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A Critical Analysis of Foster Youth Advisory Boards in the United States

Brad Forenza¹ · Robin G. Happonen¹

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Abstract

Background The enactment of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act brought welcome attention to young people aging out of foster care, and sought to include them in both case planning and policy dialog. Foster Youth Advisory Boards help to promote such inclusion, though the implementation of those boards has not been formally analyzed.

Objective This critical analysis of foster youth advisory boards in the United States answers the following questions: (1) What/where are each of the Youth Advisory Boards in the United States? (2) How is each board implemented? (3) How would a young person aging out of care (or a practitioner working with this population) access its local board?

Methods A content analysis of public child welfare agency programs was conducted to identify youth advisory boards in each of the United States and the District of Columbia to identify implementing agencies and contact information.

Results While every state and Washington, D.C. had a version of Youth Advisory Board, some boards were implemented exclusively through public child welfare agencies and others through public/nonprofit partnerships. Contact information for each of the 51 boards was identified and is displayed.

Conclusions Youth Advisory Boards have proliferated throughout the United States since the enactment of Chafee programming. They can be useful, pro-social mediums to include foster youth in case planning and policy dialog, while simultaneously promoting a sense of leadership, mentorship, and ecological permanence. Implications for policy, practice, and research are explored.

Keywords Foster care · Youth advisory boards · Aging out · Child welfare

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Introduction

Rationale

Background

Foster care—sometimes known as “out-of-home care”—encompasses the following placement scenarios: non-biological—family care, kinship care, treatment care, residential/group care, emergency care, and shared family care (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2013). The prevalence of children in foster care varies by race/ethnicity, with 1 in 9 Black children and 1 in 7 Native American children entering care before the age of 18 (Wildeman and Emanuel 2014). The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) recently released cumulative data on trends in foster care from 2002 to 2014 in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. The collected data illustrates the trends in children served, the number of young people living in care, the amount of foster care entries and exits, the number of children waiting for adoption, the number of terminations of parental rights, and the number of children adopted from care. As of September 30, 2013, there were approximately 402,000 children in care nationwide; 102,000 were waiting to be adopted, and the average age in foster care was 8.9 years old (AFCARS 2013). Regarding placement statistics, 47 % of children in care were living in traditional, out-of-home placements, while 28 % were living in kinship scenarios (AFCARS 2013).

Kinship care—as opposed to traditional, out-of-home care—may best enable the preservation of family connections and cultivate the development of a child’s identity (Font 2014). Yet there are various factors that may contribute to why a child may not benefit from those desired kinship scenarios. Such factors include, familial substance abuse, familial mental and physical illness, homelessness, poverty, domestic violence, and dysfunction in the family system (Lewit 1993). When children are placed in out-of-home care it is the only time, other than incarceration, when youth are involuntarily removed from their families by the state (Courtney 2005).

Foster care services are located within an even larger entity known as the child welfare system (Lewit 1993). Child welfare policies and services are implemented state-by-state and are responsible for, among other things, investigating reports of child abuse and neglect. State child welfare agencies extend preventive and treatment services to targeted children and families. While in foster care, state child welfare agencies provide certain rights and assistance to foster children, such as medical care, a quality education, and other services to contribute to the wellbeing of the child (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2013). Children in foster care are also entitled to a permanency plan, which, under federal law, should be decided in court within 12 months of the child entering care, and subsequently revisited every year thereafter (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2013). Permanency plans may involve family reunification, adoption by a resource family, or emancipation from the foster care system (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2013). Colloquially, “emancipation” from foster care is also referred to as “aging out.”

Nationally, around 26,000 young people age out of foster care every year (Byrne et al. 2014). Research shows that youth exiting care are more likely to experience unemployment, or encounter lower income employment than the general population of the same age (Byrne et al. 2014). Emancipated foster youth have also reported having trouble with

paying rent and utilities, and generally seem to have more health problems, behavioral problems, and trouble with the law (Byrne et al. 2014) than non-foster youth.

