



2026

FOSTER YOUTH SUMMIT REPORT



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NOTE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Greetings!

It is our pleasure to share the **2026 Foster Youth Summit Report** with you.

Every young person leaving foster care deserves to enter adulthood with confidence and the skills needed to succeed. The Foster and Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center (FAPAC) created the Annual Foster Youth Summit to help make that vision a reality by bringing together youth, caregivers, mentors, and community partners for a day of learning, connection, and empowerment.

This year's Summit reaffirmed what we have long believed: **foster youth have ambitious dreams and tremendous potential, but they also need greater encouragement, meaningful career mentorship, improved access to mental health services, and consistent guidance as they transition into adulthood.** This report captures what we learned directly from youth and caregivers in Washington, D.C., and presents recommendations to strengthen outcomes for transition-age youth. We are deeply grateful to the young people who courageously shared their experiences and entrusted their stories to us. Their voices are the foundation of this report.

We also extend our sincere appreciation to the Executive Office of the Mayor for its Community Development Grant, Frank's Fund, All Souls Church Unitarian, Foster Care to Success, the Foundation of the Bar Association of the District of Columbia, and the Max and Victoria Dreyfus Foundation for their generous support. Their investment made the 2026 Foster Youth Summit possible and will strengthen the programs and services developed in response to the needs identified by youth and caregivers in foster care.

Improving outcomes for children and families in the child welfare system requires collaboration. If you are inspired by what you learn from this report and want to contribute in some way, we invite you to join us as we work together to ensure every young person leaving foster care has the opportunity, support, and connections they need to thrive.

Sincerely,



Najiba Hlemi
Executive Director
Foster and Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center



ABOUT FAPAC

THE FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENT ADVOCACY CENTER IS A 501C3 NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION, ESTABLISHED IN 2000.

VISION

Every child in the nation's capital is safe, supported, and nurtured by their birth, kinship, foster, or adoptive family, and every family is empowered to uphold the well-being and dignity of the children in their care.

MISSION

Empower and advocate for families and youth involved in the child welfare system, to promote the long-term stability of families in the nation's capital.



2026 FOSTER YOUTH SUMMIT

The Annual Foster Youth Summit is the Foster and Adoptive Parent Advocacy Center's (FAPAC) flagship youth empowerment conference designed to prepare older youth in foster care for a successful transition into adulthood. Held each spring, the Summit brings together foster youth, foster parents, mentors, professionals, and community partners for a full day of education, mentorship, and connection.

The Summit focuses on youth ages 16–21 who are involved in the District of Columbia foster care system. Participants attend interactive workshops, meet one-on-one with career mentors, and develop practical skills needed for independent living.

Summit topics include:

- Career exploration and workforce readiness
- Financial literacy and money management
- College and vocational education planning
- Housing and life after foster care
- Physical and mental health
- Healthy relationships
- Self-advocacy and leadership
- Goal setting and future planning

