunity to meet or talk with the young person in advance of placement.

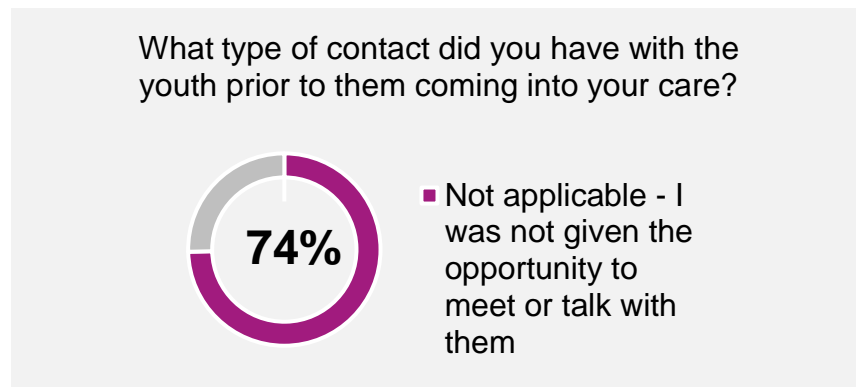


FIGURE 21. CAREGIVER CONTACT WITH YOUTH PRIOR TO COMING INTO CARE

Recommendation #22: DCYF should allow young people and caregivers the opportunity to meet prior to placement.

Finding #23: Most caregivers reported they feel prepared to care for youth with diverse needs.

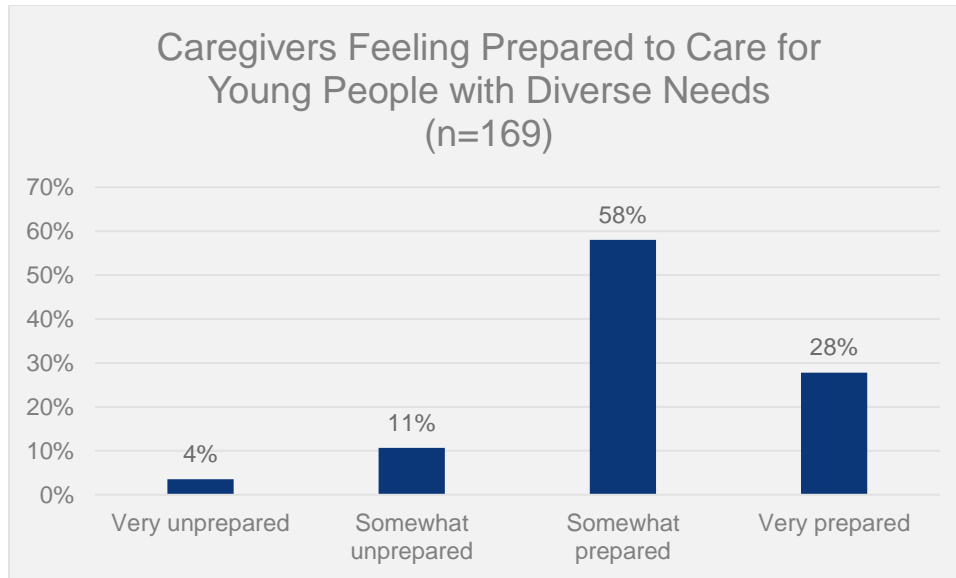


FIGURE 22. CAREGIVERS FEELING PREPARED TO CARE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DIVERSE NEEDS

Recommendation #23: Caregivers recommend having a living document about the young person’s culture, identity, and well-being needs, informed by young people, and shared with caregivers and other relevant parties.

Professional Partners

Finding #24: Referrals and transitions occur as a result of crisis or reaction, rather than being proactive based upon the individual needs of the youth.

“DCYF often calls in crisis but we (the agency) don’t always get the answers we need right away. It would be nice if there was room on the DCYF social worker’s plate to answer those questions, have consents signed, and information provided. It would be helpful for the social workers to have more capacity to help us before things are on fire.”

“Over the years, both agencies have made gigantic strides in our communication with one another. We can still improve.”

Recommendation #24: Professional partners recommended that social workers understand the roles and resources of partnering agencies by providing cross-agency trainings to ensure referrals and transitions are in the best interest of the child. In addition, DCYF representatives should communicate with partnering agencies timely and routinely.

Resources

Parents and Caregivers

Finding #25: Caregivers access resources on their own to better care for young people placed in their care.

“They just drop them off with their name. They don’t tell you anything about the child. It causes more trauma on the kids. They need to tell us things like using the wrong pronoun.”

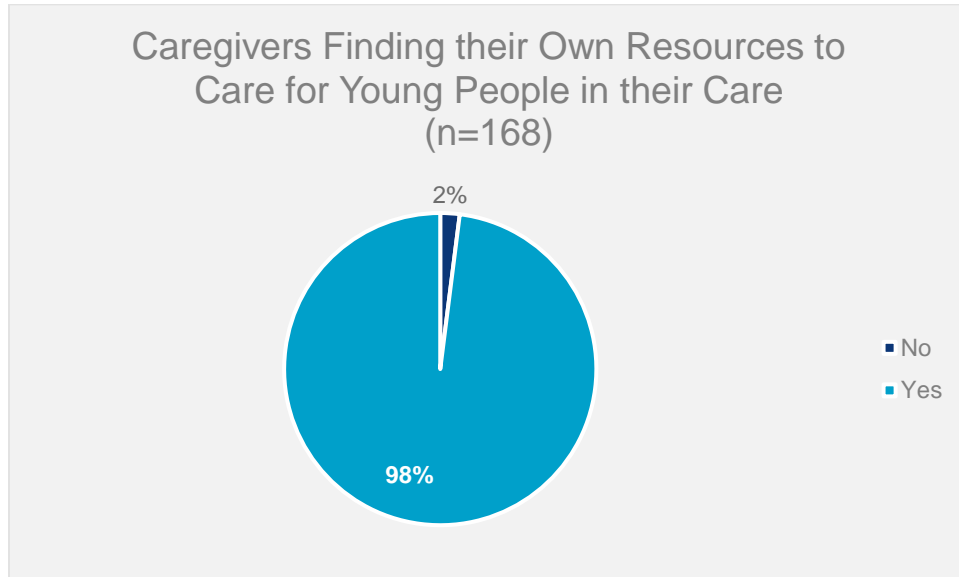


FIGURE 23. CAREGIVERS FINDING THEIR OWN RESOURCES TO CARE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN THEIR CARE

Recommendation #25: Ensure foster parents receive sufficient information on available resources to allow their time served to be devoted towards caring for the children, rather than searching for referral agencies and other sources of assistance. This can include complete and up-to-date information tools.

Finding #26: Some caregivers identified helpful resources that are provided to them by DCYF, including:

- ▶ Financial support
- ▶ Training
- ▶ Gift cards for gas and food
- ▶ Daycare tuition
- ▶ Mileage reimbursement
- ▶ Clothing vouchers
- ▶ Support navigating new and unfamiliar medical needs

Recommendation #26: Caregivers recommend providing resources consistently in every region throughout the state.

Finding #27: Some parents and caregivers indicated services are not provided while others reported having access to a variety of services. Services parents and caregivers reported as receiving include:

- ▶ An occasional phone call to check on the youth
- ▶ Visitation services
- ▶ Referrals to services, such as Tree House, Mockingbird, BRS, Wraparound with Intensive Services (WISe), and Case Aide
- ▶ Birth to three-month services for infants in foster care
- ▶ Translation services

Recommendations #27: Caregivers recommend providing services consistently in every region throughout the state.

Professional Partners

Finding #28: Some professional partners reported that collaboration efforts take place with DCYF when identifying services for young people and families while others expressed that partnerships could improve.

Recommendation #28: Ensure agencies are working with counterparts and not in silos by facilitating frequent conversations and cross-agency conversations.

IV. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS & KEY RECOMMENDATIONS: YOUNG PEOPLE WITH FOSTER/KINSHIP EXPERIENCE

The detailed summary below captures the key findings as surfaced from the listening sessions and survey facilitated by Think of Us. These findings and recommendations were found independently by Think of Us and were obtained from the Youth Engagement for the Washington State Settlement: Report of Findings and Recommendations located in Addendum A.

TABLE 5. YOUNG PEOPLE’S EXPERIENCES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

	Young People’s Experiences	Young People’s Recommendations
1. How DCYF brings youth into the system		
1.1. Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people believe their removals might have been prevented had their parents received sufficient and appropriate support and services from DCYF. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide greater access to comprehensive and tailored prevention programming to parents.
1.2. Reporting and Investigations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people who self-report cases of abuse or neglect are not taken seriously. Reports to child protective services (CPS) do not trigger the provision of potential services and support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Give credence to child- and youth-reported cases of neglect and abuse, and believe them when they disclose that they are unsafe. Initiate prevention services for families who have been reported to CPS.
1.3. Removal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people’s determination of their own safety is not always considered, delaying removals that can end the harm they endure. Unnecessary removals in non-life-threatening situations are distressing to young people. Lack of communication from DCYF at the point of removal causes additional distress to young people. Young people are made to wait for extended periods in uncomfortable settings until a placement is identified. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seek and honor young people’s assessment of their own safety when making decisions about removals. Work to expeditiously remove young people from environments where they report feeling unsafe. In non-life-threatening situations, delay removal until a placement is identified to minimize disruptions and moves. Communicate what is going to happen or might happen to the young person before and during removal. Strive to place a young person quickly; if possible, have a placement identified before removal.
2. How DCYF places youth		
2.1 Youths’ placement needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people are not asked about their placement needs, which are informed by their histories and identities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask young people about their placement needs to better understand and consider their histories and identities when identifying potential placements.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While in a DCYF-chosen placement, young people wish that they lived elsewhere. • The lack of consideration for young people’s placement needs leads to placement instability and further harm. • Young people who identify kin to live with are frustrated that DCYF does not provide their kin with the support they need to qualify as a placement option. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask young people regularly about where they want to live and strive to place them in their preferred placement. • If young people can’t be placed where they want to live, give them an explanation as to why. • Give young people options for placement and allow them to choose. • Strive to place young people with a family member or trusted adult(s) first. • Provide the necessary information and support for preferred placements to become licensed.
<p>2.2. Placement instability and transfers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people experience high placement instability and frequent transfers from one placement to another. • Young people are given little to no notice or communication as to when or where they are going. • Abrupt transfers with limited communication cause distress and make young people feel unwanted. • Young people are not given the opportunity to build relationships with potential placements. • Young people are not given the opportunity to pack and keep their belongings, and are made to use garbage bags as containers for their items. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make every effort possible to reduce the number of transfers and increase placement stability. • Limit abrupt transfers to life-threatening emergencies only. • Notify young people as early as possible about an upcoming transfer. • Communicate to young people the reason behind a placement change. • Give young people the opportunity to speak to, meet, or visit prospective placements prior to transfer. • Transport young people to placements during the day, not in the middle of the night. • Ensure young people are able to pack and keep their personal belongings, and end the use of garbage bags to store belongings.
<p>2.3 Transitions into new placements</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Once in a new placement, young people need support to cope with grief and loss. • Young people need support to build relationships with the people in their new placement. • Young people need help meeting their basic needs after moving to a new placement to ensure it is successful. • Young people need support to transition into and succeed in their new school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer emotional and mental health support, including comfort items and help around grief and loss. • Facilitate activities for foster families and young people to get to know each other once a placement has begun. • Provide young people with support around transportation, clothing, and basic hygiene needs to help them settle in their new placement.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people want DCYF to check in with them to ensure they feel safe and affirmed in their new placement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate with young people's previous and new schools to ensure smoother transitions. • Check in regularly with young people to ask if they feel safe and affirmed in their new placement, and take their concerns seriously.
<p>2.4 Shelters, facilities, and group homes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being placed in shelters, facilities, and group homes causes young people grave harm. • Young people believe that caseworkers place them in out-of-home facilities as punishment in addition to convenience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work to never place young people in a shelter, facility, or group home. • Provide more tangible and intangible support to family-based placements to reduce reliance on shelters, facilities, and group homes
<p>3. How DCYF engages youth's families and loved ones</p>		
<p>3.1 Disconnection from siblings, loved ones, and community</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people experience severed relationships and disconnection from siblings, loved ones, and community. • Young people are not provided with or allowed access to the tools that would enable them to maintain connections with loved ones. • Disconnection from community negatively impacts young people's well-being and ability to form the support systems they need. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strive to place siblings together. • Provide young people with access to technology and concrete opportunities to maintain communication and stay connected. • Ensure placement providers do not prevent young people from remaining in contact with loved ones. • Support young people in nurturing relational support systems throughout their time in foster/kinship care. • Provide young people with opportunities to connect with peers who are also in foster/kinship care.
<p>3.2 Kinship Engagement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people are not always asked about kin they could live with. • Young people hesitate to provide names of kin to DCYF out of worry for their kin or concern that they have no understanding or agency in how that information would be used. • Young people who identify kin they want to live with are sometimes not placed with them for reasons they feel are arbitrary and unjustified. • Young people lament the lack of support DCYF provides kin caregivers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistently ask young people about kin they could live with. • Explain to young people how the information they provide about kin will be used. • Give young people a choice around which kin to involve in each decision that concerns them. • Revise requirements to allow more flexibility for kin to be a placement. • Recognize that kin caregivers require additional resources and provide them with said support.
<p>3.3. Reunification</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people have conflicting opinions about whether or not they 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask and defer to young people about reunification being

<p>and family preservation</p>	<p>desire reunification as an option DCYF pursues for them.</p>	<p>appropriate for them and their circumstances.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask and defer to young people on whether parents should be included when discussing reunification options. • Share with young people what DCYF requires parents to complete before reunification would be considered.
<p>4. How DCYF listens to and represents youth</p>		
<p>4.1. Youth voice and agency</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people don't have a voice in the very decisions that affect their lives. • Young people believe DCYF and other system actors operate from a lens of adultism. • Young people's concerns and grievances, including reports of abusive or harmful experiences in placements, are not believed or taken seriously. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask young people what they need and want, and make efforts to center their voices and honor their requests as much as—if not more than—other stakeholders. • Provide required training on anti-adultism to judges, caseworkers, and DCYF staff. • Provide channels for young people to share their concerns, including anonymously, and provide a timely resolution. • Believe young people when they come forward with concerns and reports of harm and abuse they are experiencing in foster care. • Consult with the young person when responding to the harm and abuse they report. • Hold regular listening sessions with young people.
<p>4.2. Interactions with staff and professionals</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people are not treated by DCYF staff in caring and compassionate ways. • Young people perceive DCYF is inadequate at performing their jobs for a myriad of reasons, including weak staff competencies; lack of trauma-informed skills; high staff caseload; and high staff turnover. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make it a priority for DCYF staff and placement providers to interact with young people in developmentally appropriate and trauma-responsive ways. • Hire caseworkers who listen and care, and have shared lived experiences and identities with young people. • Have more qualified and trained staff with the skills to work with trauma survivors. • Ensure staff have reasonable caseloads, sufficient time, supportive supervision, and competitive market pay to improve quality of services and reduce turnover.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluate and support the mental health and overall well-being of DCYF caseworkers. Enable access to more than one DCYF staff member, such as a caseworker and mental health specialist, so that young people are not represented or supported by only one person.
<p>4.3. Family group planning meetings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not all young people are invited to or attend family group planning meetings. Young people don't feel prepared to attend family group planning meetings. Family group planning meetings are not designed to support the agency of young people. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invite young people to family group planning meetings and prioritize their attendance when planning logistics. Explain what each family group planning meeting is about and what decisions are being made. Provide the preparation and support young people need to attend family group planning meetings. Consider, prioritize, and respond to the perspectives and requests young people express in family group planning meetings. Respect young people's choice about whether or not to participate or speak in family group planning meetings.
<p>4.4. Court hearings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people don't always get the opportunity to speak or have competent counsel during court proceedings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow young people to participate in court or mediation proceedings if they choose, in a format that is comfortable for them. Provide young people with opportunities for appropriate and capable legal representation and advocacy during court hearings.
<p>4.5. Case files</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Case files misrepresent the realities and experiences of young people, reflecting caseworker bias. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer young people the opportunity to review, respond to, and correct the information in their case files.
<p>5. How DCYF treats youth of different identities and experiences</p>		
<p>5.1. Disability competency</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people who are or are deemed to be mentally ill or neurodiverse experience sanism and neuro-discrimination. Young people are not taught about mental health in ways that could be helpful in understanding themselves and advocating for what they need to thrive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educate and train placement providers and DCYF staff to understand mental health and how it manifests emotionally, behaviorally, and socially among young people. Provide mental health education to young people so they can recognize and ask for the help they need.

<p>5.2. Cultural competency</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people noted a pattern of youths of color being placed with white families and experiencing discrimination and microaggressions. • Young people are not encouraged or given opportunities to stay connected with their cultural, racial, and ethnic identities. • Native youth want support in (re)connecting with their indigenous culture and peers. • Young people are being forced to conform to their placements' religious or spiritual practices, regardless of their own beliefs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritize placing young people in placements that share their cultural and racial/ethnic identities and religion. • Provide robust racial equity/cultural competency training to DCYF staff. • When living in placements that don't share the same cultural, racial/ethnic, and religious identities, provide youth opportunities to stay connected to those identities and care for their specific cultural needs. • Support Native youth in (re)connecting with their culture and peers. • Place young people in placements that do not compromise their own religious practices or impose religious beliefs different from their own. • Offer and encourage educational opportunities for placements to become more culturally competent.
<p>5.3. 2SLGBTQIA+ competency</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2SLGBTQIA+ youth experience discrimination or, worse, abuse. • Young people believe that placement providers and DCYF staff lack 2SLGBTQIA+ competency. • Young people are not provided with the critical opportunities they need to explore, label, and express their emerging 2SLGBTQIA+ identities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protect 2SLGBTQIA+ youth against queerphobia and transphobia from placement providers and DCYF staff. • Place 2SLGBTQIA+ youth in safe and affirming homes and communities. • Mandate required initial and ongoing 2SLGBTQIA+ training for placement providers and DCYF staff. • Provide young people with expansive sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) education and opportunities to safely explore and find themselves.
<p>5.4. Affirmation of Identities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some young people are forced to act differently and hide who they are to please others or out of concern for their own safety. • Young people don't feel like they can speak out against discrimination or mistreatment out of fear of retaliation. • Young people want their identities to be understood and affirmed as they change over time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure young people feel safe to be themselves. • Offer secure and non-retaliatory avenues for young people to report discrimination or mistreatment. • Seek to continuously understand young people's shifting identities throughout their time in foster/kinship care.

