

Propelling Improvements for Youth With Foster Care Experience Through Advocacy

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Introduction

Child welfare agencies play a central role in the lives and outcomes of youth who are in foster care. Agency structures and policies influence where a foster youth lives, what services they qualify for, how often they can see their parents or siblings, and the educational opportunities they receive. The role of the child welfare agencies also echoes in the lives and circumstances of their families, foster parents, and kinship caregivers—and for the practitioners who provide support.

The voices of youth and families, combined with robust research findings, tell us that youth with foster care experience face barriers and challenges that their peers do not, both during and after their time in foster care. There is ample evidence showing that youth with foster care experience have lower educational, employment, health, and housing outcomes as a result of these and other barriers.ⁱ Due to the role of child welfare agencies in the lives of youth in foster care, changes to the policies that dictate agency practices and procedures are necessary to improve those outcomes and set youth up to thrive in adulthood.

Advocates play a key role in driving change and holding agencies accountable by educating policymakers, system leaders, and the public about challenges, barriers, and opportunities for improvement. Advocacy does not begin or end with educating policymakers or launching a public campaign. Rather, advocates do substantial work to understand existing problems, define a policy solution, and ensure that the policy operates in the intended way to directly improve the lives of youth and their families.

The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, as part of its overarching Foster Youth Initiative, has invested in advocacy for over 14 years across a portfolio of grantees to drive child welfare improvements for foster youth in Los Angeles, New York City, Atlanta, and nationally. There are many ways that grantees have approached their advocacy work to make positive changes and directly address the needs of youth, families, and the practitioners who serve them. Child Trends has served as the Initiative's evaluation partner since 2018.

In this brief, we organize the examples identified through our evaluation of the Initiative into five categories of advocacy wins commonly achieved by grantees:

1. Meeting the needs of youth by establishing new programs and services
2. Providing continuity and new opportunities for young people by preserving or expanding programs
3. Opening the door for more youth and caregivers to receive services by leveraging federal resources

4. Ensuring youth receive the benefits created by policies through enhanced implementation
5. Grounding coalitions in the voices and direct needs of youth and caregivers

These categories are often interconnected—for example, a coalition may support advocacy for a new program and, once that program is created, shift toward supporting implementation.

This brief describes each advocacy category and showcases an example from the Initiative's portfolio, drawing on interviews with the grantees and a document review. Each example highlights the need that the policy aims to address, the strategies used to educate decision makers and address the need, and the direct outcomes of the shift that occurred. The brief also provides a short overview of other examples within each category, although it does not describe all the accomplishments of the Initiative's advocacy grantees. Each of these efforts was accomplished in collaboration, drawing on the support of multiple partners and funders who were integral to this work.

1. Meeting needs of youth by establishing new programs and services

Across a number of measures such as education, employment, housing, and health, youth in foster care do not achieve the same outcomes as youth who never enter foster care. Often, youth in foster care lack access to the resources and services they need to thrive. One way to address this is through advocacy, which can play a critical role in establishing new programs and services to meet those needs. Child welfare agencies, mostly in partnership with other agencies, provide services such as workforce training, educational support, physical and mental health services, and mentorship for youth in foster care. When there are service gaps, advocates raise awareness and educate policymakers on how to fill those gaps. Youth who have experienced foster care, community partners, caregivers (including kin and foster parents), and practitioners all provide essential information for advocates to incorporate into their recommendations and often engage in advocacy efforts themselves.

The Initiative supported Georgia EmpowerMENT and the Multi-Agency Alliance for Children (MAAC) to identify and remedy barriers to enrollment and persistence in postsecondary education for youth with foster care experience. The example below demonstrates how needs were identified, policymakers were educated, and the resulting policy shifts directly addressed the needs of youth with foster care experience through a new program.

► Example: Securing postsecondary support for youth in Georgia

Youth faced limited access to the necessary financial resources to achieve their postsecondary goals.