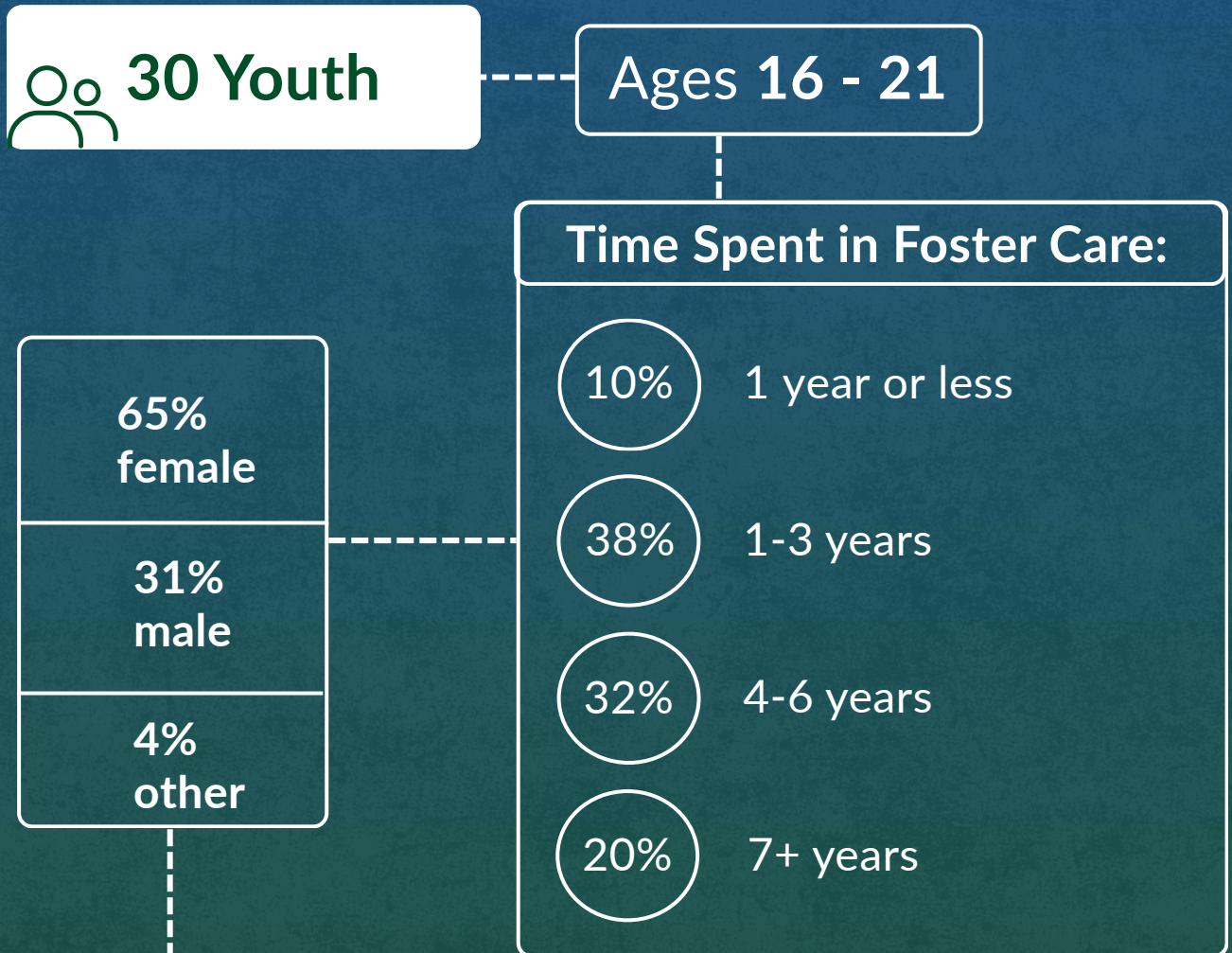


WHY IT MATTERS

The program was created in response to the significant challenges many youth face when leaving foster care, including higher risks of homelessness, unemployment, financial instability, and limited support networks. By combining life-skills education, mentoring, and positive youth development, the Summit aims to equip participants with the knowledge, confidence, and relationships they need to thrive as adults. The Summit also provides FAPAC the opportunity to survey youth and foster parents to learn about their challenges and experiences in the foster care system. FAPAC then shares its findings and solutions with stakeholders to increase awareness, collaboration, and problem-solving.

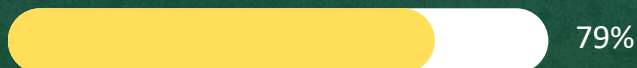
THE FULL PICTURE:

ATTENDEE DEMOGRAPHICS



Youth Residency:

DC



MD



(Some D.C. youth are placed in Maryland and remain in the care of the District)

YOUTH-REPORTED CHALLENGES

The 2026 Foster Youth Summit highlighted several significant challenges faced by youth preparing to transition into adulthood and independent living. Through surveys and group discussions, youth consistently expressed concerns related to **emotional support, independent living skills, financial stability, and navigating adulthood without a reliable support system.**



LIMITED PREPARATION FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING

Many youth expressed concern about managing the responsibilities associated with adulthood, particularly financial and household responsibilities. Participants frequently identified paying rent, managing money, scheduling appointments, and balancing school with employment as major stressors.

