VIRGINIA COMMISSION ON YOUTH

Meeting Minutes

Advisory Group: Workforce Development for Foster Care Youth
June 21, 2021, 1:00 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.
(virtual meeting)

Attending:
Senator Barbara Favola (Co-chair), Delegate Emily Brewer (Co-chair), Suzanne Bednar, Jason Brown (VEC), Cassie Cunningham, Delegate Karrie Delaney, Erykah Ewing, Delegate Elizabeth Guzman, Tiffany Haynes, Vanessa Johnson, Brooks Kirkwood, Valerie L'Herrou, Senator Monty Mason, Leah Mills, Patricia Morrison, Sarah Morton, Amber Pajouhandeh, Gary Powers, Brent Rolsten, Donna Shires, Rachel Strawn, Alex Wagaman, Celest Williams, Deana Williams

Not Attending:
Jason Brown (Fostering Acadia)

Staff Attending:
Amy Atkinson, Will Egen, Kathy Gillikin

I. Welcome and Introductions
The Honorable Barbara Favola, Senator, Senate of Virginia
The Honorable Emily Brewer, Delegate, House of Delegates

Senator Favola and Delegate Brewer welcomed the Advisory Group to the virtual meeting. Senator Favola emphasized the incredible importance of foster youth having a pathway forward with a career field that fits their skills, enabling self-sufficiency to support themselves and their family. She thanked the 30 stakeholder members for their work with foster care youth. Delegate Brewer thanked all representatives, especially the foster youth panelist, for her participation in this purposeful and thoughtful work, assisting the most vulnerable. Senator Favola and Delegate Brewer are ready to move forward with the recommendations that come out of this group.

II. Foster Care Panel
Brent Rolsten, Moderator, Fostering Acadia
Amber Pajouhandeh, Foster Care Youth

Senator Favola and Delegate Brewer welcomed Senator Monty Mason and Delegates Elizabeth Guzman and Karrie Delaney for their leadership for a better transition process to the workforce for foster care youth. Senator Favola asked Amy Atkinson, Executive Director of the Virginia Commission on Youth, to introduce the Foster Care Panel. Ms. Atkinson introduced Brent Rolsten, Executive Assistant with Fostering Acadia.

Mr. Rolsten explained that he is representing Fostering Acadia as an extension of Jason Brown, the founder and CEO. Fostering Acadia is an independent living organization that currently works with 50 foster youths, ages 17-21, to help them become self-sustainable and successful. Fostering Acadia has seen very good results using individual coaches and mentors for each youth. Youths who come into the Program in their late teens or early twenties may enter the Acadia Homes Program beyond age 21.

Mr. Rolsten introduced a current foster care youth in the Fostering Acadia Independent Living (IL) Program, Amber Pajouhandeh, and asked her questions about her foster care experiences. Ms. Pajouhandeh described how she came to be in foster care at the age of 16. She had earned her GED certificate and was assigned to an amazing social worker through the Richmond Department of Social Services.

At age 17, the social worker suggested Ms. Pajouhandeh talk to Fostering Acadia's CEO, Jason Brown, to determine eligibility for their IL Program. Fostering Acadia's Independent Living Program was mutually agreed to be a good fit so she joined the Program. At 18, Ms. Pajouhandeh became pregnant and now has a child. With her savings and financial help from Fostering Acadia and her local department of social services, Ms. Pajouhandeh was able to find a job and buy a reliable car. She has turned her life around and would like to help improve the Virginia process for transitioning from foster care to employment and independent living. Fostering Acadia facilitates sustained positive relationships with a mentor well beyond the age of 21.

The challenges that Ms. Pajouhandeh mentioned include the following:
- finding affordable child care at age 18 for her young daughter (Some DSS will only cover part of the child care costs.)
- difficulty obtaining a driver's license
- assistance with health care for herself and her child
- finding sustainable employment during and after her pregnancy
- knowing how to get and keep a steady job
- finding affordable transportation that is reliable
- finding a concerned and invested case worker/s who will advocate for youths and find available resources that will help, especially moving from home to a group home
- having a good mentor that will stick with the youth no matter what
- knowing how to keep a budget, save money, and write a resume
- having a support system/sustainable positive relationships through and after age 21

This interview may be found at the following link: [Meeting Video Archive](#).