Access to postsecondary education is a persistent challenge for foster youth nationwide as research shows postsecondary enrollmentⁱⁱ and completionⁱⁱⁱ rates for foster youth remain low. In Georgia, foster youth lacked sufficient funding to support their postsecondary education, with youth unable to leverage both federal and state tuition supports due to misinterpretation of existing law.

Youth advocated for a new program with clear criteria and allocated funding to open the doors to postsecondary education. With the Initiative's support, youth advocates who serve on

Georgia EmpowerMENT's Policy Council worked alongside the Tuition Coalition and the Youth Advocacy Initiative to identify and address financial barriers to postsecondary education. With the Tuition Coalition,

youth advocates gathered data, researched best practices from other states, and developed their advocacy approaches. Youth advocates were also supported by both coalitions to prepare for educational meetings with policymakers. Youth advocates met biweekly to advance their advocacy efforts toward postsecondary access for foster youth, and each coalition met quarterly to coordinate collaborative efforts. Their efforts resulted in the Georgia Foster Care Scholarship Program, which provides funding for youth with foster care experience to pursue postsecondary education.

Youth advocates built relationships with policymakers and educated them about their personal experiences, the financial barriers faced by youth with foster care experience, and how the proposed Georgia Foster Care Scholarship Program would address those barriers. They also testified at committee meetings and hearings and provided recommendations to legislators on the program's eligibility criteria, application process, the role of the program's administering entity, and the level of allocated funding. These recommendations ensured clarity about how the grant program would be implemented and made certain that previous barriers to postsecondary education support were addressed by the program.

Youth will have a pathway to access postsecondary education services. SB 85, signed into law in 2025, created the Georgia Foster Care Scholarship Program. Starting fall 2026, a young person aging out of foster care in Georgia who has already used all other applicable federal and state aid can receive up to \$30,000 a year to finish their degree. This program directly addresses the challenges identified by the Policy Council, and youth advocates are supporting implementation by testing the application process and informing the plan to evaluate the program.

Other advocacy wins that contributed to new services for youth

The challenge facing youth in foster care	The advocacy approach taken by Foster Youth Initiative grantees to address the challenge
In New York, child welfare leaders, community organizations, youth, and caregivers identified barriers to family-based placement stability, including inadequate caregiver training and foster care payment rates that did not align with the level of support caregivers need for youth in their care. Caregivers reported feeling unequipped to support youths' emotional needs and facing financial constraints in providing appropriate care.	New York City's child welfare agency created the Enhanced Family Foster Care model, through which all caregivers are trained as therapeutic foster parents and in trauma-informed care and receive higher payment rates to better meet the needs of youth in their care. Since the model's launch, the number of foster parents therapeutically trained has increased, with 1,693 foster parents trained by the end of fiscal year 2024. ^{iv} The Initiative has been an ongoing partner through its funding to New Yorkers for Children, which supports New York City's child welfare agency with ongoing technical assistance, research, and evaluation to promote placement stability.
Since 2017, California's Continuum of Care Reform has aimed to reduce the use of congregate care and increase family- and kinship-based placements. Yet, foster care payment rates, historically based on placement type and age of the youth rather than based on youth needs, have been reported as a barrier to caregivers serving as a placement option, impacting the availability of family- and kinship-based placements.	California is implementing a new tiered foster care rate structure to meet youths' individual needs across all placement types. The new rate structure includes strength-building funds to help kin and foster parents better meet those needs. To ensure caregiver input shapes the 2027 rollout, California Alliance of Caregivers is gathering caregiver feedback to share in regular meetings with the state and county (LA) child welfare agency and hosting navigation clinics to understand and address caregivers' barriers and questions.

2. Providing continuity and new opportunities for young people by preserving or expanding programs

Once a program exists, it can provide essential support that youth in care rely on to meet their needs. However, when federal, state, or local budgets shrink, it can mean that programs are vulnerable to reducing availability or closing completely, disrupting youths' access to services. Similarly, programs that are supporting youth well may not have adequate funding to meet all the needs in the community, limiting enrollment to only some youth.

