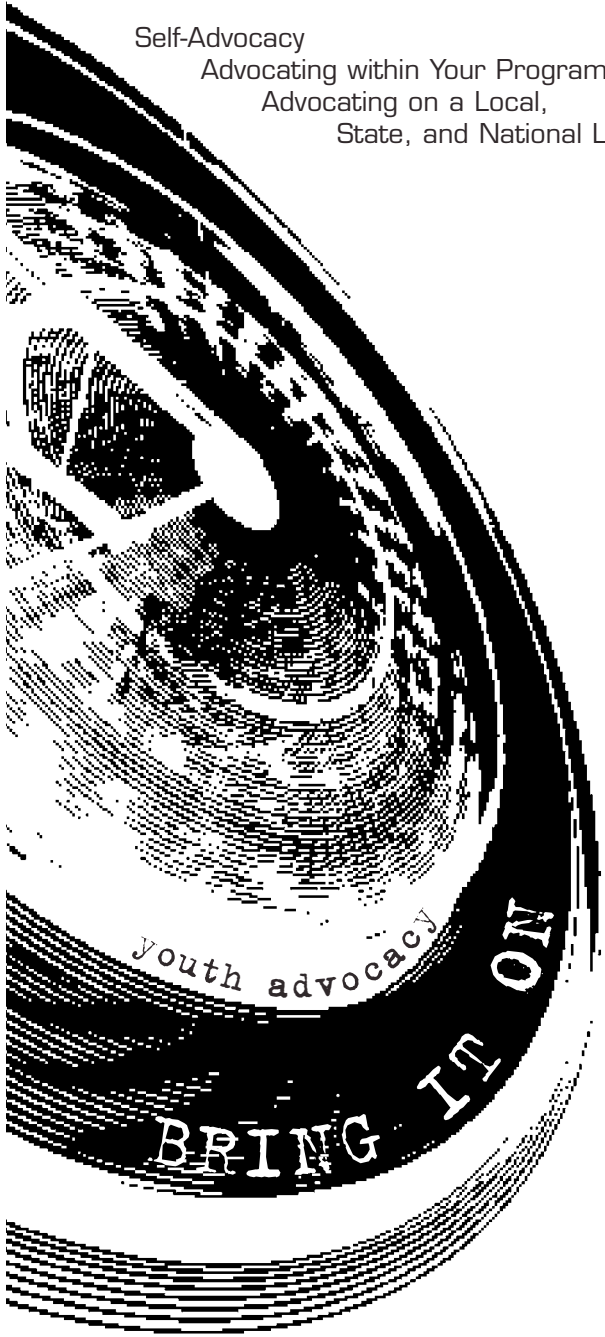


PRACTICING YOUTH ADVOCACY

Self-Advocacy
Advocating within Your Program
Advocating on a Local,
State, and National Level



"Speaking up for what
you believe in."

Jennifer Thomas
Former Foster Youth



"Helping others
defend their
rights."
Darrell Locke,
Former Foster Youth



What does
advocacy mean?

"Acting, speaking, or
writing in support of a
person or issue."



Debbie Dominick
Former Foster
Youth



"It means working
diligently to
educate others to
bring about
necessary change."

Tameka Jefferson
Former Foster Youth



"What does advocacy
mean? Defending your
point of view."

Kaleshia Manning
Former Foster Youth

As a youth in foster care, it may sometimes feel like someone else is in control of your life, like other people make all the decisions for you. If that's how you feel, then it's time to **TURN ON YOUR POWER!** It's up to you to get involved in the decisions that affect your life. It's up to you to advocate for change if something isn't right or if you see something that's unfair.

Four Types of Advocacy

1. Self-Advocacy means speaking up and/or taking action about a problem or foster care issue that directly affects you.

2. Local Foster Program Advocacy means speaking up and/or taking action on issues you wish to change within your community. Some examples of local advocacy might include county/regional social services departments, your city, your group home or residential center, or even your foster home. What makes local advocacy different from self-advocacy is that your goal is to make changes that affect more than just yourself. You are taking action to make changes for all foster youth affected by the program in your community, city, or county.

3. State Advocacy for foster youth means attempting to change a state law, policy, or regulation that affects foster youth in your state.

4. National Advocacy for foster youth means working to impact foster youth across the nation. National advocacy efforts involve working with national agencies or organization and/or meeting with your elected senators and representatives in an effort to enact legislation that would affect foster children in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.

"When I have a problem, I always speak out and advocate for myself by speaking to my caregiver, writing letters to the state, or even to the department of social services - to anyone that will listen."



