

2023 Foster Youth Summit Report



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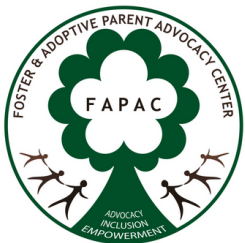


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Executive Summary



The 2023 Foster Youth Summit was a first-time initiative by the Foster and Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center (FAPAC) to bring together teens approaching or at the point of aging out of the foster care system. This initiative was conceived while working with foster parents who identified that youth exiting the foster care system sometimes return to their homes, asking for support. However, they are no longer in the custody of the DC Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) or considered to be in foster care. Further investigation into this issue of potential homelessness led to the realization that many young adults aging out of the foster care system are inadequately prepared for young adulthood and the responsibilities of living on their own.

Communities nationwide struggle to help young people transition from foster care to self-sufficiency, and research consistently illustrates the challenges youth face when aging out of the system. The Foster Youth Summit is FAPAC's attempt to provide a targeted learning experience that gives helpful information and resources to young people aging out of care while identifying challenges and developing ideas to resolve systemic issues in the DC foster care system.

It is with both heavy hearts and great pleasure that we bring you this report in the hope that it will shine some light on potential solutions to improving the DC foster care system, especially for teens aging out of foster care. FAPAC is a true partner with stakeholder agencies, nonprofits, and legislatures seeking to improve the quality of life for children and families in the foster care system.

We give our most sincere thanks to the partners and individuals who helped to make this program possible, especially Taylor Lewis, J.D. of Xstruct, LLC for designing and executing the summit.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Najiba Hlemi". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "N" and "H".

Najiba Hlemi
Executive Director
Foster and Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center



About FAPAC

The Foster and Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center
501c3 Nonprofit Organization, Established in 2000

Vision

We support a vision of strong prevention programs to keep families intact; high-quality, well-trained, and supported foster placements when youth need to come into care; serious efforts toward reunification and other permanency; and meaningful and effective post-permanency services to support youth and families and keep them stable and healthy. FAPAC collaborates with DC Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) and various stakeholders in creating programming to meet the needs of families involved in the D.C. child welfare system.

Mission

FAPAC was founded in 2000 to improve the quality of life, well-being, and dignity of children in the District of Columbia by strengthening, supporting, and empowering foster, adoptive, kinship, and birth families.

Healing Children by Empowering Families

Introduction



Problem and Purpose

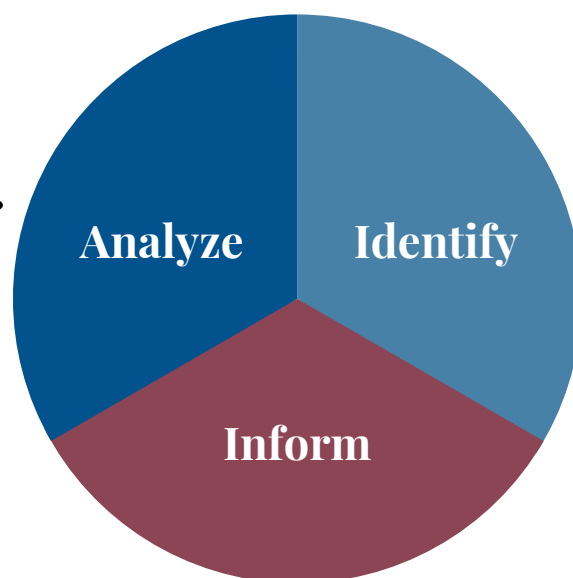
The process of becoming an independent adult can be challenging, even for young people with supportive families. It becomes exponentially more difficult for youth who do not have a wealth of guidance and resources. In particular, youth aging out of foster care face significant challenges as they exit a system of various government supports and enter life as independent adults with the accompanying responsibilities. FAPAC launched its inaugural Foster Youth Summit (Summit) in May 2023 in an effort to address the challenges experienced by young people aging out of foster care in Washington, D.C. (D.C. or the District). The Summit sought to provide information and resources to teenagers and young adults with lived experience in foster care and offer them a forum to voice their concerns and suggestions to child welfare stakeholders.

The purpose of this report is threefold:

1. To analyze the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to creating targeted learning experiences for young adults with lived experience in care;
2. To identify the challenges youth with lived experience in care face during the process of aging out of care; and
3. To present youth-informed recommendations for programs, practices, and policies that stakeholders can implement to prepare young adults with lived experience in foster care to transition to independent living.

GOALS

**Data-Driven
Advocacy**





Scope and Limitations

This report offers a comprehensive analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats involved in planning and delivering the Summit as a targeted learning experience for teenagers and young adults aging out of the foster care system. It includes both youth and organization-identified challenges faced by youth aging out of foster care. It concludes with recommendations for programs, practices, and policies to address those challenges.

The recommendations presented do not include cost analyses or estimates. The existing processes discussed in this report are limited to those reported by CFSA relating to youth aging out of foster care in Washington, D.C., unless otherwise noted. Any quotes or youth-informed challenges and recommendations are limited to youth aged 14 to 24 who participated in the Summit or the pre-Summit survey.

Sources of Data Collection

The recommendations presented in this report are based on the results of the pre-Summit survey, post-Summit survey, pre-Summit focus group, oral feedback presented by Summit attendees during and after the Summit, and qualitative observations from FAPAC staff, board members, consultants, and partners, as well as from Summit facilitators, volunteers, vendors, and committee members.

Report Preview

The report is a comprehensive analysis of FAPAC's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats during the planning and delivery of the Summit, followed by youth and organizational observations of challenges faced by young people aging out of foster care. It concludes with recommendations for programs, practices, and policies to address the significant challenges of youth aging out of foster care.

FAPAC Programs and Services



Before launching the Foster Youth Summit in May of 2023, FAPAC's programming and services focused mainly on adults, specifically foster and adoptive parents. Programs and services included support groups, training, and advocacy for foster families; preventative programs for birth parents; and events for traditional and non-traditional families to connect. Through feedback from foster parents, FAPAC learned that some young people were returning to foster parents after aging out of foster care because the level of preparation or support they received in the process of aging out of the child welfare system was insufficient to put them on a stable path to living as independent young adults. We knew then that we needed to make an effort to bring youth voices to the table.

Thanks to the generous support of the Meyer Foundation, FAPAC launched its first Foster Youth Summit in 2023 to learn more about the needs of youth aging out of foster care. Engaging youth throughout the process of planning and delivering the program was crucial to ensuring that the voices of youth with lived experience in the child welfare system were included and honored in discussions and programming. As planning continued for the Summit, we sought stakeholder feedback and reviewed already existing research, which indicated that additional discussions, services, and programming might be necessary to improve the quality of life, well-being, and dignity of youth and young adults transitioning from foster care.