Advocacy plays a critical role in ensuring programs have the funding they need to continue serving youth in foster care, and in expanding the footprint of programs that could meet the needs of more youth. By educating policymakers about the benefits of specific programs and services for youth and families, grantees have advocated for maintaining or increasing funding for effective services and supports. Sometimes advocacy entails sharing research or data on the value of programs and services when budget shortfalls threaten existing funding. At other times, advocates may seek to show how additional funding would allow more youth and families to benefit. The advocacy of youth, caregivers, and practitioners can be particularly powerful when sharing how a program has directly supported their lives. John Burton Advocates for Youth's (JBAY) advocacy to expand access to transitional housing in California, described below, exemplifies this approach.

► **Example: Reducing homelessness and housing instability through expanded access to transitional housing for youth**

Although youth needed access to safe and stable housing, which could be met through a transitional housing program, the program lacked adequate funds to meet the need. Youth face high rates of homelessness^v and housing instability^{vi} after exiting foster care. Housing programs that serve youth after they exit foster care can provide greater stability and support into early adulthood, but data monitored by JBAY showed that one program—Transitional Housing Program-Plus (THP-Plus)—did not have enough funding to meet the need. As of June 30, 2021, 473 youth were on a waiting list for THP-Plus, and nearly one in five were estimated to have experienced homelessness while waiting for a housing slot to open. In addition, once youth obtained housing through THP-Plus, they faced service limitations (i.e., the program only served youth up to age 24 and for a maximum of two years, unless the county had opted for an optional extension to three years for youth in school—an option that was rarely used but when it was, demonstrated improved outcomes).^{vii}

Educating policymakers about the needs of foster youth led to additional funding and expanded program eligibility requirements. JBAY educated policymakers using a combination of quantitative data on the need and the lived experiences of young people. The effort was grounded in strong coordination across sectors including a coalition of youth advocates, legal organizations, service providers, postsecondary partners, and public agencies. JBAY's advocacy also relied on their existing, long-standing legislative relationships and regular communication with government offices.

To meet the needs raised by JBAY and their partners, the 2022-23 state budget included an additional \$25.3 million in ongoing annual funding for transitional housing for former foster youth which counties could use for their THP-Plus programs. The investment was accompanied by a policy change adopted in a budget trailer bill (SB 187, 2022), which increased the upper age limit of THP-Plus from 24 to 25 and expanded the maximum length of services from 24 months to 36 months. The new state funding both increased the number of youth who could access transitional housing statewide and funded the additional year of housing services. This win brought the total annual statewide investment in transitional housing for former foster youth to \$77.2 million.^{viii}

More youth are housed and receiving supportive services through THP-Plus. The data JBAY continues to gather from counties on THP-Plus program slots and waitlists demonstrates an increase in available services. From 2021 to 2024, JBAY reported a 27 percent increase in available THP-Plus housing slots (to 1,664 THP-Plus slots in 2024), and fewer youth (378) were on waitlists.^{ix} THP-Plus service providers have also benefited from the increased funding, which some counties used to pay providers a higher monthly rate per youth, enhancing their sustainability by reducing the level of private fundraising necessary to operate the program.

"More young people have housing opportunities, whether it's leasing their own place and getting through with a voucher or whether it's being in a three-year program where they're in a shared apartment and their rent's being covered, or something else... There's more capacity to serve young people... a lot more of a safety net now for young people leaving foster care."

– Initiative grantee

Other advocacy wins that expanded or preserved funding to serve youth

The challenge facing youth in foster care	The advocacy approach taken by Foster Youth Initiative grantees to address the challenge
New York's Foster Youth College Success Initiative (FYCSI), created with input from youth advocates with the Foster Youth Success Alliance (FYSA), provides state funding for postsecondary education. Funding for this program must be allocated each year, requiring ongoing advocacy.	Youth advocates have successfully advocated to maintain and increase state investments in FYSCI, which supports over 1,300 college students with foster care experience each year and has disbursed over \$67 million in funds since 2015. ^x
California's NextUp campus support program provides counseling, tutoring, financial support, and other resources to students attending select community colleges.	In 2022, JBAY successfully advocated to expand the NextUp campus support program, which is now available at all CA community colleges. JBAY has since supported implementation through a toolkit and community of practice.

