



## Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board

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*We exist to be the knowledgeable statewide voice that influences policies and practices that effect all youth who have or will experience out of home care.*

# Annual Report:

*June 2008- October 2009*

### **Introduction:**

In the short years, since its inception, The OHIO (Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio) Youth Advisory Board has changed the culture and nature of the advocacy work throughout Ohio. With energy, enthusiasm and a commitment above all else to make the foster care system in Ohio better for their brothers and sisters in care today they have led the way to giving youth a voice in the state of Ohio.

The group has convened on a statewide level, adopted a name, developed a mission statement, adopted bylaws, and elected officers. They have formed regional membership groups that meet several times a year. They have also created a strategic plan.

Their mission of advocating on behalf of other foster youth in Ohio and across the country has been demonstrated in many activities such as meeting with members of Congress, presenting at various conferences, and working with members of the Ohio General Assembly. In 2007, the youth successfully advocated for the extension of Medicaid for foster youth until they are 21. Testimony from the Youth Board members is still recalled by legislators with great respect. This group has never stopped working to empower youth across the state to bring their voice and experience to the table when foster care is being discussed. The main components of the OHIO Advisory Board's work are advocacy, public education, and leadership development and employment opportunities. Our youth have been extremely successful and below is a summary of activities for June 2008-April 2009.

### **Advocacy:**

- OHIO Youth Advisory Board officers participated in a Child and Family Service Review stakeholders interviews held throughout the state.
- Public Children Services Association of Ohio and OHIO Youth Advisory Board officers/members participated in regional Legislative Forums held by the Ohio Association of Child Caring Agencies (OACCA) and several private and public agencies have been leading an initiative to craft policy recommendations for the improvement of services and opportunities to youth aging out of the public child

welfare system. The goal of the workgroups are to increase youth likelihood of becoming productive and responsible adults. Topics included: access to college and post-secondary education, access to driver's education and driver's licenses, access to affordable and safe housing, access to workforce training, access to and expansion of Medicaid health coverage, and increasing the availability of mentoring services. Youth were able to give input, specifically as it related to independent living which is consistent with OHIO Youth Advisory Board current recommendations. Policy recommendations are expected to emerge from these forums. Some policy recommendations may be found at the following website: <http://www.oacca.org/initiatives.html>.

- The OHIO Youth Advisory Board members participated in a Statehouse Rally in August 2008. The rally, aptly themed "Success is a Choice" brought together foster youth from across the state, as well as elected officials and many professionals to talk about youth success and highlight things that can be encouraged to contribute to youth success.
- OHIO Youth Advisory Board members and staff attended and supported the statewide Ohio Independent Living Youth Summit Oct. 3 & 4, 2008. The event was tremendous, and involved several hundred youth and adult professionals. Youth engaged in speak out with elected officials to address concerns regarding challenges to independent living. The OHIO Youth Advisory Board Leadership Scholarship policy was highly promoted to facilitate youth overnights at the Oct. 3 & 4 Independent Living Youth Summit, covering overnight expenses. Several youth were able to attend both days, thanks to the generous funding provided by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.
- OHIO Youth Advisory Board youth presented budget testimony on March 19, 2009 in the Health and Human Services Subcommittee of Finance to advocate for full restoration of the Independent Living funds removed in the proposed 2010-2011 proposed budget as well as restoration of TANF to Title XX transfer funds used by county agencies to provide child protection services.
- OHIO Youth Advisory Board youth also presented testimony before the full finance committee to urge restoration on funds on March 31, 2009. Shortly thereafter the Ohio House of Representatives partially restored both the independent living and TANF to Title XX transfer funds.
- OHIO Youth Advisory Board youth participated in a "Ready to Launch" advocacy day on April 28, 2009. The day was filled with training on advocacy, a meet and greet with media and legislators, and actual legislative visits in the Ohio Senate. The campaign was geared at a cross systems approach to budget advocacy and the issues that affect transitional youth.
- Youth from across the state have participated in various surveys, one such survey is the Capstone Project which gauged the needs of youth who have/are preparing to emancipate from care. Additionally, youth helped draft the youth survey commissioned by the Child Specific Recruitment Taskforce's survey to get youth perspective on adoption and recruitment activities. Youth also took the survey to offer come feedback.