Youth Aging Out of Foster Care



Background and Statistics

Approximately 600 youth live in foster care in Washington D.C [1]. Nearly half are teenagers or older [2]. In FY 2022, 46 teenagers entered or reentered foster care [3]. In that same year, 41 of the youth in D.C.'s foster care system aged out of foster care [4]. Youth aging out of foster care have often experienced numerous traumatic events that impact their social and emotional development as they transition into adulthood [5]. This translates to an increased risk of facing a range of harsh challenges as young adults.

Homelessness

Over 20% of youth experience homelessness upon aging out of care[6]. The correlation between foster care and homelessness is exacerbated for young people who identify as LGBTQ [7]. Between 31% and 46% of young people with lived experience in foster care also experience homelessness by the age of 26[8]. Additionally, 50% of the homeless population has lived experience in foster care[9]. Studies on former foster youth homelessness indicate troubling findings in that youth are expected to live independently and support themselves once they leave the child welfare system even though they often lack the financial, social, and personal resources needed to do so. As a result, this population is at high risk of becoming homeless after they age out of care. In fact, studies conducted in both Hollywood and San Francisco, California, found that more than one-quarter of the youth who had been discharged from state care spent their first night in a shelter or on the streets [10].

[1]<https://cfsadashboard.dc.gov/page/total-children-and-families-served-foster-care>

[2]<https://cfsadashboard.dc.gov/page/foster-care-demographics>

[3]<https://cfsadashboard.dc.gov/page/children-entering-or-re-entering-foster-care-during-fiscal-year>

[4]<https://cfsadashboard.dc.gov/page/exits-reason>

[5]<https://youth.gov/youth-briefs/foster-care-youth-brief/challenges>

[6]<https://youth.gov/youth-briefs/foster-care-youth-brief/challenges>

[7]<https://youth.gov/youth-briefs/foster-care-youth-brief/challenges>

[8][https://endhomelessness.org/blog/preventing-homelessness-for-youth-and-young-families-in-foster-care-fy2021-updates/\(citing](https://endhomelessness.org/blog/preventing-homelessness-for-youth-and-young-families-in-foster-care-fy2021-updates/(citing)

<https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/abs/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301455>)

[9]<https://nfyi.org/issues/homelessness/>

[10]<https://www.huduser.gov/portal//publications/pdf/p6.pdf>



Juvenile Justice

The National Foster Youth Institute reports that children who have been in foster care have a disproportionate risk of being incarcerated at some point in their young lives due to their lack of resources and support systems, which is heightened by an inequitable and flawed criminal justice system. It's estimated that a quarter of former foster youth will be involved with the criminal justice system within two years of transitioning out of the child welfare system [11].

General Well-Being

Various aspects of well-being become problematic for young people with lived experience in foster care. Youth aging out of foster care experience post-traumatic stress disorder at two times the rate of war veterans [12]. Approximately 50% of youth aging out of foster care have chronic health conditions [13]. Additionally, more than 50% suffer from mental and emotional health disorders [14].

Other Concerns

Other areas of concern for young people aging out of care include:

- Education
- Employment
- Job training
- Physical health and health care
- Behavioral health
- Lack of social connections[15]

Additionally, some reports about former foster youth indicate that within four years of aging out:

- 70% will be on government assistance
- 50% will be unemployed
- 50% will experience homelessness
- 25% will not have completed high school
- Less than 12% will ever earn a college degree[16]

[11]<https://nfyi.org/issues/juvenile-justice/>

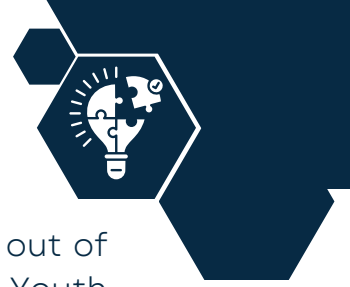
[12][https://nfyi.org/issues/health/\(citing https://thesoh.org/about-us/foster-youth-statistics-need/\)](https://nfyi.org/issues/health/(citing https://thesoh.org/about-us/foster-youth-statistics-need/))

[3][https://nfyi.org/issues/health/\(citing https://thesoh.org/about-us/foster-youth-statistics-need/\)](https://nfyi.org/issues/health/(citing https://thesoh.org/about-us/foster-youth-statistics-need/))

[4]<https://thesoh.org/about-us/foster-youth-statistics-need/>

[15]<https://youth.gov/youth-briefs/foster-care-youth-brief/challenges>

[16]<https://ifoster.org/the-facts/>



As these statistics demonstrate, youth in foster care are aging out of the system without a plan. FAPAC planned its first Foster Youth Summit as an intervention to help these teenagers and young adults obtain information and resources. FAPAC aims to break the cycle of abuse and neglect. It has become clear that supporting youth during their transition from foster care to life as independent young adults is vital to fulfilling our commitment to provide meaningful and effective post-permanency services to support children and families.



1st Foster Youth Summit May 2023 Washington, D.C.

CFSA Programs For Aging Youth



Through DC Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), the District already offers a variety of programs to aid young people in the process of aging out of foster care. CFSA’s Office of Youth Empowerment (OYE) supports youth aged 14 to 20 who are in care. OYE primarily focuses on case management and college and career preparation. The Career Pathways Unit of the Office of Youth Empowerment “provides career and supportive services to youth beginning in 9th grade and through age 21”[17]. These services include career exploration, resume building, soft skill development, vocational and certificate program placement, and employment assistance. Internships are also available to those in foster care. Youth can access these services by obtaining a referral from their social worker and submitting the appropriate identification documents.

The OYE also has an Education Unit that helps youth with high school graduation and higher education [18]. Specifically, this program offers assistance with SAT and ACT testing, academic advising and tutoring, disability support, college tours, college applications, financial aid, scholarships, education and training vouchers, and in-college support.

The Generations Unit of the OYE aims to help pregnant and parenting youth complete their education, gain work experience, and master other life skills [19]. It also connects young parents to community resources and support services.

Additionally, by law, youth aging out of foster care in D.C. are entitled to a written housing plan to mitigate their risk of homelessness [20]. Thirty days before aging out of care, youth should receive their personal documents, including birth certificate, social security card, ID, and essential records. When aging out of foster care, young people 18 years old or older are eligible for health care insurance until they move out of the District or turn 26 years old. Still, even with abundant services from OYE, there appears to be a gap between youth living in foster care and their successful transition into young adulthood.