6. How DCYF meet youths' needs		
6.1. Services received	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Despite receiving a wide range of support and services, young people face barriers in receiving them, including lack of information on available services, long waiting periods, and lack of transportation. • Young people wish for more support that better meet their needs. • Young people lament the lack of resources in rural areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train DCYF staff on how to identify available resources and connect young people to them. • Proactively and consistently share with young people what services and resources they have at their disposal. • Provide a more expansive suite of support and services to young people that meet their specific needs. • Work to meet the needs of young people in rural or remote areas with fewer available resources.
6.2. Basic needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foster families don't spend the stipend on the needs of young people. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that stipends received by foster families are being spent to cover the basic needs of young people. • Ask young people if their basic needs are being met in their placement. • Require placement providers to give young people a regular spending allowance from the foster care stipend.
6.3. Health needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people are not provided with the proper mental health support that centers their self-determination in their own care. • Young people don't want to be sent to psychiatric institutional facilities against their will. • Young people are not made aware of their eligibility to receive the appropriate physical health care. • Young people are not receiving proper education on sexual health and drug-related harm reduction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide individualized, consistent, and non-coercive mental health services and support to young people. • Preemptively inform young people of the preventative and routine physical health care services they are entitled to receive and the health insurance benefits they have. • Ensure affordability, transportation, and other concerns are not barriers to young people accessing health services. • Consider young people's preferences on what healthcare providers they want to care for them. • Follow up with young people to ensure they are keeping up with their medical and mental health needs. • Provide young people with ongoing education about and supplies for sexual health, sexual harm, self-

		<p>harm, and drug-related harm reduction.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train placement providers on the range of young people’s health needs and the health issues they face.
<p>6.4. Education needs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people’s preferences about where they go to school are not considered. • Young people’s education and social networks are affected by school changes and disruptions. • Young people, especially first-generation college applicants and those who experience high school changes, need support in navigating college and federal student aid applications. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strive to maintain the same school for young people. • Provide tutoring, credit tracking, and educational support to young people as they navigate the impact of school disruptions. • Provide young people with referrals and letters of recommendation that help secure opportunities for education post-high school. • Provide young people with college and financial aid application support, irrespective of whether or not they opt into extended foster care.
<p>6.5. Employment and financial needs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people need support to access employment, manage their credit, build savings, and invest money. • A critical area of support is helping young people understand and pay their taxes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guide young people in the process of building and leading healthy financial lives. • Hold financial education sessions, including around saving, investing, and budgeting. • Provide young people with support in navigating filing taxes, particularly those earning income as independent contractors.
<p>6.6. Housing needs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transitional living facilities for youth who are aging out are not adequate or supportive. • There is a lack of options for housing for youth who are aging out. • Youth are not informed about housing options at the time when it is most opportune for them to apply. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inform and guide youth towards affordable housing opportunities before they become eligible so they are able to enroll as early as possible. • Provide mandatory homelessness diversion training to DCYF staff.
<p>6.7. Aging out support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people do not feel prepared for their transition into adulthood. • Young people are made to believe that they are being “spoon-fed” by the system, leading many to opt out of extended foster care and the critical resources it can provide as a way to prove they can be independent from the system. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect data on the needs of aging-out youth and provide support accordingly. • Give young people timely referrals and information about the range of resources they can access, including emailed and hard copies of referrals specific to their location.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Young people want to extend the age for aging out of foster care and have the opportunity to come back and access support after they age out.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Push against the harmful rhetoric that young people should feel bad or ashamed for receiving help and using resources from the system.• Increase the age limit for extended foster care.• Allow young people who age out of care to opt into extended foster care.• Inform young people and caseworkers of the state legislation allowing young people to exit and re-enter care as many times as necessary until age 21, and create accountability mechanisms to ensure it is implemented
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VI. LIMITATIONS

This study had two important limitations to consider when reviewing this report. First, the study and all related activities had to be completed within 60 days (about 2 months) as prescribed in Attachment A – Stakeholder Facilitator and Process Description of the Agreement and Settlement Order. All recruitment efforts, engagement (listening sessions and survey), data analysis, and report development had to be completed within this time limit. The Washington State IRB (Institutional Review Board) was contacted for an IRB Exemption Determination to complete the study with prospective participants ages 18 years and older, and full WSIRB approval was requested to involve young people under the age of 18 for Think of Us's study. The IRB approval process, which was expedited, did not begin until after the 60-day time limit started, creating time constraints for the study. Recruitment and engagement activities could not begin until IRB approval was obtained.

Second, most organizations preferred to distribute the listening session registration flyers and the survey through their own listservs, newsletters, and social media in lieu of sharing individual contact information of their group members with an outside party. Therefore, PCG relied heavily on organizations who volunteered to disseminate recruitment and follow-up materials to their group members and partners, to do so in a timely manner. Many agencies provided substantial support by distributing recruitment materials and identifying additional stakeholder individuals and organizations to recruit for the study. As evidenced by the number of engagement participants, there may have been missed opportunities for participation due to lack of timely notification and the time limits for completion of the study.

VI. CONCLUSION

Public Consulting Group was contracted as an objective third party to engage with youth, parents, caregivers, and professional partners to solicit feedback on three key areas of the D.S. Settlement Agreement: Kinship Engagement, Family Group Planning, and Referrals and Transitions. PCG partnered with Think of Us to engage with young people with foster care lived experience. This report includes a summary of feedback and key recommendations to inform DCYF's system improvement plan.

PCG collected feedback from parents, caregivers, and professional partners surrounding their experiences with the policies and practices of DCYF as related to three key areas of the Agreement. Several recurring themes became evident throughout the listening sessions and the electronic surveys. Key themes found within the three key areas were broken down further and categorized into subsets. Each subset expands upon the stakeholders' experiences, positive or otherwise, and captures recommendations offered by stakeholders. Over the course of PCG's engagement, stakeholders involved were invested in sharing first-hand experience to highlight the strengths of DCYF, point to gaps that have an impact on people and systems, and provide concrete and realistic recommendations. The achievement of positive outcomes may be informed by the information provided in this report in its entirety.

ADDENDUM #1
Youth Engagement for the Washington State Settlement:
Report of Findings and Recommendations

Youth Engagement for the Washington State Settlement

Report of Findings and Recommendations

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April 2023

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Think of Us acknowledges that this project was conducted on the traditional lands of the Cayuse, Umatilla, Walla Walla, Yakama, Syilx (Okanagan), ščəl'ámxəx^w (Chelan), Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, Nsyilxcən (Nsyilxčń) (Nselxčín), and Nxaʔmxčín (Wenatchi). Naming is an exercise in empowering that which historically has been erased. This acknowledgement renounces the erasure, forced removal, and genocide of Indigenous peoples.

We wish to express our deepest gratitude to the many people of Washington state who contributed to this engagement process.

First, thanks goes to the young people who shared their stories and opened their hearts to us. None of this would be possible without your generosity, wisdom, and courage.

We also want to thank the many community leaders and organizations who contributed time, expertise, relationships, and resources to the co-design and execution of this project. Thank you for making this project possible.

The project team offers a special acknowledgement to members of the Think of Us team Katie Buxton, Courtney Canova, and Emily Stochel. Thank you for your tremendous support and guidance as we partnered with your Washingtonian community.

Thank you also to Katy Fortune-Reagan for her brilliant proofreading and to Emma Webb for the layout design support.

This project was funded by Think of Us and the Raikes Foundation. Thank you for your partnership in creating the conditions for all young people to have the support they need to reach their full potential.

Introduction

This report honors the experiences and uplifts the recommendations of young people with lived experience in the Washington state child welfare system. Its purpose is to inform the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) implementation plan resulting from the class action settlement approved in September 2022 by the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Washington ([D.S. et al., v. Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families, et al.](#), Case No. 2:21-cv-00113). This lawsuit was brought by three young people with lived experience in the Washington state child welfare system, alongside Disability Rights Washington. The youth were represented by attorneys at Disability Rights Washington, Carney Gillespie PLLP, the National Center for Youth Law, and Children’s Rights. The suit argued that: (1) DCYF was not giving foster children the services and supports needed to stay with or return to their families; and (2) many foster children had been moved too many times, or had to stay in hotels, offices, or one-night or out-of-state placements. Class members included youth who experienced 5 or more foster care placements; were referred for or were in out-of-state group care placements; experienced a hotel or office stay in the prior six months; or were awaiting a Children’s Long-Term Inpatient Program (CLIP) bed. The settlement places emphasis on youth who identify as 2SLGBTQIA+, are from a broad range of ethnic and racial groups, have disabilities, and/or are neurodiverse. The settlement agreement requires that DCYF hear feedback and recommendations from youth and other stakeholders and develop and implement a plan for systemic changes that are trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and 2SLGBTQIA+ affirming.

Engagement process

Think of Us spearheaded a youth engagement process between February 7, 2023 and April 7, 2023. This 60-day timeline included:

- Facilitating a community co-creation workshop with 35 lived experts and representatives of community-based organizations that work closely with both youth in foster/kinship care and DCYF.
- Conducting a series of four listening sessions in Eastern (Spokane), Central (Yakima), and Western (Seattle) Washington, as well as virtually, with 21 young people ages 14-26 with lived experience in the Washington child welfare system within the last five years.

- Disseminating a statewide survey to young people ages 14-26 with lived experience in the Washington child welfare system within the past five years, which received 48 responses.
- Synthesizing and analyzing the perspectives and recommendations shared by these young people, and communicating them through a written report.

The purpose of this report is to center the people who are most impacted by the Washington child welfare system: those with lived experience. It does so by offering their insights and recommendations to inform DCYF's development and implementation of a plan that improves how they serve and support young people and their families.

How to read this report

The report begins with a summary of findings followed by more detailed findings, substantiated with direct participant quotes and survey results, and includes a description of the approach in the appendix.

The findings of the report are structured around six thematic sections:

- 1.** How DCYF brings youth into the system.
- 2.** How DCYF places youth.
- 3.** How DCYF engages youths' families and loved ones.
- 4.** How DCYF listens to and represents youth.
- 5.** How DCYF treats youth of different identities and experiences.
- 6.** How DCYF meets youths' needs.

The young people engaged through this process shared, time and time again, their hope that their experiences and recommendations would not be ignored. We urge the readers of this report to hear and heed their words and, above all, to take them to heart and action.

Summary of Findings

	Young People’s Experiences	Young People’s Recommendations
1. How DCYF brings youth into the system		
1.1. Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people believe their removals might have been prevented had their parents received sufficient and appropriate support and services from DCYF. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide greater access to comprehensive and tailored prevention programming to parents.
1.2. Reporting and investigations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people who self-report cases of abuse or neglect are not taken seriously. Reports to child protective services (CPS) do not trigger the provision of potential services and support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Give credence to child- and youth-reported cases of neglect and abuse, and believe them when they disclose that they are unsafe. Initiate prevention services for families who have been reported to CPS.
1.3. Removal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people’s determination of their own safety is not always considered, delaying removals that can end the harm they endure. Unnecessary removals in non-life-threatening situations are distressing to young people. Lack of communication from DCYF at the point of removal causes additional distress to young people. Young people are made to wait for extended periods in uncomfortable settings until a placement is identified. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seek and honor young people’s assessment of their own safety when making decisions about removals. Work to expeditiously remove young people from environments where they report feeling unsafe. In non-life-threatening situations, delay removal until a placement is identified to minimize disruptions and moves. Communicate what is going to happen or might happen to the young person before and during removal. Strive to place a young person quickly; if possible, have a placement identified before removal.
2. How DCYF places youth		
2.1. Youths’ placement needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people are not asked about their placement needs, which are informed by their histories and identities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask young people about their placement needs to better understand and consider their histories and identities when identifying potential placements.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While in a DCYF-chosen placement, young people wish that they lived elsewhere. • The lack of consideration for young people's placement needs leads to placement instability and further harm. • Young people who identify kin to live with are frustrated that DCYF does not provide their kin with the support they need to qualify as a placement option. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask young people regularly about where they want to live and strive to place them in their preferred placement. • If young people can't be placed where they want to live, give them an explanation as to why. • Give young people options for placement and allow them to choose. • Strive to place young people with a family member or trusted adult(s) first. • Provide the necessary information and support for preferred placements to become licensed.
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2.2. Placement instability and transfers

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people experience high placement instability and frequent transfers from one placement to another. • Young people are given little to no notice or communication as to when or where they are going. • Abrupt transfers with limited communication cause distress and make young people feel unwanted. • Young people are not given the opportunity to build relationships with potential placements. • Young people are not given the opportunity to pack and keep their belongings, and are made to use garbage bags as containers for their items. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make every effort possible to reduce the number of transfers and increase placement stability. • Limit abrupt transfers to life-threatening emergencies only. • Notify young people as early as possible about an upcoming transfer. • Communicate to young people the reason behind a placement change. • Give young people the opportunity to speak to, meet, or visit prospective placements prior to transfer. • Transport young people to placements during the day, not in the middle of the night. • Ensure young people are able to pack and keep their personal belongings, and end the use of garbage bags to store belongings.
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2.3. Transitions into new placements

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Once in a new placement, young people need support to cope with grief and loss. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer emotional and mental health support, including comfort items and help around grief and loss.
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Young people need support to build relationships with the people in their new placement. ● Young people need help meeting their basic needs after moving to a new placement to ensure it is successful. ● Young people need support to transition into and succeed in their new school. ● Young people want DCYF to check in with them to ensure they feel safe and affirmed in their new placement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Facilitate activities for foster families and young people to get to know each other once a placement has begun. ● Provide young people with support around transportation, clothing, and basic hygiene needs to help them settle in their new placement. ● Communicate with young people's previous and new schools to ensure smoother transitions. ● Check in regularly with young people to ask if they feel safe and affirmed in their new placement, and take their concerns seriously.
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<p>2.4. Shelters, facilities, and group homes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Being placed in shelters, facilities, and group homes causes young people grave harm. ● Young people believe that caseworkers place them in out-of-home facilities as punishment in addition to convenience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Work to never place young people in a shelter, facility, or group home. ● Provide more tangible and intangible support to family-based placements to reduce reliance on shelters, facilities, and group homes.
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3. How DCYF engages youth's families and loved ones

<p>3.1. Disconnection from siblings, loved ones, and community</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Young people experience severed relationships and disconnection from siblings, loved ones, and community. ● Young people are not provided with or allowed access to the tools that would enable them to maintain connections with loved ones. ● Disconnection from community negatively impacts young people's well-being and ability to form the support systems they need. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strive to place siblings together. ● Provide young people with access to technology and concrete opportunities to maintain communication and stay connected. ● Ensure placement providers do not prevent young people from remaining in contact with loved ones. ● Support young people in nurturing relational support systems throughout their time in foster/kinship care. ● Provide young people with opportunities to connect with peers who are also in foster/kinship care.
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<p>3.2. Kinship engagement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Young people are not always asked about kin they could live with. ● Young people hesitate to provide names of kin to DCYF out of worry for their kin or concern that they have no understanding or agency in how that information would be used. ● Young people who identify kin they want to live with are sometimes not placed with them for reasons they feel are arbitrary and unjustified. ● Young people lament the lack of support DCYF provides kin caregivers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consistently ask young people about kin they could live with. ● Explain to young people how the information they provide about kin will be used. ● Give young people a choice around which kin to involve in each decision that concerns them. ● Revise requirements to allow more flexibility for kin to be a placement. ● Recognize that kin caregivers require additional resources and provide them with said support.
<p>3.3. Reunification and family preservation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Young people have conflicting opinions about whether or not they desire reunification as an option DCYF pursues for them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ask and defer to young people about reunification being appropriate for them and their circumstances. ● Ask and defer to young people on whether parents should be included when discussing reunification options. ● Share with young people what DCYF requires parents to complete before reunification would be considered.