III. Great Expectations: Recent Initiatives
Rachel Mayes Strawn, Ph.D., Great Expectations Program Coordinator & Director
Virginia Community College System

Delegate Emily Brewer introduced Dr. Rachel Strawn. Dr. Strawn explained how the Great Expectations Program helps high school students navigate college, coaching them for a variety of certifications and degrees, including community college degrees, specialty certifications, bachelor's and master's degrees. The Program began in 2008 and is currently at 21 of the 23

community colleges, with hopes to add the last two community colleges next year. With large percentages of foster care youth ending up in bad situations (59% incarcerated, 31% homeless and 60% relying on public assistance), Great Expectations fills a need by assisting with college admissions, making resource connections, finding affordable housing, and finding mental health services.

Dr. Strawn's presentation included information on Single Stop, the Gilliam Housing Initiative, the Daniel Success Fund FastForward Pilot, and the Virginia Tuition Grant for Foster Care Youth. This presentation can be accessed on the Commission's webpage under the Meetings tab.

This presentation may be found at the following link: Great Expectations Presentation

IV. Foster Care Workforce Development: A National Perspective
Jennifer Pokempner, Policy Director, Youth Law Center
Serita Cox, Co-Founder & CEO, iFoster

Senator Favola introduced Jennifer Pokempner to provide a national perspective on funding streams, strategies across the country and how to build and expand programs for foster care youth transitioning to adulthood. Ms. Pokempner described the barriers to success for foster care youth. Some of the factors to positive outcomes include access to high quality and stable education, stable and consistent relationship connections, connections to gain work experience, tailored supports, and the inclusion of foster care youth in the program design.

Ms. Pokempner emphasized the need for leveraging federal funding streams with the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) to provide family support and funds for ancillary support, leverage connections across systems, enable specialized support people and programs, eliminate barriers for eligibility, develop built-in ancillary training opportunities in every program (e.g., soft skills), and engage employers with training, support, recognition and tax credits. There is an unintentional screen-out of foster care youth. Foster Care, Juvenile Justice, and workforce liaisons are needed in the child welfare agency.

Delegate Brewer introduced Serita Cox to discuss the jobs program, seamless workforce development for foster care youth, and braided federal funding. Ms. Cox provided some background of iFoster and how they started as a national organization in 2010 and now provide an online resource portal for foster care families and organizations. Their goal is for every child to have what is needed to become independent and successful with competitive and permanent employment. The portal serves 30,000 families and 14,000 foster care youth who annually consume $125M in resources. Youth carry their documents with them in the portal with over 500 resources.

The iFoster Program Model includes 7 steps with a single entry in the portal. For Pre-employment there are 4 steps: Employer Needs Assessment, Youth Job Soft and Life Skills Training (How Do I…. training), Necessary Resources Provided, Youth Assessment Readiness. For On the Job, there are 3 steps: Youth Job Matching/Confidence-Building, Applications and Interviews, and Ongoing Coaching/Resource Support. iFoster provides the tracking for each step. They established a Transition Age Youth (TAY) Americorps Program as an internship experience with peer coaches, and to find a path into the public sector, do social work, and work in mental health or healthcare. Funding is braided with SNAP employment and training,

Workforce Investment Board's on-the-job training, and other money sources (e.g., TAY Americorps, Chafee ETV, Apprenticeship Program, vocational training, Department of Aging and Rehabilitative Services for individuals with disabilities, YouthBuild). Braided funding helps develop a more strategic plan and allows scaffolding to prepare for a job. Ms. Cox is willing to share a draft Workforce Investment Opportunity Act (WIOA) waiver request to reduce out-of-school funds to 50% so that the remainder can be used to educate/train foster care youth. Curricula, metrics and goals must be aligned across partnership programs for each youth.

Alex Wagaman asked how iFoster prepares the foster care youth to know their rights and protections. Ms. Wagaman wondered about matching skills and the work environment with the youth, as well as matching mentors. Ms. Cox explained that iFoster has a training module about rights in the workplace, especially with LGBTQ youth. iFoster matches skills/safe work environment with the foster care youth and addresses individual needs, such as transportation needs, and workplace and home proximity. Permanent relationships cannot be forced but programs must provide a mentor that fits with each youth. Jenny Pokempner stated that there are too many youth aging out of foster care who don't have permanent relationship connections, and this is an area that needs to be addressed. Best practices are related to matching appropriate mentors individually with each youth. Confidence is the biggest barrier to success.

Leah Mills with the Dept. of Aging and Rehabilitative Services asked how many foster care youths have Individualized Education Program plans (IEPs). Ms. Cox said about 70% in California have either IEPs or 504s (a plan explaining how the school will remove barriers to learning for students with disabilities). The biggest issue is the name of the Department of Rehabilitative Services and how it has a negative stigma with youth. Ms. Pokempner stated that cross-system data sharing makes the process engaging for youth. Statewide policies of sharing information and communication are needed, making sure that youth are offered those services.