[18] https://cfsa.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/cfsa/service_content/attachments/OYE%20CareerPathways.pdf

[9] https://cfsa.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/cfsa/service_content/attachments/OYE%20Ed%20Unit.pdf

[20] D.C. Code Section 4-1303.03g

Foster Youth Summit as a Targeted Learning Experience



Targeted learning experiences play a crucial role in developing and empowering teens and young adults with lived experience in foster care. These experiences are designed to provide specialized support, guidance, and opportunities tailored to their unique needs and circumstances. By focusing on the specific challenges and strengths of foster youth, targeted learning experiences create an environment that fosters growth, self-discovery, and skill-building.

This type of learning experience offers a safe and inclusive space where youth can explore their potential, develop critical life skills, and gain the confidence necessary to overcome obstacles and thrive in their transition to adulthood. Through these transformative experiences, we not only invest in the future of individual foster youth but also build a stronger and more equitable community that values the inherent worth and limitless possibilities of every young person, regardless of their past circumstances.

FAPAC designed the Foster Youth Summit as a targeted learning experience with a threefold goal:

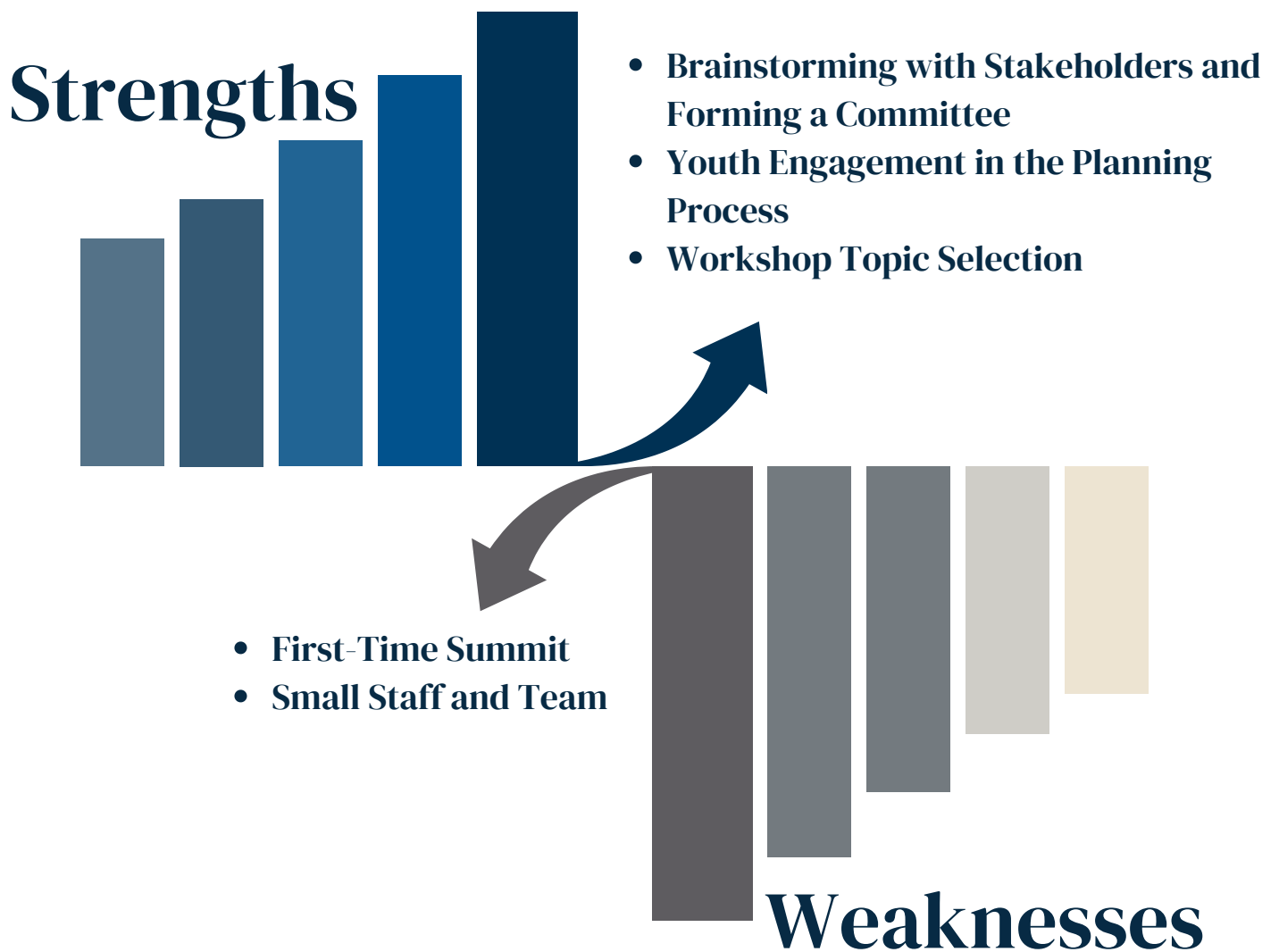
- 1) Provide informative workshops to youth in various stages of aging out of foster care;
- 2) Create an event experience to encourage participant engagement and community building; and
- 3) Empower youth with a platform to share their personal experiences and feedback, which can be used to inform improvements to the child welfare system.

We wanted to design a learning experience that would deliver information on vital life skills to young people in an engaging learning community. We also wanted to create a safe and brave space for young people to share their challenges, ideas, and recommendations based on their lived experiences in the foster care system.

Youth Summit Experience Planning



FAPAC’s strengths in planning the Summit were brainstorming with stakeholders, engaging youth, and selecting workshop topics. Its weaknesses were undertaking a Youth Summit for the first time and having a small staff and team.

