



Facing Foster Care in Alaska **Policy Agenda 2008**

In May of 2008, the youth and alumni of Facing Foster Care in Alaska, (FFCA) came together from across the state and gathered in Anchorage to share their ideas and experiences about life in Alaska's foster care system. During their gathering youth/alumni brainstormed ideas on what they thought would be most beneficial to them and others in foster care in Alaska. As a result of these ideas, the members of FFCA voted to create this policy agenda.

Tuition Waivers for ALL foster youth in the state of Alaska

The University of Alaska Anchorage currently offers 10 Presidential Tuition Waivers a year to foster youth who are eligible for the OCS Independent Living Program. A young person must have been in foster care on or after their 16th birthday for six consecutive months in order to be eligible for the waiver program. Since these waivers are competing, not every young person in Alaska who applies will receive one. Youth who are placed in a guardianship, adopted, or reunified before age 16 are not eligible to apply for the waiver. Many states provide Tuition Waivers or other forms of reimbursement for college expenses to foster youth interested in pursuing post-secondary education. The youth and alumni of FFCA feel that by providing All of Alaska's foster youth with tuition waivers there would be a higher percentage of foster youth attending post-secondary education. Studies show that approximately 17% of young people who exit foster care pursue post-secondary education, and only about 1% graduate from a four year degree or certificate program. FFCA would like to see that All of Alaska's foster youth are provided with tuition waivers to reduce the stress of worrying about college expenses and knowing that they are guaranteed a higher education.

Support to foster youth pursuing post-secondary education

Many of the youth and alumni who attend post-secondary education programs in Alaska have complained about not having any supports to help them achieve their goals. FFCA members would like to see that universities and vocational programs have supports put in place for foster youth transitioning to higher education. FFCA members recommended adult or alumni mentors, a family to spend the holidays with, and someone within the

university or vocational program to talk with about stressors. If every youth in Alaska's foster care system made a permanent connection with a caring adult during their stay in foster care this would be less of an issue. FFCA members also recommended implementing the "Circles of Support Program" to ensure youth in care are making permanent connections with caring adults before exiting from care.

More Independent Living Funds going to youth/alumni

The state of Alaska currently gets approximately \$500,000 a year (FY2008 \$518,814) in federal Chafee funds to be used for youth in foster care to work toward independent living. There is currently no state match for this money and it is being stretched very thin as the state's Independent Living Program grows and begins to offer more programs and resources to youth in transition. The youth and alumni of FFCA would like to see that more of this money is offered to youth and alumni transitioning from foster care for housing, education, life skills training, and anything that may support them in becoming independent, productive members of society. FFCA is also aware that many states provide a match for the Chafee dollars they receive and would like to see that this is made possible by the state of Alaska.

Transitional Living for youth

Alaska currently allows for youth who turn 18 in foster care the option to extend their time in state custody until the age of 20. There are many states that allow for youth to extend custody until age 21, or to leave custody and re-enter if they are willing to pursue post-secondary education. According to the Alaskan Alumni Study 38% of Alaska's alumni reported being homeless after exiting foster care. The population at the Covenant House Shelter in Anchorage reports that two-thirds of their current population is comprised of current and former OCS youth. The youth and alumni of FFCA would like to see a stronger focus in the area of transitional housing for youth who exit from the foster care system. FFCA members shared ideas and recommend allowing youth to remain in state custody while living in college dorms, apartments on their own, or other least restrictive environments outside of the traditional family foster home after reaching age 18.

Independent Housing Program

Some states currently allow for foster youth to live “on their own” after reaching age 18, but to remain in state custody and receive foster care payments on behalf of themselves until the age of 21. This allows for foster youth to continue services with their social worker as well as other services offered to youth in custody, and learn to successfully transition out of state custody. The youth and alumni of FFCA would like to see a program such as this put into place in Alaska, or for the state to consider more creative placements for young people once they reach 18, but are not ready to exit from foster care.

Medicaid increased to age 21 under the Chafee Independence Act

There are currently 17 states that have chosen to enact the Chafee option to extend Medicaid to age 21 for former foster youth. Alaska is not one of these states. Currently, youth in Alaska’s foster care system can receive Denali Kid Care until age 19 under the 1115 Waiver. After age 19 these young people can apply for adult Medicaid, but this holds them back from obtaining decent paying jobs and forces them to choose to go without medical coverage. Youth in foster care often attend counseling and have other medical needs, but they are forced to cut off many of these services when they leave custody. The youth and alumni of FFCA would like to see that Medicaid is increased for Alaska’s foster youth to age 21 under the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act.

Braces covered under Medicaid

Children and youth in Alaska’s foster care system often have only their Basic needs met because there is a strong emphasis on safety and permanency. There is little or no value put on whether a young person in custody needs braces, as this is usually a cosmetic procedure that parents would normally pay for. The youth and alumni of FFCA felt very strongly about this issue and believe that braces should be covered under Medicaid or by OCS. FFCA members discussed how braces could support higher self-esteem for a young person in foster care, and would give them one less thing to worry about besides the

social pressures they face as a “foster youth.” FFCA is also aware that braces are covered under Medicaid in the state of Texas, so this could be an option for Alaska.

Decreased use of Psychotropic Medication for Alaska’s foster youth

Many of Alaska’s youth and alumni complain about being prescribed psychotropic medications after entering the foster care system for symptoms of depression, anxiety, trauma, attachment issues, and misbehavior. The youth and alumni of FFCA feel that these are all normal symptoms of child maltreatment and dealing with all that comes out of being placed in foster care. There has been a national focus on the use of psychotropic medications being over-prescribed for children and youth in foster care. FFCA members have also complained about side-effects caused by these medications resulting in a decreased ability to focus on their education as well as function in everyday society. The youth and alumni of FFCA would like to see that the prescription of psychotropic medications for Alaska’s foster children and youth is decreased and reviewed more closely.

Definitions (according to FFCA)

Youth- A young person currently in state custody (foster care).

Alumni- A person who has spent any period of time in the foster care system

Facing Foster Care in Alaska (FFCA)

Mission Statement: Our mission is to improve the foster care system through sharing our experiences, supporting and educating youth and social services and implementing positive change in society as a whole.

FFCA is Alaska's only foster care advocacy organization completely run by youth and alumni of the foster care system. Since their inception in 2003, FFCA has been working to improve Alaska's foster care system by sharing their experiences with people who can create positive changes for Alaska's foster youth. FFCA is a statewide organization that provides support to Alaska's foster youth and alumni and, gives them the ability to share their voice and become leaders in their community.

Acknowledgements

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