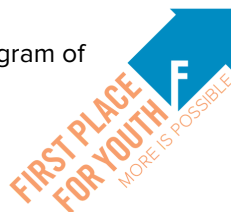


PATHWAYS TO INDEPENDENCE

Policy recommendations based on lived experience within the Mississippi foster care system



A program of



WHO ARE WE

Transition-age foster youth represent one of the most marginalized populations in the country. At risk of intergenerational cycles of poverty, they are highly vulnerable to homelessness, unemployment, incarceration, the challenges of early parenthood, and dropping out of school.

For 25 years, [First Place for Youth](#) has been working to help foster youth build the skills they need to make a successful transition to self-sufficiency and responsible adulthood. First Place offers transition-age youth the programs they need today while influencing the laws, policies, narratives, and mental models impacting future generations of foster youth for years to come.

[Mississippi Youth Voice](#) is a program of [First Place for Youth](#) providing a forum for youth leaders, 18-26+ years of age to advocate for those who have lived in foster care in Mississippi. In serving on the [MS Youth Voice](#) board, these young adults develop leadership skills and make real change in the state. Members apply their lived experience to advocate and engage with community leaders, foster care stakeholders, and the broader public to create resources for foster youth and those transitioning out of care.

Advocacy and education are targeted at the agency, legislative, and community levels. Recent efforts of [MS Youth Voice](#) include the passage of the FAITH Scholarship for foster youth, changes to leasing laws for youth ages 18-21, coordinating workforce development opportunities for foster youth and access to personal documents for those leaving foster care.

2021-2023 Mississippi Youth Voice members

Elena Bolanos	Tristyn Holcomb
Bertie Bryant	Tiffany Johnson
Keshuna Burnside	Joshua Jones
Patricia Campbell-Milton	Brenn Kennedy
Rebecca Clark	Andranella Lawyer
Aundavion Cook	Haley Nunnery
Toby Davis	Tabitha Rafferty-Hewitt
Scentrellis Dixon	Janialia Roberson
Shauntissa Dixon	Hadrain Smith
Camari Fairley	Maranda Turner
Essence Flowers	Makyla Watson
Christian Herrera	



First Place for Youth Staff:

Samantha Kalahar, Mississippi Site Director
Cotina Brown, Opportunity Passport Coordinator
C. Waide Jackson, Intern

CURRENT OUTCOMES

Based on the 2021 Foster Youth Transitions Report, 1,241 youth ages 14-21 were in the custody of the Mississippi foster care system. Less than 10% of those transition-aged youth were 18-21 years of age, meaning around 90% were leaving custody by their 18th birthday.

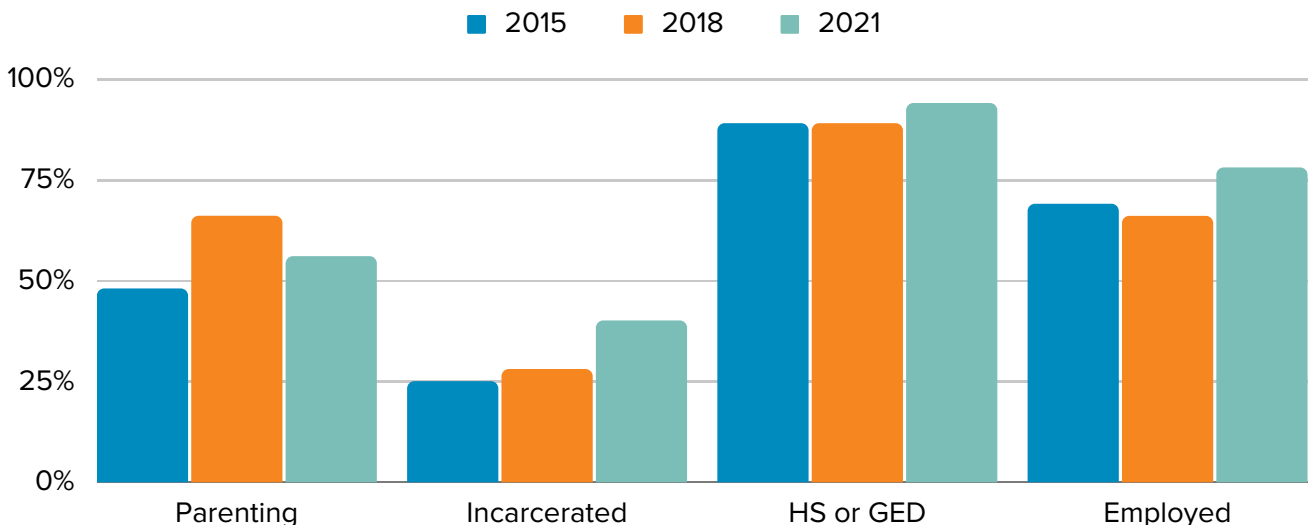
Ensuring access to quality programming and services for transition-aged youth promotes better outcomes as adults. Although some foundational services are in place, our recommendations are designed to build on positive outcomes while addressing root causes of negative outcomes.

