

Expert Voices and Lived Experience

By Jamie Suk, Field Center Lerner Fellow in Child Welfare Policy

Throughout the past year, the Field Center has been dedicated to promoting the importance of elevating the voices of those with lived experience in the child welfare system. Lived experience is defined as direct, personal experience in the child welfare and Family Court system.¹ For children and youth who have experienced foster care in the United States, all too often decisions, not only directly related to foster care, but also decisions regarding other critical aspects of their lives such as schooling and medical care, are made by adults who have no idea what it feels like to be in these youth's shoes. The Field Center hopes to change this by exploring different ways of elevating the voices of those with lived experience because these voices are critical to creating impactful change in the child welfare system.

During my year-long externship at the Field Center, I have seen the importance of qualitative lived-experience research, such as the [2021 study on COVID and mental health](#), that aims to do just this. I was challenged as a student to explore how youth voices can be elevated in different sectors, including facilitating and participating in seminars and brainstorming sessions to generate future action. Finally, for my final project I aimed to produce a podcast episode for the Field Center featuring a guest with lived experience.

Throughout the planning and recording of the podcast episode, I truly felt once again the importance of providing a platform for youth voice. I personally first learned about the concept of elevating youth voice during my time in the [Interdisciplinary Child Advocacy Clinic](#) at the law school, where I represented and counseled youth in the child welfare system. In addition to the legal representation we provided to young people, to elevate our learning we had guests who had spent periods of their lives in foster care speak to the law students about their experience with their lawyers and Family Court. Their firsthand experience and the advice they had for us based on that experience was eye-opening and critical in learning crucial concepts and practices for us to become true advocates for our clients. Remembering this particular guest lecture and the experiences of some of my clients in the clinic, I desired for the Field Center to provide a platform that would

¹ https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/previous_issues/115d75541b6ce1105461ea04bc4bc55;
<https://www.ncjfcj.org/publications/strategies-for-engaging-youth-and-families-with-lived-experiences>

allow the voices of youth with lived experience to be heard by a wider audience. That led us to develop the idea of a podcast series featuring guests with lived experience, and our pilot episode centered around the education system because the educational experience of youth who are in foster care is often far from ideal. Through a deeply insightful conversation with our guest, I learned not only about how and why education may not always be a priority for these youth but also the structural challenges that the child welfare system currently faces that make prioritizing education so difficult.²

Two remarks the guest made stood out to me. First, the guest stated that the one main ask she has for youth in foster care is for them to just be made aware of all their options. This is such a simple ask. Why are youth not given thorough information regarding decisions that are directly impacting their lives? Why are adults who do not have to bear the brunt of the decisions able to make the decisions without giving transparency to these youth? The second lasting remark that the guest made was that she much preferred placement in a group home rather than a foster home. Only after she was placed in a group home was she able to feel enough stability in her life to finally be able to place emphasis on her education. Take this personal insight and lay it against the federal mandates of the 2018 Family First Prevention Services Act to reduce the use of congregate care in child welfare.³ How do we make sense of that direction when confronted with personal stories of youth with lived experience like this individual who explicitly stated that a group home provided the environment that allowed her to thrive?

This once again highlights how youth voice is essential to providing the critical context that is necessary to know when creating policy and making decisions that impact the youth in the child welfare system. There must be more representation in every level of decision-making from youth with lived experience in order to truly create a system that listens to these youth's voices and meets their needs.

² The podcast episode will be available on the Field Center website later this year.

³ <https://www.ncsl.org/human-services/family-first-prevention-services-act#:~:text=The%20act%20also%20seeks%20to,for%20more%20than%20two%20weeks>