



# Prevention: Strengthening Families and Averting Crises

## Executive Summary

The Family Voices United campaign surveyed birth parents, kinship caregivers, foster/resource and adoptive parents, and young people with experience in the child welfare system across the country to compile their lived expertise on prevention services for families prior to interaction with the child welfare system.

Six priorities were identified across all lived experience roles as essential steps in order to best address prevention with families:

1

Families need **accessible, equitable resources** prior to child welfare intervention

*"One-on-one support from people that can empathize and understand our situation. Many services provided are not able to adapt to a family or person's specific needs, which ends up wasting everybody's time and resources."*

*-Young person in/from care, Puerto Rico*

2

**Quality legal assistance** is crucial to support the best outcomes for families

*"After more than two years of fighting to get my grandsons I did not succeed due to financially not being able to afford legal counsel against the two foster families contesting placement with me. I currently have the fourth child in my care while grieving the loss of his three living brothers."*

*-Kinship/Relative Caregiver, CO*

3

We need to see **more accountability in the pathways to reunification**

*"There was nothing to prevent me from going into the system after being abused for so many years. I wish there was more of an accountability way to make sure I was able to reunite with my family."*

*-Youth in/from care, WI*



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When exploring placements for children and young people, **more thorough searching for existing family members** and more resources to these family members should be required

*"My grandchild was placed in foster care at one month of age because there were no relatives to take her. YES there was! Me! But paternity was not established until child was at least four months old. The foster mother planned to adopt as child was nine months old before I was even able to meet her and over one year old before I was able to FOSTER her. Why did I have to be a foster parent when I am her grandmother?"*

**-Kinship/Relative Caregiver, NY**

5

**Community wrap-around supports** and services are essential to preventing interaction with child welfare

*"If many families who live in poverty were helped more they wouldn't be labeled neglectful and have their children taken from them, many caretakers are wonderful parents but just don't have the right tools, resources and supports in the community. If we were to advocate more for families who live in poverty (they just need an extra push and resources) less youth and children would enter the foster care system."*

**-Youth in/from care, MN**

6

**Mitigating biases and judgments** must be prioritized in order to equitably meet families needs

*"The lack of support, and the harsh judgement from people who don't understand mental illness, can be devastating for a family trying to overcome hard times."*

**-Youth in/from care, NV**

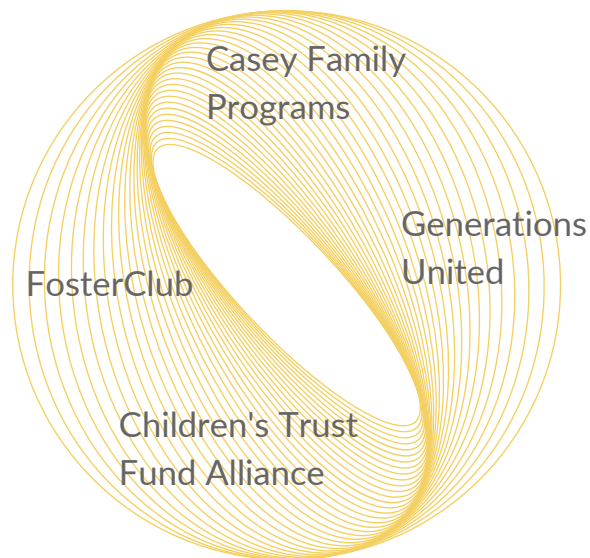


# **Prevention: Strengthening Families and Averting Crises**

Supports for families prior to child welfare intervention

# Framing

Family Voices United is a collaborative project with the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, Generations United, FosterClub, and Casey Family Programs.



Together, we work to elevate the voice and perspective of **young people, birth parents, and kinship/relative caregivers** (known collectively as **constituents**), to stakeholders, partners and organizations who make decisions about the child welfare system.

In order to make informed decisions that benefit children, young people, and families, lived experience voices and expertise must be not only heard, but must be centered in decision making.

# Share Your Perspective Campaign

Family Voices United launches regular "Share Your Perspective" questions on timely topics relating to child welfare. Currently, the campaign centers these questions around 5 rotating central themes:



Race Equity in Child Welfare



Older Youth & Congregate Care



Supporting Relatives Caring for Children



Expectant and Parenting Youth



**Prevention: Strengthening Families  
& Averting Crises**



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*July 2022 "Share Your Perspective" Question:*

What services or supports would have helped prevent you and your family or relatives from coming into contact with the child welfare system?



## Identified Priorities from Lived Experience Leaders

### *On Prevention Supports for Families*

- #1** Families need **accessible, equitable resources** prior to child welfare intervention

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- #2** **Quality legal assistance** is crucial to support the best outcomes for families

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- #3** We need to see more **accountability in the pathways to reunification**

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- #4** When exploring placements for children and young people, **more thorough searching for existing family members** and more resources to these family members should be required

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- #5** **Community wrap-around supports** and services are essential to preventing interaction with child welfare

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- #6** **Mitigating biases and judgments** must be prioritized in order to equitably meet families needs

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## Families need accessible, equitable resources prior to child welfare intervention

### Listening to lived experience voices

- Families need supports on mental health, substance use, domestic violence transportation, and finances

- When families have job stability, this leads to better outcomes for all members

- Systems and resources should be adaptable and responsive to the needs of families prior to removal

- Resources should be widely and creatively advertised to raise awareness for families

- There should be more assistance options that are not tied to income and earnings so that families can rely on the supports they need



# Accessible, Equitable Resources

Quotes from lived experience voices



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I fully believe that there needs to be an in-between service that helps directs families once CPS is ready to be involved...that goes to family and questions their needs and concerns, then provides the right tools to the family. If those need are met by the family, CPS doesn't step in.