In 2021, nearly 62% of Mississippi transition-aged youth reported receiving at least one supportive service between ages 14-21 years of age:

- 32% - Life Skills Training (down from 57% in 2016)
- 3% - Educational Financial Assistance
- 79% - Room and Board Assistance (can include foster care placement payments)
- < 1% - Mentoring, K-12 Academic Support, or Employment/Vocational training services

Outcomes for current and former Mississippi foster youth at age 21 showed both positive and negative trends, as seen in the graph below. Since 2015, there has been a light upward trend in high school/GED completion and employment (part-time or full-time) for this population was trending upward. However, rates of parenting at a young age and incarceration trended upward as well. As a state, we are doing a good job of helping youth get through high school, but we need to help them find stability and build skills to redirect them from the negative outcomes.

Young Adult Outcomes by Age 21



KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Board members outlined a variety of recommendations in the following categories.



FRONT LINE STAFFING



TRANSITION PLANNING



DOCUMENTATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY



YOUTH SOCIALIZATION



YOUTH RIGHTS AND INVOLVEMENT



PARENTING YOUTH



PLACEMENT SETTINGS



EXTENDED FOSTER CARE



KINKADE SCHOLARSHIP SUPPORT SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

INFORMED BY LIVED EXPERIENCE

The development of this report was a multi-year project of the [Mississippi Youth Voice](#) board and [First Place for Youth](#). The recommendations contained here reflect a comprehensive review of current programs and policies, youth experiences, and assessment of youth outcome data.

Integrating first-hand perspectives and discussions of shared experiences is key to developing policies and strategies that will translate to the real world. Youth identified the systems and individuals they encountered during their time in foster care and analyzed how each contributed, positively and negatively, to their experience in care. By understanding how they responded to the trauma, structures, policies, and practices of the system, they were able to identify recommendations focused on solutions for all involved.







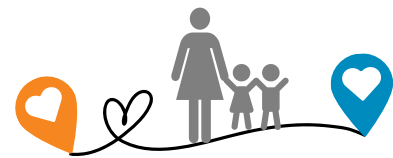
FRONT LINE STAFFING

While in foster care, I stayed at numerous group homes. My COR would fluctuate my social worker because of the lack of workers. Group homes I've lived at would have staff overworking themselves because staff would quit after only a week or month or so.




There were some good social workers that got chased away due to overloading.

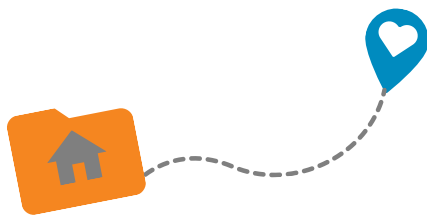
Another point that youth voice has raised is the importance for mental health services for frontline workers. I would maybe expand the statement to say that the benefits system for frontline workers and caseworkers should be revised to fit the emotional and mental needs of the job.

-  Increase salaries for all front-line workers to ensure all are earning a living wage.
-  Reduced caseloads and administrative tasks for front-line workers to ensure reasonable workloads.
-  Ensure all front-line workers, including county case workers, transition navigators, and child-placing agency direct care staff, are trained in nationally recognized trauma-informed interventions.
-  Provide all front-line workers with extensive support for processing secondary trauma which can result from their work.



DOCUMENTATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

-  Increase accountability or case planning by: performing audits or reviews of plans for gaps or opportunities; and establishing benchmarks in the new case management system with flags for out of compliance files.
-  Perform an MDCPS-led evaluation of the current system for issuing and tracking stipends and allowances to ensure youth receive funds on a regular basis.
-  Streamline the process for requesting and receiving ETV funds to ensure adherence to reasonable timelines for dispersing funds.



