



2026

Youth Development Program

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT SUMMIT

**Findings &
Recommendations**

Introduction

The Youth Development Program (YDP) is the Department for Children and Families, Family Services Division's (DCF-FSD) contracted Chafee program, providing transition and aftercare services to 450+ each year to teens and young adults ages 14 up to 23 who have experience in the foster care system.

Our mission is to ensure that youth with foster care experience enter adulthood with the necessary support to build productive and fulfilling lives through youth-driven support and resources—namely, case management services, financial assistance, and leadership and advocacy opportunities. We aim to ensure that youth exiting care have the opportunity to rise above risk factors, find resilience, and not only survive—but thrive.

We strive to partner with youth to help them knock down barriers, uncover interests and skill sets, provide opportunities, and help youth turn dreams into plans. We believe in providing services and supports that are strengths-based and fully driven by young people.

On Friday, April 10th, 2026, YDP (supported by Elevate Youth Services [EYS], DCF, and the YDP Youth Advisory Board [YAB]) hosted our annual Youth Empowerment Summit—only this year, we led with the hope of encouraging thoughtful and intentional dialogue between youth and adults that would result in true systems change. To do so, YDP prioritized elevating youth voice, strengthening youth-adult partnerships, and supporting community connections.

Over 95 people were in attendance—including 28 youth (ages 14-23), 15 representatives from DCF, 14 Youth Development Coordinators, and 25 additional adult supporters (EYS staff, foster parents, and staff representing five residential programs across the region (Laraway Youth and Family Services, Howard Center Park Street Program, Vermont Permanency Initiative, Seven Hills Foundation's Stetson School, and Elevate's Return House).

Youth were able to reflect on their experiences, engage in meaningful conversations with state leaders, learn from community partners, and connect with others who have shared experiences. Adult supporters also gathered to address gaps in care, how to better team around supporting youth, and how to further elevate youth voice. The day was filled with connection, conversation, and reconciliation—all of which was heavily grounded in themes of transparency, accountability, and a commitment to do better.

The following report is primarily focused on highlighting youth-identified challenges as they relate to youth currently in DCF custody, youth in residential programming, and youth who are transitioning into adulthood. The report outlines current obstacles to safety, stability, and resilience for youth in care while also offering guidance and recommendations for how to improve outcomes.

All information communicated in this report comes directly from young people with lived experience in the child welfare system and the adults that support them. Youth are the experts in their own experiences. We are committed to listening and leading with their insights to develop a system that values and protects youth.