4. How DCYF listens to and represents youth

<p>4.1. Youth voice and agency</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Young people don't have a voice in the very decisions that affect their lives. ● Young people believe DCYF and other system actors operate from a lens of adultism. ● Young people's concerns and grievances, including reports of abusive or harmful experiences in placements, are not believed or taken seriously. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ask young people what they need and want, and make efforts to center their voices and honor their requests as much as—if not more than—other stakeholders. ● Provide required training on anti-adultism to judges, caseworkers, and DCYF staff. ● Provide channels for young people to share their concerns, including anonymously, and provide a timely resolution.
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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Believe young people when they come forward with concerns and reports of harm and abuse they are experiencing in foster care. • Consult with the young person when responding to the harm and abuse they report. • Hold regular listening sessions with young people.
<p>4.2. Interactions with staff and professionals</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people are not treated by DCYF staff in caring and compassionate ways. • Young people perceive DCYF is inadequate at performing their jobs for a myriad of reasons, including weak staff competencies; lack of trauma-informed skills; high staff caseload; and high staff turnover. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make it a priority for DCYF staff and placement providers to interact with young people in developmentally appropriate and trauma-responsive ways. • Hire caseworkers who listen and care, and have shared lived experiences and identities with young people. • Have more qualified and trained staff with the skills to work with trauma survivors. • Ensure staff have reasonable caseloads, sufficient time, supportive supervision, and competitive market pay to improve quality of services and reduce turnover. • Evaluate and support the mental health and overall well-being of DCYF caseworkers. • Enable access to more than one DCYF staff member, such as a caseworker and mental health specialist, so that young people are not represented or supported by only one person.
<p>4.3. Family group planning meetings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not all young people are invited to or attend family group planning meetings, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite young people to family group planning meetings and prioritize their attendance when planning logistics.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people don't feel prepared to attend family group planning meetings. • Family group planning meetings are not designed to support the agency of young people. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain what each family group planning meeting is about and what decisions are being made. • Provide the preparation and support young people need to attend family group planning meetings. • Consider, prioritize, and respond to the perspectives and requests young people express in family group planning meetings. • Respect young people's choice about whether or not to participate or speak in family group planning meetings.
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<p>4.4. Court hearings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people don't always get the opportunity to speak or have competent counsel during court proceedings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow young people to participate in court or mediation proceedings if they choose, in a format that is comfortable for them. • Provide young people with opportunities for appropriate and capable legal representation and advocacy during court hearings.
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<p>4.5. Case files</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case files misrepresent the realities and experiences of young people, reflecting caseworker bias. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer young people the opportunity to review, respond to, and correct the information in their case files.
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5. How DCYF treats youth of different identities and experiences

<p>5.1. Disability competency</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people who are or are deemed to be mentally ill or neurodiverse experience sanism and neuro-discrimination. • Young people are not taught about mental health in ways that could be helpful in understanding themselves and advocating for what they need to thrive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educate and train placement providers and DCYF staff to understand mental health and how it manifests emotionally, behaviorally, and socially among young people. • Provide mental health education to young people so they can recognize and ask for the help they need.
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<p>5.2. Cultural competency</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Young people noted a pattern of youths of color being placed with white families and experiencing discrimination and microaggressions. ● Young people are not encouraged or given opportunities to stay connected with their cultural, racial, and ethnic identities. ● Native youth want support in (re)connecting with their indigenous culture and peers. ● Young people are being forced to conform to their placements' religious or spiritual practices, regardless of their own beliefs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Prioritize placing young people in placements that share their cultural and racial/ethnic identities and religion. ● Provide robust racial equity/cultural competency training to DCYF staff. ● When living in placements that don't share the same cultural, racial/ethnic, and religious identities, provide youth opportunities to stay connected to those identities and care for their specific cultural needs. ● Support Native youth in (re)connecting with their culture and peers. ● Place young people in placements that do not compromise their own religious practices or impose religious beliefs different from their own. ● Offer and encourage educational opportunities for placements to become more culturally competent.
<p>5.3. 2SLGBTQIA+ competency</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 2SLGBTQIA+ youth experience discrimination or, worse, abuse. ● Young people believe that placement providers and DCYF staff lack 2SLGBTQIA+ competency. ● Young people are not provided with the critical opportunities they need to explore, label, and express their emerging 2SLGBTQIA+ identities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Protect 2SLGBTQIA+ youth against queerphobia and transphobia from placement providers and DCYF staff. ● Place 2SLGBTQIA+ youth in safe and affirming homes and communities. ● Mandate required initial and ongoing 2SLGBTQIA+ training for placement providers and DCYF staff. ● Provide young people with expansive sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) education and opportunities to safely explore and find themselves.
<p>5.4. Affirmation of identities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Some young people are forced to act differently and hide who they are to please others or out of concern for their own safety. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensure young people feel safe to be themselves. ● Offer secure and non-retaliatory avenues for young people to report discrimination or mistreatment.

- Young people don't feel like they can speak out against discrimination or mistreatment out of fear of retaliation.
- Young people want their identities to be understood and affirmed as they change over time.

- Seek to continuously understand young people's shifting identities throughout their time in foster/kinship care.

6. How DCYF meet youth's needs

6.1. Services received

- Despite receiving a wide range of support and services, young people face barriers in receiving them, including lack of information on available services, long waiting periods, and lack of transportation.
- Young people wish for more support that better meet their needs.
- Young people lament the lack of resources in rural areas.

- Train DCYF staff on how to identify available resources and connect young people to them.
- Proactively and consistently share with young people what services and resources they have at their disposal.
- Provide a more expansive suite of support and services to young people that meet their specific needs.
- Work to meet the needs of young people in rural or remote areas with fewer available resources.

6.2. Basic needs

- Foster families don't spend the stipend on the needs of young people.

- Ensure that stipends received by foster families are being spent to cover the basic needs of young people.
- Ask young people if their basic needs are being met in their placement.
- Require placement providers to give young people a regular spending allowance from the foster care stipend.

6.3. Health needs

- Young people are not provided with the proper mental health support that centers their self-determination in their own care.
- Young people don't want to be sent to psychiatric institutional facilities against their will.

- Provide individualized, consistent, and non-coercive mental health services and support to young people.
- Preemptively inform young people of the preventative and routine physical health care services they are entitled to receive and the health insurance benefits they have.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Young people are not made aware of their eligibility to receive the appropriate physical health care. ● Young people are not receiving proper education on sexual health and drug-related harm reduction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensure affordability, transportation, and other concerns are not barriers to young people accessing health services. ● Consider young people’s preferences on what healthcare providers they want to care for them. ● Follow up with young people to ensure they are keeping up with their medical and mental health needs. ● Provide young people with ongoing education about and supplies for sexual health, sexual harm, self-harm, and drug-related harm reduction. ● Train placement providers on the range of young people’s health needs and the health issues they face.
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6.4. Education needs

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Young people’s preferences about where they go to school are not considered. ● Young people’s education and social networks are affected by school changes and disruptions. ● Young people, especially first generation college applicants and those who experience high school changes, need support in navigating college and federal student aid applications. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strive to maintain the same school for young people. ● Provide tutoring, credit tracking, and educational support to young people as they navigate the impact of school disruptions. ● Provide young people with referrals and letters of recommendation that help secure opportunities for education post-high school. ● Provide young people with college and financial aid application support, irrespective of whether or not they opt into extended foster care.
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6.5. Employment and financial needs

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Young people need support to access employment, manage their credit, build savings, and invest money. ● A critical area of support is helping young people understand and pay their taxes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Guide young people in the process of building and leading healthy financial lives. ● Hold financial education sessions, including around saving, investing, and budgeting.
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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide young people with support in navigating filing taxes, particularly those earning income as independent contractors.
<p>6.6. Housing needs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Transitional living facilities for youth who are aging out are not adequate or supportive. ● There is a lack of options for housing for youth who are aging out. ● Youth are not informed about housing options at the time when it is most opportune for them to apply. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Inform and guide youth towards affordable housing opportunities before they become eligible so they are able to enroll as early as possible. ● Provide mandatory homelessness diversion training to DCYF staff.
<p>6.7. Aging out support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Young people do not feel prepared for their transition into adulthood. ● Young people are made to believe that they are being “spoon-fed” by the system, leading many to opt out of extended foster care and the critical resources it can provide as a way to prove they can be independent from the system. ● Young people want to extend the age for aging out of foster care and have the opportunity to come back and access support after they age out. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Collect data on the needs of aging-out youth and provide support accordingly. ● Give young people timely referrals and information about the range of resources they can access, including emailed and hard copies of referrals specific to their location. ● Push against the harmful rhetoric that young people should feel bad or ashamed for receiving help and using resources from the system. ● Increase the age limit for extended foster care. ● Allow young people who age out of care to opt into extended foster care. ● Inform young people and caseworkers of the state legislation allowing young people to exit and re-enter care as many times as necessary until age 21, and create accountability mechanisms to ensure it is implemented.

Detailed Findings

1. How DCYF brings youth into the system

1.1. Prevention

Young people spoke of not receiving prevention services and an overall lack of a family preservation approach. This led to family separation when different supports and services might have prevented removal.



“DCYF should be intervening early to prevent things like child abuse and neglect in order to at least prevent us from entering the system. Also sometimes it’s not the parent’s fault because they could be mentally unstable so it would have been nice if they provided mental health counseling and substance abuse treatment. I felt like my mother didn’t get this kind of support.”

For those who were not removed from their home, they felt as though they did not receive the services they needed on par with those available for their peers in foster/kinship care.



“Youth who were not removed from the home should have the same benefits as youth who did. In my case DCYF did not remove me and expect me to have access to resources as if I have a family to support me.”

Very few young people reported being offered pre-placement and reconciliation services to prevent the need for out-of-home care.



- 9% of survey respondents said that they were offered pre-placement services with local hospitals to prevent the need for out-of-home care.*
- 5% of survey respondents said that they were offered reconciliation services with juvenile justice entities to prevent the need for out-of-home care.*

Young People's Recommendations

- Provide greater access to comprehensive and tailored prevention programming to parents. Specifically, survey respondents named the following services and supports, in order of occurrences:
 - Housing, including housing for veterans and their children (x4)
 - Mental health (x4)
 - Basic needs (x2)
 - Financial support (x2)
 - Easier access to and knowledge of resources (x2)
 - Therapy, including substance use therapy (x2)
 - Parenting skills and classes, including in jail (x2)
 - Family counseling
 - Immigration services
 - Healthcare

1.2. Reporting and investigations

When young people made reports of abuse or neglect, DCYF required them to clear a high bar of threat to their lives for them to be taken seriously.



“Unless you say something that triggers one of those things then CPS [Child Protective Services] can basically do nothing. [...] Like if someone is talking about consistently using substances or consistent verbal abuse or neglect or there’s a million things that contribute to an unsafe home. A young person should not be in threat of physical violence. There should be other reasons to take kids out of the house than they might die. There are types of mental abuse that are just as harmful that are not just hitting your child. That’s the bar for CPS now.”

Additionally, reports of abuse and neglect did not trigger the provision of services for families that could help provide support and prevent removal.



“From my perspective I don’t think there’s been a lot of benefit to all this investment in prevention services because there are folks that are getting CPS calls all the time but they are not getting these services.”

Young People's Recommendations

- Give credence to child- and youth-reported cases of neglect and abuse, and believe them when they disclose that they are unsafe.
- Initiate prevention services for families who have been reported to CPS.

1.3. Removal

On one hand, young people who feared for their safety raised concerns about their situation not being taken seriously enough for their removal to occur and put an end to retaliation and continued abuse.



“When someone is getting abused, every minute counts. I was beaten up many times. I ended [up] in the ER. CPS was called. They would say it wasn’t an immediate intervention [and] sent me home only to get beat up more for snitching. Every minute matters when you need help.”

On the other hand, young people who did not feel unsafe in their homes lamented experiencing unnecessary and abrupt removals that caused them distress.



“I didn’t need to be removed right then and there. That’s something I didn’t want to experience, being placed with other people. And that could have been totally avoided. I was able to go to my grandma’s eventually.”

The upheaval young people felt at the moment of removal was further exacerbated by a lack of communication and planning by DCYF.



“I called CPS and it seemed like nothing was going to happen. [...] A week later I was taken out of school but I was not told what would happen. I was [...] placed with my grandparents. I found out the police was at my house when I was at school. There was no communication in between. I would have liked communication from CPS that was like, “here’s what we’re going to do, here’s what’s going to happen.”

After such a sudden removal, many young people were made to spend hours or days in offices and hospitals waiting for a placement, without access to phones or their computer to communicate with loved ones.



“I was pulled out of class. [...] I got in their [the caseworker’s] car, and we went into the office. And I still remember they were on the phone, they were calling, “do you have a placement here? Do you have a placement there?” I was there for so long, stressed and waiting, while they were trying to find a placement for me. [...] I was there from about 1 pm until 8 or 9 pm.”

Young People’s Recommendations

- Seek and honor young people’s assessment of their own safety when making decisions about removals.
- Work to expeditiously remove young people from environments where they report feeling unsafe.
- In non-life-threatening situations, delay removal until a placement is identified to minimize disruptions and moves.
- Communicate what is going to happen or might happen to the young person before and during removal.
- Strive to place a young person quickly; if possible, have a placement identified before removal.

2. How DCYF places youth

2.1. Youths’ placement needs

Young people felt that their individualized preferences and needs for placement were not sought, listened to, or prioritized by DCYF.



- *When asked if their placement preferences had been considered, 48% of survey respondents said no and 34% said sometimes.*
- *55% of survey respondents stated that their cultural, racial, and religious identities were not considered by DCYF when deciding their placement.*
- *43% of survey respondents reported that their gender or sexual orientation was not considered by DCYF when deciding their placement.*

Young people’s placement preferences and needs were informed by their past traumatic experiences, their identities, and where they perceived they could feel safe and cared for.



“I feel as though taking into account traumas and gender roles is a huge one, I didn’t feel comfortable around men for a long time yet almost every placement I was in caused for a male role in the home. I would have preferred a stable female role model to be with. I felt uncomfortable in a lot of my placements.”

Young people spoke of DCYF prioritizing placements that could be made quickly or conveniently rather than considering their preferences and needs. This meant young people ended up living in places they wished they didn’t, while also being able to name places where they would have preferred to be instead.



- When asked if they had wished to live elsewhere while in a placement, 91% of survey respondents answered ‘yes’ and ‘sometimes.’
- When asked where they would have wanted to live, most young people listed kin (relatives, family friends, friends). They also mentioned wanting to live with parents; live alone; or, more broadly, live somewhere they felt safe and valued.

In the long run, the lack of consideration for young people’s placement needs and preferences led to more moves and placement instability, and risked causing further harm.



“I would have wanted to live with my best friend’s parents. They were fully capable, had multiple other children and the space and love to give me. I ended up there in the end anyway, but only after being homeless after being kicked out of a previous foster home for being gay. If the state had listened to me the first time, I wouldn’t have had so many foster homes and housing instability before ending up in the same place I requested in the beginning.”

Young people who identified kin they wanted to live with voiced frustration that DCYF did not provide the information or support necessary for the kin to qualify as a placement option.



“Also helping families who aren’t registered foster parents – helping them foster a kid they want to help. I had 3 family [members] trying to keep me and my brother in La Center where we could have had an amazing future and my CPS worker gave them no chance. No tools. No contact number. Nothing.”

Young People's Recommendations

- Ask young people about their placement needs to better understand and consider their histories (including past traumas) and identities (including culture) when identifying potential placements.
- Ask young people regularly about where they want to live and strive to place them in their preferred placement.
- If young people can't be placed where they want to live, give them an explanation as to why.
- Give young people options for placement and allow them to choose.
- Strive to place young people with a family member or trusted adult(s) first.
- Provide the necessary information and support for preferred placements to become licensed.

2.2. Placement instability and transfers

Young people described how experiencing a high number of and turnover between placements negatively impacted their well-being.



“I've been to 10 foster homes, 3 group homes, a lockdown facility, and had to stay the night at offices multiple times and weekend stays at temporary foster homes.”

Young people spoke of being given only a few hours' warning before being transferred to another placement, as well as being transferred in the middle of the night.



“I would know in the car on the way there. I was in the car with the social worker until I saw the sign for Belfair and I asked, ‘Wait, am I in Belfair now?’ And she said ‘Yes, you're going to be here for 60 days.’”

These frequent, abrupt placement transfers came with limited communication around where young people were going and why.



- 32% of survey respondents reported they were not notified ahead of time about an upcoming transfer.
- 27% of survey respondents said they were not given a reason for the placement change.

This caused young people distress and instilled in them a sense of instability and uncertainty.



“Even though I got used to packing so quickly after so many times, it’s so abrupt, so fast to the point where I don’t even have time to process it.”

The sudden and uncommunicative nature of these transfers left young people feeling dehumanized and unwanted.



“They should let kids have a part in choosing where to relocate. They should be giving the kids more support during these times like activities cheering them up because it is a terrible experience to be unwanted, when the experience should be: ‘We’re going to find you your home where you belong.’”

Young people were not given the opportunity to learn about and build relationships with potential placements ahead of time.



When asked if they were given an opportunity to connect with a future placement, 62% of survey respondents reported they were not.

This meant some young people were essentially dropped off at an unfamiliar place to live with strangers.



“Give me time to adjust, make sure I didn’t need anything before just dropping me off at a stranger’s house.”

With alarming frequency, young people were not given the time to pack or properly safekeep their personal belongings.



46% of survey respondents reported that their physical belongings were not safely stored or moved with them.

For many, they were also not afforded the dignity to keep their items in containers that were not garbage bags.



“If youth were given time to know they’re being moved and where they’re being moved and make it to where they should be able to pack our own things. [...] I’ve showed up to group homes and foster homes with my things in a trash bag.”

The inability to pack their belongings meant that young people lost sentimental items and pieces of their personal histories.



“Anything I had from my childhood is gone. I have no baby pictures of me.”

Young People’s Recommendations

- Make every effort possible to reduce the number of transfers and increase placement stability.
- Limit abrupt transfers to life-threatening emergencies only.
- Notify young people as early as possible about an upcoming transfer, including a plan of what is going to happen and when.
- Communicate to young people the reason behind a placement change.
- Give young people the opportunity to speak to, meet, or visit prospective placements prior to transfer to create familiarity, ensure it is a good fit, and allow for relationship building.
- Transport young people to placements during the day, not in the middle of the night.
- Ensure young people are able to respectfully pack and keep their personal belongings, and end the use of garbage bags to store belongings.

2.3. Transitions into new placements

Once in a new placement, young people needed support to cope with grief and loss; build relationships with the people in their new placement; meet their basic needs, including hygiene, clothing, and transportation; succeed in school; and maximize the potential for the new placement to work.



“[DCYF] drove me to school because my grandmother didn’t drive, and everything was by bus. And anytime I needed to go anywhere and there wasn’t a bus, they would take me there.”

Additionally, young people wanted for DCYF to check in with them to ensure they felt safe and affirmed in their new placement.



“DCYF should conduct thoughtful check-ins frequently, particularly at the beginning of a new placement. [...] When caseworkers do check-ins, there should be a very intentional ask: ‘Are you as a person in every way feeling affirmed in your placement in all parts of your identity?’”

However, young people did not all want the same frequency or format of check-ins from their DCYF caseworkers, stressing the need for a more individualized approach.



