



YOUTH LEADERS POLICY BLUEPRINT

The purpose of NMCAN **YOUTH LEADERS** is to use young people's lived experiences to lead change in the child welfare system through education, partnerships, policy creation, and systems advocacy.

NMCAN'S POLICY BLUEPRINT was created in partnership with young people who spent time in the foster care system and either aged out of that system or were preparing to age out. When young people age out of care, they turn 18 without being reunited with their families or becoming adopted. The authentic engagement of young people was the foundation from which this document was created. NMCAN supported young people in an extensive planning process to identify the areas of greatest priority and then helped walk the results of the process into this blueprint.

The proposed policy interventions are intended to provide possible state solutions within each priority area. Of course, some solutions might impact multiple priority areas.

While not stated within the individual priority areas, racial equity is an important lens through which each policy area must be examined and data needs to be disaggregated and analyzed. Systems must be accountable for treating children equitably.

POLICY PRIORITY AREAS (see reverse for more information)

- Normalize the foster care experience
- Young people aging out of foster care must be better prepared to transition to adulthood and have access to opportunities for success
- Young people in care must experience permanence
- Children and youth in care must receive high quality advocacy

**"[NORMALCY] MEANS TO GIVE
OUR YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE
THE SAME TREATMENT, LOVE,
AND OPPORTUNITY FOR
HEALTHY RISK-TAKING AS
YOUTH OUT OF CARE."**

—MARCO, AGE 23



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WHY IS THIS NEEDED?

Young people aging out of foster care endure poor outcomes with high social costs. National data provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation shows that by their 19th birthdays:

- 1 out of 3 experienced homelessness
- 3 out of 5 have not obtained their high school diploma/GED
- 2 out of 3 are unemployed

Similarly, young people who are impacted by the juvenile justice system or homelessness may face the same challenges. They often have a history of abuse, neglect, or trauma, and have few healthy social connections. Most mainstream initiatives are unable to address the complex barriers and challenges faced by those who have experienced foster care, the juvenile justice system, and/or homelessness.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

NORMALIZE THE FOSTER CARE EXPERIENCE

Many of us recall doing “typical” teenage things: going to a friend’s house, taking a school trip, working an after-school job, joining a club, dating, attending prom, and learning to drive. These “normal” experiences help youth develop interests, acquire skills, and build lasting, supportive relationships. Youth placed in foster care are often denied the chance to participate in the everyday activities essential to the process of maturing into adults. ***Agencies and caregivers must commit to facilitating age-appropriate experiences for youth in foster care so that they can achieve the key markers of child and adolescent development.***

YOUNG PEOPLE AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE MUST BE BETTER PREPARED TO TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD AND HAVE ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUCCESS

When older youth make the transition from foster care to independent living, generally at age 18, they face high risks of becoming homeless; giving up on their education; being unemployed and relying on public services or benefits to survive; having children at a young age; or engaging in criminal activities as they seek to make it on their own. ***Young people must be better prepared for this journey and more opportunities must be provided for young people to be able to successfully transition.***

YOUNG PEOPLE IN FOSTER CARE MUST EXPERIENCE PERMANENCE

Legal permanence for youth in care should include a permanent legal connection to a family, such as reuniting with birth parents, adoption, kinship care, or legal guardianship. However, physical and relational permanence are equally important. Physical permanence is having a home or a place to be; relational permanence is having a relationship or connection with a caring adult (e.g., maternal and paternal kin, teachers, neighbors, former foster parents).

CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE MUST RECEIVE HIGH QUALITY ADVOCACY

All children and young people removed from their homes and placed in foster care are entitled to safety, permanency, and well-being. In order to achieve this, they must receive high-quality advocacy from all parties within the child welfare system. This includes having their voices heard, respected, and acted upon throughout the process.

HOW CAN YOU GET INVOLVED?

Please contact Director of Policy & Advocacy Arika Sánchez at 505-217-0220 ext. 1003 or arika.sanchez@nmcan.org to receive a copy of the full policy blueprint or to learn how you can help improve foster care for New Mexico’s children and youth.

ABOUT US

NMCAN partners with young people to build community and lead change. Since 1990, we have been leveraging community partnerships and volunteerism to improve children and youth’s experiences in foster care. Today, we have grown to authentically engage young people impacted by the foster care and/or juvenile justice systems to improve their transition to adulthood. Together, we work to:

1. Reduce systemic barriers that negatively impact their lives
2. Help them learn how to build positive community networks and strengthen their sense of belonging
3. Access tools to achieve goals related to education, employment, health, housing, and personal finance

“PERMANENCE IS NOT JUST ABOUT THE LEGAL ASPECT. IT’S ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS AND CONNECTION. WHO DO YOU CONSIDER FAMILY? WE WANT TO BE A PART OF SOMETHING— A COMMUNITY.”

—ROCHELLE, AGE 23