Children aging out of care are exposed to myriad challenges, such as dealing with traumatic issues prior to placement and experiencing the loss of their family structure (Leslie et al. 2000). Psychological issues may be intensified through the experiences a young person has encountered while in care. Such issues include, multiple placements (also known as “placement instability”) and an uncertainty regarding his or her length of stay in any given placement (Leslie et al. 2000). Additionally, foster children are more likely than others to be diagnosed with illnesses such as depression, ADHD, and bipolar disorder (Wildeman and Emanuel 2014). Similarly, emancipating youth are assumed to encounter varied and dysfunctional attachments resulting from placement instability (Newton et al. 2000). As such, children in care—particularly children in long-term care or children aging out of care—are assumed to need long-term relational and ecological connections. Sustainable connections with people and communities are assumed vital to one’s life-course development and his or her successful transition to adulthood.

Aging Out

While the needs of children and youth in foster care are perennial concerns for child welfare professionals (see McGowan 2005), less is known about youth in long term situations (Simmel et al. 2012), or those aging out of the system. Yet aging out youth constitute a special population, whose developmental needs deserve equity in policy and practice (Goodkind et al. 2011; Pryce and Samuels 2008). Youth aging out of foster care face an array of challenges and difficulties as they transition from childhood to adulthood without family assistance or support (Greenson and Thompson 2014). As the changing context of youth evolves, so too does our understanding of the aging out process. To date, much child welfare research focuses on the presenting problems and risk associated with youth (Checkoway 2012; Fisher et al. 2005). When young people are conceptualized as risks, their strengths are de-emphasized (Checkoway 2012).

The John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program was enacted through federal legislation that recognized youth in care were being denied an emerging adulthood. Chafee funding gives credence to the notion that positive foster youth development necessitates a gradual process toward self-sufficiency, as opposed to an abrupt one that lacks relational and ecological permanence. As a result of Chafee programming, emancipation from a state’s foster care system may be elective when a foster youth reaches 18 years old (the

Table 1 Mandatory emancipation from foster care, by state

Age	State
18	CA, FL, LA, NM, RI
19	NE, NV, VT, WI
20	AK, IA, NH
21	AL, AR, AZ, CO, D.C. DE, GA, HI, ID, IL, IN, KS, KY, MD, ME, MI, MN, MO, MS, NC, NJ, NY, MT, ND, OH, OK, OR, PA, SC, SD, TN, UT, VA, WA, WV, WY
22	MA, TX
23	CT

legal “age of majority”), but it may not become mandatory until that youth reaches 21 or older because (as previously mentioned) the age at which one must emancipate from a state’s foster care system will vary from state-to-state. Table 1 identifies the mandatory ages of emancipation by state.

While AFCARS (2013) presents demographics on youth exiting care in composite fashion, we assume that National Youth in Transition Data (2012) on youth receiving Chafee services is at least partially reflective of emancipated (or emancipating) youth. In fiscal year 2011—the last year of publically accessible reports—98,561 such youth received at least one Chafee service, such as academic support, career preparation, financial management, etc. (NYTD 2012). Those who received services were 52 % female and 48 % male; 52 % white and 32 % black (Hispanic was not expressly reported). Chafee Independence Programs are one illustration of an evolving federal framework to better include aging out youth in policy and practice. Chafee programs include help with education, employment, financial management, housing, emotional support and connections to caring adults (Children’s Bureau 2012).

Other national programs serving aging out youth include: The Chafee Education and Training Voucher Program, which awards up to \$5000 per youth for those attending qualified higher education programs; the Family Unification Program, which provides transitional housing assistance through the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development; and Youthbuild, which awards competitive grants to local entities assisting “high risk youth” to learn the construction trade while also working toward a high school diploma or GED (National Association of Counties 2008). Additionally, there are special pro-bono legal services that are available to youth aging out of care. Many of these legal services are available through Family Law Clinics, which target youth aging out of care by working with child welfare agencies. Such clinics may also offer psychological evaluations, counseling, and social work services for this population (Berenson et al. 2010).

Youth aging out of foster care are at a higher risk for adult arrests, but providing extended foster care support during the early years of their transition from adolescence to independent adulthood may reduce this risk (Courtney et al. 2014). This assumption is based on the fact that aging out youth who have institutional attachments and sustained involvement in programs are less likely to engage in criminal behavior than youth who do not demonstrate such involvement (Courtney et al. 2014; Arnett 2000). Without proper connections and supportive networks, there is a decline in one’s successful transition to adulthood (Berzin et al. 2014).