3. Opening the door for more youth and caregivers to receive services by leveraging federal resources

Youth in foster care and their caregivers access a wide range of services and supports, such as services that help with connection to education, employment, housing, and other resources for youth transitioning to

adulthood; adoption subsidies; and general supports for youth and families. To strengthen these services and maximize available resources, states and localities often seek to increase access to federal funding streams. This can involve raising awareness of and access to existing funding opportunities or pursuing expanded eligibility requirements that unlock additional federal investment and allow more youth and families to access supports and services. For example, with the support of the Initiative and in partnership with other national groups,¹ Think of Us advocated to increase the use of federal funds to support kin caregivers (i.e., relatives and other adults with established relationships caring for youth in foster care).

► Example: Helping more youth live with kin, and providing kin with better support through a streamlined licensing process

Many kin caregivers face barriers to becoming licensed caregivers, thereby missing out on financial support and services and resulting in fewer youth living with kin. Youth in foster care achieve better outcomes (e.g., mental health and academic outcomes) and benefit from a greater sense of belonging and stability when they live with kin, compared to non-relative foster care.^{xi} However, states can only receive federal funds for maintenance payments to caregivers who have been formally licensed as foster parents. In 2024, close to half of children and youth in foster care living with kin were placed with *unlicensed* kinship caregivers,^{xii} who did not qualify for federally supported monthly payments. Some states do not place youth with unlicensed kinship caregivers, meaning that the opportunity to live with family was either delayed or denied when kin did not meet strict licensure standards.

Kin caregivers who wanted to get licensed faced numerous barriers to licensure that did not impact their ability to safely care for a young person and were not attuned to the unique circumstances of kinship care (e.g., space requirements such as the number of bedrooms, and certain criminal background histories, excluding serious barrier crimes under federal law). While previous federal law allowed states to waive non-safety requirements for kinship caregivers on a case-by-case basis, that provision was underutilized and cumbersome for both families and child welfare agencies to navigate.

"We talked to caregivers who spent down their entire retirement savings, who took out huge amounts of debt, who were retired and went back to work so that they could afford to keep their kids in care and saw the kind of destabilization of families... The system... kind of took advantage of the love that people had for kids and saved money on the backs of the families."

– Initiative grantee

An alternative pathway to licensure for kin caregivers can help them access support while being responsive to their unique circumstances. Think of Us and their partners mobilized education efforts at the federal level focused on the importance of providing states with flexibility to create an alternative pathway to license kin caregivers that removes unnecessary barriers and ensures more kin caregivers have access to financial support and services to meet the needs of the youth in their care. Specifically, Think of Us and their partners educated policymakers and engaged a broad coalition of organizations, including the Hilton Foundation, around the need for a separate pathway to licensure with requirements aligned to the unique needs, circumstances, and context of kin caregivers. These efforts contributed to a federal rule, finalized in 2023, that allows states to establish such a pathway. Shortly after the federal rule was finalized,

¹ All of the work done by Think of Us and described in this section was done in partnership with A Second Chance, Inc., American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, Children's Rights, CWP Policy, Generations United and its Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network; A National Technical Assistance Center, National Indian Child Welfare Association, National Association for Regulatory Administration, and New America's Child Welfare Playbook & Working Group.