GAPS IN AWARENESS OF AVAILABLE SUPPORTS AND SERVICES

Several youth expressed that simply “knowing about supports that are out there” would make their lives easier. This indicates that existing programs and services may not always be communicated in ways that are accessible, youth-friendly, or consistently reinforced. Our findings indicate that increasing access to information is just as important as expanding services. Although information is shared with youth through their social worker, they require many reminders and encouragement to learn more and utilize those services and resources. A significant challenge in youth learning about services available to them is social worker turnover, which affects the accessibility of information and their knowledge of the resources available to youth.

NEED FOR INCREASED EDUCATIONAL AND CAREER GUIDANCE

While various participants shared ambitious educational and professional goals, many also expressed uncertainty about how to achieve them. Youth identified a need for more guidance on career planning, employment opportunities, and educational pathways. Participants specifically requested:

- Help finding jobs and internships;
- Guidance identifying career goals and passions;
- Information about college, vocational programs, and career pathways;
- Access to mentors with lived and/or professional experience

MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

Youth involved in foster care often face experiences that can significantly impact their emotional well-being, self-esteem, and overall mental health. Experiences such as trauma, family separation, placement instability, and disrupted relationships can contribute to feelings of uncertainty, low confidence, and difficulty developing a positive sense of identity.

These challenges can affect multiple areas of a young person's life, including academic success, social relationships, participation in activities, and overall

quality of life. Many youth also struggle with emotional regulation, trust, and feelings of belonging. As youth prepare for adulthood and independence, access to supportive relationships and mental health resources becomes increasingly important.

The findings from the 2026 Foster Youth Summit reinforce the importance of emotional wellness support. Youth repeatedly identified emotional and mental health support, trusted adults, and access to someone to talk to as factors that would make their lives easier and improve their ability to navigate adulthood successfully. The traditional approach of talk therapy may not sufficiently fulfill the mental and emotional needs of youth. Youth require more positive experiences overall, including interactions with supportive adults.



LACK OF LONG-TERM EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

A significant challenge identified during the Summit was the lack of consistent emotional support systems for youth transitioning out of care. Many participants expressed fear of “being alone” or “not having any connections” once they become adults. Youth repeatedly emphasized the importance of having trusted adults available for emotional guidance, encouragement, and mentorship. The findings indicate that emotional wellness and independent living are connected. Youth who lack stable emotional support systems may face greater challenges navigating education, employment, housing, and day-to-day life. Participants identified needs such as:

- Access to therapy and mental health resources;
- Safe spaces to discuss stress and emotions;
- Support navigating difficult life transitions; and
- Stronger connections with caring adults.

BARRIERS TO MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT AND SELF-ADVOCACY

Despite growing awareness of mental health needs, many barriers still prevent youth from accessing available resources. These barriers include stigma, restrictive requirements, transportation issues, concerns about confidentiality, placement changes, and difficulty navigating support systems. These challenges can be especially significant for transition-age youth preparing for greater independence and adulthood. Resource parent feedback also highlighted concerns about youths' ability to advocate for themselves, communicate their needs, and navigate important decisions about their futures. Limited self-advocacy skills may affect confidence, independence, and willingness to seek support when challenges arise.

NEED FOR SUPPORTIVE ADULTS

Supportive relationships play a critical role in helping youth build resilience and overcome adversity. For many youth involved in foster care, trusted adults provide guidance, encouragement, and emotional stability during periods of transition and uncertainty. Throughout the summit, youth emphasized the value of having someone they could turn to for advice, support, and encouragement. Responses such as “a therapist,” “emotional and mental support,” and “just a talk” highlight the importance of consistent and meaningful connections with caring adults.



RESOURCE-PARENT REPORTED CHALLENGES

Feedback gathered from caregivers highlighted the challenges many face when trying to address complex emotional and behavioral needs.

**“SOMETIMES I KNOW MY CHILD IS STRUGGLING,
BUT I DON'T ALWAYS KNOW WHAT TO DO TO HELP.”**



Many expressed uncertainty about how to respond to emotional dysregulation, support positive behavior, and help youth build confidence and self-esteem. Others reported a need for additional tools to support youth through difficult transitions and community resources that can help them feel more confident in their role.

MENTAL HEALTH AMONG YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE: NATIONAL FACTS AND STATISTICS

FACT 1

80% of foster youth in the United States have mental health issues, compared to just 20% of non-foster youth nationwide¹.