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Topics Addressed

Provider
Collaboration

Housing
Supports

Accessing
Normalcy

Engaging
Youth Voice

Residential
Programming

Permanency
Planning

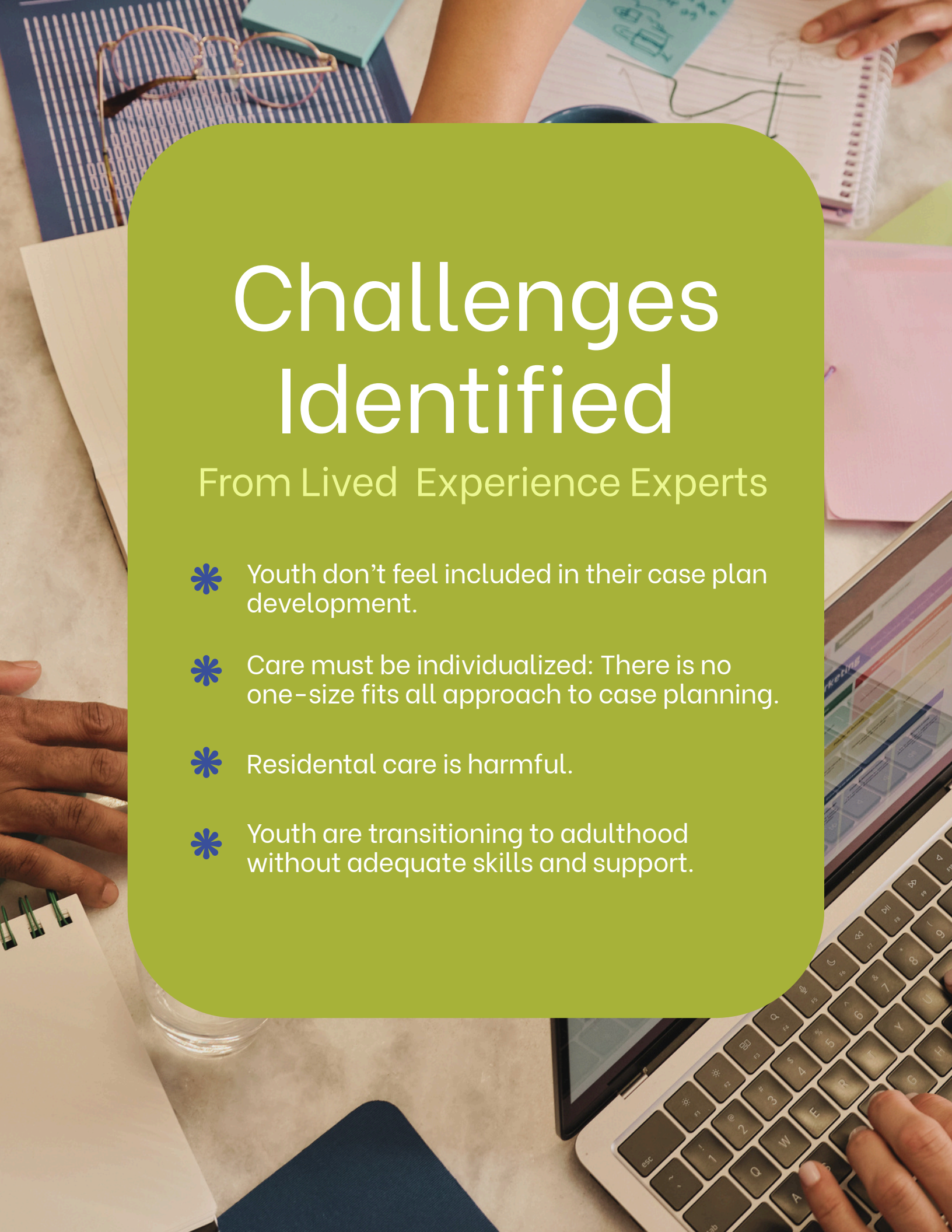
Natural
Supports

Life Skills
Development

Accountability

Youth Quotes

- * "People cannot thrive when they are not stable."
- * "We are kept alive, but not nurtured."
- * "Emotions are normal, not something to punish/send away."
- * "I was in limbo my entire adolescence."
- * "We are not luggage."
- * "Have some empathy, go easy on us, everything about this is hard."
- * "Not knowing when we will see our family takes a huge toll."
- * "My experiences have never been validated."
- * "Nothing about being in care is insignificant – we remember every date and every detail of everything that has happened."
- * "Being heard can be scary because people can be judged on what you have to say."
- * "We feel stuck and are stuck."
- * "I'm scared."

A background image showing a desk with a laptop, notebooks, and glasses. The laptop is open on the right, showing a keyboard and a screen with some text. There are several notebooks, some with spiral binding, and a pair of glasses on the left. The overall scene suggests a workspace or a place for study and work.

Challenges Identified

From Lived Experience Experts

- * Youth don't feel included in their case plan development.
- * Care must be individualized: There is no one-size fits all approach to case planning.
- * Residential care is harmful.
- * Youth are transitioning to adulthood without adequate skills and support.

Challenges Identified:

Case Work

1. **Services aren't youth led.**

- Youth aren't involved in case planning.
- Youth input and needs aren't centered in meetings.
- System goals are prioritized over youth goals.

2. **Meetings aren't accessible.**

- Youth frequently aren't invited to their own meetings, and when they are, they often don't attend.
- Meetings are not youth-friendly (timing, setting, language, etc.)
- Youth aren't able to communicate regularly with their team, especially if they do not have a phone.



