

Homeless and Foster Youth Find Their Voices

by Diana Scholl

More and more homeless youth and those in the child welfare system are advocating legislatures and governments on behalf of their own needs, and a growing number of groups and coalitions are assisting them in their efforts.

The benefits of giving young people seats at the table are manifold. Youth are empowered and emboldened by the experience, and as a result, policies are put in place that reflect the real needs of people most affected by homelessness and foster care.

Destiny Raynor, 15, testified before the U.S. House of Representatives Financial Services Committee in December 2011 about changing the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's definition of homelessness to better encompass families who are not living in homeless shelters but do not have stable homes—such as those doubled up or living in motels or cars.

“There are some programs that provide housing help, but we don't qualify because my dad doesn't have a regular job and he doesn't make enough money. When Beth [the school homeless liaison] pays for the motel room, we are considered homeless,” Destiny testified before Congress. “When my dad pays for the motel room, we are not considered homeless. That doesn't make sense to me. It's the same hotel room, and it's hard to live there when you are young, no matter who pays.”



While many advocates and experts testified before Congress, those in attendance said the most compelling testimonies came from current and former youth, like Destiny, who spoke about their experiences being homeless. The bill, HR 37, is currently making its way through the House of Representatives.

“I was meeting with [Congress] members' staff recently, and they are still talking about the kids' testimonies,” says Barbara Duffield, executive director of the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, which is advocating in favor of the bill. “It's one thing to look at the issue from a 30,000-foot perspective. It's another to be able to say, ‘Brittany herself said she felt safer in her car.’”

Duffield says that to make sure the youth felt comfortable on the big day, they practiced their testimony beforehand and met one another the night before they testified in order to increase their comfort levels.

Duffield says she understands why there is reluctance to include youth in advocacy.

“The instinct of most people, including educators and providers, is not to traumatize people. Some students you wouldn't ask, but for some, it's part of the healing process,” Duffield says.

For Destiny, the experience was life-changing, and she wants now to pursue a career as a child advocacy lawyer. And although her family currently has permanent housing, she was happy to help homeless teenagers who came after her.

“If you're a greedy person, when you need help no one's going to help you,” she says. “I would tell anyone else interested in doing this that they should, and that if they're nervous, it will wear off.”

Seats at the table

There have been countless local, state, and national victories as a result of youth advocacy involvement and agenda-setting. Fostering Connections, the national legislation that permits states to allow youth to remain in foster care up to age 21, was the result of youth setting the agenda.

Advocacy group California Youth Connection has had a legislative victory every year since its founding in 1988. Its first major (and teen-friendly) victory: allowing foster youth to get driver's licenses. In Oregon, youth were instrumental in passing a bill that provides free college tuition for all youth who have been through the foster care system.

Angela Lariviere spent most of her childhood homeless or in transitional housing, and founded the Youth Empowerment Program at the Coalition on Homelessness and Housing in Ohio after realizing that middle-class youth were asked to volunteer and engage in their communities, but the same wasn't expected of homeless young people. Now, more than 250 homeless and

foster youth per year participate in community service and advocacy that her organization facilitates.

"A big thing is we do a lot of community service. We tell them, you may not have a stable address, but you are part of your community," she says.

Lariviere says her first priority is "just getting youth at the table."

"When people say they want youth at the table, it doesn't mean they'll listen to what they have to say," she says. "Working with youth means really valuing them as experts, but also valuing adult partners."

Janet Knipe, executive director of the National Foster Youth Action Network (NFYAN), says that for youth advocacy to work best, adults have to learn take a step back, and let youth take the lead.

"One of the biggest challenges is getting community partners and stakeholders to be open to working with youth," Knipe says. "Adults often want to make decisions quickly, and jump in to solve problems. It's hard for all of us adults to give up that control. But we have to think: How can we truly empower and engage youth in a meaningful way?"

One of the many ways homeless and foster youth have been advocating for themselves is by testifying at congressional briefings and caucuses, such as the recent hearing about changing the definition of homelessness (below right) and the Senate Caucus on Foster Care (below left).



NFYAN, a national spin-off of the California Youth Connection, has organizers across the country who themselves were in foster care.

With 15 years in the child welfare system under her belt, Sophia Herman saw firsthand the barriers of being in foster care. She was frustrated by being separated from her siblings, and was particularly upset when her sister's psychiatric medication regimen was changed depending on her foster care placement.

But as a youth bouncing from placement to placement in California, Herman, now 25, felt like no one was listening to what she wanted. "Other people are making decisions for you, and a lot of times they don't take a step back to see what's available

to you," Herman says. "Foster youth aren't able to do the same things other kids can because of liability. I wanted to just do typical social things teens and young people do. No one ever tried to make my life normal."

But Herman joined up with the California Youth Connection, and worked to advocate on behalf of foster youth in California. Through that work, she was hired by NFYAN, where she works to organize youth in Mississippi.

"I think the Action Network is a great organization for the validation of youth voices, to allow young people to be heard in a professional manner," she says. "The squeaky wheel gets the



oil, and we're teaching youth how to use that to their advantage instead of being scared of professional social workers."

Youth can often speak from a position of experience. David Buck, now 22, ran away from a group home in Idaho at age 17, and spent three years homeless in Seattle and San Francisco. "It was awful. The [worst] thing about foster care is when you're put in a placement, and you're constantly bombarded with the fact that your parents aren't around. I felt like I was essentially a prisoner in the group home. I figured running away would give me an opportunity to take life into my own hands," he says.

Buck connected with The Mockingbird Society, a Washington State-based group that advocates for youth in homeless and foster care. Every year, The Mockingbird Society sends 250 people with experience as homeless youth or in the foster care system for Youth Advocacy Day, back-to-back meetings with legislators to advance the agenda youth themselves created. The Mockingbird Society's legislative achievements have included a bill that extends health care benefits to youth exiting foster care until they are 21 years old, and 2011's Extended Foster Care bill, Washington's first step toward implementing Fostering Connections, allowing youth finishing their secondary education to remain in care until age 21.

One accomplishment came in 2009, when The Mockingbird Society worked to amend legislation that notified authorities within eight hours if a youth entered a drop-in center. "It sounds good on paper, but I used to go to a lot of drop-in centers in Seattle, and I can think of two individuals I know who were informed by staff that if they write down their names they would be reported. That spooked them. They were running away because of abuse or something. When they're told that cops will get involved, they leave." Buck worked to educate legislators, and the bill was changed so



Opposite: Youth from The Mockingbird Society, including David Buck, took to the streets during a march on Seattle's Youth Advocacy Day to ensure that their voices were heard. **Above:** Talking with the media can be an empowering advocacy tool for youth. **Below:** After testifying at a congressional hearing, a group of students were invited to have lunch with Congresswoman Judy Biggert (R-IL).

that in some circumstances, drop-in centers have up to 72 hours before notifying authorities, to give drop-in centers time to better assess the needs of the youth who seek help.

"I feel like advocacy is part of my duty as someone who has experienced these things and is in a position to do something about it," Buck says. ■