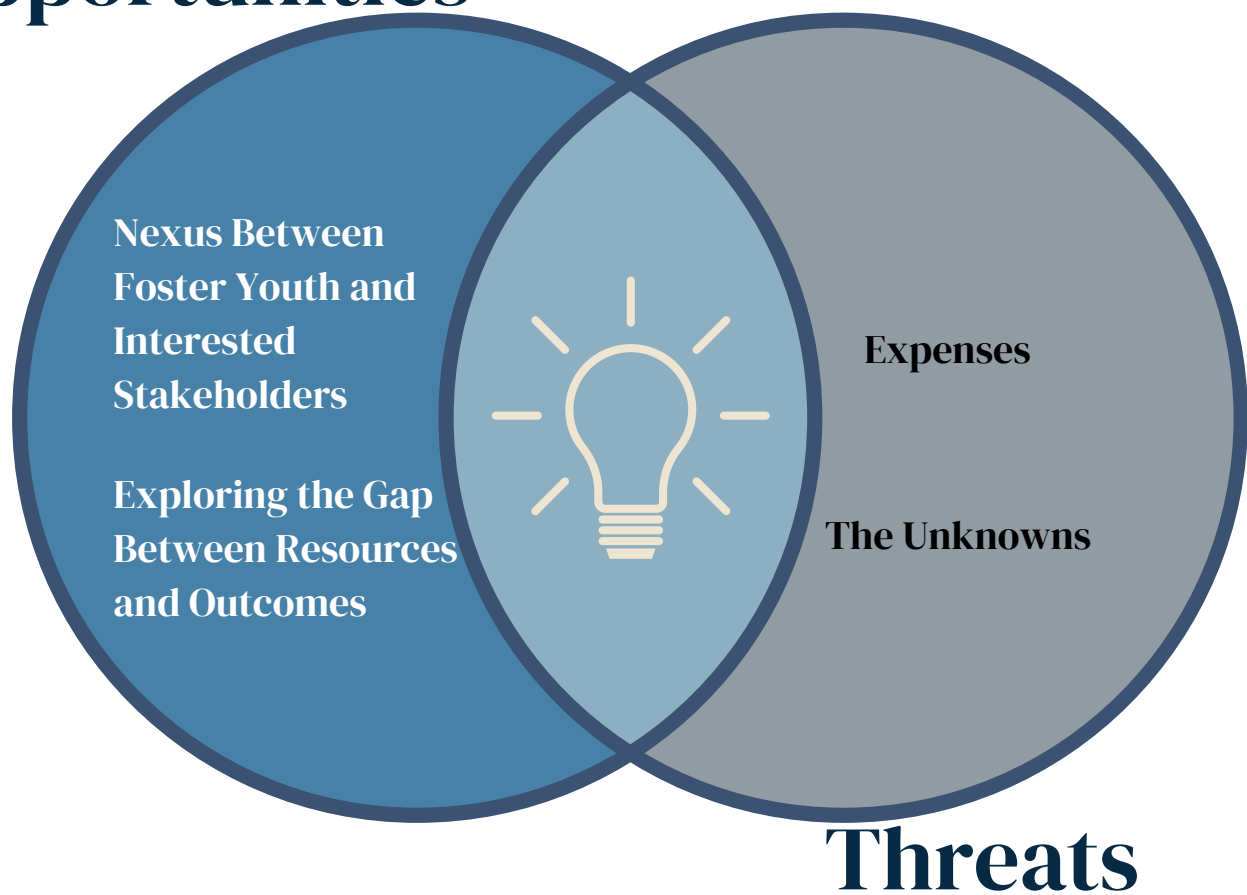


Youth Summit Experience Planning



The opportunities in planning the Summit included serving as a nexus between foster youth and interested stakeholders and exploring the gap between available resources and foster youth outcomes. The primary threats in planning the Summit were the finances required and the unknown aspects of working directly with youth for the first time.

Opportunities





Strength: Brainstorming with Stakeholders and Forming a Committee

In February 2022, FAPAC began the process of researching and scheduling meetings with important stakeholders of young people aging out of foster care. In each short meeting, the Executive Director and the Youth Summit Lead communicated FAPAC’s vision and brainstormed ideas for the Summit format and possible session topics. They asked stakeholders to continue partnering in the planning process by joining the planning committee. Stakeholders were responsive and receptive. They even recommended other stakeholders with whom we should engage.

Engaging a committee of stakeholders was an important aim in the early stages of planning the Foster Youth Summit. We hoped this collaborative approach would ensure the Summit reflected the diverse perspectives and expertise of key individuals and organizations invested in the well-being and success of foster youth. The Youth Summit Committee included various stakeholders of foster care youth, including Youth Jobs Connect, the Children’s Law Center, the North American Council on Adoptable Children, the American Psychiatric Association, CFSA, and CASA DC. The committee brought together stakeholders with direct knowledge of the challenges faced by foster youth and a deep understanding of the systems and policies that impact their lives. The committee held monthly virtual meetings for a year to brainstorm around Summit objectives, logistics, format, topics, and youth engagement.

Committee members were instrumental in providing feedback during the planning process. For example, the decision to create a paid opportunity for a youth intern to assist with Summit planning and be included as a CFSA Youth Council member came from the committee. Additionally, committee members alerted FAPAC to potential challenges with youth participation and engagement based on their experiences planning events for similar demographics.



Strength: Youth Engagement in the Planning Process

The committee recruited and engaged youth during the planning process in four ways. First, we partnered with CFSA to select an intern from their Youth Council. Next, we conducted a survey to gather youth ideas about the Summit. We then incentivized survey completion, Summit registration, and successful referrals to other youth. Finally, we held a focus group to solicit feedback from the target demographic. We were delighted that the participating youth were excellent connectors and successfully recruited additional peer youth to participate in the surveys and later in the Summit.

Strength: Workshop Topic Selection

The Summit committee decided on five key areas for workshops based on frequently observed issues with teens and young adults aging out of foster care:

1. Financial Management
2. Employment
3. Mental Health & Wellness
4. Post-Secondary Opportunities
5. Personal Development

FAPAC staff then brainstormed possible sessions within each key area and surveyed youth to identify which sessions they were most likely to attend. The most frequently selected sessions were:

- Get the Bag: Personal Finance
- Resume Writing
- Vocational and Technical Schools
- Interview Etiquette
- Cozy Corner: Stress Relief Activities
- Yoga & Mediation
- Housing Options
- Traveling Abroad

FAPAC staff finalized the workshop offerings based on youth input, space limitations, and facilitator availability. Five of the eight frequently selected sessions were included in the Summit.



Weakness: First-Time Summit

The 2023 Foster Youth Summit was FAPAC’s first attempt at executing a conference-style weekend-long event for young people. The lack of institutional knowledge around this endeavor was a potential weakness in FAPAC’s planning process. FAPAC addressed this area of concern by securing a Youth Summit Lead with youth program experience and leveraging the logistical experience of its Executive Director. FAPAC also approached the Summit as a learning experience and demonstrated an openness to feedback and guidance from a wide range of experienced stakeholders.

Weakness: Small Staff and Team

FAPAC has a very small operational team, translating into fewer hands on deck for a major undertaking such as the Summit. FAPAC addressed this challenge through the use of consultants, a planning committee, youth interns, and volunteers.

Opportunity: Nexus Between Foster Youth and Interested Stakeholders



A major opportunity in planning the learning experience was the chance to act as a nexus between foster youth and interested stakeholders. FAPAC usually acts as a nexus between foster and adoptive parents and stakeholders. Planning the Summit allowed FAPAC to expand to center on the needs of foster youth.

Opportunity: Exploring the Gap Between Resources and Outcomes

Another opportunity in planning the Summit was the ability to create a space and vehicle for exploring the gap between resources and services that are (or are supposed to be) provided to foster youth and the less-than-favorable outcomes that youth experience when aging out of the foster care system. The Summit presented a structured way of starting necessary conversations and researching this area further.