Challenges Identified:

Case Work

3. **Youth don't feel safe.**

- Check-ins are infrequent and impersonal. Young people don't know what their options are. There is little follow up with youth regarding their concerns.
- Youth don't feel safe to engage as their words are often distorted or misrepresented. When youth do feel comfortable sharing, they are not listened to.
- Relationships are hierarchical—caseworkers know everything about youth and youth know nothing about their caseworkers.
- Youth information is too freely shared between providers.
- Adults get frustrated when youth are dysregulated.
- There's nowhere to file complaints about a caseworker.
- There isn't enough notice, care, or planning when it comes to transferring to a new worker.

Youth reported poor communication between all parties involved in their care - DCF, youth, families, caregivers, schools, lawmakers, service providers, etc.



Relational Guidance



Youth want to feel **VALIDATED**

COMFORTED **GROUNDING** **SAFE**

UNDERSTOOD **REASSURED**

and **AFFIRMED.**



*Especially because they're being asked
to share their **trauma** with a **stranger!!!***

Relational Guidance

Make sure we have a shared understanding.

Summarize what you heard.

Remember what we tell you.

Ask questions.
Research solutions.

Make change,
take action.

Follow through
and follow up
on our concerns.

Make time to talk.

Practice active
listening - with no
distractions!

Using humor
to connect can
be helpful.

Use my correct
name and
pronouns.

Understand diverse
backgrounds.

Think about
how our culture
impacts us.

Understand without
judgement.

Don't compare
our experiences.

Trust us.
Believe us.

** This is guidance meant to help adult supporters engage with youth. Not all is appropriate or applicable for every situation. Every young person is different. If you've met one youth in care, you've met one youth in care.*

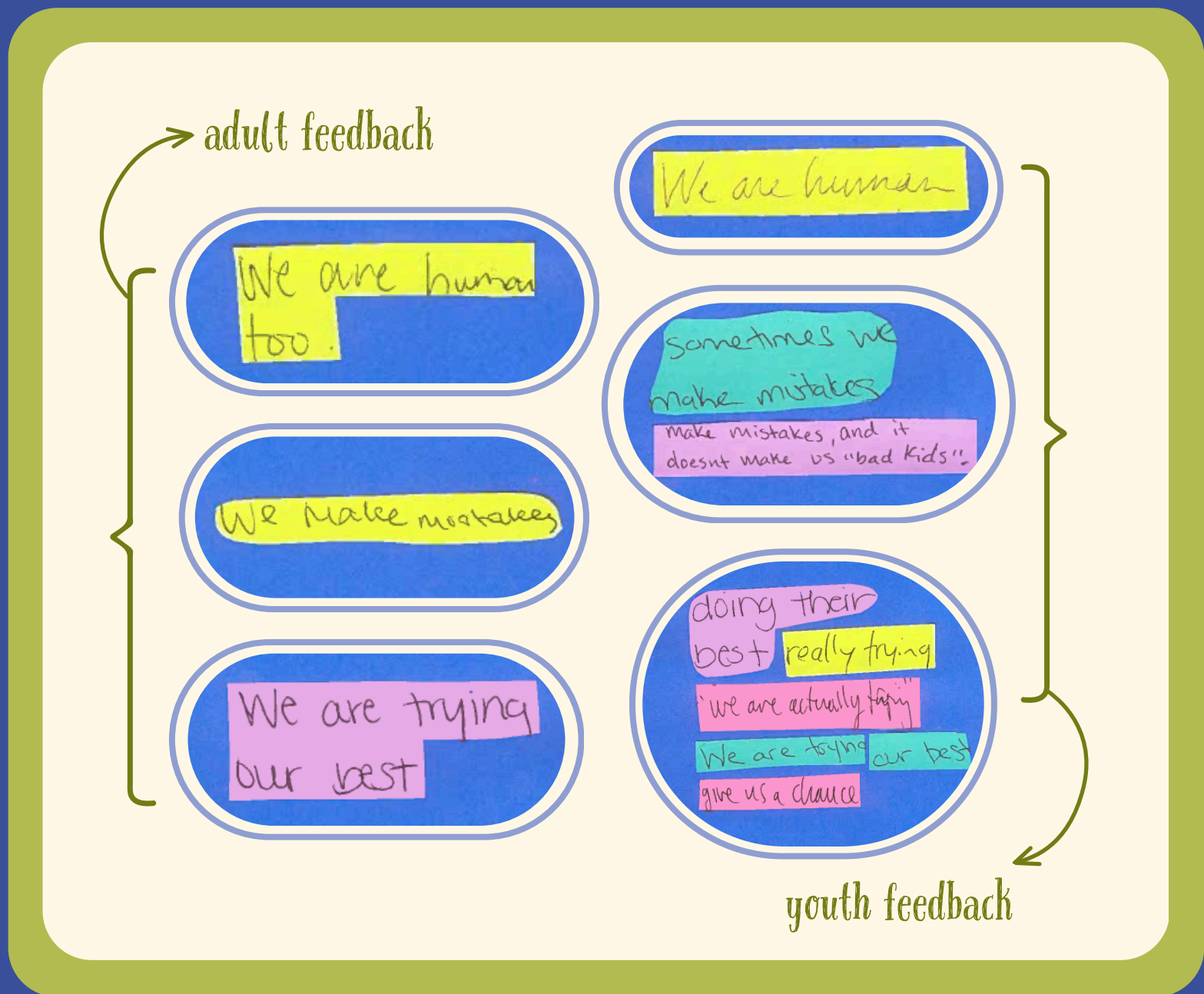
What do **adults** need to know or understand about **youth**?