Emerging adulthood is an evolving conception of youth, which emphasizes one’s transition toward independence (Berzin et al. 2014). Researchers state that there is little known about the “emerging adulthood” of general populations, though there is even less information regarding foster youth (Berzin et al. 2014). The concept of emerging adulthood has recently changed partly due to a delay in young adults becoming financially dependent (Berzin et al. 2014). Youth raised in a traditional family may have parents to act as a financial buffer during the early years of adulthood (Lee and Berrick 2014). Parents are often able to assist their children both financially and emotionally as their children take longer and longer to achieve traditional milestones. However, youth who do not have the same sustained relational and ecological supports (such as youth in care) will most likely have a more tumultuous transition.

Youth who have experienced some form of maltreatment are at risk for greater maladaptive functioning in adulthood (Lee and Berrick 2014). Foster youth experience many common factors when transitioning to adulthood. They can feel stuck in an “in-between”

phase where they are not yet adults and are still attached to a state's child welfare system in some way (Berzin et al. 2014). This evidence suggests a need to extend an aging out youth's child welfare involvement, even if the financial supports associated with life in foster care cannot extend. One such initiative is statewide advisory boards governed by, and for, current and former foster youth. These legislative bodies are comprised entirely of willing emancipating and emancipated young people. Through participation in youth advisory boards, foster youth councils, or whatever a state names its allied program, these emancipating and emancipated young people use their personal insight to advocate for other children in care, while informing child welfare officials of their own perspective.

Objective

To date, no comprehensive research has been conducted on Youth Advisory Boards, in spite of a growing (and welcome) practice-oriented trend toward facilitating these positive youth development initiatives for this vulnerable population. The primary objective of this research is to streamline our knowledge of Youth Advisory Boards in the United States. In addition to streamlining the available research, this critical analysis answers the following questions: (1) What/where are each of the Youth Advisory Boards in the United States? (2) How is each board implemented? (3) How would a young person aging out of care (or a practitioner working with this population) access its state YAB?

Methods

Because this critical analysis did not utilize data from human subjects, and it did not analyze existing data related to human subjects, this research was exempt from IRB oversight. Similarly, neither researcher has a conflict of interest to disclose. However, this research may classify as a form of heuristic inquiry, as both authors (one, a doctoral-level qualitative methodologist specializing in youth development; the other, a masters-level research assistant) have personal and/or professional experience working with public child welfare systems.

With respect to data collection and analysis: Throughout Fall 2014, a content analysis was conducted via each state's (and the District of Columbia's) publically accessible child welfare agency websites to identify youth advisory boards in each locality. This preliminary information enabled the researchers to follow-up with each agency to secure/verify a youth advisory board's mode of implementation (public or public/nonprofit partnership), as well as its site-specific contact information. To a lesser extent, the scope of youth advisory board activity and output was also explored. The first-author takes responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of data reported.

Results

Research on youth civic development shows that when youth are encouraged to take on leadership roles within organizations and communities, both youth and civic development are enhanced. Programs, which include youth in governance, youth organizing, youth activism, and youth as researchers, are initiatives where youth can flourish and advocate for their needs (Christens and Peterson 2012). McAlesse (2009), president of UNESCO,

states her concerns: “the cost of not [involving young people in decision-making] will likely come back to haunt us as a civil society and a golden opportunity to move toward a fuller and more inclusive wisdom will have been missed.” The utilization of youth as advisors has been a growing trend in the United States over the last several decades. In fact, one study conducted by the Princeton Survey Research in 1999 found that approximately one half of nonprofit agencies are including young people in decision-making roles (Zeldin 2000).