I don't believe that workers are exposing everyone to the things they are entitled to as in stipends, scholarships, and transitioning opportunities. I had to discover things that were entitled to me by word of mouth by other children or workers or of my own research.

I was placed in a group home that was misusing my stipends. I never received my stipends for hygiene and clothing.

I believe that the ETV program should work on streamlining its application and disbursement processes to significantly reduce the waiting time for funds. Providing a clear timeline, consistent communication, and emergency financial assistance during the waiting period could greatly alleviate the stress and uncertainty experienced by foster youth. Addressing this issue is crucial to ensure that the ETV program effectively supports foster youth in their pursuit of higher education, giving them the opportunity to create a better future for themselves.

We can actually keep track of the children and the worker through MANDATORY check-ups and visits. Also, objective advocates should speak with the youth about their experiences.

CPS should work on simplifying and speeding up the ETV application process, reducing bureaucracy and processing times. Implementing an online application system and providing clear instructions can make it easier foster youth to apply.

YOUTH RIGHTS AND INVOLVEMENT

- Ensure all transition-aged youth are included in court hearings and team planning for their case.
- The guardian ad litem position should represent the interest, wishes and feedback from the foster child.
- Provide foster youth with opportunities to share their written wishes and input directly with the judges deciding their cases.
- Provide foster youth with regular access to siblings and other family members.
- Establish a foster youth Bill of Rights with input and leadership from current and former foster youth.
- Provide youth the right to request participation in their service planning from a trusted adult.
- Ensure youth have access to private conversations with their healthcare provider(s) as recommended by the Academy of Pediatrics guidelines.
- Provide youth with reproductive health education and access to contraceptive options.
- Ensure youth are informed of any medical and mental health diagnosis, and educated on the medications prescribed for their care.



When I was in custody, I never had a say on things, not in court or out of court.

I never met my guardian ad litem. I couldn't tell you who he was. I was not told about my court dates and didn't even know I was released from custody until I tried to call my worker a few months later.

Youth need to be aware of people other than one social worker or their supervisor to contact and ask questions. Court reports should be thoroughly explained to youth, as it is essential to understand what is happening with their situation.

While in custody, I was never able to voice anything for myself. I was never given the choice as to what I wanted to do. You should not only be able to share their opinion, but they should be able to make decisions for themselves with an adult's evaluation.

PLACEMENT SETTINGS

While in foster care, I encountered new challenging situations with the families I was placed with. One family in particular did not meet the requirements for the children they fostered. They stopped taking me to my therapy sessions as well as treating me differently when they found out I was gay.

We had people trying to stab the other residents there, simple things like that made me feel like I was such a terrible person because I was placed in a place like that. Regardless of the type of placement those things should have NEVER been allowed to occur. Many other things were done there that shouldn't. Many things we reported but absolutely nothing was done. Kids in care should feel safe and should be urged to heal, but I felt like my time in care just made me put up a barrier the whole time. It is hard to become a better person when you have terrible things constantly happening around you.

I was in a foster home that constantly had me monitored by cameras. When I asked my social worker for more freedoms she spoke with the family, and they told me I had to leave. I was doing great in school, had a job and had friends. Because my case worker could not find a place for me, I was sent to acute care for almost two weeks. I did not need to be there. It was a scary place, and I thought about running away.

While in foster care, I was in a group home. They never provided us with the material we needed. Our month stipends would be taken from us. Our food was old and or molded. We would complain about the director of the group home yet nothing would ever be done. She would send us away to a mental institution and act as if we were the problem.

- Establish guidelines to prevent removal from parental custody due to issues related to poverty, rather than abuse. Instead, provide families with assistance, resources and support to secure adequate housing.
- Cease use of therapeutic settings as placements unless there is a documented need and clear benchmarks for being moved to a less restrictive environment.
- When placing youth with significant behavioral issues into a home, establish clear guidelines for consideration of the mental health and safety of youth currently in the home.
- Establish clear rules, rewards, consequences and rights for foster youth, foster parents, case workers and others involved in the placement.



TRANSITION PLANNING

Provide youth with access to their personal documents and records as they transition out of custody, including their birth certificate, social security card, educational transcripts, medical records, a clear credit report, and other necessary documents at 18 years of age.

