



VIRGINIA COMMISSION ON YOUTH

Meeting Minutes

Advisory Group: Workforce Development for Foster Care Youth

October 5, 2021, 1:00 p.m. to 3:30

(virtual meeting)

Attending:

Senator Barbara Favola (Co-chair), Jim André, Jason Brown (VEC), Cassie Baudeán, Delegate Karrie Delaney, Delegate Elizabeth Guzman, Tiffany Haynes, Samantha Hollins, Vanessa Johnson, Senator Monty Mason, Leah Mills, Patricia Morrison, Sarah Morton, Em Parente, Gary Powers, Eric Reynolds, Donna Shires, Rachel Strawn, Alex Wagaman, Deana Williams

Not Attending:

Delegate Emily Brewer (Co-chair), Suzanne Bednar, Jason Brown (Fostering Acadia), Caylie Fleming, Allison Gilbreath, Avi Hopkins, Janet Kelly, Valerie L’Herrou, Amber Pajouhandeh, Celest Williams

Staff Attending:

Amy Atkinson, Will Egen, Kathy Gillikin

I. Welcome and Introductions

The Honorable Barbara Favola, Senator, Senate of Virginia

Senator Favola welcomed the Advisory Group to the virtual meeting and thanked everyone for participating in this work. This meeting is convening virtually, pursuant to the seventeenth enactment of Chapter 1 of the Acts of Assembly of 2021, Special Session II. The Commission meeting is streaming for the public to view via the Virginia Senate streaming site. Senator Favola explained that the purpose of the meeting was to hear the Foster Youth Roundtable Highlights from several meetings across the state, understand the findings and determine next steps with the suggested recommendations. Senator Favola then introduced Amy Atkinson to share the highlights of the roundtable discussions.

II. Roundtable Highlights

Amy Atkinson, Executive Director, Virginia Commission on Youth

Ms. Atkinson described the roundtable discussions that were held. Starting in July 2021, Commission staff held five in-person roundtable discussions in Harrisonburg, Richmond, Charlottesville, Williamsburg, Abingdon, and one virtual roundtable on October 4. Participants included 18 foster care youth, young adults and alumni, as well as a legislator; local department of social services directors, supervisors and staff; non-profit organization representatives; community college Great Expectations representatives; and a higher education advocate. Ms. Atkinson provided a summary of each roundtable discussion, requesting input from the Advisory Group members who attended the roundtables. Ms. Atkinson noted that each meeting was unique to that particular part of the state; however, there were common themes.

Common themes included the following:

- Foster care youth and young adults need a way to learn about and connect with financial, emotional, educational and other support programs, coaches and mentors in their community.
- Funding is needed to increase flexible support for Great Expectations, decrease foster care caseloads and improve access to community resources.
- Better communication and data sharing is needed across state agencies, schools, and organizations for foster care youth.
- Foster families and Independent Living (IL) organizations must have accountability standards developed and enforced.
- Consistent mentors and coaches create stability and a safety net for these youth and young adults.
- Virginia school guidance counselors need to provide standard career exploration and exposure activities, as well as interest assessments for every student, but especially for youths experiencing foster care.
- A dedicated and reliable support coordinator for these youth/young adults in all Institutes of Higher Education is warranted.
- Life Skills classes are helpful but youths would like the activities to be more professional, relevant and engaging, simulating real-life situations.
- Workforce Development Boards need to prioritize the young people experiencing foster care.

Comments were made by members about forming good relationships between state agencies, such as the Departments of Education and Juvenile Justice, as being essential. Forming Independent Living (IL) units is essential, as well. There was agreement that the IL completion factors were helpful in providing quarterly measures of the programs. Members would like to see a holistic approach for helping youths experiencing foster care and a scaffold of progression, possibly through mapping career pathways.

Senator Favola recommended that changes in the foster care payment system should be

made to reward positive outcomes with the youths or young adults. Dr. Em Parente explained that when funding flexibility is increased, sometimes there are unintended consequences. The evaluation tool for payments needs to be reworked to measure what the needs are and what families are doing to meet those needs. Senator Favola asked Amy Atkinson to work with Dr. Parente to develop a recommendation pertaining to this for the October 19 Commission meeting. A member agreed that some foster care parents are falsifying documents to get a higher payment. Especially in foster care group homes, the youths who are excelling get less attention and so the facility does not focus on the needs of each child. Delegate Elizabeth Guzman asked what happens when document falsification is discovered. The Virginia Department of Social Services will follow-up on this for the next meeting. This answer requires a lengthy response.

Senator Monty Mason explained that the roundtable he attended in Williamsburg emphasized the need for a consistent personal coach or mentor over the years. These youths need to build their self-worth, confidence, and hope through facilitation by a coach or mentor.

