



Driving Systems Change  
in Child Welfare

# Federal Convening of Young People: Integrating Lived Experience into Federal Policy

12th Annual Wicked Problems Institute

- Sixto Cancel, CEO, Think of Us
- October 1st, 2024



think of US

# 2023 Highlights by the Numbers



## 5,948

### Youth, Parents, & Caregivers Engaged



We engaged 5,948 youth, parents, and caregivers impacted by the child welfare through our research, surveys, in-person engagements, and Virtual Support Services.

## 7,099

### Responses to Requests



We responded to 7,099 requests on behalf of 3,669 families – helping them access over \$50 million in resources.

## 2,279

### Youth, Parents, & Caregivers Participated in Research



2,279 youth, caregivers, and parents impacted by the child welfare system participated in our research studies, surveys, and in-person engagements.

## 57

### Congressional Offices



We met with 57 congressional offices across both parties from 29 states, three White House offices, and four federal agencies.





The child welfare system was not designed to focus on or support the well-being of children and youth. It also was not designed to truly infuse the unique insights and expertise of people with lived experience into decision making.

As a result, policies and practices are conceived without critical information those with lived experience can provide, such as specific barriers; missed opportunities; unfulfilled needs; and what might be done differently.



Start transition plan  
Earlier - Life Skills = Financial Literacy  
etc.

# How might we create a blueprints for Integrating Lived Experience in a new model?

Barriers for ex...  
(Technical agency...  
- Cultural Literacy  
- Cult...  
t H



Throughout 2021, Associate Commissioner Aysha E. Schomburg hosted a series of convenings with current and former foster youth to establish an equity-focused agenda for the Administration. She determined four key priority goals:

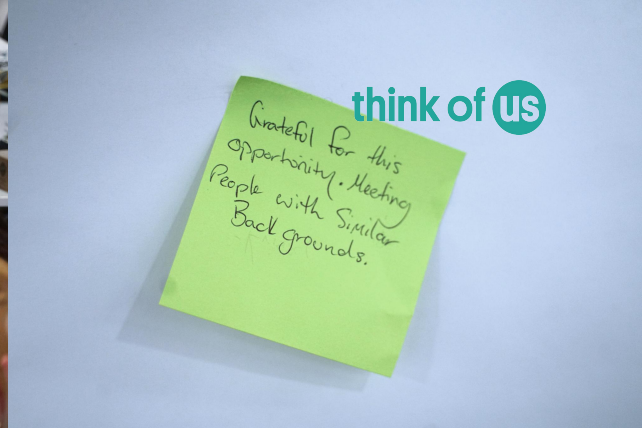
- 1 Prevent children from entering foster care.
- 2 Support for kinship caregivers.
- 3 Ensure youth leave care with strengthened relationships, holistic supports, and opportunities.
- 4 Invest in the child welfare workforce.



## The Ask

As Associate Commissioner Schomburg began to build her work plan for Priority #3, she reached out to Think of Us to help convene young people with experience in care to provide insights about their needs and priorities. Think of Us and the Children's Bureau partnered to find a new way for the Associate Commissioner and her staff to move beyond traditional forms of engaging people with lived experience.





Another Inspiring  
And Vehicle





Youth in foster care, including transition-age youth, would greatly benefit from having mentors and opportunities to build relationships with others who have lived experience.

**Recommendations:** The Children's Bureau should work to advance peer support and mentorship models by showcasing the value and importance of modalities centering lived experience; expanding available resources for peer support programs; and encouraging child welfare jurisdictions to invest in peer support and mentorship.