Think of Us and their partners published draft model kin-specific licensing standards developed in consultation with over 100 kin caregivers and over 50 child welfare agencies. These standards fulfill the federal requirement that states' licensing standards align with the recommended standards of national organizations. Think of Us and their partners also provided technical assistance and support to states as they developed and submitted their kin-specific licensing plans to the federal government for approval. In 2025, they released the finalized recommended standards, along with tools and templates to support states with implementation.^{xiii}

More youth are able to live with kin, and kin caregivers are eligible for federal funding, ensuring they have the same financial resources as non-relative foster parents. By streamlining the licensing process for kin caregivers while maintaining the focus on safety, more kin have access to federally-funded financial and other supports, and more youth have the opportunity to live safely and stably with kin. As of April 2026, 20 states and six Tribes have approved kin-specific licensing plans. This includes the Initiative's three geographies, which have committed to implementation and are developing their plans.^{xiv} This policy change is estimated to increase federal funding by up to \$3 billion over 10 years.^{xv}

"And so the expectation in all of those places is that a lot more kids get to live with kin and that those kin will get resources. But even just, you know, those kids get to be with people who know them and love them instead of with strangers."

– Initiative grantee

Other advocacy wins that have supported increased use of federal funding

The challenge facing youth in foster care	The advocacy approach taken by Foster Youth Initiative grantees to address the challenge
Youth with foster care experience face additional challenges navigating education and career pathways, compared to youth without foster care experience. ^{xvi} The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), a federally funded youth workforce program, prioritizes services for out-of-school youth, thereby limiting opportunities for youth who are balancing work and education.	The California Opportunity Youth Network, supported through a grant to the Aspen Institute, advocated for a statewide waiver, exempting foster youth from the requirement that 75% of WIOA youth program funds be spent on out-of-school youth. This statewide waiver was modeled after LA's Performance Partnership Pilot, which was supported by grantees such as the Opportunity Youth Collaborative. This means that more youth in foster care who are continuing to pursue their education can still receive critical workforce supports.
Youth with foster care experience often experience trauma before, during, and after their entry into foster care, but do not always have access to the supports needed to navigate these experiences. ^{xvii} One barrier to accessing mental health supports was the requirement that they have a mental health diagnosis to receive treatment.	In California, grantees such as Children Now advocated to remove the requirement that foster youth have a mental health diagnosis to receive Specialty Mental Health Services funded by Medicaid. Grantees including the National Health Law Program and Children Now continue to support implementation to ensure youth face fewer barriers to accessing mental health care.

4. Ensuring youth receive the benefits created by policies through enhanced implementation

Passing a law or enacting a policy is not an endpoint, but rather one step in the policy process. For foster youth to actually benefit from the new policy or program, it must be fully implemented. Without robust implementation, youth may continue to face the same challenges and barriers that the policy was intended to address.

Advocates often need to provide ongoing implementation support to ensure intended goals are met and that programs and services reach the youth they are intended to serve. This can involve talking to youth, caregivers, and practitioners about the impacts of the policy, tracking data on the impact of the policy, and helping raise awareness about the change. Grantees have supported the implementation of federal, state, and local policies. The examples below describe how Anthos|Home and John Burton Advocates for Youth (JBAY) helped ensure that youth have access to and support in using housing vouchers in New York City and California, respectively.

► Example: Getting housing vouchers into the hands of the youth who need them

Too few youth were accessing housing vouchers, leaving many foster youth facing homelessness and housing instability. Vouchers use public funds to subsidize housing for youth, with youth paying a portion of their income toward their rent and the voucher covering the balance.³

However, the number of youth who could benefit from housing vouchers has historically exceeded the number of vouchers available,^{xviii} and many jurisdictions underutilize available vouchers.^{xix} Once a voucher is obtained, youth continue to face barriers to using their vouchers (e.g., lack of rental or credit history, limited pool of units that meets program requirements and landlords who accept vouchers, challenges navigating bureaucratic processes, and time limits on identifying housing).^{xx, xxi}

"They were being given [vouchers],² and the young adults were not able to rent units. They would go out into the market, and they could not find landlords to rent to them. The process was incredibly complicated and complex. They were very upset because they had this amazing resource, but they couldn't figure out how to use it."