Threat: Expense

The primary threat to planning the Summit was cost. Venue, food, and transportation expenses were not directly tied to the goal, which had the potential to impede substantive plans for the Summit.

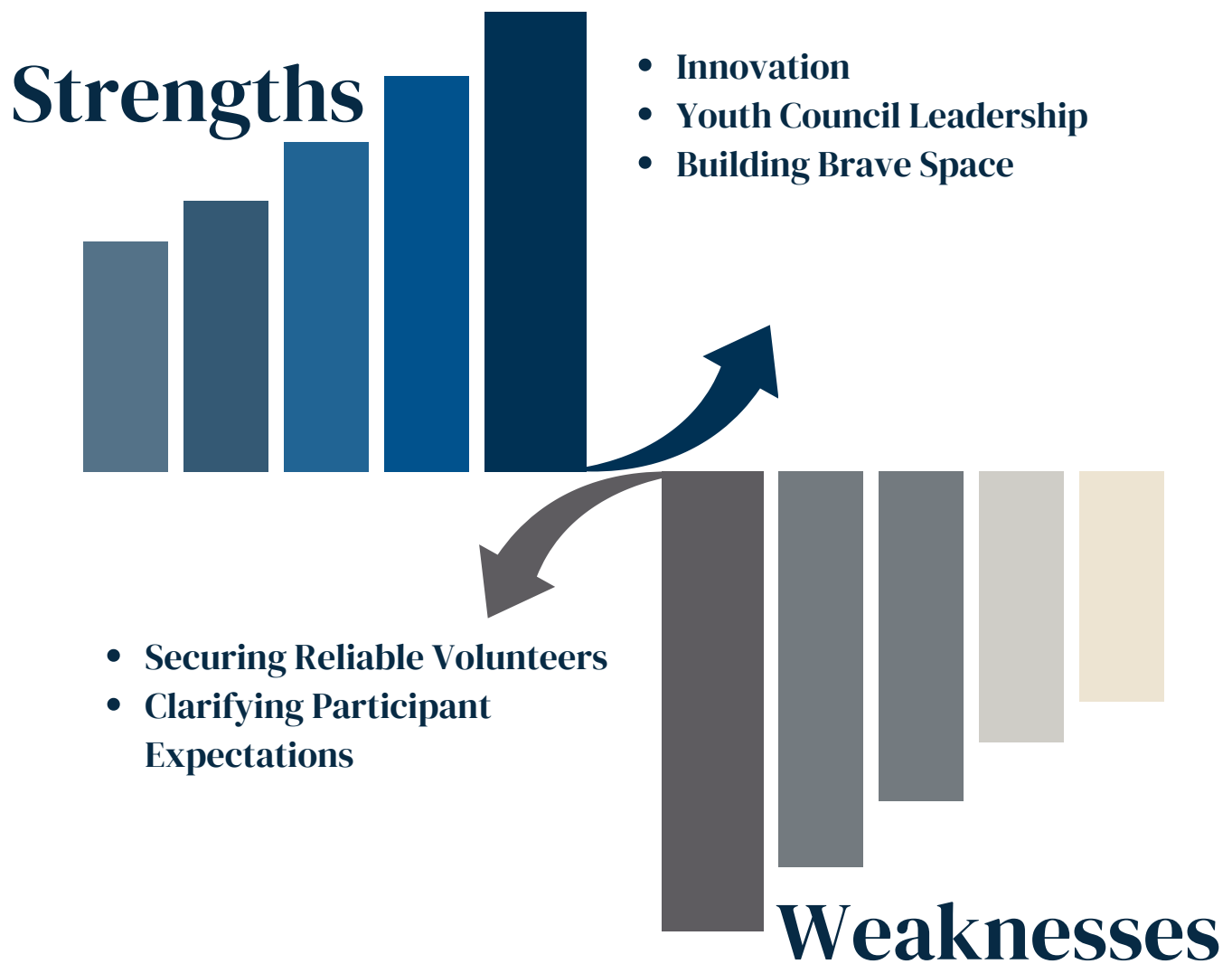
Threat: The Unknowns

Another threat was FAPAC never working directly with teens and young adults exiting foster care. We did not know what to expect and, therefore, had to prepare for a wide range of possibilities.

Youth Summit Experience Delivery



FAPAC's strengths in delivering the Summit experience were innovation, building a brave space, Youth Council leadership, and stakeholder connections. Its primary weaknesses were securing enough reliable volunteers and clarifying participant expectations.