#### Potential administrative actions:

1. Clarify in the *Child Welfare Policy Manual* that title IV-E administrative funds can be used for peer support and youth engagement activities.
2. Amend future funding applications to require information about how peer-led services will be included in provision of services.
3. Release demonstration funds to help build an evidence base for peer support within child welfare that matches the extensive evidence of its effectiveness in the mental health and substance use fields.
4. Release discretionary funding for programs and child welfare agencies to hire lived experience experts as employees within their organizations and pay them at a competitive rate.
5. Release demonstration funds to help title IV-E agencies expand capacity for and effectiveness of peer support programming for youth dealing with grief, loss, and mental health needs and to develop new methodologies with a focus on cultural affirmation that

# National Children's Bureau Convening on Kinship Care



In partnership with Think of Us



AGENDA

## National Convening on Kinship Care

March 14, 2024

think of US

Driving Systemic Change  
in Child Welfare

I support kinship care because...

I grew up in kinship care & my family was able to take guardianship of myself + my siblings. I also am a kinship care provider so that the system did not have to get involved and raise my family.

it matters, my family matters, my culture matters

National Convening on Kinship Care / March 14, 2024

I support kinship care because...

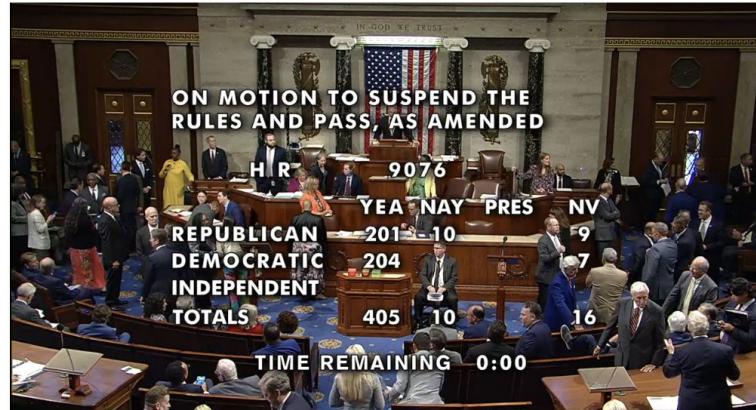
I AM  
KIN!

FAMILIES BELONG  
TOGETHER.

think of US

Driving Systemic Change  
in Child Welfare





Hi!

Yesterday, September 18, **the House of Representatives passed the bipartisan [Protecting America's Children by Strengthening Families Act](#)** with a resounding 405 to 10 votes.

This comprehensive Title IV-B reauthorization bill offers long overdue reforms and investments. For the first time, **the bill would require states to include people with lived experience in shaping child welfare plans**, ensuring that those most impacted by the system have a seat at the table. It would also:



**Challenge:** The current administration had limited time and resources left.

**Question posed:** What should we prioritize to make the most impact with young people's insights?

**Children's Bureau's partnership with Think of Us:** They reached out to design a convening that wasn't about collecting more recommendations but about making critical decisions.

**Goal:** Shift the role of youth from recommending changes to prioritizing actions based on constraints.



Convene together in Washington, D.C. to discuss their recommendations with federal decision makers, including the Associate Commissioner of the Children's Bureau

**Traditional model:** Lived experience is often extracted through storytelling, and youth are rarely involved in final decision-making or implementation.

**New approach:** The convening focused on integrating young people as full partners in the process of prioritizing, not just asking for input.

**Lived experience drives decisions:** Youth weren't just there to share stories—they helped define the key policy priorities and shape how resources were directed.

## Clear expectations for Ambassadors:

- The goal was not to tell personal stories of trauma unless they chose to, but to focus on policy-level solutions and systemic change.
- Ambassadors were compensated for their time and expertise, reinforcing that their participation was professional and valued.

**Ambassadors as partners:** They were positioned as key voices in developing actionable recommendations for what to prioritize for federal policymakers.



## 1. Diversity as a Core Principle

- **Goal:** Ensure demographic, geographic, and experiential diversity.
- **Demographic Diversity:** Considered **age, race, gender identity, and sexual orientation** to ensure a broad range of backgrounds.
- **Geographic Representation:** Selected Ambassadors from **urban, suburban, and rural** areas across the U.S. to capture a wide range of regional perspectives.