– Initiative grantee

Providing housing navigation services and addressing administrative barriers can help more young people receive vouchers and address their housing challenges. In California, the Housing Navigation and Maintenance Program (HNMP) provides housing navigation and supportive services to youth. When the program came under threat in the 2024-2025 state budget, JBAY organized a coalition of over 100 partner organizations, public agencies, and youth advocates to educate policymakers on the importance of this funding for helping youth identify and maintain housing. JBAY also leveraged their long-standing

² This quote refers to Emergency Housing Vouchers provided through Section 8 during the pandemic.

³ There are multiple types of vouchers a young person may be eligible for. Federally funded vouchers include the Family Unification Program (FUP) and Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) vouchers. Locally funded vouchers include New York City's City Fighting Homelessness and Eviction Prevention Supplement (CityFHEPS) vouchers. Anthos|Home's work with young adults has primarily focused on locally funded vouchers, whereas JBAY has primarily focused on federally funded vouchers.

relationships with legislative champions and used data to demonstrate the effectiveness of HNMP in supporting youth to use their vouchers.

In New York City, Anthos|Home⁴ provides direct services to youth and landlords to support youth in using their housing vouchers. Anthos|Home takes a multipronged approach, based on the model used by Brilliant Corners, which includes (1) maintaining a "housing bank" through partnerships with landlords willing to rent to youth with vouchers, (2) providing housing navigation for youth (e.g., help with applications and coordination across parties), and (3) providing support to youth after they move in. Anthos|Home also uses flexible funding to pay for small repairs to housing units to ensure the units meet program requirements and to cover emergency expenses or utility arrears for youth when needed. Taken together, these strategies help to both increase the pool of housing available to voucher holders and connect youth to specific units that meet their needs.

"In terms of vouchers, it became very obvious that this was truly a missed opportunity. You know, the federal government is willing to subsidize, deeply subsidize, the rent of young people who have left foster care, and we're sort of passing on that."

- Initiative grantee

To identify and address administrative barriers to implementing federal voucher programs, JBAY also facilitated a community of practice for county child welfare agencies, Public Housing Authorities, and their contracted partners in California, in partnership with the National Center for Housing & Child Welfare. The participating 15 counties received individual technical assistance on topics such as building partnerships, requesting federal vouchers, identifying and supporting youth, providing support services, and recruiting and incentivizing landlords. The community of practice culminated in a report on best practices to support other local jurisdictions in implementing voucher programs.^{xxii}

More youth have access to and are using their vouchers to achieve stable housing after exiting foster care. Supporting the implementation of voucher programs has resulted in a 136 percent increase in the number of federal FUP and FYI vouchers allocated to California – from 870 vouchers (\$14.1 million in federal funding) in 2021 to 2,049 (approximately \$33.3 million in federal funding) in 2024.^{xxiii} In New York City, over 170 young adults have obtained housing using their vouchers with the support of Anthos|Home through the locally-issued vouchers, and they have all maintained their housing for at least one year.^{xxiv} Anthos|Home maintains a pool of around 100 eligible units at any one time and has a contract with the city's child welfare agency to continue providing navigation and post-move-in supports to young people.

Other advocacy wins that have supported implementation of existing policies so resources are more accessible to youth

The challenge facing youth in foster care	The advocacy approach taken by Foster Youth Initiative grantees to address the challenge
Youth with foster care experience face barriers to accessing reproductive and sexual health education and services (e.g., through the lack of consistent adult relationships and school/placement moves).	California Reproductive Health Equity Project (CA RHEP) has supported implementation of two bills to support young people's access to sexual and reproductive health education: SB 89 (2017) and AB 172 (2021). CA RHEP's Youth Advisory Board tracks implementation, conducts bi-annual surveys, and interviews youth on barriers to sexual and reproductive health services.

⁴ Anthos|Home also supports families with child welfare involvement to use vouchers as well as households with high health needs, and others in need of support with finding housing placements. This brief focuses on their work with young people with foster care experience.