- * "We know things. We feel things. We have a voice."
- * "We don't always know how to show our emotions in the best way."
- * Youth are gonna youth—mistakes are an opportunity for growth."
- * "We are trying. We are doing our best."
- * "A lot of our energy is going toward self-regulation."
- * "I'm great. The world is the problem."
- * "Mistakes do not make a bad kid."
- * "Youth need guidance, independence, and love."
- * "We have very few resources."
- * "We have different backgrounds from you *and* each other."
- * "We are not glass."
- * "Whatever we are doing is usually developmentally appropriate."
- * "We need to be taken seriously."



What do **youth** need to know or understand about **adults**?

- * "We don't always have the answers."
- * "We are doing our best."
- * "We don't always know how to help."
- * "We are human."
- * "We worry about you."
- * "We are afraid of pushing you way."
- * "We believe you."
- * "We struggle, too."
- * "We are here to stand behind you."
- * "Resources are tight."
- * "We have good intentions."
- * "We are frustrated with the system, too."
- * "We make mistakes."



Across age and experience, both youth and adults reflected similar feelings:

"We are human." "We make mistakes."

"We are trying our best."

This shared experience of humanity must guide our work together. Grace is the greatest gift we can give one another as we navigate the challenge doing good within a system that, in design, separates families, and in practice, harms youth.

Relational Guidance

Healing and repair cannot happen without connection. Establishing safety and developing community were key, foundational priorities for this year's Youth Empowerment Summit.

When asked, "What does it look, sound, and feel like to be heard or validated?" summit attendees answered with the following:

A word cloud of responses from summit attendees, displayed on a light yellow background with a green border. The words are in various colors (orange, purple, blue, green) and sizes, arranged in a non-linear fashion. The words include: "Use correct pronouns", "without judgment", "understanding", "comforting", "hear me", "validate", "eye contact", "listen", "follow through", "check-in", "feels good", "ask questions", "grounding", "let me speak", "affirm", "action", "make changes", "safe", "use humor", "believe me", "stay invested", "reassuring", "don't compare", "to be seen", and "someone cares".