## 2. Experiential Diversity

- **Different Experiences in Care:** Ambassadors included individuals who were **adopted, reunified, aged out,** or placed in **group homes** or **kinship care.**
- **Current Life Situations:** Also considered factors like whether applicants were **expectant or parenting youth, experienced homelessness,** had a **disability,** or were in **higher education or employment.**

## Lived Experience Ambassadors

Thank you to all 20 Lived Experience Ambassadors who lent their wisdom and expertise to this convening.



Rowan Arquette



Jaquelyn Reyes Alonzo



Destiny Bromfield



Huyanna Clearwater



Ke-Shaun (Kee) Cockburn



Zilgwan Frazer



Alexander Galindo



Nykia Gatson



Justin Kidder



Melissa Mayo



Daniel Mendoza-Jacobo



Mayra Mostafa



Kristina Parker



Eden Potgieter



Kristen Powell



Duane Price



Marquan Tetz



Mariah Thompson-Grissett



Chloe Williams



Nicole Wong

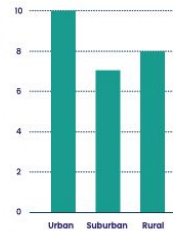
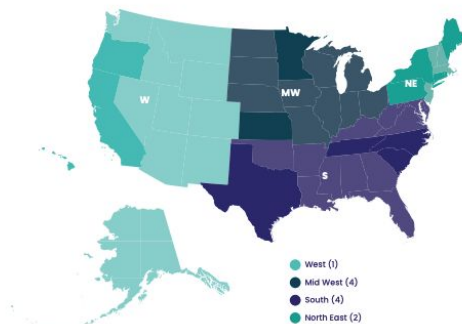
### Executive Summary

## Lived Experience Ambassadors

### Geographic Diversity

The Ambassadors represented 14 states across all regions

Geographic Type\*

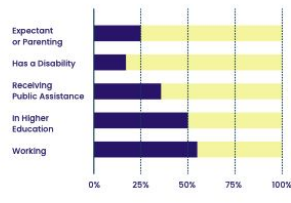
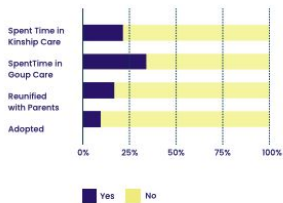


\*Ambassadors were asked to identify the types of communities they lived in during their time in care.

### Experiential Diversity\*

While in Foster Care

Currently



\*Ambassadors were asked to identify experiences they had during their time in care as well as their current experiences.

**Get proximate** by engaging with other youth with lived experience and advocates to expand the views and ideas they bring to discussions with policymakers



Participate in **virtual trainings** to understand the possibilities of administrative action and effective advocacy



**Receive input from advocacy organizations** regarding the universe of possible actions that the federal agency can take



Convene together in Washington D.C. to **discuss their recommendations** with federal decision makers, including the Associate Commissioner of the Children's Bureau



Compile their recommendations into an **advocacy report** that will be shared widely with the field



# Preparing the Ambassadors

**Partner organization:** Unicorn Solutions, LLC (led by lived experts).

**Training focus:** Providing a foundation in administrative advocacy and a deep dive into the Children's Bureau's role, history, powers, and limitations.

**Key skill development:** Ambassadors were trained to participate as subject matter experts in federal policymaking, not simply share personal narratives.

**Two training sessions:** One held on a weekday evening and one on a Saturday to accommodate different schedules and ensure no one had to miss work or other commitments.



Participate in virtual trainings to **understand the possibilities** of administrative action & effective advocacy.

## Listening sessions held before the convening:

- **Purpose:** To ensure the Ambassadors could understand and reflect broader youth experiences, not just their own.
- Involved young people not selected as Ambassadors, providing them a voice in the process.

**Crowdsourcing input:** 58 policy advocates, practitioners, and lived experts contributed potential federal policy actions, which were compiled into a working document.

**Outcome:** Ambassadors didn't rely solely on their personal narratives; they engaged with a wide array of insights and systemic challenges.