The challenge facing youth in foster care	The advocacy approach taken by Foster Youth Initiative grantees to address the challenge
While California has expanded the services and supports available to foster youth through Medicaid, youth are not always made aware of available resources or how to access them.	To ensure that medical providers and youth are aware of key changes that expand Medicaid services for youth, the National Health Law Program (NHeLP) disseminates youth-friendly factsheets on available services, advises public agencies to improve youths' access to community-based mental health services, provides technical assistance to advocates and community partners, and monitors data.

5. Grounding coalitions in the voices and direct needs of youth and caregivers

Young people and their caregivers are experts at understanding their own needs and what barriers prevent them from achieving their goals. Community-based organizations and providers also bring insights into what is and is not working. For policies to truly meet their needs, advocacy must be grounded in the needs of those whom the policy intends to impact. Through the support of the Initiative, grantees have built and nurtured coalitions of organizations and young people. These coalitions engage in various activities to identify and set clear advocacy priorities, such as testimonials, story sharing, and direct collaboration.

By incorporating diverse perspectives, advocates and coalitions can inform decision makers about the realities and challenges that youth and caregivers face daily. This informed approach helps shape policy design and implementation strategies that align with the needs of youth in care and their caregivers. One example of this is the Initiative's support for Children Now to facilitate a coalition of youth, caregivers, and LA County's child welfare agency staff focused on the continuous quality improvement of the Family Urgent Response System (FURS)—a coordinated, 24/7 statewide hotline and county mobile response system that supports caregivers and youth through conflict management and resolution support and connections to needed services, with the goal of preventing placement disruption.^{xxv}

► **Example: Ensuring a resource response system designed to connect youth and caregivers to supports is coordinated and accessible for everyone**

Youth, foster parents, and kinship caregivers were inadequately informed of and connected to FURS, missing out on the resources and support it provides. Historically, implementing foster care programs in California has posed challenges due to the system's structure, which is state-supervised and county-administered. Each of California's 58 counties organizes and operates its own child welfare program, complicating the standardized implementation of resources like FURS. Variation in how counties promote and integrate FURS into their existing programs affects youth's and caregivers' awareness, access to, and utilization of FURS. Additionally, FURS began in 2021 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when counties were focused on addressing youth's and families' needs and had limited capacity to implement FURS effectively. This contributed to a lack of administrative guidance and insufficient outreach and communication to youth and families about the resource.

A diverse coalition of youth, caregivers, and staff informs FURS implementation, ensuring better access and supports for all potential users. Since the inception of FURS, Children Now has worked to ensure implementation has been guided by those intended to benefit from it: youth in care and their caregivers. The coalition, facilitated by Children Now, collaborates to bridge policy and practice, where youth and caregivers continuously share insights and feedback with child welfare agency staff on experiences with FURS. This feedback loop has included monthly meetings to share insights and strategies to address challenges and barriers to access. Having diverse perspectives in the coalition is key to understanding what changes are needed and how best to address them. For example:

- Youth called into the FURS hotline to test the process and shared feedback on how to improve call protocols and information shared.
- Caregivers provided feedback on outreach materials, including the language used and how information is disseminated to caregivers.
- Coalition members have supported the development of additional outreach and communication materials (e.g., outreach materials designed with youth art, an FAQ document), a toolkit and checklist to support implementation, and a user satisfaction survey.

More youth and caregivers are being connected to services through FURS. The coalition's work has resulted in increased awareness of and utilization of FURS. In 2023, close to 5,000 calls were made statewide, with 1,090 receiving an in-person response.^{xxvi} These numbers illustrate that the coalition not only supported increased awareness of and utilization of FURS but that youth and caregivers are also receiving the real-time assistance needed, advancing the program's goal of reducing placement instability for foster youth.

Together, the coalition continues to gather community feedback and insights about their experiences with FURS and co-develop strategies and solutions to refine services. For example, the coalition is working to improve integration between the state hotline and county mobile response teams to ensure youth have consistent access to services across the state, as well as to embed peer partners (i.e., youth with foster care experience) into the response teams to better support youth.