Use correct pronouns
without judgment
understanding
comforting
hear me
validate
eye contact
listen
follow through
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feels good
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grounding
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make changes
safe
use humor
believe me
stay invested
reassuring
don't compare
to be seen
someone cares

Challenges Identified:

Youth in Care

1. There is no “one-size fits all” path to Permanency.

- “Family Finding” tools aren’t used consistently.
- Some youth don’t want family reunification.
- Youth feel pressured to be adopted.
- Support decreases substantially post-adoption.
- Permanency planning is too forced and too focused on short term solutions.

DCF-FSD Policy 125: Permanency Planning for Children and Youth

Permanency planning involves the development and implementation of strategies to ensure a youth is living in a nurturing family setting which “offers legal commitment” and “continuity of relationships.” DCF is required to exert **urgency** and **continual effort** toward the finalization of this goal.

DCF-FSD Policy 75 Normalcy

The Normalcy Policy requires DCF to promote normalcy by allowing youth in foster care to experience childhood and adolescence in ways like their peers not in foster care.



Challenges Identified:

Youth in Care

2. **Normalcy needs to be prioritized more.**

- Youth have to ask for normalcy related items - its not built in.
- There aren't enough social opportunities or celebration for big life events: birthdays, holidays, graduation, etc.
- Youth don't have strong relationships and struggle to maintain connections with their biological families.
- Youth have limited access to phones which are often the only way they can access the relationships that stabilize them (friends, siblings, parents, peers, caseworkers, and extended family).
- Youth lack access to adequate ethnic hair care and gender affirming care: clothing, binders, haircuts, etc.
- DCF involvement is stigmatized.
- Belongings are often lost or left behind.
- Youth in residentials don't get enough enrichment, exercise, or opportunities to be outside.
- Youth in residential programming miss out on activities, meetings, and visits because of low staffing and a lack of transportation. Low staffing leads to more low staffing.
- Youth residing in residential facilities feel very isolated.

Challenges Identified:

Youth in Care



3. **Placements aren't meeting the needs of youth.**

- DCF should prioritize appropriate foster placements, even if doing so would result in sibling separation.
- Youth feel their placements are driven by their diagnoses.
- "There's no space to go where someone will just listen to you."
- Foster parents lack adequate training on trauma, adolescent brain development, and maintaining boundaries.
- Household rules and expectations are vastly different between placements.
- Youth are often not placed in appropriate residential programs.

Challenges Identified:

Youth in Care

4. Residential programs lack oversight & accountability.

- Youth are not kept safe. They are treated poorly. Youth are abused—emotionally, psychologically, and physically.
- Youth feel “gaslit” about their experiences.
- Youth have limited access to their caseworkers. Access is often determined by their behavior.
- Youth feel misled about the amenities in residential programs.
- Youth feel unable to advocate for being placed in a lower level of care.



Challenges Identified:

Transition-Aged Youth

1. **Youth are exiting care without access to housing.**

- Youth have no money for housing. Housing is too expensive.
- There is a lack of housing across the state.
- Youth lack natural supports who can offer a place to stay, especially in an emergency.
- Housing for youth who are eligible for Adult Developmental Services is too restrictive.
- Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) housing vouchers are hard to acquire, keep, and utilize.
- Youth don't have anyone who can co-sign a lease for them.
- Tuition assistance doesn't cover the high cost of room and board.

2. **Youth do not have their important documents.**

- Youth are leaving care without their important identification documents. Without identification, youth struggle to obtain housing and employment.
- There's nowhere to consistently store or access identification, case plans, school documents, medical records, placement history, resources, rights, etc.

Challenges Identified:

Transition-Aged Youth

3. Youth are leaving care without life skills.

- Youth have a limited understanding of financial management: credit, bank accounts, savings, interest, loans, budgeting, taxes, etc.
- Youth struggle with basic life skills: health, hygiene, nutrition, sex education, self-care, healthy relationships, internet safety, etc.
- Youth have limited experience with independent living skills / "adulting," such as meal preparation, nutrition, basics, how to do laundry, how to set up appointments, how to get an apartment, etc.
- Youth are exiting care unprepared for entering the workforce. They've had little training on writing resumes and cover letters, developing interview skills, and the basics of workplace culture and professionalism.