Society has a responsibility to provide its youth, especially the most vulnerable, with an abundance of guidance, developmental support, and emotional support (Zeldin et al. 2012). With this in mind, The National Foster Youth Advisory Council (NFYAC) was created to “provide a voice for and make a difference in the lives of youth currently in care and support their successful transitions into adulthood” (CWLA 2014). The NFYAC is comprised of current and former foster youth, ages 14–21 who inform about the strengths and needs of youth in foster care systems. The aim is to improve the system’s capacity to facilitate positive foster youth development, independent living, transition supports, and foster youth involvement (FosterClub 2009). Since the creation of the NFYAC, Youth Advisory Boards (YAB), or Youth Advisory Councils, have started forming at the state and local levels throughout the United States, and are being employed across the country to advise many organizations both public and private, including local and state agencies, about the myriad needs of foster youth. To this end, it is important to note that many YABs are funded and implemented by states themselves; other YABs are funded by states and implemented through local nonprofit agencies. As illustrated in Table 2, a minority of YABs are funded and implemented exclusively by nonprofit agencies.

Youth Advisory Boards allow foster youth to advocate for positive change within the foster care system (CWLA 2003). They are organizations that endeavor to educate and empower foster youth to advocate for improvement in policies, procedures and services provided to them by child welfare agencies (Rutgers University 2014). YABs offer our most vulnerable youth the chance to civically engage and to address their needs in a guided, supportive environment. YABs also afford foster youth the opportunity to have a voice concerning issues that directly affect their lives. The acknowledged goal of most YABs is to connect foster youth to policy makers, giving them an opportunity to express their opinions about subjects that relate to the lives of young people (Taft and Gordon 2013). For foster youth, this is a crucial step to advocating for change within the system. Collins (2004) found that these boards also lobby to formulate legislation that aims to help aging out youth cope and relate with their community.

One of the principal purposes of YABs is to empower foster youth’s advocacy and leadership skills (Crowe 2007). According to Crowe (2007), extra care must be taken to ensure that such boards represent the diversity of youth in care. In choosing the composition of the board, attention should be given to gender, race and age composition because

Table 2 Youth Advisory Boards funded via State or Nonprofit agency

Youth Advisory Boards funded and implemented by State OR Youth Advisory Boards funded by state/implemented by non-profit agencies	AL, AK, AR, AZ, CO, CT, D.C., DE, HI, IA, ID, IL, IN, KS, KY, LA, MA, MD, ME, MI, MN, MS, MO, MT, NE, ND, NH, NJ, NV, NY, OH, OK, OR, PA, SC, SD, TN, TX, UT, VA, VT, WA, WI, WV
Youth Advisory Boards funded and implemented exclusively by non-profit agencies	CA, FL, GA, NC, NM, RI, WY

those factors determine how youth leaders and non-leaders perceive the programs and initiatives under the boards (Crowe 2007). How foster youth are perceived by society depends on how well the leaders of these youth groups present themselves to society (Courtney et al. 2001). However, perceptions of foster youth are not solely formed based on the behavior of YAB members. There is a general perception within society as a whole that foster youth have poor developmental and educational outcomes; that they are wrought with mental health issues and as a result they will most likely make poor life choices for themselves (Bruskas 2008). Thus it is important that YAB members be a positive representation for this population of youth to help to decrease the stereotypes that surround foster youth and have the impact necessary to bring about change.

Foster Youth Advisory Boards provide an avenue for interested foster youth to take on a leading role and become involved with issues that affect their lives. In doing so, they have effectively and assertively created positive community and organizational change (Zeldin 2000), while raising awareness of their specific needs. Foster YABs address a variety of concerns across many different spectrums. For example, there are YABs that deal with child obesity, bullying, disabilities, dating violence, homelessness, service-learning, and issues confronted by youth both in and transitioning out of foster care. Crowe (2007) asserts, “The embracing of youth as partners, not only in individual case planning but also in the development, implementation, and evaluation of policies, programs, and services, has resulted in tremendous gains for the profession as well as the youth” (p. 139). In other words, YABs are seen as beneficial for both child welfare agencies and their clients.

