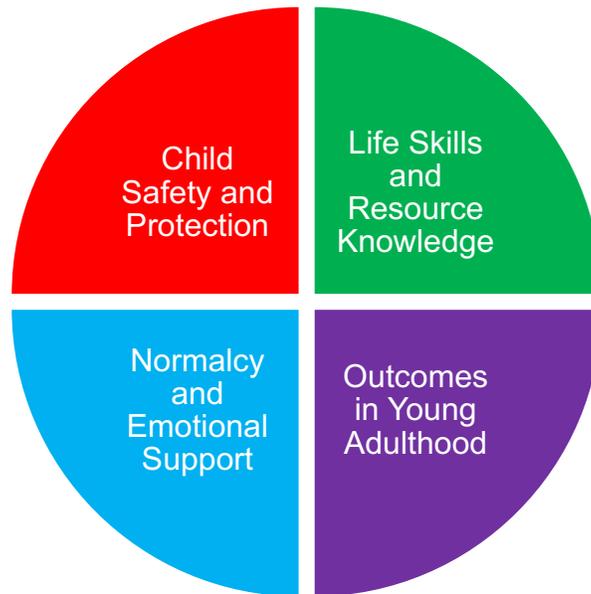




## 2021 Statewide Priorities

### Ohio Foster Care Youth and Alumni



#### **1.) Child Safety and Protection**

- Statewide Foster Youth Ombudsman's Office
- Youth Voice in Court and GAL Requirements
- Residential Licensing Requirements

#### **2.) Life Skills and Resource Knowledge**

- Make Every Training Hour Count
- Alumni Voice in OCWTP Training
- Consistent Independent Living Preparation Statewide

#### **3.) Normalcy and Emotional Support**

- Congregate Care Placements
- Addendum to the ICCA Form
- Maintaining Sibling Connections

#### **4.) Outcomes in Young Adulthood**

- Increased Federal Chafee Funds in FY 2021
- Post-Emancipation Resources
- Roadmaps for Resource Awareness and Access

# 1.) Child Safety and Protection



Governor DeWine shared two powerful quotes during his November 20th press conference regarding reformations to foster care in the state of Ohio:

- "Foster youth's health and safety needs to remain the North Star... The children/teen's rights need to come first.
- "We have to do better for these kids. The child's rights need to come first. These are tough decisions, but we need to focus on children."

The OHIO YAB and ACTION Ohio are keenly aware of the Family First Act, and its focus on keeping children safely with their families. However, the key word is safety, and the utmost priority of child protection must never be abandoned.

In the words of one of our OHIO YAB Youth Ambassadors, *"There is nothing so terrifying and soul-shattering than to be a young person experiencing neglect, abuse or abandonment, to try to speak out about it, and to have your voice not be heard. I know this from personal experience. When I was a child, I used to wish that somebody, anybody, would stop by my house and witness the abuse that my siblings and I were experiencing – but it never happened. It took two years of self-advocacy on my behalf to get my siblings and I to safety."*

In 2021, Ohio foster care alumni recommend and are eager to work towards the following:

<b>Statewide Foster Youth Ombudsman's Office</b>	For youth who are experiencing abuse in their biological, foster, adoptive, kinship, respite, residential and group home placements to be able to contact that Office, and for their concerns to be independently investigated.
<b>Expanded GAL Requirements</b>	To increase the frequency of guardian ad litem meetings with foster youth, in order for GALs to truly listen to youth before representing their voices in court.
<b>Youth Voice in Court</b>	We deeply value our partnership with the Ohio Supreme Court, and are eager to work with them to establish a statewide procedure whereby foster youth would be informed of their court dates and empowered to attend.
<b>Improved Residential Licensing Requirements</b>	It is deeply concerning that after a two-year investigation led to license removal for a residential facility in Ohio, they are allowed to reapply for that license in 10 months.