Angel French, Former Foster Youth

Some Important Elements of Advocacy

This section includes several advocacy fundamentals that NFYAC believes are essential for foster youth to practice to be heard on issues important to them. Because of space limitations, we have emphasized the most important elements. They are:

IDENTIFY THE ISSUES

DEVELOP A PLAN

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS &

CULTIVATE COMMUNITY ALLIES

MONITOR AND EVALUATE YOUR WORK

IDENTIFY THE ISSUES

The first step to become a Youth Advocate is to identify a specific foster care issue that motivates and inspires you. Try to find an issue that you will be willing to research and learn about so you can effectively communicate about it to others. Showing your passion and dedication is important when advocating, but you will always be more effective if you can back up your feelings with facts.

When you choose your issue, try to be very specific and find out as much as you can about the issue's history. You can read newspapers, books, newsletters, and you can contact other organizations. Log on to the web and see if your subject has been dealt with elsewhere. Remember to be critical of your sources to be sure you are getting accurate, unbiased information.

As you are doing your research, ask:

? Who do I need to meet with to further my cause? ?

? What laws and policies are in place that might affect my issue? ?

? Who else is interested in or is working on this issue? ?

? What has been done about the issue and did it work and if not, why not? ?



DEVELOP A PLAN

There are many strategies you can use as a youth to advocate for your chosen foster care cause. Following is a discussion of some usual ways to take action for a cause. Use several methods, if appropriate.

Write Letters *to whom it may concern,*

Letter writing is one of the most commonly used strategies to convey concern about issues. It's a great way to organize your thoughts and have your voice heard. It is a good way to contact people in government or organizations to let them know what you think. Writing a letter can be as simple as sitting down and handwriting a note to your foster parent, caseworker, or social worker. Or you can choose to type a letter (double spacing may improve legibility).



tips on writing letters

- Explain who you are and the issue you are writing about.
- Include as many relevant facts as you can.
- Describe your mission or your purpose in writing.
- Answer the questions: Why are you writing? What do you want from the person you're writing to? Who will benefit? Why should they do what you want them to do?
- Thank them for their time and consideration.
- Include the date, your complete name and address, phone number, and e-mail address (if applicable) so you can be contacted.
- Have someone check your letter for spelling or grammatical mistakes.

hello, may I speak to...

Make Telephone Calls

When making phone calls, remember to be professional, polite, and to the point. Before placing the call, make notes to yourself about the points you want to cover with the person you're calling. If you aren't sure who to speak with, you may end up getting transferred several times before you speak to the right person. Be patient. Be polite and professional with those with whom you talk. Be upbeat. Remember, to get respect, you have to give respect.

tips to making phone time work for you



- Make a list of points you want to be sure to cover.
- Briefly state the reason for the call.
- Ask if they have a few minutes to talk, or if they would like to schedule another time for you to call back or visit their office.
- If they invite you to continue, go into further detail about the reason for your call.
- If they do not have time, try to schedule another time to contact them.
- If the person you are calling is not interested in what you are saying, respect their opinion. Thank them for their time. Ask if they can tell you who would be another person for you to contact about your issue.
- Keep calling until you reach people who can help you move your cause forward.

I hereby call this meeting to order...

Hold a Meeting

Meetings are a powerful force for progress and change. They are a good way to get your information out to a lot of people at one time. Although holding a meeting can save you time in some aspects, facilitating an effective meeting can be challenging.



tips for a successful meeting

Decide where you can hold your meeting and get appropriate permission. Be sure the location is convenient, accessible, and large enough to accommodate your group. Some location ideas are:
Churches, Social Service Agencies, Schools, Restaurants or Coffee Shops, Libraries, Community Centers, Group Homes or Residential Centers

Prepare an agenda to outline the issues that need to be discussed and decided. An agenda helps to ensure that everyone stays focused during your meeting and that all items are covered by the end of the meeting.

Contact people that you want to attend your meeting at least two weeks before the meeting date. If you are inviting the general public, hang posters about the meeting (be sure to get permission before hanging posters.) Some relevant places to post your notices could be: group home, churches, residential center, social service agency, school, grocery store, other neighborhood locations.

Make Visits

come face to face...

Presenting information in person can have a powerful impact on the people you are hoping to influence.



some tips for your visit

Contact the person that you want to meet with ahead of time and schedule a meeting, if at all possible.

Dress for success. If you have a nice pair of pants or skirt, it can help to make a good impression. If you don't have professional clothes, that's OK, too. Look as neat and clean as possible.

Be polite and use appropriate language. Do not use cussing or harsh words to communicate your point.

Shake hands with people. This is how most professional business is conducted. You will be taken more seriously if you join in.