One researcher noted that the benefits of engaging foster youth in child welfare services included the creation of more effective policies, programs and services, improved relationship building between staff and youth and increased youth engagement that encouraged changes at the macro and micro level for social service provision (Crowe 2007). For example, an established youth advocacy organization in California (California Youth Connections) made up of former and current foster youth used their advocacy and leadership skills to change the way some foster youth are educated in non-traditional settings. California Youth Connection’s recommendations to state lawmakers helped create a bill that eventually became a law, which improved the way foster youth are educated in group homes (Rodriguez 2005). Rodriguez also indicated that when foster youth are given a chance to engage and participate in the day-to-day activities that have an impact on their wellbeing, they are able to influence policy and program changes. Rodriguez also reports that “The organization’s advocacy efforts have shattered the stereotype that young people in foster care are too young and inexperienced to participate in policy making and... are in the best position to advise the foster care advocacy community about what works and what does not” (p. 170).

Foster Youth Advisory Boards grew out of a necessity to engage the perspectives of young people served by state public child welfare systems. New Jersey YABs are implemented through a government–university–nonprofit partnership. States with similar engagement and leadership opportunities for this population may adhere to similar models, or they may be more autonomous. For example, Michigan’s board is implemented similarly to New Jersey’s YAB model, with 13 local boards throughout that state, advising the Michigan Department of Human Services. California adheres to a similar model, and its board also includes young people served by the criminal justice system. In Tennessee, the board is a singular statewide body (Oldmixon 2007). All three examples incorporate the voices and experiences of participating foster youth into civil discourse around child welfare policy and services. The Illinois board is a great example of one the most comprehensive foster youth boards in the United States. It is a democratic group that advocates for youth rights, issues, and concerns. In addition, the Illinois board hosts graduation

Table 3 Youth Advisory Board inventory, by state

State	Information	Contact
Alabama	D.R.E.A.M State Council (Dedicated, Responsible, Empowered, Motivated); Youth Advisory Council at local levels	Alabama Department of Human Resources: (334) 353–3108 or (334) 354–5238
Alaska	Facing Foster Care in Alaska (FFCA)—meets quarterly	Department of Health and Human Services: (907) 465–8659; facing_fostercare@yahoo.com or (907) 230–8237; http://www.alaskacasa.org/resources/1/FFCA_Youth_Advisory_Board.pdf
Arizona	Arizona Youth Advisory Board; local boards—most active is Maricopa County Youth Advisory Board	Arizona Department of Economic Security: (480) 545–1901 https://www.azdes.gov/dcyf/ilp/
Arkansas	Arkansas Youth Advisory Board	Arkansas Division of Children and Family Services: (501) 682–8439
California	California Youth Connection (CYC)	California Department of Social Services: (916) 651–9974 http://www.cal youthconn.org
Colorado	Colorado Youth Leadership Team and several county youth boards. The Office of the Child’s Representative (OCR) has a Youth Advisory Board	Colorado Department of Human Services, Child Welfare Alive/e Program: (303) 866–4539
Connecticut	Connecticut Statewide Youth Advisory Board; 12 local boards meet 1–2 times monthly and each local board meets quarterly with the commissioner	Connecticut Department of Children and Families: (860) 550–6331
Delaware	Delaware Youth Advisory Council	Division of Family Services: (302) 633–2638
Florida	Florida Youth SHINE (FYS)—statewide youth organization; 12 local chapters	Department of Children and Families: (850) 717–4632 http://www.floridayouthshine.org
Georgia	Georgia Youth EmpowerMENT	Georgia Division of Family and Children Services: (404) 657–0037; http://www.maac4kids.org/maac-empowerment-program.html
Hawaii	Hawaii Foster Youth Coalition (HFYC)	Department of Human Services State of Hawaii: (808) 586–5297; http://hawaiiyouth.net/
Idaho	Idaho Youth Advisory Board—statewide council that assists the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare (IDHW)	Idaho Department of Health and Welfare: (208) 334–4932
Illinois	Statewide Youth Advisory Board (SYAB); Four Regional Youth Advisory Boards (RYAB): Northern, Southern, Central, and Cook Central Youth Advisory Boards	DCFS, Service Intervention: (217) 557–2689; http://www.chicagoareaproject.org/programs/statewide-youth-advisory-board
Indiana	Statewide Indiana Youth Advisory Board—members from 18 regions, located in Ball State University’s Social Science Research Department	Department of Child Services: (317) 234–5737; http://www.in.gov/dcs/ ; http://cms.bs.u.edu/academics/centersandinstitutes/ssrc/projectexamples/serviceprojects