FACT 2

Some of the most common mental illnesses among foster youth include:² PTSD, Major Depression, Social Phobias, Panic Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Bulimia.

FACT 3

Substance use, including alcohol and drugs, is also more common in foster youth than the general population.³



A case study published in the May 2023 issue of the *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics* examined the mental health needs of adolescents entering foster care by tracking mental health diagnoses before and during their time in care. Researchers found that **41% of youth had already been diagnosed with at least one mental health condition prior to entering foster care.**

Among those who had no previous diagnosis, **52% were later diagnosed with a mental health condition** while in foster care, highlighting the significant emotional and behavioral needs that often emerge or are identified after placement.

¹FosterVA, 2026, <https://www.fosterva.org/blog/facts-about-mental-health-in-foster-care>

²Study; Casey Family Programs, https://www.casey.org/media/AlumniStudy_US_Report_MentalHealth.pdf

³Highland Hospital, 2023, <https://highlandhosp.com/mental-health-in-foster-youth/>

The most common new diagnoses included **adjustment disorders, mood disorders, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**. The study also identified important disparities, finding that **racial and ethnic minority youth were less likely to have received mental health services before entering foster care**, suggesting that many children enter the child welfare system with unmet behavioral health needs due to inequitable access to care.

Another study published in the **April 2026 issue of the *Journal of the National Medical Association*** examined the prevalence of psychiatric diagnoses among youth within their first year of entering foster care, with a focus on demographic disparities and the complexity of mental health conditions.

Researchers found that **56% of youth received at least one psychiatric diagnosis within one year of placement**, while **30% were diagnosed with two or more psychiatric conditions**, underscoring the high prevalence and complexity of mental health needs among children in foster care.

The findings emphasize the importance of providing **early, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive mental health interventions** to improve outcomes for youth. The study also identified persistent racial disparities, with racial and ethnic minority youth experiencing higher rates of new-onset psychiatric disorders, highlighting the urgent need for coordinated, equity-focused approaches to mental health assessment, diagnosis, and treatment within child welfare systems.

BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH SUPPORT, CONNECTION, AND POSITIVE EXPERIENCES

Positive Childhood Experiences, or PCEs, are the supportive relationships and environments that help children feel safe, valued, and connected as they grow. While Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) focus on stressful or traumatic events in childhood, PCEs highlight the positive interpersonal relationships that foster a child's ability to thrive. Examples of PCEs include having a trusted adult to turn to, feeling supported by family and friends, feeling a sense of belonging at school, participating in community activities, and even having someone to take them to the doctor if needed. These experiences help children develop confidence, healthy relationships, and the ability to cope with challenges later in life.⁴

A nationally representative study from 2023 concluded that experiencing childhood peer support, a healthy school climate, and neighborhood safety were protective against multiple adult health conditions, including for individuals who had been exposed to Adverse Childhood Experiences. It found that interventions promoting PCEs may improve overall population health.⁵ Research on Positive Childhood Experiences underscores the importance of expanding access to supports that help youth build resilience and maintain positive relationships.



For youth in foster care, creating PCEs requires intentional support and requires going above traditional talk therapy strategies. It requires intentional positive experiences, which collaboration among caregivers, schools, mentors, and community organizations can help create and encourage youth to participate in, even when they don't understand its future positive impact.

⁴"What are PCEs," American Psychiatric Association, <https://www.apaf.org/our-programs/justice/free-resource/what-are-pce-s/>

⁵"Specific domains of positive childhood experiences (PCEs) associated with improved adult health," National Library of Medicine, Charite. et. al. 2023. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10685007/>

CFSA MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES OVERVIEW

After the Summit, FAPAC met with the mental health support team at the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency and learned the following:

UPON ENTERING CARE

- Children already receiving therapy continue their existing services.
- Those not in therapy receive a mental health evaluation to determine whether immediate or ongoing treatment is needed.
- CFSA's in-house team focuses on crisis stabilization and short-term support rather than long-term therapy.

CURRENT CAPACITY

- Four full-time in-house therapists.
- Approximately 56 youth are currently receiving CFSA therapy.
- Youth needing ongoing treatment are referred to community providers.