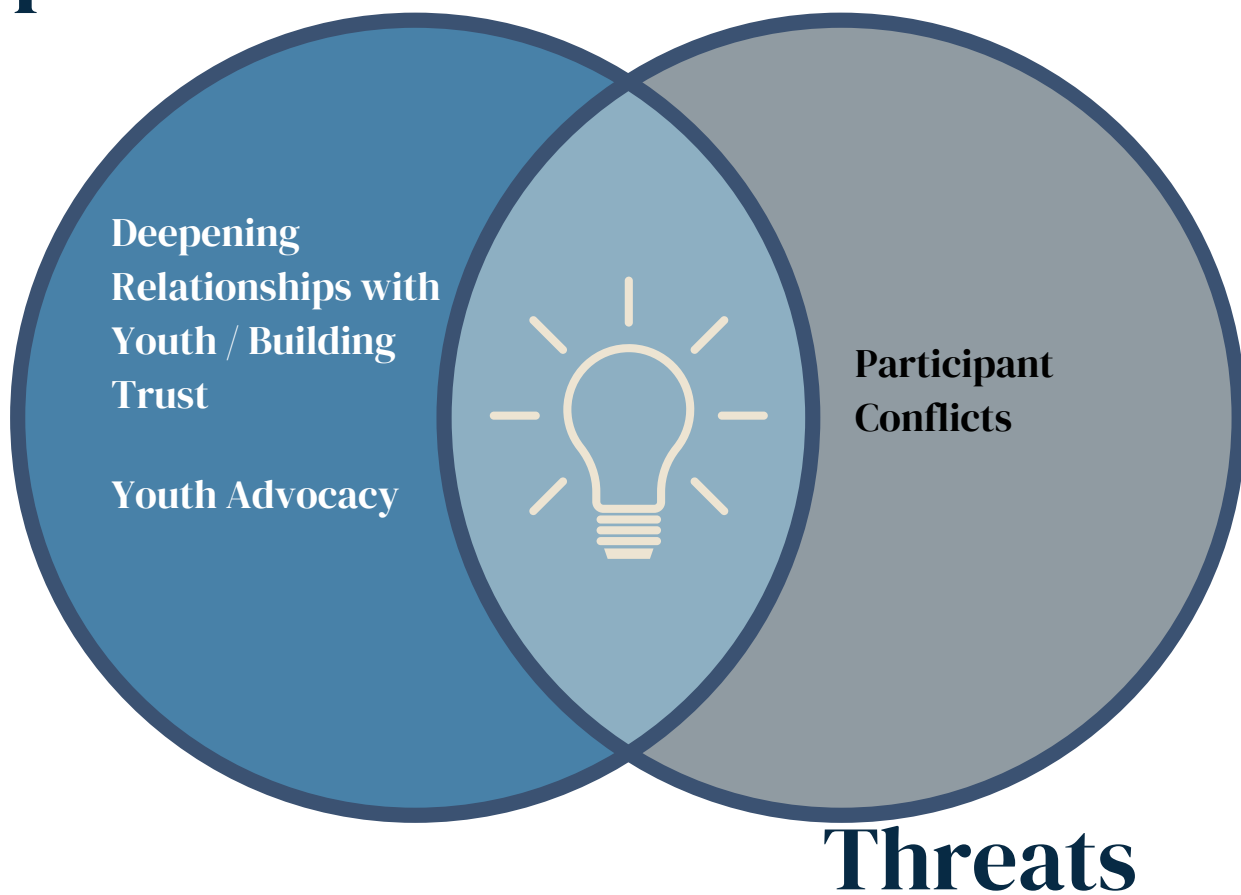


Youth Summit Experience Delivery



The main opportunities in delivering the Summit experience were deepening relationships with youth and positioning FAPAC to better advocate for youth aging out of foster care. A threat that we anticipated and prepared for was a potential conflict involving behavior management of youth during the Summit. Unfortunately, only 2 out of the 19 adults who signed up to volunteer during the Summit actually attended. This was an unfortunately ironic demonstration of adults indicating that they wanted to support youth yet failing to meet expectations and keep promises.

Opportunities





Strength: Innovation

A significant strength of the Summit was innovation. FAPAC prioritized trying new ways to engage youth, including embracing the use of technology. Participant communication included modern methods, such as QR codes, texting, and calling software. The custom-built Youth Summit App that tracked the completion of certain tasks before and during the Summit in a points-and-rewards system called the Leaderboard was a huge hit with Summit participants. We also used the app to check participants into sessions and take attendance. Additionally, we leveraged technology in a game room that included virtual reality headsets and a cash-blowing booth for youth to frequent during session breaks. In addition to technology, FAPAC innovated in the delivery style of classic conference events. For example, networking was infused with education and given a new spin in a session called Speed Lunch and Learn, where youth visited numerous booths of potential employers, speed dating style.

Strength: Youth Council Leadership

The leadership of the President and Vice President of CFSA's Youth Council was a strength in delivering the Summit as a targeted learning experience. The President, who also served as the Summit Intern, and the Vice President took the initiative to check participants into sessions, monitor discussion sessions, lead activities, and resolve minor conflicts and issues between participants. This youth-led element of the Summit helped maintain the flow of the Summit and made the Summit feel more relatable to participants.

Strength: Building Brave Space

A strong point of the Summit's delivery was the intentional construction of the Summit as a brave space. One of the Summit intern's first assignments was to research and review potential options for creating brave space with the Youth Summit Lead, who had previously been trained in building brave spaces. The intern's work around Brave Space was implemented in various parts of the Summit, including creating a community agreement, moderating the discussion, and designing foster youth-specific questions for an activity on lived experiences. Many youth bravely shared vulnerable feelings and experiences in the Summit sessions. We share a submission that one participant shared with FAPAC after the Summit.



Finding My Voice: The Power of Speaking Up for Change in Foster Care

By Zyarre Prince

My name is Zyarre Prince, and I am a foster child. My journey through the system has been a tumultuous one, characterized by a lack of stability, love, and support. However, it was at the Foster Care Youth Summit that I found the strength to raise my voice and shed light on the dark realities that countless children endure in foster care. This pivotal event marked the beginning of a journey toward empowerment, both for myself and for the countless voices yearning to be heard.

The summit was a gathering of foster care professionals, advocates, and fellow youth who had experienced the same broken system as me. As I stood before the podium, my heart raced with anticipation and fear. I had spent years feeling invisible, unheard, and helpless, but that day, I refused to let my voice be silenced any longer. With each word I spoke, the weight of my experiences lifted off my shoulders, replaced by a newfound sense of purpose and determination.

Sharing my story at the summit was no easy feat. I recounted the countless homes I had been shuffled between, the lack of stability and love that had characterized my early years, and the heartbreaking moments when I felt like nothing more than a number on a case file. I spoke of the countless nights spent longing for a sense of belonging, of the pain of being separated from my siblings, and of the emotional scars that had seeped deep into my soul. The room fell silent as I spoke. Tears welled up in the eyes of many as they realized the raw vulnerability behind my words. A young woman raised her hand and asked, "Zyarre, how can we help you and other foster youth like you?" I paused, taking a deep breath, and replied, "We need more than just policies and regulations. We need love, support, and a sense of belonging. We need people who are willing to listen and truly see us."



Zyarre Prince
Foster Youth
2023 Star Summit
Participant Award
Recipient



As the summit continued, I connected with other youth who had experienced similar struggles. Together, we formed a support network, a community of individuals who shared a common goal: to reform the foster care system. Through our conversations, we found strength in our shared experiences and united our voices to demand a better future for foster children.

Leaving the summit, I felt a mix of emotions—relief, hope, and a deep sense of accomplishment. My voice had resonated with the hearts of others, and I knew that the seeds of change had been planted. But I also felt a profound responsibility to continue fighting for the rights and well-being of foster children. In conclusion, my journey as a foster child led me to the Foster Care Youth Summit, where I found the courage to speak up and advocate for change. Through the power of storytelling, connecting with fellow youth, and engaging with community leaders, I could start my journey making a difference. Together, we can transform the foster care system, bring attention to the injustices, and demand a better future for all foster children. This journey continues, and I am committed to using my voice to create a world where every child, regardless of their circumstances, is given the love, support, and opportunities they deserve.

Together, we can transform the foster care system, bring attention to the injustices, and demand a better future for all foster children. This journey continues, and I am committed to using my voice to create a world where every child, regardless of their circumstances, is given the love, support, and opportunities they deserve.