People to Visit:

For Self-Advocacy:

House Managers, Teachers, Caseworkers, Social Workers, Lawyers, CASAs, Judges, Counselors, Therapists

For Local Foster Program Advocacy:

Mayor, Local Social Services Director, Administrators, Caseworker Supervisors, Judge, Local Youth Advisory Councils

For State Advocacy for Foster Youth:

State Social Services Director, Legislative Officials, State Independent Living Coordinator, State Youth Advisory Councils, State Non profit Agencies that work on Foster Care Issues

For National Advocacy for Foster Youth:

Senators, Congressional Representatives, Government Officials and Agencies, National Youth Advisory Councils, National Agencies that Specialize in Foster Care Issues

Contact Media

your 15 minutes of fame!

Every time you turn on the TV, tune into the radio, or read the newspaper, the media is influencing you. So use this powerful tool when you are trying to get your message about foster care out to the community. The media includes newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the Internet.

tips to get the word out

Whenever you are about to send a message out to the public, it's a good idea to criticize your message by imagining that you are hearing it for the first time.



Include all the important information: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

When contacting the media, be prepared for their questions and realize that you can write down the questions and get back with them after you've had time to think about how you want to answer.

Contact the media if you want to get the word out about a meeting or an event. It may be possible to put your information out there as a public service announcement. Another possibility is to get free coverage if the media is interested in doing a story about you and your advocacy for foster care.

Develop a "sound bite" - a message that you can use over and over again to get your message across concisely and quickly.

"Learning to effectively advocate has enabled me to succeed in my goal of attaining a quality education. I believe that my education will be vital to my success in the future."

David Ambroz, Former Foster Youth

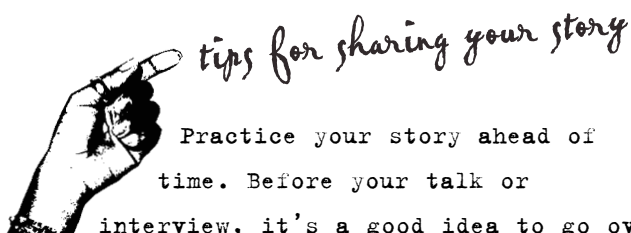
your experience is valuable

Tell Your Story

You may be asked to talk about your foster care experience, either formally or informally. It is OK to speak about your experiences, especially if it furthers the cause you've chosen.

Think ahead of time about what you should tell and what is better kept private. If you ever feel uncomfortable when someone asks about your experiences, just remember that it is your story, and you do not have to share personal information if you choose not to. You will want to protect others' privacy, and be cautious that your personal information is not misunderstood or interpreted in a way you do not intend.

If you are still in foster care, you may need to get permission from your foster care agency prior to speaking publicly or before having your photo published. Ask your caseworker.



tips for sharing your story

Practice your story ahead of time. Before your talk or interview, it's a good idea to go over what parts of your experience you feel comfortable sharing. That way, you will be less likely to talk about an item you did not want to share. Also, write down notes or points that you want to cover. This will keep you on track and keep you from rambling.

People can be curious. Just because they ask a question doesn't mean that you have to answer. Be polite and just say "that's personal" or "I'd rather not share at this time."

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS & CULTIVATE COMMUNITY ALLIES

You can accomplish a lot on your own, but when you advocate for youth in foster care, you can increase your effectiveness by calling on the people you have relationships with and developing community allies to help with the action.

As you are working to promote change for other foster youth, the personal relationships you've made at every stage in your life can add to the success of your cause. You'll depend on your friends and family for support and encouragement. In addition, teachers, parents and/or foster parents, caseworkers and CASAs, clergy, coaches, and mentors can all be part of the core group dedicated to your cause.

All relationships will test your ability to work with, share, teach, and learn from other people. Being able to work with others provides the strength and power needed to make your goal or vision a reality.

Building healthy relationships where everyone feels valued involved, and empowered is not only the cornerstone to being good leaders, as stated in the *Promoting Youth Leadership* section, it is also the cornerstone to creating allies for effective advocacy.

Cultivating community allies means creating positive relationships with people and/or groups that have similar goals and values. Here are some ways to cultivate community allies:

- Collaborate with others (which means to work with others on a project).
- Build strong connections with people or groups (also called "networking").
- Combine resources: go in with another person or group to increase your chance of reaching a goal.

Here's an example of how you can create a community ally. For example, if you want to influence a family court judge on issues that are important to foster youth, you might work with the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), a group of volunteers that have access to the courts. CASA could assist in getting your message and point of view to the judge, since they have access to the courts, access that is not available to most youth.

tips on creating beneficial relationships

Think carefully about what it is you want to achieve. Do research, if necessary, to find out about other people or groups that are concerned about the same issue.