CURRENT CAPACITY SERVICES AVAILABLE

- Short-term individual therapy for youth in care.
- Emergency medication support when needed.
- On-site mental health unit and a Department of Behavioral Health (DBH) liaison to coordinate community referrals.
- No in-house psychiatrist; medication management is provided by a Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner (PMHNP) on a limited basis.

YOUNG CHILDREN

- CFSA does not provide in-house therapy for children under age 5 due to specialized developmental needs.
- Younger children are referred to community providers, including the Parent Infant Early Childhood Enhancement (PIECE) Program, when appropriate.

ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES

- Limited availability due to funding.
 - Services may include:
 - Animal-assisted therapy (contract-based)
 - Art therapy (limited)
 - Play therapy for younger children
 - Music therapy is no longer offered.
- Families cannot self-enroll but can request these services through CFSA.

YOUTH PLACED OUTSIDE D.C.

- Youth placed in Maryland remain eligible for telehealth services through CFSA's Office of Wellbeing.

BARRIERS TO CARE

- Primary barriers exist within the community, including:
 - Shortage of mental health providers
 - Long waitlists
 - Difficulty keeping youth engaged in treatment
- CFSA reports that initial mental health assessments are generally available upon entry into care.
- Foster parents are not typically able to participate in family therapy with youth.

ACCESSING SERVICES

- Resource parents should work through the child's social worker to request therapy.
- If barriers arise, concerns should be escalated through supervisory channels.
- CFSA indicated it is best able to address mental health needs when specific youth are identified rather than discussing broad systemic issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR TRANSITION-AGED YOUTH

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PROVIDE CAREER-FOCUSED MENTORING FOR YOUTH

Many young people in foster care do not have consistent, supportive adult figures in their lives. They often receive less guidance than other youth regarding educational and career pathways. Youth involved with foster care in Washington, D.C. leave the system at age 21, often without a solid plan for housing and employment. Mentors can make a huge difference in these young people's lives. These experienced career mentors provide focused career support and advice to help the mentees meet their annual goals and prepare to leave the foster care system. Mentors also provide a long-term emotional connection by showing that they will stick around and support their mentee throughout a full year.



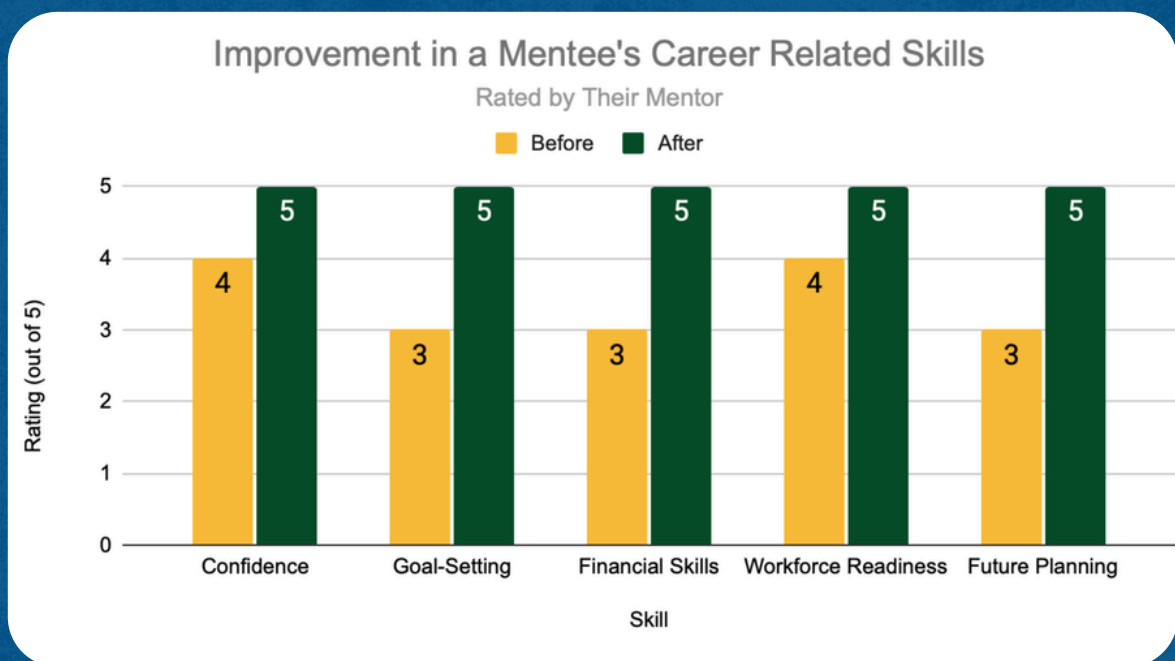
FAPAC launched a Mentoring Program in 2025 as a pilot program to address the need for supportive adult relationships specifically related to career and employment. Screened volunteer mentors were paired with youth at the 2025 Foster Youth Summit. Together, they observed educational workshops and discussed possibilities for the youths' futures. After the Summit, one mentor-mentee pair continued working together to achieve a career-specific goal. After a year of mentoring, the youth successfully achieved his goal of taking the Air Force test. Their story is detailed in the section titled Jayden and Clarence's Mentoring Experience.