Strength: Stakeholder Connections

Another strength of FAPAC during the delivery of the Summit was facilitating meaningful connections between youth and stakeholders. For example, FAPAC forged connections between stakeholder parents and young parents aging out of foster care by providing a childcare room during the Summit. In the childcare room, youth participants using the service received guidance and support from the stakeholder parents. Additionally, various youth connected with and shared transformational conversations and experiences with the Summit Lead and Executive Director. Young people also related to workshop facilitators who shared similar lived experiences. Three of the facilitators that resonated the most with participants were motivational speaker Justyn Iman, self-advocacy workshop facilitator Nicole Johnson, Esq., and a panel representative from the Carpenters' Union, Kunta Bedney. The commonalities in these presenters were sharing personal stories of hardship as teens, expressing a message of resilience, and communicating an authentic desire to see the participants realize their ability to overcome hardship.

Weakness: Securing Reliable Volunteers

One of the weaknesses in the Summit delivery was securing enough reliable volunteers to staff the Summit. Not having enough volunteers to attend the event caused the FAPAC team to be spread thin between navigating logistics, engaging participants, and facilitating components of the Summit. Board members and Youth Council Leaders stepped up to fulfill some of the responsibilities of volunteers who signed up but did not attend.

Weakness: Clarifying Participant Expectations

Another weakness in the Summit delivery was setting clear enough expectations for youth participants. Some issues had to be resolved during the Summit around expectations for:

- Childcare for parent participants
- Stipends for partial attendance
- Etiquette and engagement during workshops

All issues were resolved on-site, and the youth involved received the care they needed.



Opportunity: Deepening Relationships with Youth / Building Trust

The Summit provided FAPAC with an avenue to establish deeper relationships with young individuals who have firsthand experience with the foster care system. Many of these youths were able to establish a connection with FAPAC's personnel and consultants, and some continued to seek assistance from them in navigating the system and acquiring resources even after the event. As a result, FAPAC's opportunities for fostering connections and building a community with young people at different stages of exiting foster care were expanded.

Opportunity: Youth Advocacy

Through stories, experiences, and challenges that youth shared during and after the Summit, FAPAC has become more aware of the issues and areas of need that burden this population. This translates to a tremendous opportunity to begin advocating for the resources and policies foster youth need to support their transitions to independent adulthood.

Threat: Participant Conflicts

The main challenge during the Summit's delivery was to manage conflicts between participants. Some attendees had to be de-escalated during disagreements with their peers, volunteers, and staff members.

Conflicts arose due to various reasons, including misunderstandings with volunteers, misinterpretation of the stipend policy, and unintended comments made by other participants. FAPAC intends to address this issue by setting clear expectations from the beginning and increasing the minimum age of participants from 14 to 17.

What We Learned: Summit Survey Results



Summit Sessions

The advocacy workshop was the most highly rated session, with an average participant rating of over 4. The other highly rated sessions were LinkedIn Optimization, Interview Etiquette and Resume Writing, Healthy Relationships, Get the Bag - Personal Finances, Motivational Speaker, and How to Travel Abroad. Conversely, Table Etiquette was the lowest-rated session, as were the Career Panel, Speed Lunch & Learn, and the Town Hall Discussion. All the highly rated sessions were delivered in a traditional classroom learning setting with a speaker and presentation. Having engaging speakers was the most highly rated aspect of the Summit. The lowest-rated sessions all had alternative formats to a traditional speaker and presentation. Innovation in the session format was not as successful as innovation in other aspects of the Summit.

Support & Resources

During the summit, we surveyed youth on their perception of support during and after their time in foster care. The majority of participants reported feeling supported as young adults when they exited foster care, with 64% of respondents reporting that they feel supported and 36% reporting that they do not feel supported. These results were very similar to participants' responses to whether they feel or felt supported specifically while they are or were in foster care, where 62% of respondents reported feeling supported, and 38% reported not feeling supported.

Additionally, the survey demonstrated that the resources participants were most familiar with were employment opportunities and the Making Money Grow Program, with 54% of participants reporting familiarity with both programs. Participants were the least familiar with the Family Unification Program (FUP), independent living programs, Elizabeth Ministries, and ETV funds, with 15% of participants reporting familiarity with either or both programs.



Overall, most participants reported that they felt prepared to live on their own. Based on the survey, 57% of respondents felt somewhat prepared, and 36% felt very prepared. Only 7% of participants reported not feeling prepared to live as independent young adults.

It is important to note that among the youth who continue to engage with FAPAC post-Summit, some had indicated they were receiving adequate support in foster care. However, after learning about programs such as FUP and other resources about which they were not aware, they have since changed their minds, indicating in our monthly support groups that they now believe they did not receive adequate support while in foster care or after.

Identified Challenges for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

Housing Instability

Homelessness is a significant concern among the participants, as indicated by 64% of them who reported that "being homeless" is their top worry when it comes to living independently. It's worth noting that many participants had to request a change of pick-up location several times while arranging transportation to the Summit. This was due to the instability in their current housing arrangements.

Mental, Emotional, and Physical Health

During the Summit program, we noticed that the wellness of youth participants is a top priority. They emphasized that "being alone" and "having healthcare" were more important concerns than having a job. We also learned that they need additional support in processing, managing, and expressing their emotions in a positive way. Many of them were eager to connect with staff and volunteers for emotional support. They showed a desire to engage and be near the staff and volunteers during breaks and activities. Furthermore, the youth participants seemed to yearn for physical closeness.