In Abingdon, a pilot for a Great Expectations housing stipend was implemented and many recipients provided feedback that this saved them. All funds for the Great Expectations Program are provided by private donors currently. Members liked the idea of a housing stipend to supplement students' expenses while in college.

Members discussed the need for child care for young adults who are in foster care with children. Additionally, it was noted that career education should start in middle school so that foster youth have time to learn about careers and begin volunteering to build their work experience for a future resume.

More support for foster youths is needed to pursue their interests and talents for less traditional career options (child care, hair styling, art, etc.). Business grants or other financial support would help these young adults struggling to find a way to make money. Delegate Karrie Delaney agreed that there should be a pathway to encourage entrepreneurship.

A concern about undocumented youth who can't work until they have documentation of their citizenship status was also raised. Helping undocumented youth to obtain their paperwork is important.

III. Advisory Group Discussion – Draft Recommendations

Ms. Atkinson reviewed the findings and draft recommendations that came out of the roundtable discussion process.

Finding: There is a lack of communication and coordination of resources with state, local, and private agencies that offer services to those who are currently being served or have been served in the foster care system .

Recommendation 1: Develop the iFoster Portal/App to include Virginia and locality specific resources that are available for individuals who are currently being served or have been served in the foster care system, as well as for professionals serving the foster care population. Resources include workforce development assistance, educational opportunities, housing and living stipends or discounts, financial supports, internship and employment opportunities, and other resources that are available in Virginia for those involved in the foster care system.

Members wondered how people would find out about this app. It was suggested that using the app can be required in the Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and 504 Plans. A marketing roll-out plan will also be developed.

Finding: There is a lack of communication and coordination of resources with state, local, and private agencies that offer services to those who are currently being served or have been served in the foster care system.

Recommendation 2: Request that the Virginia Social Services' System (state and local departments of social services), through its regional and local offices, identify workforce development organizations (such as Goodwill, Virginia Department of Labor and Industry's Apprenticeship Support Program, Virginia Department of Business and Supplier Diversity, Great Expectations, etc.) and other foster care transition resources in each locality, add them to the iFoster App, and communicate those opportunities to the local agencies on at least an annual basis.

Finding: Private companies and nonprofit agencies are willing to hire those who have been in foster care. These organizations need to better understand the challenges of youth who have experienced foster care by becoming trauma informed.

Recommendation 3: Engage potential employers who hire foster care alumni in trauma informed and accountability strategies training for employment success.

Senator Favola mentioned that job coaches could work with employers, LDSS, local workforce boards, Goodwill of Central and Coastal Virginia and others. It was suggested that the Workforce Boards' Business Solutions Teams could help. A decision was made to keep this Recommendation as 3A and add Recommendation 3B about creating a pathway to entrepreneurship within the program.

Finding: Great Expectations is a nationally recognized program that helps Virginia's foster youth earn the postsecondary credentials they need to achieve an independent and successful life. Currently, Virginia's program is funded solely through private dollars.

Recommendation 4: Introduce a budget amendment to develop a state funded grant program for the Great Expectations Program. The Virginia Community College System (VCCS) shall develop the grant program to provide a range of funding for

Community Colleges in the following areas: the hiring of college coaches or mentors; housing stipends; and transportation needs. VCCS shall report to the Commission on Youth the outcomes of the grant program by November 30 each year.

Senator Favola asked Ms. Atkinson to talk with Rachel Strawn about the amount of money that would be needed for each community college Great Expectations Program. Ms. Hayes suggested connecting efforts with the YMCAs and community programs, such as the Boys and Girls Clubs. Education and training would be needed.

Finding: A point of contact is needed at Virginia colleges and universities to assist those who have been in the foster care system.

Recommendation 5: Introduce a Virginia budget amendment to direct the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) to examine the feasibility of having a point of contact at each state and/or private college and university for those who have been involved in the foster care system. SCHEV shall investigate the possibility of using federal dollars (such as the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs Fund) for this purpose and report their findings to the Commission on Youth by November 30, 2022.

Ms. Atkinson mentioned that Project HOPE, led by Patricia Popp through the College of William and Mary, has a homeless coordinator at each Virginia college or university and that she would contact Dr. Popp for more information about how they developed their structure statewide. Ms. Wagaman noted that there is a similar cohort model being piloted now at Arizona State University and that holistic needs should be addressed. Ms. Strawn indicated that all community college coaches have completed trauma-informed training and there are lots of good models out there. Currently, only 4% of foster care youth earn their four-year degree so dedicated coaches are greatly needed.

Finding: The Fostering Connections to Success Act and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 and Title I, Part A provisions in the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) is intended to ensure school stability for students in foster care, requiring child welfare agencies to coordinate with school divisions.