Vanessa Johnson agreed that data-sharing is so important and advocates for education being the gatekeeper of success. Programs need to collaborate for better outcomes.

Ms. Haynes asked what type of supports each program has that nurture permanent connection relationships. She also asked about what barriers exist within the programs for facilitating permanent relationships. Ms. Cox responded that criminal background records can be sealed and expunged if there is no murder conviction or the youth is not on a national sexual predator list. iFoster helps the youth identify assistance for life coaching or mentoring and supports those interactions as long as needed. Programs need to identify unhealthy relationships; trauma and secondary trauma are huge. UCLA's School of Resiliency designed a self-care program for everybody, and they will come on-site to train resiliency. iFoster works with employers about their new hire screening requirements. Programs need to provide an environment that encourages coaches so the foster care youth can find a mentor that they can work with.

Ms. Haynes asked how iFoster handles racial and economic inequities when assisting youth with workforce readiness. Ms. Cox explained that 90% of all foster care youth in the iFoster jobs program are minorities, 76% in foster care in one county are Hispanic, 46% in one county are African-American, and 33% are LGBTQ. iFoster employs as many minorities as possible and does employer site visits with the foster care youth in advance to personally see the job environment and make sure the youth feels safe.

Sarah Morton emphasized the importance of bridging and braiding workforce development funds to ensure that we can serve the youth without duplication. It needs to start at the state level. The iFoster portal sounds like Virginia's referral portal. She also emphasized youth serving on youth advisory boards (asking what youth were pulled to serve?) to provide their perspective. There are several issues to address:

- Agencies are unaware of this multitude of resources. Need to communicate and advocate about these resources.
- Need to figure out ways to close the gaps and eliminate barriers.
- An overhaul of the foster care system and funding sources is needed.
- Need to teach scaffold of progression. Better transition plans are needed to help foster care youth move from housing to being home owners, not moving into housing projects.

Both presentations may be found on the Commission's webpage under the Meetings tab.

V. Advisory Group Roundtable Discussion

Senator Favola segued from the previous questions into the roundtable discussion. Four themes were identified for the purposes of next steps:

- Need for a universal resource portal for youth within Virginia (education, resources, programs).
- Need to serve all youths in workforce development, including immigrant youths, foster care youths who are parents, youth in the criminal justice system, crossover youths, etc.
- Need for data-sharing across programs and communities to tailor workforce opportunities for each youth
- Need for facilitation of organic, long-term relationships, mentorships and coaches, and unconditional support

Patricia Morrison emphasized the need to facilitate self-accountability for the youths by aligning resources, networking, using the apprenticeship program, etc. Self-confidence is so important. The Registered Apprenticeship Program allows youth to get paid and trained. Serita Cox mentioned that the iFoster resource portal is free and available to all with the capability to localize the information for Virginia.

Gary Powers wants to make sure that foster care youths are ready to be independent at age 21 and wonders whether the state is requiring programs to provide outcome metrics to predict success.

Vanessa Johnson stated that the youths that return home need to value their biological family members and learn how to facilitate positive relationships.

Cassie Cunningham works with the Children's Home Society of Virginia (Path Forward Program) and agreed that youths need some training on soft skills and need ancillary supports, how to obtain and maintain employment, as well as how to problem-solve with a supervisor.

VI. Next Steps and Adjournment

Senator Favola thanked everyone for attending and encouraged those who had additional thoughts or questions to contact Amy Atkinson or Will Egen. Senator Favola turned the meeting over to Amy Atkinson for next steps. Ms. Atkinson explained that Commission staff will be coordinating about 6-7 roundtable meetings with foster care youth throughout the state this summer and fall. Celest Williams and Rachel Strawn were planning to help with the roundtables. We want to hear from the youth to find out what they think is important in addressing the four themes that Senator Favola identified. The first roundtable is planned for July 20th in Harrisonburg. The documents that were provided for this meeting about the various programs should help us begin to eliminate silos and provide a springboard for discussion. The advisory group's goal is to pull draft recommendations together at the October 19th meeting for the Commission to consider. Then we will complete the difficult task of finalizing recommendations. Ms. Atkinson thanked Jenny Pokempner and Serita Cox for helping Virginia and offering to share information with us.

Delegate Brewer thanked the panelists and Commission staff, emphasizing that each of us learned more today about the parts we all play in improving our workforce development for foster care youth in the state. She emphasized the need to look at how we are aligning G3 goals with workforce development in the foster care space. Delegate Brewer suggested that Virginia needs to look at what age young people are being assessed and how we are getting them into vocation workforce development.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 3:20 p.m.

The video of this meeting may be found at the following link: Meeting Video Archive