Receive input from advocacy organizations regarding the **universe of possible actions** that the federal agency can take





Compile their recommendations into an **advocacy report** that will be shared widely with the field



**Get proximate** by engaging with other youth with lived experience & advocates to expand the views & ideas they bring to discussions with policymakers.

## Help TOU Crowdsource Federal Administrative Actions for TAY

Aysha E. Schomburg, the Associate Commissioner of the Children's Bureau has indicated that her primary focus is on her administration's third priority: Ensure Youth Leave Care with Strengthened Relationships, Holistic Supports, and engaging in a variety of activities to support the Children's Bureau's potential to make change for transition-age youth v

We are collaborating with the Children's Bureau to c  
Ambassadors to engage in thought partnership with  
Ambassadors will produce a report of the most imp  
action to improve the outcomes and experiences of

To ensure we don't leave any opportunities unexplo  
advocacy community to crowdsource ideas for a cti  
could make an impact for youth.

Please fill out the form below to share ideas of actio  
or crafted (though it is also great if they are). Feel fr  
submission and/or to submit the application multip

\* Indicates required question

### What guidance, rules, or regulations should the Children's Bureau release or update to improve outcomes and experiences for TAY?

17 responses

30% Chafee on housing; increase Chafee age; increase EFC age; \$10,000 asset limit; age out for housing assistance; adoption/transfer at 16+ eligibility; training covered through Chafee funds instead of IV-E; ETV \$5000 annual max;

Policy changes and guidance around preserving foster youth's benefits (OASDI, SSI, VA) and assets while in care. I have submitted formal requests for administrative action laid out in some detail, accompanied by a memo outlining the legal obligation and authority to carry out each request under their existing authority. The White House is squarely behind this issue/request, and Sheri Lachman plans to join a meeting with AS Contreras and CB Schomburg soon to discuss administrative action. This is a matter of equity- we must not continue to discriminate against disabled and orphaned foster youth by charging them for their own care when the state/fed gov pays for the cost of care for all other children in care.

Policy changes ensuring IV-E admin funds can be used to provide civil legal services to foster youth to address ancillary issues related to care (housing, immigration, etc.) They put out a notice long ago that they were planning action, but haven't seen anything yet.

Better guidance for the reasonable and prudent parent standards in order to empower professionals and caregivers in creating better access for youth to engage in activities and experiences similar to their peers.



**Small group structure:** Each group included four Ambassadors, one or more federal team members, and a facilitator.

**Focus areas:** Five key policy areas discussed—relationships and placements, system practices, preparation for adulthood, health and well-being, and economic security.

**Discussion method:** The groups evaluated potential actions based on:

- **Depth of impact:** How transformational the policy could be.
- **Breadth of impact:** How many youth would be affected.
- **Equity:** How the action would affect populations that are underserved or marginalized.









Chloe Williams  
Ambassador

- **Voting process:** Ambassadors used a voting system to select top priorities based on the three criteria.
- **Prioritization goals:** Focus on policies that could realistically be enacted with the limited time and resources available.
- **Outcome:** The top six priorities were selected based on the most votes and further discussion.





...program  
...and compliance

...incentives to  
... (Finance & Social)

Self-empowerment place  
(working, money, beliefs)

Extreme practices that upend  
traditional adolescent backdrop

Prioritizing the consent of impacted people

Continue to prioritize financing  
for transition-age youth

Credit protection and  
credit building (COP)

Financial literacy program

We reluctant to work...  
(and coaching and mentoring)

Housing supports incl. leases  
housing committees or collaborations

Asset-building programs incl.  
- Mother  
- Child  
- Parent

Support





2. Awareness of current trends  
3. Identification of key players  
4. Strengths + weaknesses of players



**“We must work tirelessly to ensure that our government upholds the **dignity of all families**, recognizing that the separation of families is a **grave injustice that echoes the darkest chapters of our history**. True justice demands that families remain united, supported by policies that foster community, understanding, and equality.”**

***Michelle Alexander***

Thank You!  
[sixto@thinkofus.org](mailto:sixto@thinkofus.org)