FAPAC formalized its mentoring program at the 2026 Foster Youth Summit with great success. All youth were paired with a mentor to guide them through the day of workshops and learning, and five mentor/mentee pairs have agreed to continue their mentoring relationship for an entire year and work on achieving at least one career-related goal. Some youth are working on achieving a high school diploma, others are striving to enroll in college and complete a successful year, and others are working on finding employment they enjoy.



Youth have expressed gratitude for the career resources, advice, and emotional support they have received from their mentors. Mentors have expressed appreciation for FAPAC resources and personal fulfillment from the connections they've developed with their mentees. One youth writes, *"Having a mentor who checks in regularly and encourages me is making a big difference for me."* - Foster Youth

Preliminary results of the Mentoring Program demonstrate increases in the youth's confidence, goal-setting, financial literacy, workforce readiness, and future planning. FAPAC will continue to evaluate the program annually and report on its findings.



Group information and guidance sessions are important and continue to play a valuable role. However, the data clearly show that individualized career mentorship has the greatest impact. It is not simply about providing youth with the information they need to navigate their path toward independence; it is the individualized attention, relationship-building, and tailored support that truly make the difference.

Career mentorship allows youth to receive guidance that reflects their unique goals, strengths, challenges, and circumstances—helping them move from receiving information to taking meaningful steps toward independence.

IMPROVE ACCESS AND OPTIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND SUPPORT SERVICES FOR YOUTH

Based on youth feedback and quantitative research on foster youth mental health, FAPAC recommends the following actions to improve access to mental health and support services for youth:

PROVIDE MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES IMMEDIATELY UPON ENTERING CARE AND CONTINUING FOR AT LEAST ONE YEAR

Policymakers and service providers should invest in expanded access to counseling, therapy, crisis support, and emotional wellness programs for youth immediately upon entering the foster care system, beyond the initial assessment, and for at least one year. Waiting until a crisis occurs to provide continued support is too late. The assumption should be that the first year is sure to be challenging for any youth in foster care, and therefore, mandatory counseling is required for a year.

EXPAND THERAPEUTIC OPTIONS BEYOND TALK THERAPY

The D.C. Child and Family Services should invest in a variety of therapeutic approaches because no single type of therapy is effective for every child. Other forms of therapy include play, art, music, or dance therapy; occupational therapy with sensory integration; animal-assisted therapy; eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR); and many others. Healthy mentoring relationships could also be considered a therapeutic approach.





INCREASE PUBLIC AWARENESS OF AVAILABLE SERVICES

Agencies and organizations should improve outreach efforts and provide information that is accessible and easy to understand to youth, resource parents, and agency staff. Outside partner organizations should explore new ways to connect with youth, dedicate more resources to outreach, and provide regular updates and event promotions. Increased awareness of resources can help connect youth to vital services before challenges become crises.

INCREASE OPPORTUNITIES FOR POSITIVE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES (PCES)

While Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) increase the risk of poor health and social outcomes, PCES can buffer the effects of adversity and promote lifelong success. Research has found that children who experience more positive experiences are more likely to thrive - even when they have experienced significant trauma. Increased efforts should be made to ensure that every youth is frequently engaged in year-round positive activities, such as extracurricular sports, camps, service projects, mentoring, and family activities, among others. Youth are experiencing significant idle time, which is damaging to their emotional well-being. CFSA provides a \$1,000-per-month summer camp stipend that could be expanded to serve this purpose year-round and to include teens and young adults. Additionally, CFSA could expand partnerships with other organizations around the District that provide free or highly reduced extracurricular programs to teens and young adults.



