

Their Voice, Their Lives, Our Future

In a recent meeting of child advocates from across the country, a presenter* posed the question: “If you could change one thing about the child protection system for children in foster care, what would it be?” Answers shot out around the room:

“Never separate siblings!”

“More support for kids transitioning out of the system!”

“More support for relatives caring for children!”

When every advocate had shouted out their deepest wishes for change to our system, the presenter asked them if they could guess what kids in foster care said they would change first. Can you?

They said they wanted driver’s licenses. Because of significant agency liability concerns, many young people in foster care can’t get a driver’s license or insurance until they are 18; which makes it difficult to get a job, they said, and experience the freedom, and responsibility that their peers enjoy. Who would have thought?

Operating on the theory that honest feedback from children in the system speaks more to our success or failure than any expert, statistic or report can; PCSAO youth who have been in foster care in Ohio the chance to tell us what we have done well, and what we can do better.

In January, PCSAO invited current and former youth in foster care to participate in an art and writing contest. The contest was called *My Voice, My Life, My Future*, and we asked participants to represent, through art or writing, their experiences with the child welfare and court systems and how those experiences have impacted their lives and hopes for the future. Cash prizes are being awarded to the winners and selected entries may appear in a collection of foster youth art and writing from across the nation.

In May, Ohio judges and child welfare professionals will be invited to participate in four *My Voice, My Life My Future* forums across the state during which panels of current and former foster children will participate in a moderated discussion about ways that the courts and child welfare system affected their lives.

A smaller group of children will be chosen to participate in a *My Voice, My Life, My Future* Summit at an outdoor camp, where they will participate in ropes course, learn more about the California Youth Connection what they can do to start a similar program in Ohio; and develop specific recommendations for Ohio courts and child welfare systems. PCSAO will pass their feedback onto children services directors, courts and child advocates.

All of these activities are in partnership with *Home At Last*, a national initiative which is focused on reforming the nation's foster care system according to the following recommendations, as laid out Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care report, *Fostering the Future: Safety, Permanence, and Well-Being for Children in Foster Care*:

- Juvenile courts should adopt court performance measures and measure outcomes for children.
- Courts and child welfare agencies should exhibit effective collaboration on behalf of children.
- Children and parents must have a strong voice in court and effective representation, including well-trained attorneys and court appointed special advocates (CASA).
- Chief Justices must provide leadership to promote effective standards for juvenile courts and judges.

We are very excited to offer these opportunities for youth to give something back to the child welfare system. We hope that every Ohio county will help a child participate in one of the May events! Contact Jessica at pcsaojessica@sbcglobal.net or 614-224-5802 with your questions.

**The presenter, Janet Knipe, is the Executive Director of the California Youth Connection, an advocacy organization of current and former foster youth between the ages of 14-24 who want to make a positive change in the child welfare system.*