Table 3 continued

State	Information	Contact
Iowa	State of Iowa Youth Advisory Council; Achieving Maximum Potential (AMP)	Iowa Department of Human Services: Phone: (515) 242–5271; http://www.icyd.iowa.gov/SIYAC/ ; http://www.ampiowa.org
Kansas	Statewide Kansas Youth Advisory Council (KYAC); five Regional Youth Advisory Councils	Department of Children and Families: (785) 368–8192
Kentucky	Kentucky Youth Leadership Council; Kentucky Foster Care Council	Kentucky Department for Community Based Services Division of Protection and Permanency: (502) 564–2147
Louisiana	Louisiana Youth Leadership Advisory Council (LYLAC)	Kentucky Department for Community Based Services Division of Protection and Permanency: Phone: (502) 564–2147
Maine	Youth Leadership Advisory Team (YLAT)—collaborative project with Maine’s Youth in Foster Care, The Maine Department of Health and Human Services, and the Muskie School at University of Southern Maine.	Office of Child and Family Services, Maine Department of Health and Human Services: (207) 624–7928; http://www.ylat.org
Maryland	Baltimore City Youth Advisory Board (BCDSS)	Maryland Department of Human Resources/Social Services: (410) 767–7695
Massachusetts	Central Office Youth Board; Regional Youth Advisory Boards; Annual Youth Leadership Summit.	Massachusetts Department of Children and Families: (617) 748–2231
Michigan	State Youth Policy Board; 13 youth boards in 17 counties, led by 200 youth through the Michigan Youth Opportunity Initiative	Michigan Department of Human Services: (517) 373–9219; http://www.michigan.gov/fyit/0,1607,7-240-44524-162619-,00.html
Minnesota	Minnesota Youth Leadership Council (MYLC)	Minnesota Department of Human Services, Child Safety and Permanency Division: (651) 431–4663 or (651) 431–4686
Mississippi	HOPE (helping ourselves prosper equally)	Mississippi Department of Human Resources: (601) 359–4983
Missouri	Missouri State Youth Advisory Board (SYAB) meets quarterly; local boards throughout the state	Missouri Children’s Division, Older Youth Program, Children’s Division: (573) 522–627 http://dss.mo.gov/cd/chafee/index.htm 9; http://dss.mo.gov/cd/chafee/syab/
Montana	State Youth Advisory Board	Department of Public Health and Human Services/Child and Family Service: (406) 841–2484
Nebraska	Governor’s Youth Advisory Council	Department of Health and Human Services: (402) 471–9331
Nevada	Statewide Youth Advisory Board	Division of Children and Family Services: (775) 684–4428 or (775) 684–7955
New Hampshire	New Hampshire Teen Voices	Division for Children, Youth and Families: (603) 271–4706

