



News Release

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Connecticut Children and Youth and Foster Care Need Additional Support to Promote Identity Development, Report Finds

NEW HAVEN – For most adolescents, developing their own identity is one of the central aspects of teenage life. In a new report, Connecticut Voices for Children highlights the challenges that children and youth in state care face to understand, explore, and develop their racial, spiritual, and gender identities. The report examines that although the Department of Children and Families (DCF) has implemented some policies and practices to support teenage foster youth in their identity development, critical gaps remain.

Connecticut currently has close to 4,300 children in its foster care system; over 1,500 (more than a third) are ages 13 or older. Adolescents that grow up in the foster care system must respond to sometimes unstable nature derived from placement changes, the often-disruptive impact of trauma, and the negative bias associated with foster care. Because the family environment plays a crucial role in identity development, foster youth may also face the additional stress of moving and adapting to families with different beliefs and practices.

“Conflicting values and shifting environments can engender low self-esteem in foster children,” says Stephanie Luczak, Child Development Policy Fellow at Connecticut Voices for Children. “To counter this, adolescents in this situation often develop a “go-it-alone” attitude and a sense of self-reliance, but they have a higher risk of feeling isolated or alienated. Providing adequate support for their identity development is critical.”

In their report, Connecticut Voices for Children points out that DCF tries to support foster children in their transitions to new placements by providing them with a foster family profile before a placement change. DCF also lacks standardized procedures and practices to share information about youth’s identity, values, and needs ahead of their arrival at a new home. Because the family and community environments play crucial roles in identity development, foster youth may also experience additional stress from moving between communities, learning new family dynamics, and holding conflicting values from new families.

DCF has made significant strides in recent years to better support youth in foster care, including the introduction of team case planning meetings where youth can invite mentors, focusing on the reduction of racial and ethnic disparities, and diversifying the foster care parent pool. DCF caseworkers, however, often lack training on identity development, as current best practices and case planning guides only contain limited information on this area. The agency has produced a more detailed guide focused on the needs of LGBTQ children and youth, but training remains optional for caseworkers, and the guide and policies have significant omissions and gaps. This lack of training is compounded by state budget cuts that have reduced the agency’s capacity to provide adequate guidance and support to children and youth under their care.

The report offers several policy recommendations to support identity development for youth in foster care. These include updating the Adolescent Bill of Rights and Expectations to incorporate additional protections and support for identity development, bolstering

protections for youth who identify as LGBTQ, including required training for DCF workers and caregivers, implementing new tools to assess adolescent identity development needs, recruiting a more diverse pool of foster parents, and improving information sharing prior to new placements.

About Connecticut Voices for Children: Connecticut Voices for Children is a research-based child advocacy organization working to ensure that all Connecticut children have an equitable opportunity to achieve their full potential. In furtherance of its mission, Connecticut Voices for Children produces high-quality research and analysis, promotes citizen education, advocates for policy change at the state and local level, and works to develop the next generation of leaders.