"[The Initiative's support] allowed us to take best practices from other places and bring that to LA County and share that so sort of that working on LA but with an eye to the broader state. I think without that, sometimes people get tunnel vision in just LA and just LA culture. But because we had Hilton Foundation funding, we were able to sort of go out and look at what's happening around the state and bring that learning back to LA."

- Initiative grantee

"We've talked about the numbers out of LA. 100% of placements were preserved. 92% of children and youth remaining in the home or placement, preserving relationships and preventing trauma, while 8% were provided appropriate care and transitioned to a placement more suitable to their specific needs... which is pretty amazing. So, it's helping kids and caregivers on the ground in a really personal way. We've had young people engaged in implementation, which makes them a lot more excited about the program and bought in..."

- Initiative grantee

Other advocacy wins that have mobilized coalitions to advance change

The challenge facing youth in foster care	The advocacy approach taken by Foster Youth Initiative grantees to address the challenge
Youth and adult partners in New York City identified a need for long-term one-on-one coaching to support foster youth in meeting their education, career, and housing goals.	The Fair Futures coalition, with leadership from the Youth Advisory Board, advocated for public funding for a coaching model informed by Initiative-supported programs. Youth and coalition members met with decision makers, launched social media campaigns, and testified before government bodies to educate decision makers about Fair Futures and its significance. They secured \$30.7 million in annual public funding for the program, and advocacy has continued to ensure additional resources are allocated as needed to meet the need.
While existing nonpartisan coalitions in Georgia and Atlanta address specific sectors, youth with foster care experience lack cohesive advocacy representation and a dedicated child welfare advocacy infrastructure or policy agenda.	With the Foundation's support, United Way of Greater Atlanta (UWGA) built a new nonpartisan advocacy infrastructure, bringing together youth, youth-serving organizations, and local stakeholders to set policy priorities to address the needs of youth in care.

Conclusion

Advocacy has been a core investment strategy of the Initiative since its inception, always with a focus on ensuring that policies increase young people's access to and utilization of effective services and supports, and to ensure that caregivers and practitioners are equipped to support youth as they transition to adulthood. Taken together, these examples illustrate four key takeaways:

- **Partnership, including partnership with those directly impacted, is essential for moving advocacy efforts forward.** None of the advocacy wins highlighted above were accomplished by a single entity. A combination of advocacy organizations, direct service providers, public agencies, and legislative partners worked together to identify, test, advocate for, and/or implement services. Many of these efforts engaged young people and caregivers to ensure solutions matched their needs and were implemented in ways that were supportive and increased access.
- **Progress spurred by advocacy is usually incremental, meaning it takes time and sustained resources to reach their ultimate goals.** From prioritizing the needs and experiences of youth in setting policy agendas, to educating decision makers, to ensuring strong implementation, successful advocacy encompasses multiple steps. Therefore, these efforts are often long-term in nature and continue to evolve based on the needs of youth and families and the current context.
- **Understanding strengths and weaknesses in implementation is essential for ensuring policies meet the needs of youth.** Ongoing monitoring of any policy's impact—with a priority on learning about the experiences of those who should be receiving direct services—is critical for understanding whether a policy is acting as intended and achieving its goals. Ongoing and timely feedback can help agencies and programs make adjustments to better support youth.
- **Philanthropy plays an important role in advocacy efforts as a funder, connector, and thought leader.** In addition to funding advocacy organizations to engage partners and educate decision-

makers, grantees valued the flexibility the Initiative provided to pivot when needed to respond to changing circumstances (e.g., state budget deficits). The Initiative's support provided grantees with the capacity and resources to collaborate across partner organizations, ultimately strengthening their advocacy efforts and results. The Initiative also facilitated connections and information sharing across grantees and used their voice to amplify effective solutions.

Through the support received by the Hilton Foundation and other funding partners, advocates continue to make great strides in improving the lives and trajectories of youth with foster care experience. The advocacy wins of the last five years built on long histories of efforts by multiple partners and underscore the importance of investing in advocacy to improve and increase the services available to youth with foster care experience.

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