## Public Education:

- The OHIO Youth Advisory Board released a foster youth rights handbook, a comprehensive resource for youth experiencing Ohio's child welfare system. The "*For Youth, From Youth: The Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board Foster Youth Rights Handbook*" is the first of its kind in Ohio and will assist Ohio's foster youth in navigating the system and understanding their rights and responsibilities. Originally brought up as a goal in the 2008-2009 OHIO Youth Advisory Board's Strategic Plan, the handbook is the direct result of youth input from across the state. This handbook does much to improve youth understanding of their rights in foster care, in turn they will be better prepared to advocate for themselves and navigate the system, which results in better outcomes. The Handbook may be accessed at the following link: <http://www.pcsao.org/AboutPCSAO/2009/OHIO%20YAB%20HANDBOOK%20FINAL.pdf>.
- OHIO Youth Advisory Board members presented on a panel at a Prevent Child Abuse Ohio Networking luncheon.
- OHIO Youth Advisory Board staff partnered with Lisa Dickson of the Foster Care Alumni of America – Ohio Chapter, to create an OHIO YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD Blog to expand communication options for youth – link at <http://overcominghurdlesinohio.blogspot.com/>. The OHIO Youth Advisory Board also has a Facebook and MySpace page aimed at keep members aware of upcoming opportunities and the public aware of issues related to foster care.
- OHIO Youth Advisory Board staff partnered with Ohio State Bar Foundation in their ongoing project to create resources for recently emancipated youth. The project, an online website, [www.mymissiontransition.com](http://www.mymissiontransition.com) launched on May 20, 2009. This new interactive website will support Ohio youth who are preparing to age out of foster care and those who have already aged out of care by providing information that will assist them in making the transition to adult independence. The Web site features categories like: education, money, employment, health, housing and legal issues. Developing their own understanding of their rights and responsibilities is imperative to empowering these young people as they transition to independence and adulthood.
- Youth participated in several conference panels including one for statewide Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA). The 2009 Conference session focused on Senate Bill 163 and the Effects on Youth in Foster Care.
- Staff presented at the Foster Care Alumni of American Leadership Institute on youth advocacy.
- OHIO YAB presented at a panel for the launch of the Ohio Reach Initiative in Ohio. The purpose of Ohio Reach is to address recruitment and retention of emancipated foster youth in Ohio's higher education system and establish foster care liaisons at Ohio universities and community colleges. Ohio REACH is an opportunity to partner with both higher education and child welfare professionals to better prepare, engage and support former foster youth in higher education

and improve retention, graduation outcome rates, and a successful transition to self sufficiency for our foster youth and alums. <http://ohioreach.wikispaces.com/>

- Staff participated in a Casey Family Services Convening aimed at implementing the federal bill in States, including provisions regard transitional youth.
- OHIO Youth Advisory Board youth participated in a panel at Bowling Green State University to educate current and future social workers on best practices in interacting with foster youth.
- OHIO Youth Advisory Board staff met with professionals at Clermont County Children Services and offered guidance on creating a youth board in the county.
- OHIO Youth Advisory Board participated on a panel at ECORTC's Foster Parent Training. They participated on issues surrounding foster youth while in care.
- OHIO Youth Advisory Board presented at the NWPCSAO District Meeting educating the audience about OHIO YAB's advocacy efforts with specific reference to activities in the NW region.

### **Leadership Development and Employment Opportunities:**

- The OHIO Youth Advisory Board Stipend policy went into effect, allowing youth that participate in particular activities to earn stipends.
- The OHIO Youth Advisory Board Leadership Scholarship policy also went into effect – sending youth to the National Independent Living Association conference in Florida, also supporting the Public Children Services Association (PCSAO) Conference youth track.
- The OHIO Youth Advisory Board presented a session at the 2009 PCSAO Annual Conference inform child welfare professionals of youth perspectives with regards to the child protection system.
- The OHIO Youth Advisory Board participated in a Youth Track for Ohio Youth Advisory Board members held September 18 at the Public Children Services Association's (PCSAO) Annual Conference. Twenty five youth from around the state attended, and enjoyed the day. Attendance for the youth was free, the grant supported expenses associated with bringing in the presenters. The day's agenda is below.
  - Foster Care 411 – Becoming more involved in your own case plan. Led by FosterClub All Stars (foster alums from around the country)
  - What's Love Got to Do With It? – Facilitated youth discussion of Sex, Love and Relationships. Led by National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy
  - Making a Difference for our Brothers & Sisters in Care – National foster alumni movement. Led by Foster Care Alumni of America.
  - PCSAO Luncheon, including Rising Up & Moving On Awards – inspire your local youth!

## **OHIO Youth Advisory Board Recommendations:**

- **Courts:** Give youth an opportunity to speak to the judge about their case. Ensure meaningful interaction with court appointed special advocates (CASAs) or guardian ad litem (GALs) prior to them representing youth. Youth should be present whenever a move for them is being considered at court or elsewhere.
- **Normalcy:** Foster parents need the authority to make certain decisions for foster youth, such as whether or not the youth can spend the night at a friend's house, whether they can leave the county, if they can date, etc. Foster youth need to complete driver's education prior to their release, or prior to aging out of foster care.
- **Independent Living Skills:** Agencies need to give youth, core opportunities to gain hands-on, real life experience paying bills, managing a checking account, obtaining housing, and accessing public transportation, etc. so they will be prepared to transition out of foster care.
- **Siblings:** Keep siblings together when at all possible. Absolutely maintain strong, regular contact between siblings (and other kin) when placed apart.
- **Mental Health:** Strongly consider a need for youth to have continuity with the same therapist especially in a new placement. Provide accessible, in-home, community based mental health services for youth in foster care. Caseworkers and foster parents should receive increased training in mental health issues. Provide support groups and group work opportunities for foster youth.
- **Communication:** Foster youth need to be able to contact their caseworker directly. Meetings concerning the youth should include the youth, foster parent and caseworker. Meetings regarding reunification should include the youth's parent, or parents, the foster parent and the caseworker.
- **Foster Parents:** Foster parents need to participate in training and meet strict qualifications. Foster parents need to be evaluated on an ongoing basis. Foster parents should be observed interacting with youth before they become licensed.