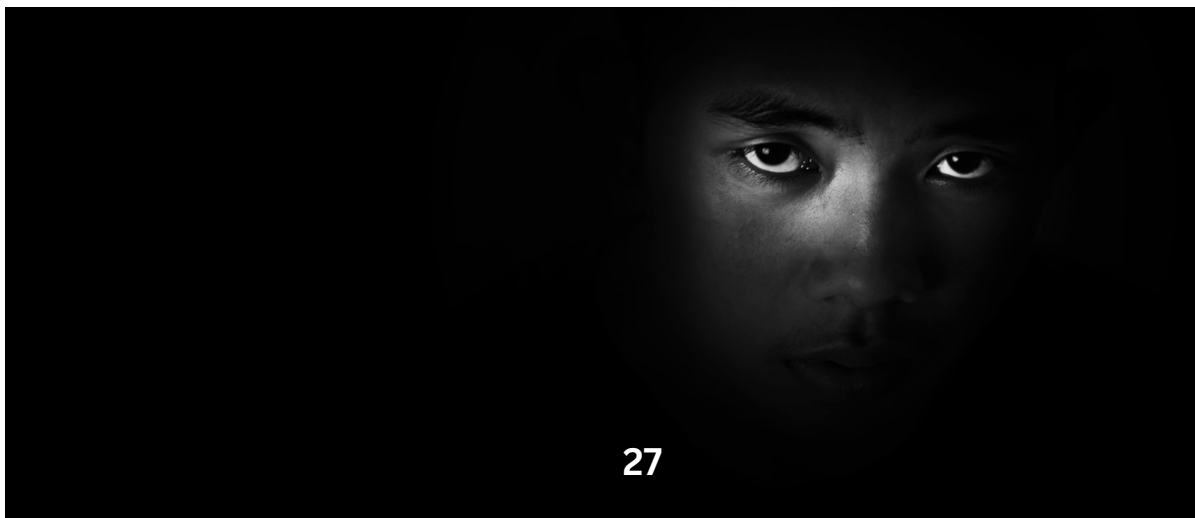


Legal and Systemic Barriers

During the Racial Equity and Self-Advocacy workshop, we participated in a modified version of the "Privilege Walk" activity, which highlighted the significance of creating a safe space for individuals to share their personal experiences with systemic barriers. We also had the opportunity to hear from Attorney and Advocate Nicole Johnson, who shared her personal story of perseverance and professional experience with common obstacles faced while navigating child welfare systems. The workshop taught us that young people are capable of discussing sensitive topics related to legal and systemic barriers in foster care, as well as being open to gaining knowledge about their rights. We learned that many young people are interested in understanding the appropriate procedures for resolving conflicts with foster parents, appealing the decisions made by social workers and other professionals, and communicating directly with judges and decision-makers. Additionally, a lot of participants reported not being aware of the District's policies and processes that could support them in advocating for themselves.

Financial Literacy

During the financial workshop, it became clear that most participants struggled with financial literacy. At the end of the Summit, participants received their stipends via check, as an intentional effort to assess their financial readiness with a physical bank account. Unfortunately, the majority did not have bank accounts, and some did not have the identification necessary to conduct basic financial transactions. Many were unfamiliar with the process required to cash a check, and as a result, most participants cashed their checks at check-cashing establishments, incurring hefty fees. Despite these obstacles, all participants eventually found ways to convert their checks to cash, although some took as long as six months to do so.





Recommendations: How to Improve the Foster Care System for Youth Aging Out

After analyzing the data collected during the 2023 Foster Youth Summit, it is clear that additional assistance is required to aid young adults in transitioning out of the child welfare system. Regardless of the level of support they receive, they are still unprepared for independent living. The main concerns of young adults were safe, secure, and affordable housing, as well as a lack of experience in handling adult responsibilities like paying bills, scheduling appointments, managing bank accounts, and self-advocacy. The study showed no significant difference in the preparedness of young adults living in traditional foster homes versus those leaving group homes or non-traditional care environments. In conclusion, young adults are significantly unprepared for living independently.

After the Summit, multiple youth participants reached out to staff they met during the Summit to express a need for financial, transportation, food, employment, and housing support. FAPAC has continued to connect these youth with resources, at times meeting with them one-on-one.

According to the Summit observations and the post-Summit survey results, FAPAC suggests that support for foster youth who are aging out should start earlier than the current practice. Additionally, FAPAC believes that such support should be mandatory for all foster youth and should incorporate the following elements.

YOUTH

“Know Your Rights”
and Self Advocacy

Soft Skill Building

Adult Skill Building

Focus on Building
Independence

SUPPORT NETWORK

Policy Training and
Continued Education for
Supporting Adults

Stakeholder
Collaboration



“Know Your Rights” and Self Advocacy

It is crucial that youth in foster care receive regular education on their rights and responsibilities, and are given a chance to share their experiences, provide feedback, report mistreatment. Youth should also have access to a clear chain of command, similar to their foster parents, so they know whom to reach out to when their needs are not being met. FAPAC recommends that the foster youths’ chain of command starts with the foster parents, and then escalates to the social worker, the social worker’s supervisor, and so on. Additionally, it is important to educate and instruct youth on their responsibilities, such as proper behavior, respect for foster parents’ homes and property, respect for others, and appropriate methods of communication.

Soft Skill Building

An increase in soft skills will help youth be better equipped to leverage existing resources and services in the most appropriate and effective ways. Soft skills should include communication, responsiveness, empathy, growth mindset, persistence, time management, perseverance, honesty, and curiosity. Youth should receive frequent reinforcement of these skills and be encouraged to practice utilizing them with supportive adults.

Adult Skill Building

Foster youth must gain experience in life management much earlier than they currently do. These experiences allow youth to practice managing their lives while under the supervision of caring adults so they can receive guidance when they make mistakes. Practices should include (and are not limited to) paying their bills, managing a bank account, managing transportation, searching for a job, and acquiring a driver’s license. These adult skills will provide youth with much-needed practice and a sense of empowerment when they see what they can achieve. Youth in this demographic need the loving support of caring adults as well as the tools to build and practice life skills for their transition to independent living.



Stakeholder Collaboration

Child welfare agencies must partner with outside organizations to increase support for youth exiting foster care. Nonprofit organizations such as FAPAC are nimble and can work between the cracks to meet the needs of youth aging out of the system. Collaboration in this space will better serve youth aging out of foster care.

Policy Training and Continued Education for Supporting Adults

Greater continued education focused on CFSA policies and guidelines, along with training, and support must be provided to foster parents and support workers so they know the services available, the policies regarding teens, as well as best practices for issues such as allowances, curfews, and behavior management. One-time learning is not adequate to amply support teens in foster care.

Focus on Building Independence for Youth

Independence must not be delayed for teens in foster care but instead encouraged and supervised. Foster youth 18 and older who have demonstrated that they are emotionally prepared to undertake some aspects of independence should be encouraged to begin that process as soon as possible. Foster parents, social workers, and youth advocates should educate foster youth on the various options available to them as well as the pros and cons of each – for example, community college, four-year universities, and trade careers. Many housing options can help foster youth gradually learn independence while still accessing resources – such as on-campus housing, federal housing programs, and shared housing opportunities with other like-minded peers.

Conclusion



The Foster Youth Summit in 2023 provided FAPAC with a great opportunity to build relationships with teenagers and young adults who are leaving foster care and to gain valuable insights into the resources and information they need to transition to independence. Many of the challenges and concerns that were shared by these young people are familiar to child welfare advocates, but the Summit also gave us some new insights. Based on what we learned from the Summit, FAPAC has taken concrete steps to address the issues faced by youth exiting foster care. One of the measures we have taken is launching the "Adultish" youth program, which takes place monthly and aims to educate and support them on their journey out of foster care. Additionally, we have improved our parent training sessions to focus more on policies and best practices. Finally, we have been advocating for individuals who did not receive housing vouchers once they left foster care.

FAPAC is committed to working with partner organizations such as CFSA and other stakeholders, non-profits, and legislators to continue improving outcomes for foster youth. We are dedicated to enhancing the child welfare system for foster, adoptive, and kinship parents, as well as for young people growing up in the foster care system.



**Together, we
can make a real
difference for
youth exiting
foster care.**

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