Establish policies to require development of a formal transition plan should be developed for all youth ages 14 years and older. The plan should be developed in collaboration with the youth and should have specific benchmarks, timelines and action items for youth, case workers and other adult supporters. It should be evaluated on a regular basis, with youth input and include:

- Permanency plans and timelines
- Educational plans, including high school and post-secondary education opportunities
- Independent living needs, expectations, and timelines
- Rights and responsibilities as a foster youth
- Court dates and other key dates
- Understanding of all diagnosis and medications
- Understanding of all social, sibling and kinship connections

Support foster youth in obtaining their driver's license, car insurance and purchasing a vehicle by their 18th birthday.

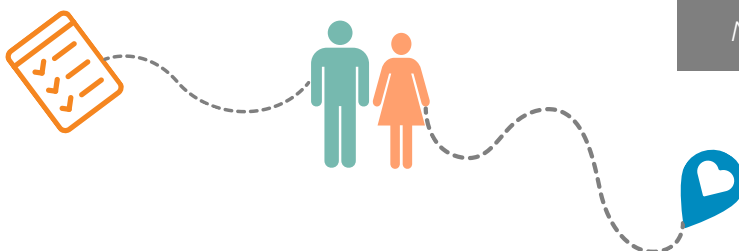
At the age of 17, I was released from state custody. I was not told much except that I was a liability due to being pregnant. I was not given a placement. I was released with no where to go, and I had to figure it out myself. Thankfully, I had family that let me in for awhile. I was only 17, I was still a minor, and I was left to fend for my own. I didn't have anywhere to go. I didn't know what to do. I had no type of planning. I went to sleep one night, and the next day, I was told I had to leave.

When I turned 19, I was dropped off at my college and was pretty much on my own. Occasionally, the group home that was in would offer minimal help, but overall, I was on my own. The only time MDCPS stepped in was if it was a situation that would have me homeless. If it came to money or food, I was completely on my own. I would never hear from a social worker unless they needed something from me.

My exit wasn't planned. I was just told that I was getting emancipated, and I would have to figure it out.

I believe some solutions are making sure social workers have these documents in hand and ready to place to the youth as they leave. I believe we should have classes on what documents are needed for different things, for example, you need to have a birth certificate and social security for renting an apartment, you'll need school transcripts to transfer schools or apply to colleges.

No one should leave care without a plan.



YOUTH SOCIALIZATION








I was told that I had to have my staff chaperone my senior prom. They said that my date and I had to ride with them, and they had to be with us all night. I decided to just not go. How embarrassing!

Everytime I went to a new placement, I had to fit in with their rules and how they did everything. No one asked me what was important to me. I always had to change who I was to there.

My senior year, I was not given the option to go on my senior trip. They made that decision for me without even talking to me or asking me or even explaining to me why I could not go.






I had to pay for my own phone with my allowance. But the group home made me turn it in every night even though I was 19 years old. They would take it away for any punishment.

Everytime I would make friends and get settled, I would have to change homes. I went to so many different schools I quit trying to make friends or fit in.

-  Provide foster youth with reasonable access to phones and computers for social and academic use.
-  Allow youth to participate in school functions with reasonable supervision and boundaries.
-  Create standard guidelines for approving youth employment, unsupervised social time and participation in outside activities.
-  Provide youth with a full cadre of independent living skills options to prepare for adulthood.
-  Encourage participation in activities such as sports, theater, music, art, and other creative outlets.



PARENTING YOUTH

-  Provide parenting foster youth with specific training and classes to support them as caregivers. This can include infant care, healthcare and insurance access and stress management.
-  Creation of specific placements for parenting youth designed to support new parents who are not supported by family.
-  Provide parenting youth with specialized case management to help them navigate additional services needed for themselves and their child.
-  Evaluate specialized services and programs for parenting youth in custody and address the high rate of young parents in foster care.
-  Offer reproductive health education to all transition-aged youth.



First, no one talked to me about how to get birth control or condoms. I thought I was in love, and no one else cared about me but him. I had no one I could talk to about sex and not getting pregnant. But when I got pregnant, I had to leave.

When I was in care I never got to make one decision about anything and that includes making decisions about my child. When I aged out of custody. I did not know how to make sure my child was on Medicaid, I did not know how to fill out paperwork at the doctors office for myself or for my child. I felt like that I was a failure because I had not learned any of these things because I was deprived of them. Everybody else made decisions for me, including what daycare my child went to, if I was going to go to her doctors appointment or not and she was in my custody.