When approaching others to help out with your cause, be sure you've taken the time to consider the different perspective they may have on the issue. You can help them understand where you're coming from.

Don't be discouraged. Some people or groups will turn you down. Be gracious and respectful. You can have a good relationship with someone even if you don't agree on everything.

Do not give up. Building relationships takes time and hard work.

Stay focused on your issue and others will recognize your passion and commitment and may eventually rally around you.

Ask people you talk to if they know anyone else who may want to get involved. Ask them if they can introduce you to others.

*that was successful!) could do better.
positive vs. negative
this is good!*



MONITOR AND EVALUATE YOUR WORK

So now that you've taken action, it is important to measure how effective you've been. Although evaluating is important once you have done all that you can do for your cause, it is also important to monitor each small action step toward your goal. Take a look at your plan, your contact with the public, your membership and meetings, and the results of all your efforts. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- ✓* What were the positive and negative results of my/our efforts?
- ✓* What methods to achieve success did I use?
- ✓* Which ones worked? What should I have done that I didn't do?
- ✓* What was the end result? Did I see what I wanted to have happen?
- ✓* What would I change if I had it to do all over again?
- ✓* Did I have too much or not enough guidance?
- ✓* How did the team feel and learn about the project?
- ✓* Were there major conflicts within the team? If so, how can we solve conflicts in the future?
- ✓* What is my next step?"

Be proud of your achievements!



Self-Advocacy Scenario:

Your brother and sister and you were recently placed in foster care. You were placed in a group home. Your brother was placed in a foster home on the east side of town. Your sister went to a different foster home on the north side of town. When you were placed in foster care, your caseworker said that you would be able to visit with your brother and sister once a week. It has been two months since you were first placed in your group home and you haven't seen either your brother or sister yet.

How would you go about advocating to see your brother and sister?

Who should you call?

Is there any research you need to do or background information you need to get?

Are there any policies or regulations that might support your cause? If so, what are they?

Local Foster Program Advocacy Scenario:

A group of foster youth from the Independent Living Program noticed that adults made all the decisions regarding the program. They felt that youth from the program should represent their ideas, since in fact, the program's purpose is to assist youth in their transition into adulthood.

What are the first steps the group of youth should take to explore this issue?

Who should the youth request to meet regarding their concern?

What should the youth do after they meet with those people?

What are some possible recommendations the youth can propose?

What should the youth do to prepare to meet with anyone from the Independent Living Program?

State Advocacy Scenario:

In your state, youth in foster care emancipate (age out) when they turn 18 years old. Foster youth around the state believe that youth should have the opportunity to stay in foster care until their 21st birthday.

Where can you find the current law that states foster youth age out of foster care at age 18? Why is it important to have a copy of this law?

If you write a letter to a state legislator, what information should your letter contain?

What other research should be conducted to help youth build your argument?

Who are the people at the state level you would want to meet with?

How would you go about setting up a meeting with those people??

If you meet in person with a state legislator, how should you prepare for this meeting?

What are some possible strategies you could use to get your point across to a legislator or state official?



"I effectively advocate on maintaining a relationship with my biological sister who was adopted by a non-relative. In my state, they usually sever all ties once a youth is adopted."

April Curtis, Former Foster Youth

National Advocacy Scenario:

Foster youth around the country would like educational assistance with college tuition even after they have aged out of the foster care system. Some states have tuition waivers that allow foster youth to go to college or vocational school for free even after emancipation, while other states have policies and regulations that target foster youth in care only. Some states offer no help at all. There are no uniform policies or laws to benefit foster youth across the country. Your goal is to see all states offer educational assistance to youth who have aged out of foster care.

What research should you do to help build your argument?

Who are the people at the national level you would want to meet with?

How would you go about seeking support and collaboration from other organizations?

If you write a letter to a senator or congressional representative, what information would your letter contain?

How would you go about setting up a meeting with a senator or congressional representative?

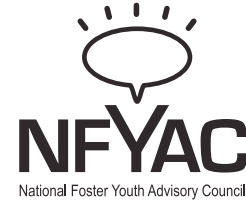
What are some ways you could use the media to get the word out about this issue?

If you meet in person with your senator or congressional representative, how would you prepare for this meeting?

What are some possible strategies you could use to get your point across to a senator or congressional representative?

Look into yourself and figure out what issues in foster care you feel strongly about. Find out what you can do to make a change.

Make your voice heard!



The Child Welfare League of America is the nation's oldest and largest membership-based child welfare organization. We are committed to engaging people everywhere in promoting the well-being of children, youth, and their families, and protecting every child from harm.

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