“[DCYF] hovering was too much. I like that they check in, but it’s a lot of checking in. Sometimes nothing happens, and I’m like, ‘Oh, I just talked to you yesterday, and there’s nothing going on.’ Sometimes they ask questions and I’m forced to give answers. They should limit the times they reach out. The beginning or the end of the week would be perfect. And if the young person needs to reach out, they have that option. Sometimes we need time so that there is something to report.”

Young People’s Recommendations

- Offer emotional and mental health services and support to cope with transitions, including comfort items and help around grief and loss.
- Provide opportunities and facilitate activities for foster families and young people to get to know each other once a placement has begun.
- Provide young people with additional support around transportation, clothing, and basic hygiene needs to help them settle in their new placement.
- Communicate with young people’s previous and new schools to ensure smoother transitions.
- Check in regularly with young people, both in person and through other means of communication, to ask if they feel safe and affirmed in their new placement, and take their concerns seriously.

2.4. Shelters, facilities, and group homes

Young people described how being placed in shelters, facilities, and group homes caused them grave harm, and yet they were often placed there by DCYF, sometimes repeatedly.



“I was in a facility that had locks on doors, with alarms that go off if you open the door. You can’t open it yourself, they have to open it for you. There was barbed wire outside. I couldn’t even look out the window. It was kind of like a prison. It was just wild. There was no freedom at all. They threatened to put me in a headlock [and] said I ran away because I was running errands for prom.”

Simply the prospect of being placed in out-of-home facilities drove some young people to go to great lengths to avoid living there.



“The first out-of-home placement an after-hour social worker took me to was a shelter. [...] I was extremely afraid and was refusing to go in. It was in the middle of the night. We were parked outside the shelter all surrounded by woods. She called the police on me and two white sheriff’s officers showed up and dragged me out of the car and threw me inside the place. I got hurt. The director of the shelter [said] to the officers that it is a voluntary shelter so they could not take me in. [...] I was terrified. The officers pushed me back in the car and the social worker drove [me] to an office where I broke a razor open and inflicted many deep cuts into my wrist knowing I would be taken to the hospital.”

Some young people felt that they were placed in out-of-home facilities not just out of availability or convenience to the caseworker, but also as a punishment.



“My caseworker put me in a group home even though I had a stable home to go to. Later, I found out that it was my punishment. A few weeks later they closed the group home due to poor conditions!”

Young People’s Recommendations

- Work to never place young people in a shelter, facility, or group home.
- Provide more tangible (financial, housing, etc.) and intangible (training, counseling, relationship building) support to family-based placements to reduce reliance on shelters, facilities, or group homes.

3. How DCYF engages youth's families and loved ones

3.1. Disconnection from siblings, loved ones, and community

Upon removal and throughout their time in care, young people experienced severed relationships and disconnection from siblings, loved ones, and communities.



“I wasn’t allowed to see my dog or my younger sister for years. I wasn’t allowed to have phones, I couldn’t stay in touch with anybody.”

Some young people noted they were not provided with or allowed access to tools that would enable them to maintain connections with loved ones, leading them to find their own workarounds and hope they did not get in trouble.



“I had a little phone [...] and I hid it on me the whole time and tried to call when I was at school. I was really worried I would get caught and they would take the phone away. Being able to talk to my mom would have helped.”

Most young people reported not being supported in maintaining connections.



Among survey respondents, only 12% had received support to preserve relationships and address grief and loss after moving.

Disconnection from community and loved ones negatively impacted young people's well-being, exacerbated feelings of isolation, and had lasting impacts on their ability to nurture the relationships and support systems that would be crucial for their success as they grew older.



“I didn’t have a lot of friends, I didn’t have a lot of people to talk to about my situation. I don’t feel like I got what I needed at the time I needed it.”

Supporting young people in maintaining contact with relatives and friends didn't require a lot of effort from caseworkers but had an outsized positive impact in their lives. For one young person, it was something as simple as their caseworker nudging them to reach out to people or helping them write a text message they could send.



“They definitely facilitated that [those relationships to keep going]. It wasn't like forcing me, it was just kind of telling me, if that makes sense. I was detaching myself from people. I can be a really good person, I just detach myself. They would just be like, ‘Have you talked to duh duh duh? Have you heard from duh duh duh? Maybe you could just shoot them a text. I could word it out for you.’ I think it's just bringing it up. Unless somebody brings it up to me, I'm not going to do it. It wasn't forceful.”

Young People's Recommendations

- Strive to place siblings together.
- Ensure young people are able to maintain continued communication with family and loved ones by providing them with access to technology and concrete opportunities to stay connected.
- Ensure placement providers do not prevent young people from remaining in contact with loved ones.
- Support young people in forming and nurturing relational support systems throughout their time in foster/kinship care.
- Provide young people with opportunities to connect with peers who are also in foster/kinship care.

3.2. Kinship engagement

Young people were not asked about kin they could live with at their initial removal or throughout their time in foster care.



46% of survey respondents said they were never asked to provide names and/or contact information of kin.

It's worth noting that some young people hesitated to provide names of kin to DCYF. When asked why, young people shared that they worried DCYF would interfere in their kin's lives by

investigating them, that their kin would become involved in legal issues, or that they wanted to protect their kin from an abusive parent. Others needed more information to understand what would happen if they did share names of kin, including how that information would be used, or wanted the ability to decide where and with whom they should live.



53% of survey respondents reported that when asked, they hesitated or refused to give DCYF the names of trusted adults with whom they wanted to live.

Sometimes young people who identified kin they wanted to live with were told they could not be placed with them for reasons they felt were arbitrary and unjustified.



“I was abandoned at a hospital and was transferred over to the care of the state and a social worker came and said, ‘If there’s any family you can live with, you don’t have to go into foster care.’ [...] I called my sister and she said that she could take me in. I think they found out that I wouldn’t have my own bedroom or something and they said, ‘You can’t go.’ Something as simple as a spare bedroom.”

This was particularly disheartening, as young people who were placed with kin reported having positive experiences, including the ability to stay together with siblings, remain in their school, and live with someone they knew instead of a stranger.



“Everybody else was against my grandma and didn’t want me to go with her. I wish they understood that she was the best option for me. At the end of the day, she was tough, but she took care of me, she got up, she cooked for me.”

Those who were placed with kin lamented the lack of support provided by DCYF, arguing that caseworkers pushed for kin placements because it was a faster process, but did not consider the services kin should receive to better care for young people or the benefits young people would have access to during their time in the system.



“When I was in care I was emergency placed with my grandma, and after a couple of months I went with my aunt. At the time, kinship providers were not receiving remotely the benefits that other caregivers were. Just because I was placed with my aunt didn’t mean she magically had more money. In my situation, the state pushed

my aunt to put me through a program that was essentially adoption without terminating my mom's parental rights. Because of that, I lost out on all sorts of extended foster care and other benefits. A lot of the process is less 'so what is the best thing for the young person' and more 'so how can we get this finished as quickly as possible.'"

Young People's Recommendations

- Consistently ask young people about kin they could live or keep in contact with.
- Explain to young people how the information they provide about kin will be used.
- Give young people a choice around which kin to involve in each decision that concerns them.
- Revise requirements to allow more flexibility for kin to be a placement.
- Recognize that kin caregivers require additional resources that they deserve and need, and provide them with said support. Specifically, survey respondents named the following services and resources, in order of occurrences:
 - Financial support (x5)
 - Classes for caregivers to understand how to care for and support young people dealing with grief and trauma (x5)
 - Mental health and counseling services, including family therapy, help with family dynamics, and strategies to keep parents at a distance (x5)
 - Support with basic needs such as clothing and food, including food stamps (x4)
 - Accessible and compassionate caseworkers to reach out to and learn about resources (x3)
 - Legal assistance for kin to be able to get custody of the young person
 - Access to healthcare for the young person
 - Hair appointments for the young person
 - More information and resources translated for non-English speakers

3.3. Reunification and family preservation

Although reunification is prioritized by DCYF, young people did not consider it a priority when asked what the agency should focus on. Overall, young people had conflicting opinions about whether or not they desired reunification as an option DCYF should pursue for them.



- *“The conditions set [by DCYF] for one to return to their birth parents shouldn't be too harsh.”*
- *“Don't just focus on getting the child back to their family. This can be so damaging, especially if it's rushed.”*

Young People's Recommendations

- Ask and defer to young people about reunification being appropriate for them and their circumstances.
- Ask and defer to young people on whether their parents should be included when discussing reunification options with them.
- Share with young people what DCYF requires parents to complete before reunification would be considered or possible.

4. How DCYF listens to and represents youth

4.1. Youth voice and agency

Young people knew what they wanted and needed but were not asked. This left young people feeling like they had no voice in the very decisions that will affect their lives.



“I was never asked what I wanted, decisions were all made for me. I was never told what was happening until it was in motion, so the feeling of the rug being pulled from under me was always lingering. Everything could change in a moment and I felt like my voice didn't mean much to anyone.”

Some young people believed this was because the system is based on adultism, the belief that adults are entitled to have control over and make decisions for young people without their agreement, and solidifies the power that adults have over children and young people.



“The reality is they treat kids like objects. [...] More trainings are required. Make anti-adultism training mandatory for judges and caseworkers.”

As a result, young people found themselves in situations where they were not taken seriously or believed when they expressed their opinions and preferences.



“They believe the parents more than me.”

This included situations when young people reported concerns or grievances – including reports of abusive or harmful experiences in placements.



“I’ve always felt like young people’s grievances are pushed aside as quickly as possible and they wait until things escalate before they can act. [...] They should find the root cause of these concerns.”

In addition to asking and listening to individual young people, one young person suggested that DCYF hold listening sessions to learn from groups of young people on a regular basis.

Young People’s Recommendations

- Ask young people what they need and want, and make efforts to center their voices and honor their requests as much as—if not more than—other stakeholders.
- Provide required training on anti-adultism, sharing power, and decision-making with young people to judges, caseworkers, and DCYF staff.
- Provide channels for young people to share their concerns, including anonymously, and provide a timely resolution.
- Believe young people when they come forward with concerns, grievances, and reports of harm and abuse they are experiencing while in foster/kinship care.
- Consult with the young person when responding to the harm and abuse they report.
- Hold regular listening sessions with young people.

4.2. Interactions with staff and professionals

Young people felt there needed to be a better way for caseworkers to demonstrate care for and understanding of trauma and youth behavior. Many spoke of feeling judged or uncared for, and of caseworkers acting out of obligation with little regard for the traumatic experiences that the young person was going through.



“A caseworker feels like a parent who just doesn't give a fuck about you. And they just show up because like, ‘Oh, I gotta take care of you. I have to watch over you to make sure you're okay, but I pay these people to take care of you.’”

This was evident in the insensitive and uncompassionate way some caseworkers treated participants.



“My extended foster care case worker was very insensitive. My mom had terminal cancer and I was rightfully upset and exhausted because I was taking care of her, and she would ignore my cries for help.”

For some young people, this is related to staff competency. Young people felt as though their caseworkers were not the right people for the job, and instead were mean and thoughtless.



“It's not just the qualifications, it's also ‘do you have the mindset to want to help and not bail on the young person?’”

Young people also lamented the fact that caseworkers they worked with did not look like them, relate to them, or understand their lived experiences.



“Hire people that look like us. Hire BIPOC staff. Hire LGBTQ+ staff. Hire neurodiverse staff. Hire staff with physical disabilities. If you do this, you will see a significant shift in your ability to help young people.”

They also spoke to the fact that they believed their caseworkers had inadequate training or skills to treat young people in trauma-informed and survivor-centered ways.



“They need to be specialized [in working] with kids who deal with trauma.”

For other young people, they pointed to caseload size as an issue of ineffective support, contributing to a higher likelihood they would be moved from one caseworker to another, across counties, or between programs and placements.



“There are no caseworkers who have an open slot to take me on at the moment, but my caseworker didn’t want to take me on anymore, so [they] moved me to an extended foster care worker even though I’m not in extended foster care since I’m not 18 just yet.”

Young people also noted high staff turnover, resulting in less reliable and effective support and causing them further harm.



“The changing of caseworkers every other month is stressful and retraumatizing. You have to talk about your situation every single time.”

Young People’s Recommendations

- Make it a priority for DCYF staff and placement providers to interact with young people in developmentally appropriate and trauma-responsive ways.
- Hire caseworkers who listen, care, and are ready to do the work.
- Hire caseworkers who have shared lived experiences or identities with young people, including 2SLGBTQIA+, neurodiverse, and racially/ethnically diverse staff, as well as staff with disabilities.
- Have more qualified and trained staff with the skills to work with trauma survivors.
- Ensure staff have reasonable caseloads, sufficient time, supportive supervision, and competitive market pay to improve quality of services and reduce turnover.
- Evaluate and support the mental health and overall well-being of DCYF caseworkers.
- Enable access to more than one DCYF staff member, such as a caseworker and mental health specialist, so young people are not represented or supported by only one person.

4.3. Family group planning meetings

Not all young people attended their family group planning meetings, also referred to as Shared Planning Meetings (SPM) or Family Team Decision Meetings (FTDM).



Most survey respondents (70%) attended at least some or all family group planning meetings.

When those who didn't were asked what they would have needed to attend their family group planning meetings, they shared needing to be informed of and invited to those meetings; transportation; access to the internet and a device (phone or laptop); clothes to wear to the meetings; or the ability to go with an adult they know and trust.



30% of survey respondents never felt prepared to attend their family group planning meetings, and 26% felt prepared only some of the time.

Young people also wished they had been made aware of what those meetings entailed and what was discussed or decided in them. Oftentimes, not knowing what to expect could be anxiety inducing, resulting in young people not feeling comfortable or prepared to attend.



“Now that I’m learning more about children [as part of my college education], I wish they had a bit more communication with me. I feel like my grandmother and the adults were involved, but not me. And I feel like I was mature, and I wasn’t respected in the level that I should’ve been. I was out of the loop. I’m not sure if my anxiety developed because of that, but I have anxiety, and it would have helped to not have all that uncertainty.”

Some young people wanted the opportunity beforehand to decide whether to attend the meeting, to share their thoughts and opinions ahead of time, or discuss how to speak up during the family group planning meeting.



“There should be a pre-meeting with the child letting them know [about the proceedings at the meeting] so they feel like they have control on whether they do and don't want to go.”

Broadly speaking, young people reported that family group planning meetings were usually held at a time and location convenient for them.



Among survey respondents, 37% said always and 46% said sometimes when asked if meetings were held at a convenient location. When asked if the time of the meeting was convenient, 46% said yes and 35% said sometimes.

Young people reported that family group planning meetings were attended by a wide range of stakeholders. The majority said caseworkers attended, as well as kin caregivers, parents, other trusted adults (such as an attorney, therapist, family friend, or foster parent), and CASAs. However, they did not always have a say in who should attend those meetings, and when they did express their preferences about who should be there, those preferences were not always considered.



Of survey respondents who expressed preferences of who should attend the meetings, 27% said their preferences were never considered and 42% said their preferences were sometimes considered.

Young people who attended family group planning meetings spoke to the fact that they had little say in family group planning meetings and didn't know why certain decisions were made.



“I wish I had a voice during family group meetings and I wish someone had told me, ‘This is how we’ve considered what you actually said and this is why we’ve done/not done X.’”

When asked how to improve family group planning meetings, survey respondents made a number of suggestions, including: considering, prioritizing, and responding to the opinions of youth; reducing the pressure on the young person; sharing information before meetings about what will be discussed; scheduling the meeting such that everyone is able to attend; holding the meetings in a welcoming environment; allowing more representation and voice from family/kin; ensuring disagreements among DCYF staff and professionals are worked out beforehand rather than attempting to resolve them during the meeting; and allowing for and respecting the decision of a young person who opts out of participation.



“I think that the main point is to communicate with the youth in a manner in which they are not placed in the spotlight with all the pressure of having to agree to something based on the influence of others. I think it is also important to pay close attention to the child’s body language and bring them into the conversation as opposed to letting the caseworker [speak] for the youth.”

Young people noted the importance of having the option to speak or not speak and having that choice respected.



“Make sure to consider how seeing family and discussing family issues can be retraumatizing for some young people. Respect decisions to opt out.”

Young People’s Recommendations

- Invite young people to family group planning meetings and prioritize their attendance when planning logistics (location, time, etc).
- Explain to young people what each family group planning meeting is about and what decisions are to be made.
- Provide the preparation and support young people need to attend family group planning meetings. Specifically, survey respondents recommended the following support and improvements:
 - Access to transportation.
 - Access to the internet and a device (phone or laptop).
 - Clothes to wear to the meetings.
 - The ability to express preferences on who should attend the meetings.
 - The ability to go to meetings with people they know and trust.
 - Sharing information before meetings on what will be discussed.
 - Scheduling the meetings such that everyone is able to attend.
 - Holding the meetings in a welcoming environment.
 - Access to resources and information that would help young people make informed decisions.
- Consider, prioritize, and respond to the perspective and requests young people express in family group planning meetings.
- Recognize that family group planning meetings can be retraumatizing for young people and respect their choice about whether or not to participate or speak in the meetings.

4.4. Court hearings

For some young people, attending a court hearing was one of the few spaces where they witnessed decisions being made about their lives firsthand. However, they rarely got to speak in court.



“The court date [...] was the only decision process I was a part of.”

Young people wanted options for how they could participate in a court hearing, whether speaking in person, sharing in written form, or divulging through a trusted adult.



“Talking in court may be super intimidating, maybe offering to write a letter to the court or having someone such as a trusted adult help youth.”

Young people didn't believe that court proceedings had their best interests at heart, particularly when they did not have access to effective counsel or advocates.



“I don't really think I got to speak much for myself, there were a lot of people speaking for me. And I like to speak about myself, I feel comfortable doing that. I don't even think I got to speak at court, I was just there. I would have told them I wanted to go with my grandma. I wish they understood that. Thankfully my dad was able to get her a lawyer who was able to advocate on behalf of my grandmother.”