When you are in custody being threatened every other week that they were going to take your child because you were a unfit mother, it makes you want to give up. Everything I did was being shared with CPS, and they were not trying to show my how to be a good mom. They just wanted to take her away.

I wanted to be a good mom. I was always afraid of messing up and having my baby taken away from me. I didn't want him to go into foster care like I did. But, I couldn't ask for help or they would say I didn't need to keep him. It was very scary, and I felt so alone. I couldn't trust anyone.

EXTENDED FOSTER CARE



Develop and implement a Title-IV-E Extended Foster Care state plan for Mississippi. The plan should be submitted to the Children's Bureau for approval for federal matching funds under the Fostering Connections Act guidelines listed below.

FEDERAL GUIDELINES FOR TITLE IV-E EXTENDED FOSTER CARE

To receive federal reimbursement through the Title IV-E program, participants must

- have attained the age of 18 but be not yet 21;
- be in the custody of a public children services agency upon attaining the age of 18; and
- meet at least one of the following five criteria:
 1. completing secondary education or a program leading to an equivalent credential;
 2. enrolled in an institution that provides post-secondary or vocational education;
 3. participating in a program or activity designed to promote or remove barriers to employment;
 4. employed for at least eighty hours per month; or
 5. incapable of doing any of the activities described above due to a medical condition.

NEW SUPERVISED INDEPENDENT LIVING HOUSING CATEGORY

- The Fostering Connections Act established a new type of placement for foster youth age 18 or older—the Supervised Independent Living Setting.^[i] However, federal guidance gives states broad discretion in determining what kind of living arrangement can fall under this designation. States are encouraged to develop a range of settings and be innovative in designing settings that “meet an older child’s needs for supervision and support as he or she moves toward independence.”
- The purpose of extending care is not merely to postpone negative outcomes from age 18 to age 21, but to make lasting achievements in key outcome areas such as education, employment, housing stability, and healthy living, so that the disparities between foster youth and their non-foster care peers can be eliminated. In order to achieve these outcomes and transition youth to independence, states must design placement settings specifically for that purpose.

EXTENDED FOSTER CARE DESIGN OPTIONS

- OPT-IN/OPT-OUT at age 18:
 - Automatically enroll youth in extended foster care and let them choose to opt-out if they do not wish to remain in custody, or
 - Exit all youth at age 18 and allow them to opt-in to extended foster care formally with a voluntary placement agreement.
- RE-ENTRY before age 21:
 - Youth can return to extended foster care after they have opted-out or chosen to leave custody and receive the same supports and services as those provided to young people who remained in care continuously.

EXTENDED FOSTER CARE



Develop a robust case management program for youth in extended foster care placements. Services should be offered state-wide and be tailored to the needs of each participant.

TITLE IV-E EXTENDED FOSTER CARE CASE MANAGEMENT SERVICES

- Extended foster care, if implemented effectively, should provide the full range of services foster youth are entitled to as minors, including independent living services, placements/room and board, case planning, and judicial oversight.
- However, the system should be designed to be developmentally appropriate for young adults and achieve meaningful outcomes in education and employment, housing stability, and healthy living.







EXTENDED FOSTER CARE SERVICE OPTIONS

- Transitional housing with integrated supports to build independent living skills and make progress in education and employment. Can include gradually decreasing levels of supervision, and a range of support with housing related expenses.
- Academic support, including tutoring, study skills training, literacy training, and help accessing educational resources
- Career preparation, including the following: Vocational and career assessment, job-seeking and job-placement support
- Budgeting, financial management, and consumer-skills training and support; Assistance accessing the youth's credit report and resolving any inconsistencies
- Housing education and home-management skills, including homemaker skills and basic home maintenance
- Developing and maintaining relationships with individuals who are important to the youth
- Health education, including topics such as family planning, sex education, healthy relationships, risk prevention
- Assistance enrolling in Medicaid or other State-sponsored medical insurance coverage
- Referrals to community supports, mentoring and counseling, short-term financial assistance, assistance obtaining a driver's license
- Parenting education and supports for youth who are parenting. Support in maintaining custody and preventing future child welfare involvement

**Additional resources, data and design details are available from First Place for Youth. Contact skalahaar@firstplaceforyouth.org for more information.*