PREVIOUS RECOMMENDATIONS

From the 2023 Foster Youth Summit, FAPAC made the following recommendations to CFSA:

- **Self-Advocacy:** teach youth about their rights and how to escalate their needs up the chain of command, as part of a self-advocacy training.
- **Soft-Skill Building:** teach youth soft skills such as communication, responsiveness, empathy, growth mindset, persistence, time management, perseverance, honesty, and curiosity.
- **Adult Skill Building:** provide youth the opportunity to practice managing their lives 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.
- **Stakeholder Collaboration:** the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency should expand its partnerships with nonprofit organizations to expand supports for youth, rather than housing them entirely under its Office of Youth Empowerment, which supports youth 16 years and older.
- **Policy Training and Continued Education for Supporting Adults:** Increase education focused on CFSA policies and guidelines for resource parents, social workers, and other supporting adults.
- **Focus on Building Independence for Youth:** 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, including independent living.

JAYDEN AND CLARENCE'S MENTORING EXPERIENCE

At the 2025 Youth Summit, Clarence and Jayden met by chance. What followed became an example of the power of connection and consistent mentorship.

During the Summit, Clarence, a retired foreign service officer, overheard Jayden talking with friends about his interest in joining the military. The conversation immediately stood out to him. Having previously served in the Air Force himself, Clarence understood both the opportunities and the challenges that come with pursuing that path.

"It was almost like destiny,"
Jayden said.

After the Summit, the two stayed connected, and what began as a shared interest grew into an ongoing mentorship. For Jayden, pursuing military service involved more than just submitting an application. There were confusing steps to navigate, requirements to meet, and moments that required persistence.



Clarence became someone Jayden could rely on throughout the process. He offered encouragement, accountability, and practical guidance as Jayden worked toward his goal. He helped connect Jayden with additional math support and encouraged him through multiple attempts until he ultimately passed the exam.

Ultimately, Jayden's story is about what becomes possible when young people have consistent access to trusted adults who believe in them and help them navigate challenges that would otherwise feel insurmountable.

Mentorship can't solve every challenge, but it certainly helps. Sometimes, completing a goal begins with a simple conversation. Individualized career mentorship is focused on identifying and achieving tangible steps towards self-sufficiency.

CONCLUSION

The 2026 Foster Youth Summit reinforced a consistent message from both youth and caregivers: while foster youth are optimistic about their futures and aspire to attend college, build meaningful careers, and live independently, many do not feel adequately prepared to navigate adulthood on their own. Participants identified emotional support, access to mental health services, career guidance, financial literacy, and long-term relationships with trusted adults as essential to their success. These findings are consistent with national research demonstrating that youth in foster care experience significantly higher rates of mental health challenges and benefit from early, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive interventions.

The Summit also highlighted that supporting foster youth requires more than responding to crises. Building resilience requires direct investment in Positive Childhood Experiences, mentoring, accessible mental health services, and opportunities for youth to develop the skills and confidence needed for adulthood. While the District has established important mental health supports through the Child and Family Services Agency, barriers such as provider shortages, limited access to specialized therapies, and inconsistent awareness of available resources continue to prevent many youth from receiving the comprehensive care they need.

FAPAC remains committed to partnering with youth, caregivers, government agencies, and community organizations to develop innovative solutions that address these challenges. Through initiatives such as the Foster Youth Summit and Career Mentoring Program, FAPAC is helping youth build supportive relationships, strengthen self-advocacy skills, and prepare for successful transitions into adulthood. However, lasting change will require continued collaboration and investment across the child welfare system.

The voices of foster youth are clear. They are not simply asking for services - they are asking for connection, guidance, opportunity, and someone who believes in their future. By listening to their experiences and investing in evidence-based, youth-centered solutions, we can build a child welfare system that not only protects children from harm but also equips them to thrive long after they leave foster care.

READY TO HELP? LET'S TALK.



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