Young People's Recommendations

- Allow young people to participate in court or mediation proceedings if they choose, in a format that is comfortable for them – whether by speaking, in written form, or through a trusted adult.
- Provide young people with opportunities for appropriate and capable legal representation and advocacy during court hearings.

4.5. Case files

Young people disagreed with how their case files portrayed or described them, commenting how those files reflected the subjective perceptions their caseworkers had of them.



“The caseworkers build another character of you than who you are, [...] because there’s a lot of things that caseworkers have said that are not even true. It also affects you in the future because I had the opportunity to get adopted when I was 16 [but they] didn’t want to adopt me because of what was written on my file.”

They attributed this to the widespread biases that caseworkers act on and against which they have little power to defend themselves.



“It’s really terrifying to know that once it’s written and once it’s put into your case file, nobody’s going to take it out and it’s going to affect you for the rest of your time in care and there’s nothing you can do about it. Because nobody cares. Honestly, you know, you could sit there and you can fight and fight and fight all you want. It didn’t really matter how upset you were because at the end of the day, all you were doing when you got upset was kind of just prove their point—for lack of a better term—when they would label you as unstable or super emotional or irrational.”

When asked about the ability to tell their own histories, some young people wanted the ability to review what was written in their case files.



“It is important that we get the chance to review what’s actually written in our case files.”

This is especially important as very few young people had the opportunity to do so.



Only 12% of survey respondents reported they had the opportunity to develop and verify their own history and information.

However, others believed their story would be told and misrepresented by others no matter what, so they gave up on the idea that their version would matter or make any difference. As such, they’d rather not care and give up their agency than be anxious about when and how that agency would unfailingly be stripped away.



“No matter my story, there will always be somebody else who will tell it. I can talk about my feelings towards it or leave stuff out so that people don’t treat me differently, but it will always get out there and be told by a case manager or counselor. [...] Even if [telling my own story] were an option, this would not be something I would care about, sadly.”

Young People’s Recommendations

- Offer young people the opportunity to review, respond to, and correct – in writing – the information in their case files.

5. How DCYF treats youth of different identities and experiences

5.1. Disability competency

Young people reported being subjected to sanism and neuro-discrimination, either by being ignored, misdiagnosed, or – for those with mental health diagnoses – by being dismissed because of their diagnoses.



“The foster system tried to diagnose me without actually taking me to the doctor. Like they tried to get me meds for ADHD when that’s not what I have. So they put me in a home with mostly ADHD kids and it messed me up.”

Young people also found they were not taught about mental health in ways that could have been helpful in understanding themselves and advocating for what they needed to thrive.



“I just did a survey and I’ve learned so much about my own mental illness over the last few years. A lot of that information would have been very helpful to me, especially in high school. I knew that I had an IEP [Individual Education Plan] but I didn’t understand. I was in foster care a lot of my life, [and] I was always told that I was manipulative. I didn’t understand a lot of my behaviors until I was like 25.”

Young People's Recommendations

- Educate and train placement providers and DCYF staff to understand mental health and how it manifests emotionally, behaviorally, and socially among young people.
- Provide mental health education to young people so that they can recognize and ask for the help they need.

5.2. Cultural competency

Participants spoke to a pattern of youth of color being placed in the homes of white families and experiencing discrimination and continuous microaggressions from placement providers.



“I wish I was connected/informed about more events for my ethnic group. I felt like I lost all touch with my ethnic/culture background. My foster family also had a lot of microaggressions towards me and other kids of color in the home. I felt like sometimes they were using me for being ethnic to look like ‘white saviors.’ They would post about how they were taking care of me and how I was such an unfortunate kid.”

Young people reported that their cultural identities, racial identities, religion, spiritual practices, language, and/or other traditions were not considered in decisions about where they were placed by DCYF.



Only 16% of survey respondents felt that their cultural identities were considered in decisions about where they were placed.

This left young people feeling disconnected from their cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds, which impacted their nutrition, body care and appearance, and sense of connection and belonging.



“I’m Pakistani, and my mom used to cook for me. As soon as I went into foster care, I felt like no one had any knowledge about my background or my culture. I was put into a white foster home, and immediately lost contact with my culture. I wish someone told my foster family, ‘It’s important to know about and value her culture.’”

Native youth expressed wanting support to (re)connect with their indigenous culture and peers.



“I remember at that time being interested in reconnecting with that part of my [Native American] culture, but they didn’t really help around that. I wish they helped me with that, like being able to go to powwows, I’ve only been to a few, I wish I did more.”

Youth experienced misalignment between their religious and spiritual practices and those of their placements.



“I was in a religious placement even though I wasn’t religious. My caseworker took it upon herself to tell me I shouldn’t be with a religious person given how I looked as a masculine-feminine person who wears gauges, and that I wasn’t dressing like the Christian Catholic family girl they would want to see.”

This led many to feel that the religious beliefs of their placement providers were imposed on them.



“I don’t know if this is something we could even legally do, but I feel very strongly that foster parents should not be allowed to impose religious or any other kind of beliefs on young people at all. If a young person is interested, then maybe. I think a lot of foster parents are like, ‘This is who I am, then this is who you’re going to be under my roof.’”

Young People’s Recommendations

- Prioritize placing young people in placements that share their cultural and racial/ethnic identities and religion.
- Provide robust racial equity and cultural competency training to DCYF staff.
- When living in placements that don’t share the same cultural, racial/ethnic, and religious identities, provide youth opportunities to stay connected to those identities and care for their specific cultural needs.

- Support Native youth in (re)connecting with their culture and peers.
- Place young people in placements that do not compromise their own religious practices or impose religious beliefs different from their own.
- Offer and encourage educational opportunities for placements to become more culturally competent.

5.3. 2SLGBTQIA+ competency

2SLGBTQIA+ youth were discriminated against in their placements or by DCYF staff. Some young people reported being subjected to or witnessing physical and other forms of abuse, particularly in institutional placements, because of the survivor’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity (SOGI).



“I experienced a lot of transphobia from social workers. To be honest I don’t really think they care about your gender identity nor do they care about your sexual orientation too.”

Young people reported that their sexual orientation or gender identity were not considered in decisions about where they were placed by DCYF.



Of the survey respondents who disclosed that their sexual orientation and/or gender identity was public and shared with parents or DCYF, only 19% felt their identities were considered in placement decisions.

Some young people believed DCYF did not provide the right training to ensure placement providers and DCYF staff were 2SLGBTQIA+ competent.



“I think that the department information about the LGBTQ+ is not a mandatory training, it’s optional. [...] I don’t know if people can understand people’s inherent value and can help empathize and support folks.”

The lack of queer and trans representation in foster/kinship care placements and among DCYF staff meant young people had little exposure to the education they needed to explore and understand their own emerging sexual orientations and gender identities.



“As a trans woman of color, it has to be noted that there was no one like me, there was no adult I could identify with. There were very few queer people in the system. There are no resources geared towards me as a trans person, as a Native person, or as a South Asian person. I didn’t see that for many other communities. The cis hetero and religious communities are allowed to take up space, but I was never able to find spaces for 2SLGBTQIA+ folks.”

Young People’s Recommendations

- Protect and support 2SLGBTQIA+ youth against queerphobia and transphobia from placement providers and DCYF staff.
- Prioritize placing 2SLGBTQIA+ youth in homes and communities where they feel safe and affirmed..
- Mandate required initial and ongoing 2SLGBTQIA+ training for placement providers and DCYF staff.
- Provide young people with expansive sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) education and opportunities to safely explore and find themselves.

5.4. Affirmation of identities

Young people were not asked by caseworkers if they felt affirmed in the placements where they were living.



“When caseworkers do check-ins, there should be a very intentional ask: ‘Are you as a person in every way feeling affirmed in your placement in all parts of your identity?’ I think that there are a lot of situations where a young person may not speak up about this but need to in their placement to feel safe where they are.”

Some young people reported that the lack of affirmation of their identities forced them into acting differently, hiding who they are, and not living their lives as authentically as they wished they could in order to please others or out of concern for their own safety.



“They placed me to go to a religious home who forced me to wear a dress [as a trans person] and go to church, even though that’s not my religion.”

Because they didn’t feel seen and valued by the child welfare system, young people were conditioned to not value themselves.



“They didn’t value me, so I didn’t value me.”

Young people felt as though they couldn’t speak out against discrimination or mistreatment out of fear of retaliation.



“It feels like you can’t speak out against racism, microaggressions, or mistreatment because if you do, you’ll just be retaliated against or thrown around and put into another home. You get scared and don’t say anything because you don’t want to keep moving. You settle.”

Some young people also mentioned wanting DCYF to know that their identities can change and shift through time, and that seeking to affirm and understand who they are should be a continuous effort rather than a one-time exercise.



“Sometimes certain identities can change over time. It is important for the state to be able to support folks at the different stages. Have there be options.”

Young People’s Recommendations

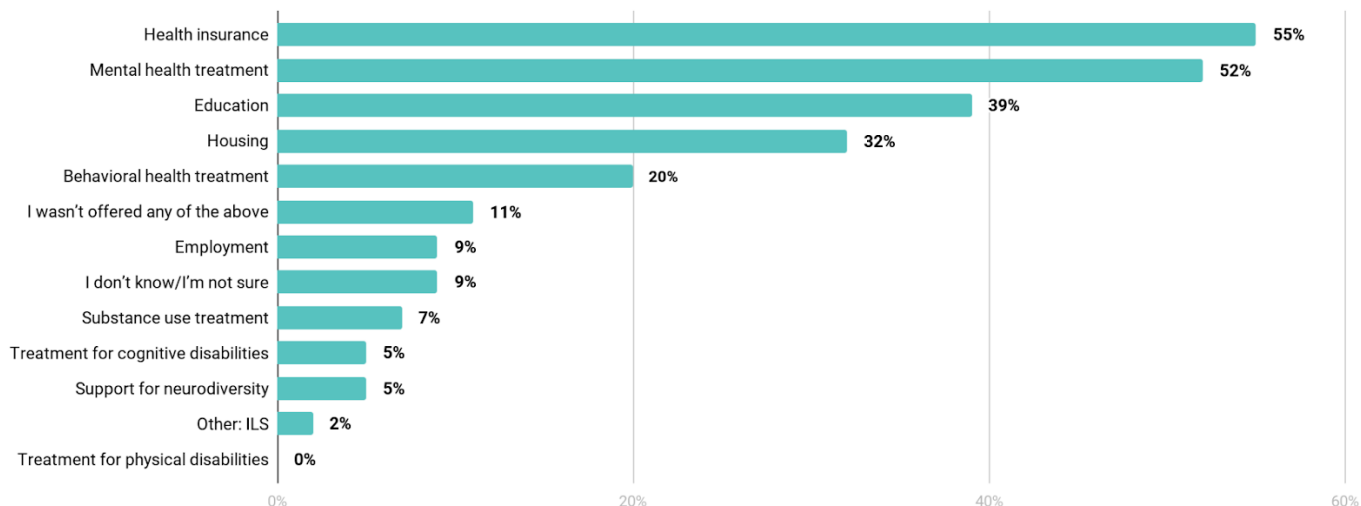
- Ensure young people feel safe to be themselves.
- Offer secure and non-retaliatory avenues for young people to speak out against and report discrimination or mistreatment.
- Seek to continuously understand young people’s shifting identities throughout their time in foster/kinship care.

6. How DCYF meets youth’s needs

6.1. Services received

Broadly speaking, young people reported receiving a wide range of referrals and services during their time in foster/kinship care.

Percentage of young people who received the following services and referrals...



However, young people expressed they faced barriers to receiving DCYF support and services, including lack of information on what supports were available to them; what services they were eligible for; long waiting periods; and lack of transportation to access relevant resources.

When young people were asked how DCYF should improve its services and referrals, the overwhelming majority wanted DCYF to better explain and provide information about all possible services that could meet their different needs, and to do so in respectful and consistent ways.



“[DCYF should] communicate with the youth regarding their needs, as well as let the youth know what is available to them. I was never aware of all the benefits that were available to me or at what times. Oftentimes when I was told, it was last minute or too late to receive them.”

With regards to the appropriateness of services they were offered, most young people felt that they did not receive the support they needed. Some young people lamented the fact that rural areas don't have enough resources available.



55% of survey respondents said that they did not feel DCYF provided them with the support and referrals they needed.

Young People's Recommendations

- Train DCYF staff on how to identify available resources and connect young people to them.
- Proactively and consistently share with young people what services and resources they have at their disposal, including potentially providing a website that houses all necessary information.
- Provide a more expansive suite of support and services to young people that meet their specific needs. Specifically, survey respondents wished they had been offered the following services (in no particular order):
 - Family engagement support, including opportunities to connect with fathers, and parent visitation
 - Counseling and mental health services, including services beyond talk therapy and grief support groups
 - Medical care, including care for diabetes and dentistry
 - Housing, including independent living options
 - Educational support, including tutoring, educational assistance, and college support
 - School supplies
 - Extracurricular activities
 - Employment skills
 - Transportation
 - Clothing
 - Hair care
 - Legal aid
- Work to meet the needs of young people in rural or remote areas with fewer available resources.

6.2. Basic needs

Participants spoke about the fact that their foster parents did not spend the stipend they received on the youth's needs, including meeting their basic needs by purchasing appropriate hygiene products, clothing, and hair care products.



“My foster family would get \$700–\$800 from the state to use in my needs. Those needs were not being met and that money was being pocketed by my foster family every month. DCYF needs to ask for receipts and check with kids to see if they are receiving the benefits of these funds. I was required to work every day after work and then use that paycheck to provide for myself rather than my foster parents meeting my needs because they were receiving funds for this monthly.”

This was particularly true when it came to culturally specific hair care needs.



“I remember how much DCYF fought me on getting my hair done because it isn't cheap. They wouldn't cover [it].”

Young People's Recommendations

- Ensure that stipends received by foster families are being spent to cover the basic needs of young people.
- Ask young people if their basic needs, such as hygiene items, clothing, hair care products, and others, are being met in their placement.
- Require placement providers to give young people a regular spending allowance from the foster care stipend.

6.3. Health needs

Most young people felt that their medical and mental needs were fully or partially met. However, their preferences for treatment services related to their health were not considered by DCYF.



- 33% of survey respondents reported DCYF did not meet their current medical and mental health needs.
- 26% of survey respondents felt DCYF never considered their preferences related to their own medical treatment, and 60% felt their preferences were considered some or most of the time.

Young people wished for better mental health services and better mental health care, particularly in a way that prioritized the self-determination of youth in their own care.



“I feel like caseworkers should not be forcing kids, especially when it comes to mental health, to go to therapy. I guess they believed something was wrong with me. They wanted me to go to therapy, and at the same time they called me ‘crazy.’ I’ve hated therapy for such a long time, and because of that I threw away taking care of my mental health and it got worse as an adult.”

In particular, young people wanted mental health resources that were consistent and dependable – unlike providers they worked with, who had high turnover. They also wanted more individualized care, not hotlines.



“Imagine being put on hold when you’re calling the suicide line.”

Young people also deplored the reliance on institutional residential facilities, which they felt were chosen as placement out of convenience rather than their ability to provide the help young people needed and deserved.



“They just dump kids in psych wards and don’t care because they don’t have responsibility for the kids when they are hospitalized, so it’s their easy way out.”

Young people felt that their physical health needs, particularly those related to preventative health care, were neglected, which they considered akin to a safety issue. It was particularly important to some when understanding that medical neglect is a form of abuse and neglect the child welfare system purportedly exists to correct when inflicted by caregivers.



“A lot of kids are not aware of the preventative health services they are qualified for. I was not aware of the checks that I should have been doing and that I was qualified for, like going to the dentist every 6 months. I only did physical checks during PE [Physical Education], but aside from that, I was relying on home remedies. I needed to remove molars and I had cavities that could have been prevented with more regular visits to the dentist. [...] I had migraines because I didn’t have glasses for a while. When I told the case manager, she was like, ‘Oh, you could have picked an eye doctor.’ That should have been a known factor. I just started to wear glasses now.”

Young people also noted they wanted their preferences around physical health providers to be considered.



“I did not know you could request a gender preference when seeing a doctor for a physical. [...] I would have been more comfortable.”

Young people expressed they did not have appropriate sexual education and wanted to learn more about sexual health.



“Don’t get me started on that stuff. The good teachers, they can’t show you condoms. He made a condom out of a sock. Until I brought it to the table, I’d never heard of dental dams or anything about queer sex ed. It really goes to how queer young folks get into really dangerous situations because of lack of education.”

Young people noted how rapidly health-related information can change, indicating young people needed this education to begin at a young age and continue as they grew older.



“Young people are not receiving proper sexual health education. In the world of medicine and health, things keep changing. We even have PrEP and PEP that didn’t exist a few years back. It is important that they get to be educated as much as possible.”

Young people also expressed they lacked proper education on sexual assault and abuse, as well as on self-harm awareness.



“I was sexually assaulted while in foster care. I also struggled with self-harm. And there’s no education or support around that.”

Young people further wanted to be properly educated about drugs and harm reduction, and have easy access to harm reduction supplies.



“When you’re told about safety, what do they tell you it’s about? What does safety actually mean? Harm reduction and knowledge. I wasn’t aware of these things until I lost the love of my life to a fentanyl overdose.”

Young People’s Recommendations

- Provide individualized, consistent, and non-coercive mental health services and support to young people. Additionally, survey respondents added that DCYF should:
 - Provide counseling with therapists that share young people’s identities.
 - Inform young people about their rights to confidentiality and privacy.
- Preemptively inform young people of the preventative and routine health care services they are entitled to receive.
- Explain to young people what health insurance benefits they have access to and, if specialized providers are not covered, identify ways to make them accessible.
- Ensure affordability, transportation, and other concerns are not barriers to young people accessing health services.
- Consider young people’s preferences on what healthcare providers they want to care for them.
- Follow up with young people to ensure they are keeping up with their medical and mental health needs.
- Provide young people with ongoing education about and supplies for sexual health, sexual harm, self-harm, and drug-related harm reduction.
- Train placement providers on the range of young people’s health needs and the health issues they face.