Table 3 continued

State	Information	Contact
New Jersey	Division of Child Protection and Permanency (DCP&P) has county based Youth Advisory Boards—Five YAB's in the northern region, 5 in the central region, and 5 in the southern region.	New Jersey Child Protection and Permanency: (609) 888–7071; http://socialwork.rutgers.edu/InstituteForFamilies/officeofchildwelfareinitiatives/TFY/Projects/statewideYAB.aspx
New Mexico	Leaders Uniting Voices, Youth Advocates of New Mexico (LUVYANM)	Youth Services Bureau CYFD/Protective Services Division: (505) 660–1589; New Mexico Children, Youth and Families: (505) 841–7786; http://cyfd.org ; http://addr.ws/leaders-uniting-voices-youth-advocates-of-nm-albuquerque-us.html
New York	Youth In Progress (YIP)—New York State Foster Care Youth Leadership and Advisory Team; six regional foster care youth leadership groups	New York State Office of Children and Family Services Division of Child Welfare and Community Services: (518) 473–0611; http://www.youthinprogress.org
North Carolina	SaySo, Strong Able Youth Speaking Out (statewide)	North Carolina Division of Social Services: (919) 334–1110; www.saysoinc.org
North Dakota	North Dakota State Youth Advisory Board	North Dakota Department of Human Services, Children and Family Services Division: (701) 328–4934 http://www.nd.gov/ndyouth/
Ohio	Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board (OHIO YAB)	Substitute Care and Permanency Services: (614) 752–0651; http://www.pcsao.org/ohioyouth.htm
Oklahoma	State Youth Advisory Board	Oklahoma Department of Human Services (OKDHS): (405) 521–6671
Oregon	Oregon Foster Youth Connection	Division of Human Services: (503) 945–5688; www.ORYouthConnection.org
Pennsylvania	Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Board (state); 6 regional Youth Advisory Boards	Department of Public Welfare/Office of Children, Youth and Families: (717) 705–2911; http://www.independentlivingpa.org ; https://www.ilp.pitt.edu
Rhode Island	Rhode Island Youth Advisory Board; ASPIRING Young Leaders Program	Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families: (401) 528–3576; http://www.fosterforward.net/aspiring-young-leaders-program#sthash.vgQTCCf0.dpuf http://www.dcyf.state.ri.us
South Carolina	Go Out and Learn Life (GOALL)—Sponsored by The Center for Child and Family Studies and South Carolina Department of Social Services; Youth Voice—Youth advisory panel that assists with the review and distribution of the National Youth in Transition Database	South Carolina Department of Social Services: (803) 898–7637; University of South Carolina: (803) 777–5225; http://ccfs.sc.edu/programs/child-welfare/81-go-out-and-learn-life-goall.html
South Dakota	State Youth Advisory Board	South Dakota Department of Social Services: (605) 773–3227; http://dss.sd.gov

Table 3 continued

State	Information	Contact
Tennessee	Tennessee Youth Advisory Council	Department of Children's Services: (615) 253–3503 or (615) 943–9972 http://www.state.tn.us/youth/
Texas	Statewide Youth Leadership Council—consists of two former foster care youth from each region of the state	Texas Department of Family and Protective Services: (512) 438–2350; https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/txyouth/events/
Utah	Youth Advisory Board—Division of Utah Family Coalition and Department of Human Services.	Division of Children and Family Services: (801) 707–9734 http://justforyouth.utah.gov
Vermont	New England Youth Coalition—members from all 6 New England states; Vermont Youth Development Committee (VYDC)	Washington County Youth Service Bureau: (802) 229–9151 or (802) 505–0862; Department of Children and Families—Family Services Division: (802) 769–6303
Virginia	Virginia Youth Advisory Council, Project LIFE—a state and 5 local youth advisory councils	Virginia Department of Social Services: (804) 726–7576 http://www.dss.virginia.gov/family/fc/independent.cgi ; http://www.vaprojectlife.org
Washington	Statewide Youth Advisory Board, Passion to Action	WA State Department of Social and Human Services: (360) 902–8063 http://www.dshs.wa.gov ; http://independence.wa.gov/self-advocacy/make-a-difference-and-get-involved/self-advocacy-resources/passion-to-action/
Washington D.C.	Youth On A Mission YOAM, Foster Care Youth Advisory Board	DC Child and Family Services Agency: (202) 727–7517
West Virginia	West Virginia Foster Advocacy Movement	West Virginia Bureau for Children and Families: (866) 720–3605
Wisconsin	Wisconsin Youth Advisory Council	Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services: (608) 267–7287; http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/children/IndLiving/
Wyoming	Wyoming Advocates for Youth (W.A.Y.)	Department of Family Services: (307) 777–6348

ceremonies for foster youth, encouraging its constituents to be involved with their court hearings, assisting youth that are transitioning out of foster care, and conducting focus groups throughout Illinois for feedback about needed services and resources (Chicago Area Project 2014).

A final example of youth led activism can be traced back to the passing of the Chafee legislation, which, as discussed in the introduction, was enacted to assist foster care youth in gaining independence and transitioning to adulthood. The passage of the Chafee program can be credited with our current state of youth-led organization (Crowe 2007). One of the requirements for states to be eligible for Chafee funding includes assurance that participants will design their own program activities to prepare them for transition into adulthood (Collins 2004). Since planning, decision, and policy making are a major focus of YABs, it follows that the creation and maintenance of Foster YABs has become universal. Indeed, in 2000, the National Foster Care Awareness Project reported formal Foster YABs

were established in more than half of the states in the country (Collins 2004). As illustrated by Table 3, today Foster YABs have a presence in all 50 states.