4. Transition plans are inadequate.

- There isn't enough time for thorough transition planning.
- Eligible youth cannot access developmental services until they're 18, at which point they are no longer in custody and lack connections to supportive adults who can help them navigate that process. This leads to a gap in supports for vulnerable youth.
- Services for young adults are heavily siloed.

Challenges Identified:

Transition-Aged Youth

5. **Youth have limited access to transportation.**

- Many youth have no one to teach them how to drive.
- Foster parents don't want youth on their insurance.
- Insurance is too expensive.
- Youth don't have access to vehicles to practice driving.
- Navigating DMV bureaucracy is challenging.
- Youth can't afford to purchase a vehicle or maintain it: YDP is unable to help youth purchase vehicles.

6. **Youth have no natural supports.**

- Youth exiting care often don't have an adult they can trust. Their only safe relationship is often with a paid professional.
- "Youth have no one who will provide unconditional support."
- Youth have limited access to community.
- Youth have little access to extended family.
- Youth are isolated by their experience in custody.
- Youth have less opportunities to make mistakes.
- Youth struggle to maintain healthy relationships.

Challenges Identified:

Transition-Aged Youth

7. Youth voice is overlooked.

- There aren't many avenues for youth to provide feedback or share concerns while still in care.
- There are limited opportunities for youth who have aged out of YDP to share feedback or provide input.
- Youth feel like there is little follow through to make change.
- Priorities shift and commitments to do better are often abandoned as state leadership changes.



Key Findings



The stakes are high. Our approach to care must be individualized.



It's critical that we center youth in case planning—ask questions, listen, BE RESPONSIVE.



Youth are exiting care without supportive relationships or access to housing.



Connecting youth to family and community is the most effective approach to supporting normalcy and permanency.



Youth in residential need more support and more normative experiences.



Youth need to share their story. They want to change the child welfare system for the better, for those who come after them.

IDENTIFIED ACTION ITEMS

DIRECT YOUTH INVOLVEMENT

- Ensure youth in care know their rights and have access to contact information for their team.
- Include youth on emails, meeting invites, case plan reviews, FSW evaluations, and in agenda planning.
- Increase communication: more texts, phone calls, and check-ins.
- Provide clear expectations for contact.
- Provide a warmline—"Sometimes we just need someone to talk to."

QUALITY ENGAGEMENT

- Prioritize face-to-face meetings.
- Meet in the community (prioritize normalcy).
- Focus on quality over quantity.
- Ensure follow through on action items.
- Be more relational.
- Walk youth through next steps and options without being asked.

PLACEMENTS

- Be more intentional about the placement process; slow down and ask youth what they want.
- Reunification should be based on the youth's comfort, history, and feedback.
- Standardize rules in foster homes for youth.
- Increase post adoption supports.
- Create foster parent guide for supporting youth.
- Increase the frequency and expand the content of trainings for foster parents (e.g., trauma, brain development, neurodivergence, LGBTQIA+, disability, culture, boundaries, intersectionality, etc.).

IDENTIFIED ACTION ITEMS

COMPREHENSIVE COORDINATION

- Increase meetings between providers.
- Utilize the family group conferencing model with families and kinship placements.
- Ensure meetings are family-centered, consistent, and meaningful.
- Use YDP's Youth Advisory Board for feedback and consultation.
- Provide youth with comprehensive information on community resources.

TRANSITION PLANNING

- Review benefits, basic needs plan, health care and gender affirming care options with youth.
- Ensure youth have access to identification and other relevant documentation (e.g., hard copies, create an online database, develop an app, etc.)
- Connect youth with advocacy opportunities.
- Provide youth with opportunities to practice developing life skills.
- Enable access to adult services for youth in care at 17.5 years old.
- Create an adulting boot camp for life skills development.

SOCIAL HEALTH

- Provide phones and consistent internet access so that youth can maintain connections to their family, friends, caseworkers, etc.
- Provide mentorship opportunities, support groups, and more social events.
- Create a Vermont chapter of the Foster Care Alumni Network so that youth can maintain access to community and natural supports during and beyond their involvement with DCF and YDP.