6.4. Education needs

Young people did not always feel that their preferences for where to go to school for K-12 were considered by DCYF.



51% of survey respondents reported that DCYF never considered their preferences regarding where they wanted to go to school.

Young people described the negative consequences that came with having to change schools, which impacted their emotional and mental well-being as well as their educational attainment and higher education prospects.



“It needs to be better than ripping kids from their friends at school. When you’re going to four different high schools, you need help with your education. I graduated but I had to do everything I could to graduate with no help from my caseworker. [I had to do] summer school two years in a row just to make my GPA higher for the years I couldn’t keep it past a D, because I had no support.”

Young people reported that frequent school changes impacted not only their education, but also their social networks.



“If we have a future in the school we’re at, why take away all those opportunities and friendships just because the family there didn’t want you?”

With regards to higher education, young people yearned for support navigating college and federal student aid applications. This was particularly true for those who didn’t have family members that could have modeled these application processes, as well as for those who had to move between schools while in high school and therefore did not have consistent access to school counselors to help them.



“I didn’t have close family or relatives who went to college. I didn’t know how to go about financial aid, dorms, campus mail, or how any of that functioned. I needed help in navigating going to college and sharing information, especially FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid] which is the hardest piece to understand.

I wanted someone to explain to me, ‘This is your responsibility,’ and help with, ‘This is how to reach out’ or ‘This is the type of email you should send to the school.’”

Young people specified that this support should be provided whether or not they opt into extended foster care.



“I know they offer some funding for people who go to college. When I reached out to the caseworker to see if I would qualify for the program, I was told I didn’t because I’m not in extended foster care. And I’m not going to community college so I could use all the help I can get. But I’m not able to get any support.”

Young People’s Recommendations

- Strive to maintain the same school for young people.
- Provide tutoring, credit tracking, and educational support to young people as they navigate the impact of school disruptions.
- Provide young people with referrals and letters of recommendation that help secure opportunities for education post-high school.
- Provide young people with college and financial aid application support, irrespective of whether or not they opt into extended foster care.

6.5. Employment and financial needs

Young people expressed interest in having more support to access employment and lead financially healthy lives. Such support ranges from addressing emergent needs such as resume building and job searching to providing continuing guidance related to paying bills, managing credit, building savings, and investing money.



“We need more advanced financial training so folks can grow wealth beyond just access to housing. Another thing that would be helpful would have been how to invest money. All those TikTok bros with crypto say, ‘Oh, it’s so easy!’ But it’s not that easy. [...] It’s really complicated.”

More specifically, helping young people understand and pay their taxes emerged as a critical area of support, given the potentially significant negative consequences it could lead to.



“This year was the first time that I filed taxes and I’ve been working since I was 14. No one explained to me that, when someone was claiming me on taxes, I could still file taxes. I missed out on a lot. [...] Because I owe taxes for so long I was not able to pay. I dropped out of school because I was going to age out of foster care. Do I spend the last term in school working so I can pay for housing or do I stay in school and get a degree? I was not able to go back to school because I didn’t know how to do my taxes which meant that I didn’t know how to do FAFSA so I couldn’t do anything. I ended up dropping out of college.”

Those who relied on income streams from independent contractor work – including when engaged for their lived experience by child welfare actors – found themselves facing challenges filing their taxes.



“It’s important [...] to consider and serve those who have taxable (over \$600) income as an ‘independent contractor.’ Most opportunities for young people to contribute to systems change are that of stipended volunteers rather than employees. [...] If DCYF wants young people to provide leadership (giving more than one afternoon or evening) in systems change conversations and efforts, [they should] support these young leaders in finding low-cost tax support that can actually help stipended volunteers.”

Young People’s Recommendations

- Guide young people in the process of building and leading healthy financial lives.
- Hold financial education sessions, including around saving, investing, and budgeting.
- Provide young people with support in navigating filing taxes, particularly those earning income as independent contractors.

6.6. Housing needs

Transitional living facilities for youth who are aging out were not adequate or supportive.



“I currently am already living in an aging out place. It is terrible, let me tell you. It’s supposed to be a place for young people to be able to get a job and get on their feet. A lot of people here are relapsing, going through worse times.”

One participant lamented the lack of timely, alternative options for housing for those who are about to age out. For many, this led to housing insecurity and homelessness.



“When I aged out I was awarded a voucher, but the problem is that you’re not able to use it or look for a place to stay until after you turn 18. And unfortunately what comes with that is that there are no immediate resources except shelters.”

Across the board, youth stated they were not provided with information about the housing opportunities they have at their disposal in a timely manner, especially when qualification and eligibility thresholds, application timelines, and potential waitlists were taken into account.



“Every part of being in foster care should be DCYF enrolling you in Section 8. I didn’t know about the FYI [Foster Youth to Independence] or IYHP [Independent Youth Housing Program] programs until a month or two ago. And now I’m getting to the point that I’m aging out of extended foster care. This is something that I could have accessed from age 18 and now I’m racing against the clock. They told me you don’t qualify for FYI, because you’re not potentially homeless. When my lawyer reached out to me to see if there’s anything I wanted to add, I started stressing the severity [...] then my lawyer told me that I could go to FYI. It seemed like the timing was very coincidental.”

Young People’s Recommendations

- Inform and guide youth towards affordable housing opportunities before they become eligible so they are able to enroll as early as possible.
- Provide mandatory homelessness diversion training to DCYF staff.

6.7. Aging out support

Overall, young people reported not feeling prepared for their transition into adulthood.



35% of survey respondents reported they do not feel they have what they need to be prepared for their transition into adulthood and 44% said they somewhat feel they do.

Particularly, young people felt precipitated into an abrupt cut off point the day they aged out, after which they were left to fend for themselves.



“After leaving EFC [extended foster care], I was cut off from what felt like any little resource I had, I no longer had a caseworker to ask questions. My ILP [Independent Living Program] manager was gone, my funding was gone. I got no notice or help preparing for this cut off of everything. I was not prepared when it came to housing and to this day still struggle immensely to make my half of rent.”

Some people felt slighted by the fact they could have accessed resources before aging out had they been informed about them.



“I did not know that I could get gift cards to buy groceries and clothes until the last month in EFC before I exited out. Though it can be a bit out of control, gift cards to buy food and necessities should be provided and [youth should be] informed about them.”

Young people expressed they needed a wide range of support to prepare them for this transition, but most importantly they wanted caseworkers to be brutally honest and manage their expectations for what's to come.



“I’ll say this though: The best caseworkers I had were straight up and real. They didn’t bullshit. They knew this sucked and didn’t sugarcoat hard information. Truth, realness mixed with empathy, support, and building trust through hearing me and giving me agency in my own life was the only reason I made it to be a successful adult now. Do more of that.”

Sadly, young people were made to believe they were being “spoon fed” by the system. This rhetoric ultimately led many to untether themselves from a system of support they needed in an effort to prove they could be independent from it.



“I did not opt into extended care because I wanted to be on my own and do things on my own. [But] there’s nothing wrong with using resources and asking for help. Just because you’re out of care doesn’t mean your mental health isn’t important anymore.”

Young people expressed wanting to extend the age for exiting foster care, as well as the opportunity to come back and access support after they aged out.



“We deserve peace once we’re 18, not stress about where we will live or how we will support ourselves.”

[Substitute Senate Bill 6222](#), passed in 2018, changed state law to allow young people to exit and re-enter care as many times as necessary until they are 21. One young person referenced this law.



“A few years ago, this recommendation was enacted into legislative policy. I think supporting caseworkers to understand this policy and create accountability mechanisms to foster implementation of this policy is the next step forward.”

One young person suggested that the extension should be brought up to the age of 26.



“Extend the age out to 26. We never were taught to iron our clothes, let alone to do taxes [or] make doctors appointments. Give us more time to grow up and be there with us. Help us be better adults so that we don't follow this pattern anymore. We want to be good parents to our children. How can we when we have no mothers or fathers? Be that for us.”

Young People’s Recommendations

- Collect data on the needs of aging-out youth, and provide support accordingly. Specifically, survey respondents shared they needed the following:
 - Financial support, including safety net funds for youth in emergency situations
 - Financial education

- Housing support
 - Parenting support and child care
 - Employment and career support
 - Education funding
 - Mentorship
 - Life skills (including how to dress for the weather, grocery shopping, learning to drive, writing emails, using Zoom, and more)
 - A suitcase for personal belongings
 - Hygiene and care items
- Give young people timely referrals and information about the range of resources they can access, including emailed and hard copies of resources specific to their location.
 - Push against the harmful rhetoric that young people should feel bad or ashamed for receiving help and using resources from the system.
 - Increase the age limit for extended foster care.
 - Allow young people who age out of care to opt in to extended foster care.
 - Inform young people and caseworkers of the state legislation allowing young people to exit and re-enter care as many times as necessary until age 21, and create accountability mechanisms to ensure it is implemented.

Appendix

Youth engagement approach

Objectives

The objectives of the project were to engage young people involved with Washington state's foster/kinship care system in order to hear about their experiences and elicit their feedback and recommendations on how DCYF can better support and meet their needs.

Methods

The project utilized a combination of two methods: a series of listening sessions and a survey:

Four listening sessions employing participatory activities were conducted. This included three in-person sessions with young people in Eastern (Spokane), Central (Yakima), and Western (Seattle) Washington, and one virtual session.

A survey with both quantitative and qualitative questions was conducted and disseminated statewide. The survey was offered in English and Spanish.

Engagement scope

The topics and questions covered in the listening sessions and survey were informed by the priorities named in the settlement agreement (Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families, n.d.). Attachment A of the agreement specified that the engagement process should elicit input on system improvements regarding kinship engagement, family group planning, and referrals and transitions (National Center for Youth Law, n.d.).

This initial scope was complemented by additional lines of inquiry suggested by lived experts, state and community-based organizations in Washington state who work directly with young people in foster/kinship care, and representatives from DCYF during a co-creation meeting held at the onset of the project.

Lastly, listening session participants were invited to add topics for discussion at the beginning of each session, and survey respondents were asked multiple open-ended questions to ensure they could opine about additional topics that were important to them.

Ethical review

The project plan, scope, and related materials – including survey questions, listening session agendas, and outreach and recruitment materials – were submitted to and approved by the Washington State Institutional Review Board (WSIRB) following approval from DCYF’s Office of Innovation, Alignment, and Accountability Research Review Committee.

Outreach and participant recruiting

Participants were recruited to engage in the listening sessions and the survey through an open call shared on social media, as well as more targeted outreach through Think of Us’s networks and via community-based organizations who serve young people in foster/kinship care across Washington State.

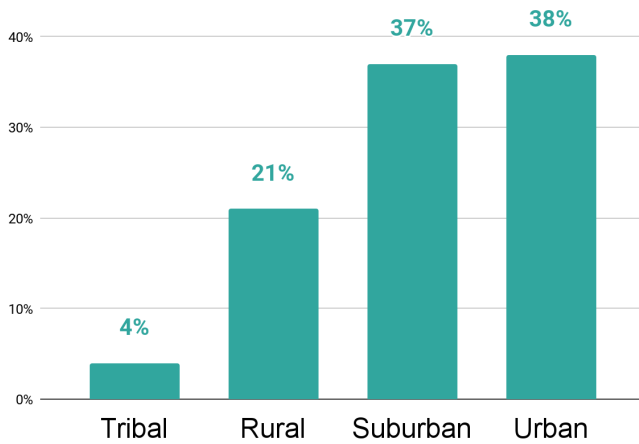
Young people were eligible if they were 14 years or older and had been in the foster care system in Washington state within the past five years to aid with recall of their experiences. All young people 18 years and above were required to sign an informed consent and all those aged 14-17 years signed an assent form with guardian consent prior to participating.

Engaged participants

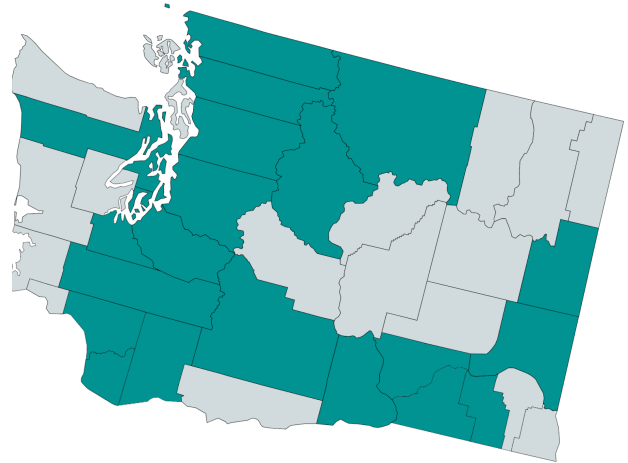
A total of 21 young people participated in the in-person and virtual listening sessions. A total of 86 respondents started the survey, 38 of whom were screened out based on eligibility criteria, and 48 respondents completed the full survey.

Participants hailed from a wide range of geographic locations to ensure representation of youth who experienced foster/kinship care in urban, suburban and rural areas, as well as on tribal reservations. Additionally, survey respondents were able to indicate the counties where they resided while in foster/kinship care. There were 21 counties specified: Benton, Chelan, Clark, Columbia, Cowlitz, Franklin, Jefferson, King, Kitsap, Lewis, Okanogan, Pierce, Skagit, Skamania, Snohomish, Spokane, Thurston, Walla Walla, Whatcom, Whitman, and Yakima counties.

Geographic location of participants while in foster/kinship care



*graph represents listening session and survey participants



*map represents survey respondents only

Furthermore, to ensure the young people who were engaged reflected the diversity sought after in the settlement agreement, participants were given the option to self-identify as the following groups of people: youth who identify as 2SLGBTQIA+; youth from marginalized racial and ethnic groups; youth with physical disabilities; youth who have cognitive disabilities; and/or youth who are neurodiverse.

Percentage of participants who self identified as...

Youth from marginalized races/ethnicities	Youth who are neurodiverse	2SLGBTQIA+ youth	Youth with cognitive disabilities	Youth with physical disabilities
55%	47%	39%	17%	8%

Representation of findings

Throughout this project we used a *narrative inquiry approach*, a research methodology that honors lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding. Narrative inquiry is a “profoundly relational form of inquiry” (Clandinin, 2013) that informed our approach of listening to young people share the experiences that have been of most significance to them and creating space for them as they live and tell their stories.

Narrative inquiry also grounded the way we represented those lived experiences in this report. We applied a decolonial lens to our research and strove to include all voices, especially those who are multiply marginalized, in addition to the research tradition of testimonies; the narrative of witnessing (Beverley, 2004) as a means through which oral evidence carries “a formality” and “a notion that truth is being revealed under oath” (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Quotes are extensively featured throughout the report to center young people’s voices and first-hand accounts. They were taken directly from the listening session notes, taken verbatim by notetakers, as well as from open-ended answers to the survey.

Qualitative findings were written up after looking for patterns and themes as well as contrasts and tensions in the raw data. All experiences are represented, as the aim of narrative inquiry is not to find one generalizable truth but to “sing up many truths/narratives” (Higgs et. al., 2001).

Quantitative survey findings are represented in percentages of the total respondents who answered each question rather than absolute numbers to account for questions in the survey that were optional.

Recommendations compiled in this report are a direct reflection of the recommendations shared by young people in the listening sessions and the survey.

Participant review

After the team wrote an initial draft of this report, all young people engaged through the listening sessions or survey who had voluntarily provided their contact information were invited to participate in a review process, where they were asked to review the draft and check the findings and recommendations for resonance and accuracy.

Reviewers received the complete initial draft of the report along with an abbreviated version that included the summary findings only. Of the 69 young people who participated in the listening sessions or the survey, 36 (52%) completed the participant review. Following this, the team consolidated the feedback from reviewers and reflected it throughout the report.

Project team

The team included four facilitators and researchers from Think of Us, who had a combination of lived experience in foster care; professional expertise in child welfare; training and

specialization in youth-centered and trauma-responsive participatory research and facilitation; and prior crisis response or social work background.

Observers

In three of the four listening sessions, a contractor working on other aspects of the settlement agreement stakeholder process was represented and served as a notetaker. A representative from Disability Rights Washington or Children's Rights attended three out of four listening sessions as an observer.

Limitations

In order to move implementation of the settlement forward, the project was limited to a 60-day timeline. Given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed and the fact that the project sought to engage minors, this short timeline was further challenged by the need to seek and obtain IRB approval which, although granted as efficiently as possible, left the project team a very short window to conduct community outreach and recruit young people. While outreach efforts included more than 50 youth-serving organizations statewide - including those who work specifically with Native youth, neurodiverse youth, youth who identify as 2SLGBTQIA+, and youth with disabilities - the short timeline likely impacted the number of people who were ultimately engaged in the listening sessions and through the survey.

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Think of Us is a research & design lab with a goal to fundamentally change how the child welfare system works.