FAITH SCHOLARSHIP SUPPORTS

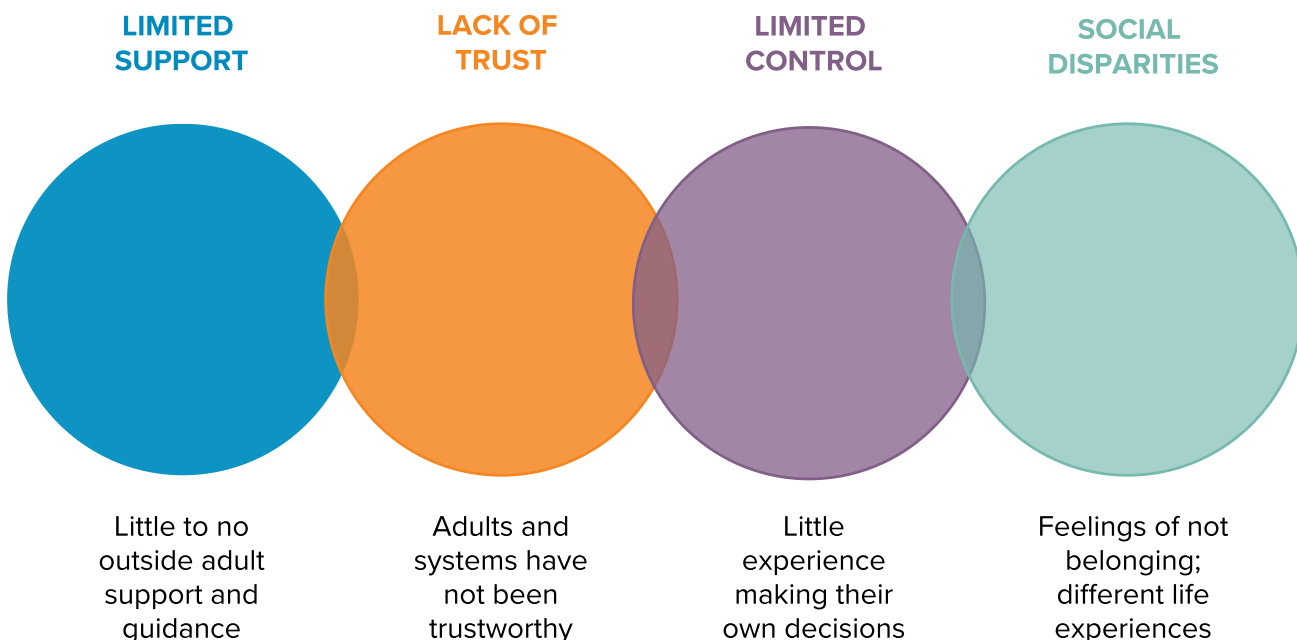
With the creation of the FAITH scholarship for Mississippi foster youth, the financial burden of post-secondary education has been addressed. However, there are other factors impacting retention and completion rates for these youth.

-  **BUILDING CONNECTION AND BELONGING**
-  **GUIDANCE AND MENTORING**
-  **PLANNING FOR BASIC NEEDS**
-  **ENSURING ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE SERVICES**
-  **SUPPORTING PARENTING STUDENTS**
-  **INCLUDING THE COST OF ACTIVITIES AND INTERNSHIPS IN THE COST OF ATTENDANCE CONSIDERATIONS**



**Based on the "Keeping the FAITH" post-secondary educational supports brief soon to be released by MS Youth Voice.*

FACTORS TO CONSIDER



NEXT STEPS

The recommendations in this report have been developed by the Mississippi Youth Voice board as strategies to decrease negative experiences and increase positive outcomes for Mississippi's transition-aged foster youth. This report is designed to offer a broad set of tangible strategies that can be implemented by decision makers at various levels, however, the list is not exhaustive. The increased support of, funding for and prioritization of this population is foundational to the success of any of the recommendations provided.

This report will be shared with foster care provider organizations, state child welfare leadership, program directors, youth court professionals, policy makers and other foster care and youth advocates to develop strategic plans for implementing change throughout the system. The youth voices behind these recommendations allows decision makers to see the direct human impact of action and of inaction.

As with any system, the child welfare system has many points of contact and many points of influence. Each of the points and the decision makers they represent can impact the system as a whole and allow for positive (or negative) change for the youth served. These recommendations can be implemented at multiple points, giving a variety of opportunities to affect change.



Visit www.firstplaceforyouth.org/Mississippi to find this report and other valuable resources for supporting transition-aged foster youth in Mississippi.