Recommendation 6: Request the Virginia School Counselor Association include training at its annual conference on foster care. The training should include trauma informed strategies for those working with students experiencing foster care, resources available with the iFoster App, and the importance of knowing these students and providing consistent checks and support. A representative from Great Expectations and Social Services should be invited to assist with this training.

Senator Favola would like to strengthen this recommendation by adding a provision for specific school counselor training and accountability. Dr. Samantha Hollins added that the Virginia Department of Education could work in partnership with VDSS and the School

Counselors, possibly adding more counselors in the schools. Dr. Hollins will work with Ms. Atkinson to strengthen the language for this recommendation. Ms. Hayes added that a youth welfare approach should be mandatory for annual training and would strengthen the partnership between the agencies.

Recommendation 7 : Request that all Virginia middle and high schools have dedicated guidance counselors who can provide consistent workforce development coaching for students experiencing foster care, including interest and strength surveys, exposure to various career fields, job trends and salaries, and resources available to the foster care population (such as the iFoster App, Fostering Futures, Great Expectations, quality Independent Living programs, etc.).

There seems to be a lack of clarity among trauma-informed professionals and the academic professionals about how to use workforce development strategies. Ms. Atkinson will work with Dr. Hollins to revise this recommendation.

As an employer, Ms. Donna Shires has witnessed youth who have experienced foster care not being ready for the workplace. An internship program would help, but these youth need a lot of guidance about being on time for work, being productive, workplace etiquette, and how to regulate their emotions. Senator Favola asked for a new recommendation that would include the need for middle and high schools to provide work or academic internships to help prepare the youth for employment. Dr. Hollins will assist Ms. Atkinson with developing a new recommendation. Ms. Hayes added that the “modified” high school diploma does not suffice and is a barrier to employment.

Finding: Quality Independent Living programs are beneficial to the youth and young adults who have experienced foster care by providing a gradual independence plan. These programs include standards of completion with requirements for a high school/GED diploma, driver’s license and stable transportation, a savings account, possession of a secured credit card, stable housing and employment, ownership of and access to vital records, and permanency .

Recommendation 8: Request that the Virginia Social Services’ System (VDSS and LDSS) review their requirements for foster care Independent Living programs in Virginia and include a gradual independence plan that includes these Standards of Completion.

Senator Favola advised that a letter from the Commission Chair to the Virginia Department of Social Services should be written to strongly encourage the use of the eight domains for all Independent Living Programs as a Standard of Completion for each participant and use these domains as a program evaluation tool.

Finding: The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I Youth Program is designed to serve low income youth who face barriers to continued education and includes services provided through those either in, or aged-out of, the foster care

system. WIOA elements may include, but not be limited to, the following: work experience opportunities; occupational skills training; on-the-job training; GED and high school completion options assistance; tutoring and basic skills education; leadership development opportunities; financial literacy; career counseling and exploration services; postsecondary education preparation; entrepreneurial skills training; apprenticeship opportunities; and supportive services.

Recommendation 9: Request that Virginia Career Works, through the local workforce boards, prioritize serving the foster care population with WIOA funding and other workforce development opportunities.

There was a suggestion to add the words, “and promote” after “prioritize”. Foster care youth need to have priority for WIOA funds.

Senator Favola asked if there were any glaring omissions to the recommendations. Additional discussion took place about finding these youth a foster family. It is important to match youth with a foster family who is within their community, and with cultural and racial similarities. Ms. Cassie Baudeán added that child care needs to be emphasized more in the recommendations with a conversation about child care with potential employers. Senator Favola requested that a recommendation about child care be added. Dr. Parente explained that the local departments of social services can fund child care for foster care. Follow-up on the driver’s license for foster care youth and alumni is needed. Funding for foster care youth to purchase a vehicle and pay for auto insurance is needed, as well.

Today’s presentation on the roundtables across the state as well as these findings and recommendations can be found on the Commission’s website.

IV. Next Steps and Adjournment

The Honorable Barbara Favola, Senator, Senate of Virginia

Senator Favola explained that the findings and revised recommendations would be shared with the Virginia Commission on Youth members at their next meeting on October 19, 2021. Draft recommendations will be shared with the Commission and go out for public comment after October 19, 2021. Public comments will be received and presented to the Commission on Youth before recommendations are voted on. This is the last meeting of the Advisory Group on Workforce Development for Foster Care Youth. Senator Favola thanked the members of the Advisory Group and the Commission staff for all of their good work.

The meeting ended at 3:04 p.m. The meeting video is available on the Virginia Commission on Youth website and at the following link: [Meeting Video Archive](#).