We work with government agencies, lawmakers, providers, advocates, and foundations to drive novel, scalable solutions at the federal, state, and local levels.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: OUTREACH ORGANIZATIONS

Organization/Agency Name	Volunteer Distributor of Recruitment Materials
Washington Administrative Office of the Courts	x
Amara Family	x
CASA Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children	
Casey Family Services	
Catholic Charities	x
Children's Home Society Parents for Parents Program	x
Child Welfare Advocacy Coalition	
Children's Village	x
Community Youth Services (CYS)	
Department of Children, Youth, and Family (DCYF)	x
DCYF ICWA Tribal relations subcommittee	x
DCYF Communications Team - Listservs	x
DCYF contracted Child Placement Agencies Team	
DCYF contracted Behavioral Response Agency Team	
DCYF contracted Independent Living Providers Team	
Passion to Action youth board	
Department of Social and Health Services	
Educational Service District 105	
Extraordinary Parenting (XP) LLC	
Family Education & Support Services (FESS)	
Family Impact Network	x
Family Well-Being Court Collaborative	x
Fatherhood Council	x
Foster Parent Association of Washington State (FPAWS)	x
Helping Families Thrive	
Huot Law	
Institute for Family Development (IFD)	
Kid's Mental Health, Pierce County	
King County Court	
Kitsap Strong	
Legal Counsel for Youth and Children (LCYF)	x
Myers Family Defense Law	
Northwest Resource Associates	
Office of Civil Legal Aid	x
Office of Civil Legal Aid Children's Representation program	x

Office of Public Defense	x
Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI)	x
Olive Crest	x
Parent 2Parent ARC Washington State	x
Peninsula Youth & Family Services	
People First of Washington	x
Pierce County Alliance	
Service Alternatives	
Sound Health	
Spokane Fatherhood Initiative	x
TeamChild	x
The Arc of Washington State Parent to Parent Program (DD)	x
The Reach in Tacoma - Homeless youth program	
Thurston County Court Appointed Special Advocates	
Volunteers of America	
WA State Court Appointed Advocates	
Washington Association for Children and Families	x
Washington Developmental Disabilities Administration	x
Washington state Developmental Disabilities Council	x
Washington Hospital Association	x
Washington School Counselor Association	
Washington State Health Care Authority	x
Washington State Health Care Authority Coordinated Care	
YMCA of Greater Seattle	
YouthNet	
YWCA of Clark County	
Confederate Tribes of The Chehalis Reservation	
Jamestown S'klallm Tribe	
Confederate Tribes of The Colville Reservation	
Kalispel Tribe	
Cowlitz Tribe	
Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe	
HOH River Tribe	
Lummi Nation	
Nooksack Tribe	
Makah Tribe	
Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe	
Muckleshoot Tribe	
Puyallup Tribe of Indians	

Nisqually Tribe	
Quileute Nation	
Shoal Water Bay Tribe	
Quinault Indian Nation	
Skokomish Tribe	
Samish Indian Nation	
Snoqualmie Tribe	
Sauk-Suiattle Tribe	
Spokane Trie of Indians	
Squaxin Island Tribe	
Tlingit and Haida Tribe	
Tulalip Tribes	
Stillaguamish Tribe	
Upper Skagit Tribe	
Suquamish Tribe	
Yakama Nation	
Swinomish Tribe	

APPENDIX B: LISTENING SESSION PRESENTATIONS



Thank you for joining!

If you are able, please consider turning on your camera to join us in participating in the video conference.

Please make sure your line is on mute during the session unless you are speaking.

We will start the session shortly.

Parent Listening Session

March 2023

Agenda

Introductions

Project Overview

Informed Consent

Guided Questions on 3 topics:

- Kinship Engagement

- Shared Planning Meetings

- Referrals/Transitions

Next Steps

- Invitation for survey completion

- Opportunity to give additional feedback

Who we are: The Public Consulting Group Team



Ivy Doxley
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La Toria
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Kate
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Katie
Bright



Diane
Haver

PCG is an objective third party contracted to collect information and recommendations from key partners and advisors about their experiences with the Washington State Department of Children, Youth and Families' (DCYF) foster care program as required by the D.S. Lawsuit Settlement Agreement.



D.S. & Disability Rights WA vs DCYF

Vision

Increase placement stability for children and youth with behavioral health and developmental disabilities.

Achieve a youth and family-centered, culturally and trauma-informed system of placement supports and services.

Broad system improvements in 8 areas

8 Areas for Systems Improvement

4.6 Emerging Adulthood Housing

4.7 Professional Therapeutic Foster Care

4.8 HUB Home Model Program

4.9 Revise Licensing Standards

4.10 Kinship Engagement

4.11 Family Group Planning

4.12 Referrals & Transitions

4.13 Qualified Residential Treatment Programs

PCG's Role and Responsibilities

Facilitating	Collecting	Reporting
<p>Listening sessions and a survey with key advisors and partners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Parents• Foster parents & kinship caregivers• Service providers• Child welfare partners involved with youth and parents experiencing foster care	<p>Feedback and recommendations in three specific areas of the lawsuit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Kinship Engagement• Family Group Planning• Referrals and transitions to services and placement supports	<p>A public report that includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A summary of input and recommendations• A cross-walk section that synthesizes key recommendations for DCYF's system improvement plan



Informed Consent

Purpose of the Activity: To provide feedback on structured and open-ended questions during the listening session

Benefits: Inform DCYF's system improvement plan to increase placement stability for young people experiencing foster care and trauma informed services and supports provided to youth with behavioral health needs and developmental disabilities, their parents, family, and caregivers.

Results: PCG will issue a public report with a summary of input and key recommendations for DCYF's improvement plan.

Risks: Please do not share other people's identities or responses from the listening session outside of the session.

Protection: All information gathered will be used in aggregate form and any personal information will be de-identified.

Participation: Please complete the consent form to ensure you are over age of 18 and volunteering to participate. You may discontinue participation at any time.



Session Guidelines

Please consider turning on your camera

Make sure your line is on mute during the session unless you are speaking

Be positive and respectful of others and their opinions

And...Don't hesitate to speak up if you think something important is being left out, or even if you just have an idea. This session is an opportunity to provide your insight and **we want to hear from you.**



Guided Questions

Kinship Engagement

What information would you want to know throughout your involvement with DCYF?

What information were you provided about resources or additional supports?

What type of communication occurred with your DCYF representatives?



Kinship Engagement

How are you able to share with DCYF your family's unique needs, traditions and beliefs?

How are you able to share information about your child and their individual needs?

How are you able to share information about relatives and other people who are important to your child?

How are you included in planning for your child's services and placement?

How should DCYF engage relatives and kin with services, supports, and resources?



Shared Planning Meetings



Tell us about your experience with Shared Planning Meetings (frequency, structure, location, time)



What has been your involvement in these meetings?



Who attended the Shared Planning Meetings?



Are there others who you think should be included in these meetings?

Shared Planning Meeting: Inclusion & Recommendations

Do participants feel safe and heard sharing their thoughts/concerns during meetings? Youth?

What is working well during Shared Planning meetings, and how could they be more effective?



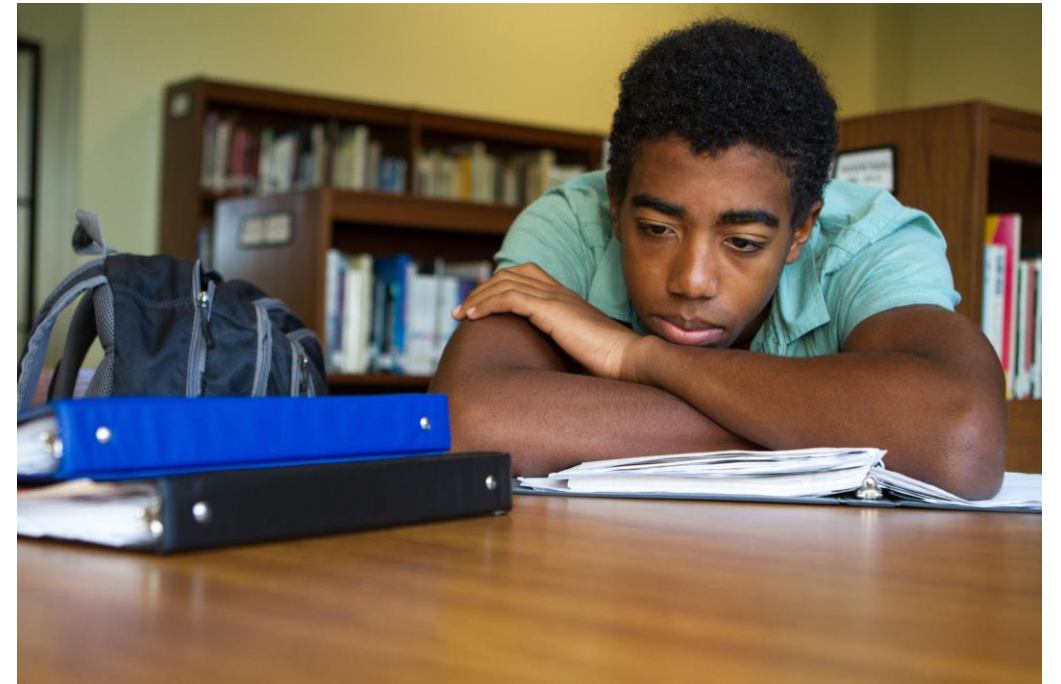
Referrals and Transitions

How does DCYF share the information you've provided about your child's individual needs, their identity, and culture when considering placement or services?

Do you have a say when DCYF is looking for alternative living arrangements and services for your child(ren)?

What is working well?

How could DCYF engage parents in making decisions for your child?



Magic Wish Question

If you could make one change to strengthen kinship engagement, shared planning meetings, or referrals and transitions to services, what would it be?



Next Steps

Wrap Up / Next Steps

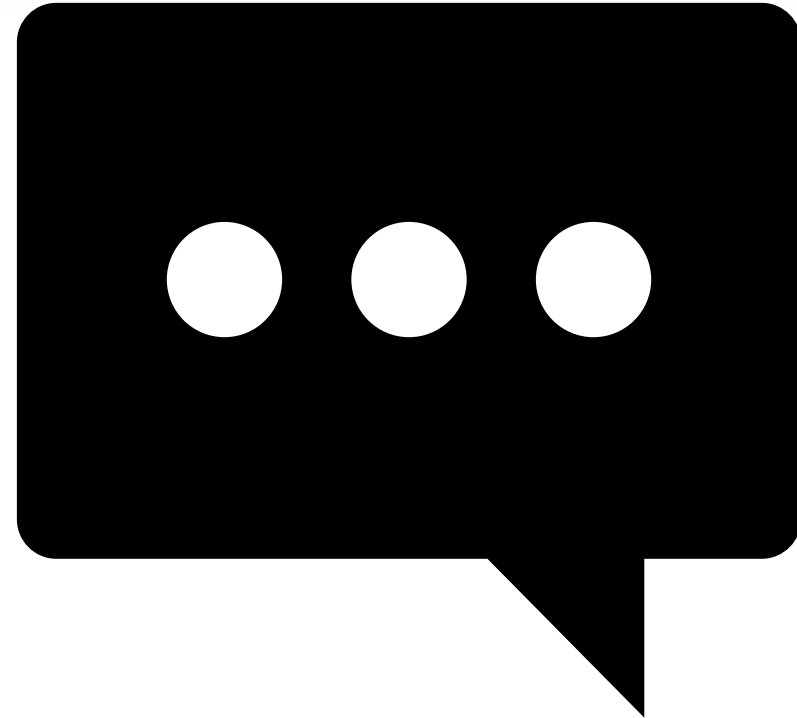
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Questions?

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DSEngagementInquiry@pcgus.com





Solutions that Matter



Thank you for joining!

If you are able, please consider turning on your camera to join us in participating in the video conference.

Please make sure your line is on mute during the session unless you are speaking.

We will start the session shortly.

Community Partners Listening Session

March 2023

Who we are: The Public Consulting Group Team



Ivy Doxley
Martin



La Toria
Lane



Sara
Gilbert



Kate
Smith



Katie
Bright



Diane
Haver

PCG is an objective third party contracted to collect information and recommendations from key partners and advisors about their experiences with the Washington State Department of Children, Youth and Families' (DCYF) foster care program as required by the D.S. Lawsuit Settlement Agreement.



D.S. & Disability Rights WA vs DCYF

Vision

Increase placement stability for children and youth with behavioral health and developmental disabilities.

Achieve a youth and family-centered, culturally and trauma-informed system of placement supports and services.

Broad system improvements in 8 areas.

8 Areas for Systems Improvement

4.6 Emerging Adulthood Housing

4.7 Professional Therapeutic Foster Care

4.8 HUB Home Model Program

4.9 Revise Licensing Standards

4.10 Kinship Engagement

4.11 Family Group Planning

4.12 Referrals & Transitions

4.13 Qualified Residential Treatment Programs

PCG's Role and Responsibilities

Facilitating	Collecting	Reporting
<p>Listening sessions and a survey with key advisors and partners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Parents• Foster parents & kinship caregivers• Service providers• Child welfare partners involved with youth and parents experiencing foster care	<p>Feedback and recommendations in three specific areas of the lawsuit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Kinship Engagement• Family Group Planning• Referrals and transitions to services and placement supports	<p>A public report that includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A summary of input and recommendations• A cross-walk section that synthesizes key recommendations for DCYF's system improvement plan



Informed Consent

Purpose of the Activity: To provide feedback on structured and open-ended questions during the listening session

Benefits: Inform DCYF's system improvement plan to increase placement stability for young people experiencing foster care and trauma informed services and supports provided to youth with behavioral health needs and developmental disabilities, their parents, family, and caregivers.

Results: PCG will issue a public report with a summary of input and key recommendations for DCYF's improvement plan.

Risks: Please do not share other people's identities or responses from the listening session outside of the session.

Protection: All information gathered will be used in aggregate form and any personal information will be de-identified.

Participation: Remember, you may discontinue participation at any time.

Please complete the consent form to ensure you are over age of 18 and volunteering to participate.

Session Guidelines

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Feel free to type answers or questions in the chat

And...Don't hesitate to speak up if you think something important is being left out, or even if you just have an idea. This session is an opportunity to provide your insight and **we want to hear from you.**



Guided Questions

Kinship Engagement: Communication & Inclusion

Tell us about the ways DCYF representatives communicate with you about the youth's individual needs including mental and behavioral health and/or developmental disability needs.

How are youth, family, and positive supports engaged when identifying services and placements?

What is working well and what are the barriers?

What information or assistance could DCYF provide to help you engage family and other positive supports for the youth?



Kinship Engagement: Opportunities & Recommendations

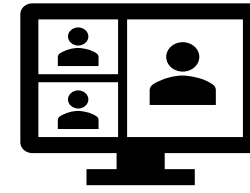
What opportunities are given to influence policies and programs that impact youth and families involved with foster care?

What would help you participate in these opportunities?



Shared Planning Meetings: Experience & Observations

What has been your experience and role in DCYF Shared Planning Meetings?



Who attends the meeting and are there others who you think should be included?



Are you encouraged to provide input for the meeting? How?



Shared Planning Meeting: Inclusion & Recommendations

Do participants feel safe and heard sharing their thoughts/concerns during meetings? What about Youth?

What is working well during Shared Planning meetings?

What could make the meetings more effective?



Referrals and Transitions: Experience & Observations

What services or supports does your agency provide to meet the individual and cultural needs of the youth/family you're serving?

When a service/referral is made, how are you informed of a youth's cultural and individual needs?

How is input from youth, family and kin considered when determining what services youth receive?



Referrals and Transitions to Services and Placements

How is your input considered when determining what services youth receive?

How do providers share trends in services within the provider network and DCYF?

How can collaboration and communication with DCYF be enhanced?



Magic Wish Question

If you could make one change to strengthen kinship engagement, shared planning meetings, or referrals and transitions to services, what would it be?



Next Steps

Wrap Up / Next Steps

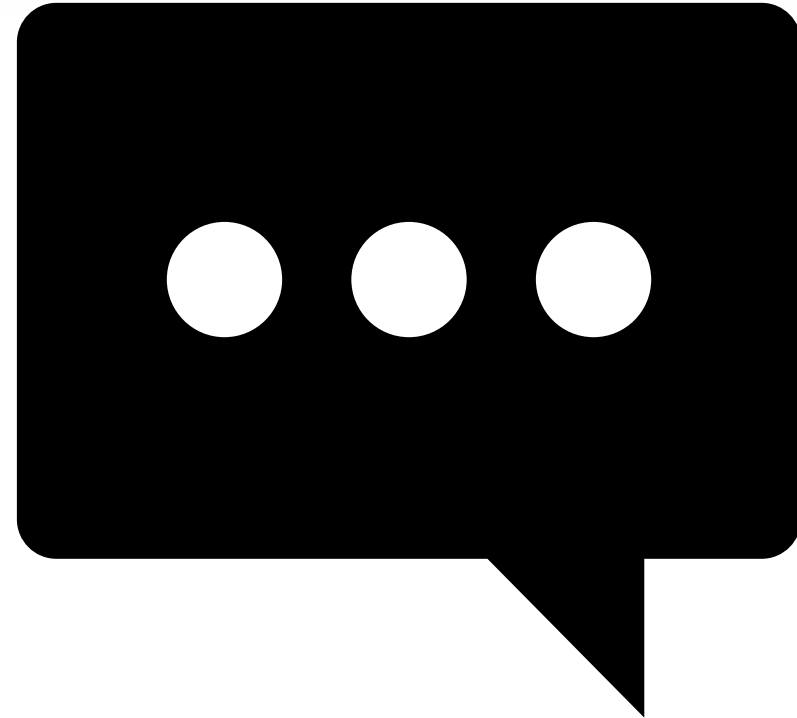
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Caregiver Listening Session

March 2023

Agenda

Introductions

Project Overview

Informed Consent

Guided Questions on 3 topics:

- Kinship Engagement

- Shared Planning Meetings

- Referrals/Transitions

Next Steps

- Invitation for survey completion

- Opportunity to give additional feedback

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Benefits: Inform DCYF's system improvement plan to increase placement stability for young people experiencing foster care and trauma informed services and supports provided to youth with behavioral health needs and developmental disabilities, their parents, family, and caregivers.

Results: PCG will issue a public report with a summary of input and key recommendations for DCYF's improvement plan.

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Be positive and respectful of others and their opinions

Feel free to use the chat feature to answer questions

And...Don't hesitate to speak up if you think something important is being left out, or even if you just have an idea. This session is an opportunity to provide your insight and **we want to hear from you.**

- Make sure to **JOIN** the breakout room when the pop-up box appears.

Guiding Questions

Kinship Engagement: Experience & Observations

How did you get involved with WA DCYF?
What is your role?

In what ways has DCYF helped you navigate
the child welfare system?



Kinship Engagement: Communication & Inclusion

How did DCYF communicate with you about the youth's cultural identity and individual needs while placed in your home?

