



March 1, 2022

Senate Committee on Finance
Attn. Editorial and Document Section
Rm. SD-219
Dirksen Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, DC 20510-6200

Submitted via email to: Statementsfortherecord@finance.senate.gov

RE: Testimony Submitted for Protecting Youth Mental Health: Part II-Identifying and Addressing Barriers to Care, Hearing Held on February 15, 2022

Dear Chairman Wyden, Ranking Member Crapo, and Members of the Senate Committee on Finance,

Thank you for your interest in improving access to mental and behavioral health services for children, young people, and their families. Testimony provided during the hearings on February 8th and 15th demonstrated the urgent need to improve these services, the importance of involving young people and included ideas for improvement.

We write to you as add our voices organizations with networks of individuals with lived experience in foster care and kinship care and elevate the voices of those lived experience leaders.

The Children's Trust Fund Alliance is a national leader in promoting and supporting the voices of parents in policy and practice areas, in helping families build protective factors to gain capacity for life-long changes and in preventing parental and societal neglect of children. Its national network of state children's trust funds invests almost \$300 million annually in statewide and community-based initiatives to strengthen families and protect children.

Generations United's mission is to improve the lives of children, youth, and older people through intergenerational collaboration, public policies, and programs for the enduring benefit of all. We are home to the National Center on Grandfamilies, and our work is informed and driven by a national network of grandparents and other relatives raising children.

FosterClub is the national network for young people who experience foster care. FosterClub believes when young people have the support they need and opportunity to drive change in their life, they become self-determined and do better. We also believe when the system listens to young people, it does better.

We bring together young people, birth parents and relative caregivers to drive change within foster care. Collectively, these voices are referred to as lived experience leaders - each bringing their own experience engaging with the child welfare system.

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During the February 15th hearing, Mr. Trace Terrell stated: “My peers and I believe we deserve a seat at the table. While there are many ways we can do this, it starts by ensuring young people can meaningfully contribute to and be involved with legislative work on the local, state and federal level.” Our organizations agree fully and we are thankful for Chairman Wyden’s, Ranking Member Crapo and the Committee Members’ commitment to ensuring young people have a seat at the table as work on this critical issue continues. In addition to young people, we are asking that parents and kinship caregivers be included at the table when identifying challenges and solutions.

While the February 8th and 15th hearings were focused on protecting youth mental health, we know providing mental health support to parents and caregivers, along with young people, leads to better outcomes. Robust, quality and accessible mental and behavioral health services can lead to children and youth staying safely together with their family, rather than experiencing the trauma of entering the foster care system.

In April 2021, we asked young people, parents and relative caregivers about the support services for families that are facing mental or behavioral health challenges (including addiction). We received 80 total responses that came through with 5 key themes of recommendations. Lived experience leaders discussed the types of support services and resources that will help families who are facing mental, behavioral health and/or addiction challenges receive support, build on their strengths and stay safely out of the foster care system, wherever possible.

It is clear from the responses, that the whole family must be able to access and engage in mental and behavioral health services and supports.

The recommendations from young people, parents and caregivers are below:

1. Provide us with timely, unbiased, culturally relevant, and evidence-based prevention services that center family engagement.
2. We need rehabilitation and treatment programs that serve and support the entire family, to include caregivers, and children, when providing treatment services for mental health or substance use.
3. Create space for individuals with lived experience to serve as peer mentors and work to deliver treatment programming and services to families.
4. Connect us with trauma-informed mental health and family engagement services that address the root and systemic challenges and reasons for addiction including adverse childhood experiences and trauma.
5. Address and support our basic needs by providing services such as: housing, transportation, food, education, employment, and child care assistance.

We’ve selected perspectives and quotes from lived experience leaders to further demonstrate the above recommendations. We invite you to view this document that was previously published with additional information which can be viewed [here](#).

1. **Provide us with timely, unbiased, culturally relevant, and evidence-based prevention services that center family engagement.**

"Having equitable mental health services like being able to do therapy through the phone, having a daycare connected, every insurance covered or no cost at all to get help. Teaching children and parents and adults about boundaries, and how to communicate when they are disrespected."

-Grace Gold, Former Foster Youth from New York with New York State Youth Advisory Board and BraveHearts MOVE

"Culturally appropriate services."

- Robyn Wind-Tiger, Kinship caregiver from Oklahoma

"A parent's mental health and or behavioral health is often thought of as a weakness because of the parent's inability to receive the appropriate care. The child welfare system and or child protection does not realize the difficulty that families have to try to receive the health care benefits to begin to access services. In addition, are the services located in the community in which they live? Are the services family-friendly allowing for the consideration of holistic treatment which considers the entire family and is culturally sensitive? Child welfare/child protection [can] help expedite services with the family without judgment and when parent/parents cannot do homework with the family to establish a care plan specifically for their family. It's important for the caseworker, child welfare/child protection to know what's available in the community and how to tap into those resources in a way that families that may not have access to. Understanding the waitlist and the lack of appropriate services in all communities. Most importantly acknowledge the strength of the family that may not be like your family or any other family but unique family strengths to their culture and environment."