Interestingly, Richards-Shuster (2012) states that youth-led advisory boards present a remarkable approach to the authenticity of foster youth participation because they are tied to funds and in doing so, it “ensures that young people have a role in ongoing ways” (p. 97). Indeed, the State of New Jersey, Department of Children and Families (2013) request for bidding for available funds outlines the requirements and expenditure guidelines for state YABs. Foster Youth Advisory Boards have not only been effective in bringing necessary change to systems but can also be credited to building leadership skills, a sense of control, and empowerment to those foster youth who participate in them (see Forenza and Simmel 2014).

Discussion

Summary of Evidence

This critical analysis of foster youth advisory boards in the United States answers three research questions: What/where are each of the Youth Advisory Boards in the United States? (2) How is each board implemented? (3) How would a young person aging out of care access its state’s board? A content analysis of nationwide public child welfare agencies determined that every state and the District of Columbia has its own incarnation of a youth advisory board. Boards are implemented exclusively through those public agencies or via public/nonprofit partnerships. Contact information for each of the 51 boards identified is also displayed in this report, for a foster youth’s (or a practitioner’s) ease of access. It is noteworthy that all boards grew out of a federal initiative—via Chafee programming—to better include system-involved young people in individual case planning and macro-oriented policy concerns. While myriad research has examined specific YABs, this research is among the first of its kind to offer a national perspective.

Conclusion

Implications for Policy

To the extent that Youth Advisory Boards operate in the civic sphere and connect aging out foster youth with the broader community, they may function as important channels through which policymakers can solicit and incorporate youth voices into their decision-making processes. Although growing efforts to accept the participation of youth in policy issues has increased, youth participation is still often diminished and marginalized (Richards-Shuster 2012). Society in general, tends to concentrate on the vulnerability of youth and the risks associated with this population (Finn 2001). This focus has unfortunately led to the struggle to accept and include youth as policy advisors, especially at-risk youth. Consequently, youth programs tend to focus on protecting youth or attempting to fix their issues instead of accepting that youth can make important contributions to society (Richards-Schuster 2012; Finn 2001). YABs challenge the deficits-based conceptions of youth by policymakers.

Implications for Practice

YABs may facilitate sustained relational and ecological permanence for young people aging out of care, an otherwise disenfranchised population. Practitioners will benefit most of all from the state-by-state descriptions of, and contacts for, YABs that this research presents. There can be considerable obstacles that dissuade youth from becoming involved in community activeness (Brennan et al. 2007). Youth often feel that they are not being taken seriously, that they are simply told what to do instead of asked to participate, and that there are not any specifically defined roles assigned to them (Independent Sector 2001). Other challenges for youth programmers include, youth awareness that opportunities for involvement exist, the fear of speaking out, the lack of diversity within an organization, and adultism or the mistreatment of youth simply because of their age (Felix 2003) by practitioners. Also, practitioners may be hesitant of the role or impact that youth may have in effecting any type of change (Brennan et al. 2007). Adults often view youth as transitory, with unpredictable schedules, moving from one activity to the next. This impression of youth instability might contribute to organizations excluding youth, or not taking their role very seriously (Brennan et al. 2007). YABs challenge this prevailing perception of youth.

Implications for Research

The literature indicates several suggestions and challenges surrounding YABs. Hohenemser and Marshall (2002) assert that a critical component of successful youth-led organizations is a positive youth-adult partnership. Future research should examine the extent to which YABs can facilitate mentoring relationships, and to what extent those relationships prove useful for aging out foster youth. Future research should also examine the processes and outcomes associated with Youth Advisory Board participation. For example: What do foster youth experience when they participate in such an initiative? What results can Foster Youth Advisory Board produce at both the individual and community levels? Future research should also examine the extent to which Foster Youth Advisory Boards may facilitate the empowerment process for aging out youth. Most importantly, future research must evaluate the utility and efficacy of Foster Youth Advisory Board participation at the individual level.

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