What information would you like to access to help you care for youth placed in your home?



Kinship Engagement: Opportunities & Recommendations

How have the youth's parent's, family, and social supports been engaged throughout your involvement with DCYF?

How could DCYF engage relatives and kin with services, supports, and resources?



Shared Planning Meetings: Experience & Observations



Tell us about your experience with Shared Planning Meetings (frequency, structure, location, time)



What has been your involvement in these meetings?



Who attended the Shared Planning Meetings?



Are there others who you think should be included in these meetings?

Shared Planning Meeting: Inclusion & Recommendations

Do participants feel safe and heard sharing their thoughts/concerns during meetings? Youth?

What is working well during Shared Planning meetings, and how could they be more effective?



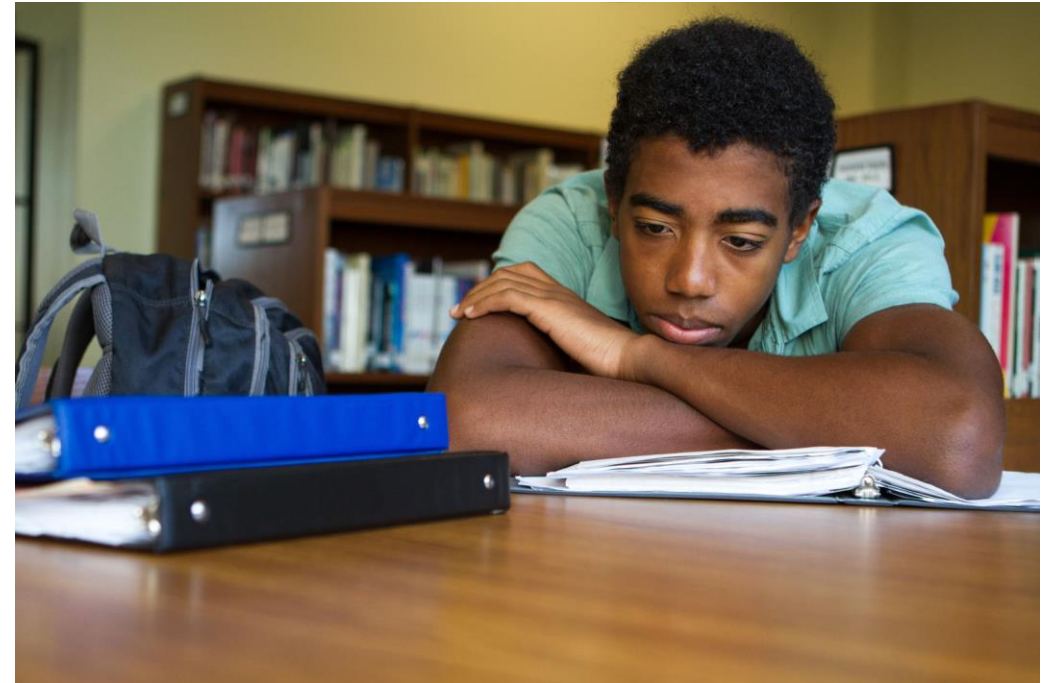
Referrals and Transitions: Experience & Observations

How does DCYF collect and share information about the youth's individual needs, their identity, and culture during placement decisions and service planning?

Do you think you are fully prepared and supported to meet the individual needs of youth placed in your home?

How are youth able to provide information about themselves before placement in your home?

How could DCYF prepare and support you in caring for youth placed in your home?



Magic Wish Question

If you could make one change to strengthen kinship engagement, shared planning meetings, or referrals and transitions to services, what would it be?



Next Steps

Wrap Up / Next Steps

- Share your email address to receive the \$100 gift card for participating in today's session
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Questions?

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Solutions that Matter

APPENDIX C: PROFESSIONAL PARTNER LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANTS

Professional Partners Listening Session Participants, included:

- Court staff, including legal counsel for youth and parents
- Providers who serve youth with neurodiversity, or developmental disabilities
- Transition Age Youth service providers
- Providers who serve 2SLGBTQIA+ young people
- Health care providers
- Parents and parent/family service providers
- Child placing agencies
- Substance use, mental health, and therapeutic service providers
- Residential care providers and behavioral health response providers
- Foster parent and Kinship caregivers, and supportive service providers
- In-home service providers
- Washington state child and parent advocate organizations

APPENDIX D: CAREGIVER AND PROFESSIONAL PARTNER SURVEY

Opening Paragraph

Data Collection has closed for this survey. Gift cards are not being distributed for any further survey responses.

Public Consulting Group (PCG) has been contracted by Washington State Department of Children, Youth & Families (DCYF) to conduct a survey with key community partners with the purpose of identifying gaps in service delivery and community relationships. The survey includes questions about your satisfaction, thoughts, and feelings regarding the services you received or need from DCYF. These questions will allow DCYF to identify challenges and improve service delivery to support your needs.

You were asked to take part in this survey because you are an individual with lived experience. Your identity will be kept confidential, meaning that your name and any identifying information will not appear in public reports anywhere. No one involved in this research will contact you to try to sell you anything. Please give yourself at least 10-15 minutes to complete the survey. Your participation is completely voluntary. You may skip questions or end the survey at any time. If you need to pause taking the survey before you are finished, your progress will be saved, and you can resume where you left off. Thank you for your participation!



Pre Block

We'd like to know your relationship with Washington State Department of Children, Youth & Families (DCYF) or Child Protective Services (CPS).

Which of the following best describes you?

- Youth with current experience with DCYF, CPS, or foster care
- Youth with past experience with DCYF, CPS, or foster care

- Community Service Provider
- Immediate Family Member (parent or sibling who is biologically related to a foster youth, or any other immediate household member)
- Extended Family or Kinship Caregiver (kin or fictive kin who may provide natural supports or placement for a child/youth who has been separated from their immediate family, including licensed or unlicensed kinship caregivers)
- Foster Parent
- Guardian
- School Liaison
- Juvenile Justice Representative
- Assigned Counsel
- Youth Advocate or Disability Advocate
- None of the above

Do you have any involvement at all with DCYF, CPS, or foster care?

- Yes - I have interacted with DCYF, CPS, or the foster care system as a youth, caregiver, or service provider
- No - I have no involvement with DCYF, CPS, or the foster care system

We'd like to know your relationship with Washington State Department of Children, Youth & Families (DCYF) or Child Protective Services (CPS).

Which of the following best describes you?

- Youth with current experience with DCYF, CPS, or foster care
- Youth with past experience with DCYF, CPS, or foster care
- Community Service Provider
- Immediate Family Member (parent or sibling who is biologically related to a foster youth, or any other immediate household member)
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- Foster Parent
- Guardian
- School Liaison
- Juvenile Justice Representative
- Assigned Counsel

- Youth Advocate or Disability Advocate
- None of the above

Youth Diversion Block

This survey focuses on caregivers and providers.

A separate survey specifically for youth is being administered by the organization Think of Us.

We encourage you to take their survey!

Caregiver Block

For the purpose of this survey, youth refers to all children and youth that have been in your care as a result of being removed from their primary caregiver. When answering the following questions, please think about all the removed youth you have provided care for in the past year.

If you are a parent of youth who has had parental rights terminated or otherwise your youth does not currently live with you, some of the questions on this survey may not apply to you. Please skip any questions that you feel do not apply to you.

Have your youth experienced any of the following placement situations? Check all that apply.

- Five (5) or more placements. Do not count overnight stays with parents, hospital stays, respite care, youth camps, runaway, or detention.
- Been in the same placement for the past year or longer.
- Lived in a group home in another state.
- Stayed overnight in an office or hotel in the past six (6) months
- Awaiting a Children's Long-Term Inpatient Program (CLIP) bed
- I don't know
- None of the above

How would you describe the area where you live currently:

- Urban
- Suburban

- Rural
- Very Rural
- Tribal Reservation

What best describes the sexual orientation(s) of youth you have cared for? Check all that apply.

- Heterosexual/Straight
- Gay
- Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Queer
- I don't know

Have you cared for any youth who identify as transgender or non-binary?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer Not to Answer
- I don't know

Have you cared for any youth with an ongoing physical challenge such as a disability or diagnosed condition?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer
- I don't know

Have you cared for any youth with an ongoing mental/behavioral health challenge or a diagnosed condition?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

I don't know

How are you connected to the youth you have cared for? Check all that apply.

- Family
- Friend
- Foster family
- Other

How many of the youth chose to live with you?

- All
- Some
- None
- I don't know

How does DCYF typically communicate with you? Check all that apply.

- In person
- Phone call
- Email
- Text
- During office visits
- Not applicable - DCYF does not communicate with me

Is the frequency of communication with DCYF enough?

- Yes
- No

How could your communication with DCYF improve?

Does DCYF allow the involvement of other trusted kin throughout the case?

- Yes
- No

Does DCYF provide you with any support and resources to help you care for the youth?

- No
- Yes - but it's not enough
- Yes - it is sufficient help

What types of support and resources does DCYF provide you currently?

What other types of supports and resources could DCYF provide you that could help you better care for the youth?

If you were confronted with any challenges to accessing resources and/or supports, did DCYF assist you?

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable - I did not experience any challenges accessing resources

Are you told about court hearings ahead of time?

- Always
- Sometimes
- Never

Not applicable

How do you typically receive information related to court hearings? Check all that apply.

- My DCYF case manager
- My attorney
- I found the information on my own
- We discussed court information during the Shared Planning Meetings (also known as permanency planning, FTDM, or team meetings)
- I never received court information
- Other

Do you participate in court hearings?

- Always
- Sometimes
- Never
- Not applicable

Do you submit a caregivers report to the court?

- Always
- Sometimes
- Never
- Not applicable

The following questions are related to the **Shared Planning Meetings**. These meetings serve to engage everyone involved in the care and support of the youth to discuss case plans and decisions to support the safety, permanency, and well-being of the youth. These meetings can also be known as permanency planning, FTDM, or team meetings.

In the past year, how often have you attended Shared Planning Meetings?

- All of them
- Some or most of them

- None of them
- I don't know what a Shared Planning Meeting is

You selected "Some of them".

Thinking about the Shared Planning Meetings you did not attend...

Why don't you attend Shared Planning Meetings? Check all that apply.

- I was never asked to
- DCYF would not let me
- The meetings are not a good use of my time
- The meeting conflicted with work or other obligations
- Lack of childcare
- Lack of transportation
- I do not have internet access (for virtual meetings)
- Shared planning meetings have not yet occurred
- The location is not convenient
- Other

In your experience, about how often do the Shared Planning Meetings take place?

- Once or twice a week
- Once or twice a month
- Every other month
- Once every six months
- Once a year
- I don't know

Are the Shared Planning Meetings held in-person, virtual, or both?

- In-Person
- Virtual
- Both in-person and virtual
- I don't know

Do you know the purpose of the Shared Planning Meetings ahead of time?

- Yes
- No

Do you have contact with your caseworker before the Shared Planning Meetings?

- Always
- Sometimes
- Never
- No

What method of communication do you use with your caseworker? Check all that apply.

- Phone call
- Text
- Email
- In-person
- _____ Other

When do Shared Planning Meetings take place? Check all that apply.

- During the week (Monday through Friday)
- On the weekend (Saturday and/or Sunday)
- I don't know

What time of day do Shared Planning Meetings take place? Check all that apply.

- Morning
- Afternoon
- Evening
- I don't know

Who participates in the Shared Planning Meetings? Check all that apply.

- The DCYF case manager
- A DCYF supervisor
- Parent(s) of the youth
- The youth
- Trusted individuals identified by the youth
- Referral providers of the youth such as a therapist or a life skills coach
- CASA
- DCYF attorney
- Parent Attorney
- Other

What type of information is discussed during the Shared Planning Meetings? Check all that apply.

- The needs of the youth
- Behavior of the youth
- Matters related to the youth's education
- Level of participation of the youth in services
- Level of participation of the parent(s) in services
- Visitation
- Permanency goals (Reunification, Adoption, Guardianship)
- Independent living goals and transition out of foster care
- Best placement options for the youth
- Upcoming court hearings
- Other

If you need an interpreter for the Shared Planning Meetings, are you provided one?

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable - I have not needed an interpreter

Do people respect your ideas and opinions that you provide during the Shared Planning Meetings?

- Always
- Most of the time
- Sometimes
- Rarely or never

Do you feel safe sharing your ideas and opinions during the Shared Planning Meetings?

- Always
- Most of the time
- Sometimes
- Rarely or never

During Shared Planning Meetings, are your cultural preferences respected and considered by others?

- Always
- Most of the time
- Sometimes
- Rarely or never

Do you think your opinions regarding the treatment for the youth you care for are taken into consideration? *Examples of treatment services include counseling, therapy, medical services, and drug and alcohol services.*

- Always
- Most of the time
- Sometimes
- Rarely or never

What do you like about the Shared Planning Meetings?

How can the Shared Planning Meetings be improved?

What type of contact did you have with the youth prior to them coming into your care?

- Phone call
- In-person meeting
- Both phone call(s) and in-person meeting(s)
- Not applicable - I was not given the opportunity to meet or talk with them

What type of information and resources does DCYF provide to ensure you are prepared and able to support the youth's culture, background, identity, or personal characteristics?

How does DCYF communicate with you about the youth and their family's identity and culture?

How prepared are you to care for youth with diverse needs?

- Very prepared
- Somewhat prepared
- Somewhat unprepared
- Very unprepared

Have you accessed resources on your own to better care for the youth?

- Yes
- No

What other information or resources would be helpful to better care for the youth?

Provider Block

Select the types of services your agency provides. Check all that apply.

- Child Welfare
- Mental Health
- Developmental Disabilities
- Housing
- Substance Use
- LGBTQIA+
- Education
- Other

How would you describe the area(s) in which you provide services? Check all that apply.

- Urban
- Suburban
- Rural
- Very Rural
- Tribal Reservation

Does your organization serve youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Does your organization provide services specifically to support youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer?

- Yes
- No

Does your organization serve youth who identify as transgender or non-binary?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Does your organization provide services specifically to support youth who identify as transgender or non-binary?

- Yes
- No

Does your agency provide services to youth who... (Check all that apply)

- Currently have an open case with DCYF
- Previously had an open case with DCYF
- Never had an open case with DCYF
- Other

Does your agency conduct assessments to determine appropriate services for the youth and/or families?

- Yes
- No

What is your agency's assessment process?

In what specific ways does your agency include the youth, the youth's family members and their social supports in the assessment process?

In what ways does your agency include the youth's family members and their social supports in the delivery of your services?

Does DCYF provide your agency with information or resources to help you engage with families?

- Yes
- No

How does DCYF help you engage families?

What types of resources could be provided to assist your agency with engaging families and pro-social supports for the youth?

How are resources promoted to families and youth?

The following questions are related to the Shared Planning Meetings. The meetings are also known as permanency planning, FTDM, or team meetings. These meetings serve to engage everyone involved in the care and support of the youth to discuss case plans and decisions to support the safety, permanency, and well-being of the youth.

Does your agency provide representation during the DCYF Shared Planning Meetings?

- Yes

- No
- I don't know

Is your agency encouraged to participate and provide input during the Shared Planning Meetings?

- Yes
- No

On average, how frequently do Shared Planning Meetings occur for each family?

- Once or twice a week
- Once or twice a month
- Every other month
- Once every six months
- Once a year
- I don't know

In your experience, are Shared Planning Meetings held:

- In-person
- Virtual
- Both in-person and virtual

When do Shared Planning Meetings take place? Check all that apply.

- During the week (Monday through Friday)
- On the weekend (Saturday and/or Sunday)
- I don't know

What time of day do Shared Planning Meetings take place? Check all that apply.

- Morning
- Afternoon
- Evening

I don't know

What do you think works well during the Shared Planning Meetings?

How could the Shared Planning Meetings be improved?

How does your agency communicate with DCYF about the youth's or family's needs outside of Shared Planning Meetings?

If your agency or DCYF notices new trends in youth or family needs in your community, how does your agency and DCYF work together to build the services to address those needs?

What types of diverse needs do the youth in your community have?

What barriers or challenges do you experience with providing services to youth with diverse or special needs in their own community?

Does your agency have adequate supports to respond to the needs of the youth in the community?

- Yes
- No

What supports are needed either because they don't exist or need to be enhanced?

What added supports does your agency provide to youth and their families when transitioning to new placements?

When a youth transitions to a new placement, does your agency continue to provide services?

- Always
- Sometimes
- Never

Last Block

If you could make one immediate change to the child welfare system, what would it be?

Incentive Block

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey!

If you would like to receive a gift card...

Please [click the following link](#) where you will be prompted to enter either your email address (for an e-gift card) or your mailing address (for a physical gift card).

https://publicconsultingroup.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_en71Ai6ZMF4glmy

APPENDIX E: GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The following stakeholder recommendations were not tied directly to Kinship Engagement, Family Group Planning, or Referrals and Transitions; however, were commonly voiced. Stakeholders suggested DCYF should:

- Ensure Washington becomes a child-first state.
- Ensure the Department removes all subjective judgement and punitive responses when making decisions concerning children and families. Ensure each case is considered individually rather than systematically.
- Ensure social workers maintain manageable caseloads to reduce turnover and increase quality time available for each case.
- Support the social workers' decision-making responsibilities by ensuring deadlines are reasonable and achievable to allow for thoughtful decisions, rather than forced decisions that are as a result of a deadline rather than individually based.
- Train and inform DCYF social workers routinely on available services, resources, parent and caregiver rights and responsibilities, and any other pertinent information that impacts a case to promote information sharing. Allow adequate time to thoroughly train all social workers before assigning a caseload.
- Implement refresher trainings on identifying strengths and protective factors and trauma informed care.
- Allow social workers to access other resources, such as CPAs (Child Placing Agency), to help reduce their workloads.
- Consider input from other industry experts to inform policy change.
- Consider delivering a survey and/or other engagement activities to seek input from community stakeholders to inform policy improvements.