## 2.) Life Skills and Resource Knowledge



Ohio foster care youth and alumni believe that:

- Independent Living Departments should be supported and maintained in every county.
- Foster parents and caseworkers that serve teens should be required to take trainings on resources to assist youth in their transition to young adulthood.
- These trainings should be designed by former foster youth, with insights from today’s foster youth included in curriculum design.

The passage of House Bill 8 has reduced the number of preservice and ongoing training hours for foster parents, for the purpose of training, licensing and approving foster parents in a more expeditious matter. Expanding Ohio’s network of foster parents is a first step – the next step forward must be to *Make Every Training Hour Count* through training tracks, followed by specialized certifications.

**These training tracks and certifications** will better prepare and equip foster parents to meet the needs of the children and teens they serve. Each specific training track could lead to specialty certifications, thereby facilitating the ongoing growth of foster parents and empowering them as Subject Matter Experts.

**Both foster parents and caseworkers that serve teens** should participate in a training track that includes in-depth knowledge of resources to support foster youth in navigating young adulthood. Lack of resource knowledge, by foster parents, caseworkers, and the youth themselves undermines positive outcomes in young adulthood.

**Ohio foster care youth and alumni** would like to assist in designing future training tracks and writing future curriculum for this effort. Several of our members are certified trainers within the Ohio Child Welfare Training Program.

<b>Make Every Training Hour Count</b>	The reduction in the number of preservice and ongoing training hours for foster parents can and must be paired with specific training tracks, especially for those entrusted with teens.
<b>Alumni Voice in OCWTP Training</b>	The foster care alumni trainer effort was first launched in 2008, and since that time, Ohio foster care alumni have written curriculum for the Bridges program, facilitated workshops for foster parents and caseworkers, and led Core training. We desire to continue to be of help.
<b>Consistent Independent Living Preparation</b>	This must start at age 14, as per state and federal law. Whether foster care youth are adopted, reunified or “age out” of foster care, we all need life skills to help us succeed in the future.

### 3.) Normalcy and Emotional Support

Ohio foster care youth and alumni believe that:

- Congregate care placements should provide safety, normalcy and preparation for adulthood.
- A strengths-based addendum should be added to the ICCA form.
- Maintaining sibling connections must be made a greater priority.

Ohio foster care youth have expressed concerns regarding some congregate care placements, and praise for others. During a recent statewide OHIO YAB Ambassador meeting, participants did a compare and contrast between positive and negative placements. Praise was lavished on facilities that provided personal, group and family therapy that was specific to meet the young person’s specific needs, rather than being one size fits all. One young person wrote a play about a positive placement that helped her move forward, while describing another placement as feeling like a dumping ground.

**Placing a child in the least restrictive environment** and pairing that child with a loving foster home can be negatively impacted by an out-of-date, inaccurate ICCA form. Foster youth from multiple counties have expressed concerns that wording of their ICCA form labels and stigmatizes them. They shared that this form grows in length without evolving to reflect their growth, accomplishments, or recovery from trauma – and without providing any context to explain what might have precipitated previous behavior.

**The importance of maintaining sibling connections** remains a heartfelt, vitally important, and ever-present priority for Ohio foster care youth, alumni and adoptees. In a video testimony earlier this year, one young person compared sibling separation with the pains that people are currently feeling due to social distancing. Another young person shared, *“It is so important to keep siblings connected because, as a child or teen in foster care, you are already going through a huge change and it’s scary. Having a sibling with you makes this process a little easier, and you feel less alone.”*

<b>Congregate Care Placements</b>	Congregate care placements, and private agencies in general, should be rated on how well they provide safety, normalcy and preparation for adulthood.
<b>Addendum to the ICCA Form</b>	Ohio foster youth would like to design this form, and pilot it throughout the state.
<b>Maintaining Sibling Connections</b>	Ohio has the opportunity and responsibility to do more to identify siblings of children who enter the child welfare system, to place siblings together whenever possible, and to maintain contact between separated siblings.