IDENTIFIED ACTION ITEMS

HOUSING SUPPORTS

- Provide more funding to youth for apartment start-up costs and ongoing rental subsidies.
- Allow DCF to serve as a cosigner on first-time apartments.
- Advocate with Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for Vermont State Housing Authority (VSHA) to increase the amount of available FYI housing vouchers.
- Provide fully integrated, inclusive community housing where youth can access services, mentors, and practice transitioning into adulthood with their peers.

NORMALCY

- Review, update, and reprioritize DCF's Normalcy Policy.

ENGAGING YOUTH VOICE

- Provide more paid opportunities to engage youth voice through surveys, focus groups, youth panels, and listening sessions.
- Create consultation positions within DCF for individuals with lived experience.
- Include youth on hiring panels and annual employee reviews.
- Prioritize candidates with lived experience when hiring within FSD.
- Create more positions within FSD and YDP tailored towards building community and engaging youth voice.
- Solicit feedback from youth through routine and thorough exit interviews.
- Create specialized educational pathways for individuals with lived experience to become social workers in FSD.
- Establish local, district-level youth advisory boards.
- Publish a quarterly or annual report outlining the ways DCF is engaging youth voice and making positive change.
- Create a state office dedicated to engaging youth and family voice in policy and decision making.

Reflections

from Adult Supporters

“Listening to youth without all the other noise of life and being able to just hear them and the rawness of their experiences...[it was a] moving experience for [DCF staff].”

“YOUTH FEEDBACK WAS POWERFUL AND CLEAR—WHAT YOUTH ARE ASKING FOR IS PRETTY BASIC (CONNECTION, NORMALCY, FEELING SEEN), BUT NOT CONSISTENTLY EXPERIENCED IN PRACTICE.”

“[The day was] complicated and humbling, [I’m] left wondering about the ‘why’s.’ [I] feel that day became a lens for how I look at a lot of things now-, asking more ‘why,’ and trying to understand what youth are really trying to say.”

“MY FEELINGS ARE HARD TO PUT INTO WORDS. I FEEL THIS TYPE OF INTERACTION AND FEEDBACK SHOULD BE DONE OFTEN AND THERE NEEDS TO BE MORE DCF DISTRICT LEADERS AND FSWS HEARING AND SEEING THIS FEEDBACK.”

“[I’m] inspired by the significance of the little things and how powerful those little things can be to youth.”

“WE FORGET THE SIMPLER THINGS. IT WAS CLEAR FROM THAT DAY THAT THOSE SIMPLER THINGS ARE WHAT YOUTH WANT AND THIS WILL SHAPE YDP IN OUR DISTRICT.”

A note to the adult supporters...

My role at YDP is to help young folks with experience in the Vermont foster care system share their story, gain leadership skills, and change the child welfare system for the better—all the while doing my best to ensure that adults respect & value youth voice AND follow through on their feedback.

I anticipate that, after reviewing this report, some may succumb to a fair bit of defensiveness. At the same time, I know that many are plagued by the moral injury that occurs when bureaucratic mandates and policy constraints directly violate the ethical values that inspired many of us to consider social work in the first place. It would be easy to interpret this report as a series of complaints directed at your personhood, but I urge you to consider what's at stake—nationally, an estimated 50% of the homeless population is comprised of former foster youth, an estimated 60% of child trafficking victims have a history in foster care, and both current and former foster youth are 4 times more likely to die by suicide and up to 5 times more likely to attempt suicide than their peers. These statistics can no longer be our reality.

"Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

— James Baldwin

The young people we serve have provided us with an unprecedented opportunity to make this system work better, for us *and* for them. Youth across Vermont gathered in an adult dominated space and chose to be vulnerable. They gave us the gratuitous gift of their exceptional insight and wisdom derived directly from their own lived experience; a lived experience, that for many, was incredibly painful. They chose to be brave. We can, too. Now is the time for radical change.

YDP Youth Advocacy Coordinator
Zoe Souder