- Sandra Killett from New York with We All Rise and The Alliance

2. We need rehabilitation and treatment programs that serve and support the entire family, to include caregivers, and children, when providing treatment services for mental health or substance use.

"Preventative resources that could support families staying together could be youth and parent peers and mentors with lived experience who can illuminate hope, offer support and connect a parent or youth to other resources and model recovery. Also, support groups and community volunteer programs that focus on prevention and support keeping families together. One example of a good model is Safe Families whose focus is to prevent children from entering into the foster care system and another great model program for support is the Parents Anonymous support groups."

- Leanne Walsh, Birth parent from Oregon with Oregon Parent Advisory Council

"As a former foster child of a mother who struggled with substance addiction, my siblings and I were separated and placed in different foster homes at an early age. This was devastating for the entire family. I believe it could have been avoided if support services would have included rehabilitation services for my mother and an in-home caregiver (with temporary conservatorship) for my siblings and me vs. foster care. Perhaps counseling services for the entire family as well."

- Lorna Jackie Wilson, Former Foster Youth from Michigan

"From my personal experience, I didn't have enough support and that is why some of my children went into foster care and some went to kinship care. I truly believe that if we had more facilities that welcome both mom and dad to get treatment while children remain with them in the facility would help with the prevention of going into care, but the root is truly more support. Some families don't have relatives or people that would want to help out during a crisis and the unfortunate event is entering foster care."

- Pasqueal Nguyen, Birth parent from Louisiana with The Extra Mile and Youth Law Center

3. Create space for individuals with lived experience to serve as peer mentors and work to deliver treatment programming and services to families.

“Working with a Certified Peer Support Specialist (someone with lived experience with addiction/mental health) or a Family Partner (someone with lived experience in child welfare). Access to MAT-Medication-Assisted Treatment for Substance Misuse.” - Kelly Kirk, Birth parent from North Carolina with Sandhills Opioid Response Consortium, NC DHHS Child Welfare Family Advisory Council, Drug Free Moore County, Richmond County DSS, Richmond County - DEFT (Drug Endangered Families Task Force)

“I think support groups would help a parent’s mental health, I think that if they had a group they would be able to share their thoughts vs having to go through struggling with inside problems alone.”

- Former Foster Youth from South Carolina

“For African American families, education and awareness campaigns run by grassroots trustworthy organizations to decrease the stigma of mental health and provide resources,[including] access to culturally relevant mental health services. Anything that encourages early awareness of problems and a safe place for caregivers to share and explore options would help. This is such a HUGE problem in communities of color and progress in this area would definitely benefit the welfare of our families.”

- Melodye James, Kinship caregiver from Ohio with Restored Vision

4. Connect us with trauma-informed mental health and family engagement services that address the root and systemic challenges and reasons for addiction including adverse childhood experiences and trauma.

“A trauma-informed therapist would have helped me process what I went through and aided my dad’s understanding of my behavior and how to properly support me”

-Zoe Jones-Walton, former foster youth, TX, FosterClub

“When there are not affordable centers to treat and give mental therapy, people don’t go. We all know addiction and mental health issues go hand in hand, but when there is no access...they continue on their journey with drugs.”

- Terri, Kinship caregiver from Alabama

“As a former foster youth who aged out of care and as a parent who returned to the system and accused of having undiagnosed mental health issues, and the biases that it brings is heartbreaking. It would have been helpful to receive dialectical behavioral therapy or cognitive processing therapy as a mechanism to help revert the issues they were bringing me in for and remove my children as a consequence of something I didn’t have.”

- Ashley Alber, current foster youth from Washington with WA State Parent Ally Committee

5. Address and support our basic needs by providing services such as: housing, transportation, food, education, employment, and child care assistance.

"Extended family and friends should be considered as resources with funding being provided to aid them in keeping the family together"

- Marquetta King, foster/adoptive parent, MD, Treatment Foster Care Parent Advisory Board, Arc Northern Chesapeake; Together as Adoptive Parents

"Such resources as therapy, skills training, transportation assistance, food assistance, housing assistance can make a big change in a family's life. Prevention and Education are key to helping families stay out of the system."

- Isabel, Birth parent from Arizona

"I went into foster care for the first time when I was 11, it was due to my mother's addiction to methamphetamine. I think being able to provide an adequate amount of support for the parent, whether it be resources in the community or even a government stipend for the right treatment would help immensely. Most parents feel as if they are fighting this battle on their own and I think helping them realize they aren't would be incredible for them and the reunification process."

- Charles Lewis, Former Foster Youth from Indiana

Our organizations are pleased to share these priorities with the Committee as you continue looking at how to improve mental health supports for young people and their families. If you would like to discuss further, please contact Binley Taylor, System Change Director at FosterClub, 503-717-1552 or systemchange@fosterclub.com, Jaia Lent, Deputy Executive Director at Generations United, 202-777-0115 or jlent@gu.org and Teresa Rafael, Executive Director at Children's Trust Fund Alliance, 206-650-5317 or teresa.rafael@ctfalliance.org.

Sincerely,

Children's Trust Fund Alliance, Generations United & FosterClub