## 4.) Outcomes in Young Adulthood

- **In the midst of the current international pandemic**, foster care youth and alumni are in greater need of supports than ever before, due to disconnection from work, school, and external support systems. Far too many are at risk of losing housing, and even their lives.
- **The need for post-emancipation resources**, and for foster care youth, alumni, caseworkers and foster parents to be aware of these resources and how to navigate them, pre-dated COVID-19.
- **There are untapped opportunities** to create and maintain mechanisms to ensure that this happens – and continues to happen. And we would love to be a part of designing those resources and efforts.

**Ohio foster care youth and alumni are deeply grateful to Governor DeWine** for issuing a moratorium for youth aging out of foster care and Bridges between April – June, and then extending it until August 31, 2020. Even as we asked our Governor for help, Ohio foster care youth and alumni were reaching out nationally to suggest an increase in federal Chafee funding, and for the 30% cap allowed to room and board to be lifted.

**We are overwhelmed with gratitude that the provisions** included in the *Supporting Foster Youth and Families through the Pandemic Act* (H.R. 7947) have been signed into federal law and would like to support our state in making the very most of these provisions. We have proactive ideas to share when it comes to making the most of increased Chafee funding in order to improve outcomes after foster care and notifying young people about expanded Chafee eligibility and services, the moratorium, and the re-entry provisions.

<p><b>Increased Federal Chafee Funds in FY 2021</b></p>	<p>Let's make the most of this time-limited opportunity by working towards consistent statewide life skills preparation and a better overall safety net for former foster youth.</p> <p>Whether foster care youth are adopted, reunified, entrusted to kin or "age out" of foster care, we all need life skills to help us succeed in the future.</p>
<p><b>Post-Emancipation Resources</b></p>	<p>Post-emancipation resources can make the difference between success or setbacks for former foster youth.</p>
<p><b>Roadmaps for Resource Awareness and Access</b></p>	<p>Ohio foster care youth and alumni would love to lead by example in trying to map this out – as OHIO YAB Ambassadors are currently doing by working on a Medicaid/Managed Care Roadmap.</p>



**The *Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board*** is a statewide organization of young people (aged 14-24) who have experienced foster care. The OHIO YAB exists to be the knowledgeable statewide voice that influences policies and practices that impact youth who have or will experience out of home care.

***Alumni of Care Together Improving Outcomes Now Ohio*** is dedicated to improving outcomes for current and former foster care youth. ACTION Ohio brings together the voices of youth, alumni and allies to create lasting change and generate hope for current and former foster youth, based on access to resources, ally support and alumni expertise.

We would like to end on a note of appreciation for our allies throughout the state.

- **Governor Mike DeWine**, long-time champion of Ohio foster care youth.
- **Ohio Children's Alliance**, ever-present and actively supportive partner since 2007.
- **ODJFS**, always available to meet with and listen to foster care youth and alumni.
- **Ohio Supreme Court**, hosting youth meetings and welcoming youth insights.
- **Chancellor Randy Gardner**, for his ever-present availability and support.
- **Ohio Department of Higher Education**, helping to improve post-secondary outcomes.
- **Ohio Reach**, for creating a positive ripple effect throughout the state of Ohio.
- **Campus programs** at CSCC, CSU, Tri-C OSU, Central State and Wright State.
- **Ohio CASA**, welcoming of youth voice, and eager to partner on projects.
- **Athens County CASA**, supportive of statewide and regional efforts.
- **Adoption Network Cleveland**, statewide advocacy partner.
- **Children's Defense Fund Ohio**, statewide advocacy partner.
- **OHILA**, bringing together independent living professionals to improve outcomes.
- **Dave Thomas Foundation**, an amazing supporter and tireless improver of outcomes.
- **NCHCW**, our national partner who assists with statewide efforts as well.
- **Institute for Human Services**, welcoming the voices of those with lived experience.
- **Children Services Transformation Advisory Council**, allowing us to offer testimony.
- **PCSAO**, brainstorming with us about the Make Every Training Hour Count initiative.
- **OFCA**, including the voices of foster care youth in statewide conferences.