-Young person in/ from care, ID

I believe my children could have stayed with their mother if we had a humane and adequate social safety net. She needed reassurance that she and her children would have access to safe housing, free from intimate partner violence, as well as healthcare, and food. This would have saved my children the heartbreak of enduring the traumas that brought them into care and ultimately separated them, for a time, from their mother.

-Foster/ Resource Parent, OR

If most parents just had more money or assets like a home, job, car, food, etc , they wouldn't have their kids taken. Aging out of foster care, I wish I would have been given the chance to be given/earn a car, have some housing stability, and a job/training offer. Now, if I have kids, maybe they'd be taken from me into foster care, and the cycle continues.

-Young person in/ from care, AZ

Access to drug and alcohol treatment centers. It was extremely difficult for my parents to get ahold of anyone when it came to getting into drug and alcohol treatment centers

-Young person in/from care, Oregon/ Siletz Tribe

Funds for my grandmother to be able to put me in afterschool programs while she was at work.

-Young person in/from care, GA

One-on-one support from people that can empathize and understand our situation. Many services provided are not able to adapt to a family or person's specific needs, which ends up wasting everybody's time and resources.

-Young person in/from care, Puerto Rico

# Accessible, Equitable Resources

Quotes from lived experience voices



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Due to the lack of housing my family was very unstable and moving place to place (motels, family friends) which impacted my school attendance and began a trail of evidence that lead to my parent becoming incarcerated. Alongside my parent's instability came with addiction which inhibited by parent's ability to recognize their own problems which inevitably impacted my brother and me.

-Young person in/ from care, CA

Assistance that is not based on your income.

-Kinship/Relative Caregiver, OR

More knowledge and more advertising of the serious consequences of any type of drug use. More campaigns on how your family and life will be taken from you. In the media. Make it easier to get help getting off drugs at little or no cost.

-Kinship/ Relative Caregiver,  
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Give families the resources they need.... Those resources are only talked about or offered once child welfare is involved.

-Young person in/from care, CA

Information about resources for families should be advertised more often in public and private spaces that offer prevention services can be useful such as a public library, or bathroom stalls.

-Young person in/from care, OR

CPS didn't contact me, and didn't research me even though I have my information months in advance. They did not offer treatment before removal or discuss how to keep the kids out of care. They just went for kids removal and then the parents caved completely out of depression.

My son lost his job because he needed to go to court.

-Kinship/ Relative Caregiver, WA



## Quality legal assistance is crucial to support the best outcomes for families

### Listening to lived experience voices

- Free, quality legal assistance would help families to better navigate the child welfare system

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- Family court judges and other legal team members should spend more time with families to better understand their situations

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- Legal processes should help humanize families to feel heard and understood, not just like a number in the system

# Quality Legal Assistance

*Quotes from lived experience voices*



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After more than two years of fighting to get my grandsons I did not succeed due to financially not being able to afford legal counsel against the two foster families contesting placement with me. I currently have the fourth child in my care while grieving the loss of his three living brothers.

-Kinship/Relative Caregiver, CO

I think that family court judges should spend more than just a few minutes with families to get a better view of what is going on.

-Kinship/ Relative Caregiver, KY

Free legal assistance

-Youth in/from care, CA

In a telephone conversation with the DCF worker, I reported the ability to provide housing for and to monitor my former foster child [who was in crisis], to ensure the safety of her children, which would have allowed them to stay in the home. This was never reported to the judge. Their removal was unnecessary. A team meeting with all providers could have saved these children the trauma of removal

-Kinship/ Relative Caregiver, MA



## We need to see more accountability in the pathways to reunification

### Listening to lived experience voices

- Foster care and removal should be the last possible option explored, and systems should more strongly support the pathways to reunification

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- Trauma-informed practices are crucial to reunification pathways

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- Supports should in place from birth to support the best outcomes for all families

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- We need accountability to the quality of resources offered to families during reunification planning

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- During times of crisis, we need accessible caseworkers or other supportive adults to help us navigate the pathway

# Reunification Pathways

Quotes from lived experience voices



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There was nothing to prevent me from going into the system after being abused for so many years. I wish there was more of an accountability way to make sure I was able to reunite with my family

-Youth in/from care, WI

Finding more loving people to adopt/foster.

-Kinship Caregiver, FL

Impactful parenting classes and accountability for the parent more than the child. The ones we went through only seemed to teach tactics that actually perpetuated and increased abusive behavior. There needs to be reflection on accountability as well as tactful resources to save each parent and the relationships they have with their children.

-Youth in/from care, Kinship/ Relative Caregiver, Foster/ Resource Parent, ID

Foster care is a brutal and traumatizing experience that is a system so called initially set to protect the welfare of youth due to neglect of biological or legal guardians. They make these children encounter more trauma and neglect during their their "care" due to lack of qualification importance of foster parents and agency corruptions because essentially we are just a case that the next caseworker has to have yet not held accountable for their care of job.

-Youth in/ from care, NY

Understanding, knowledge and support about the challenges I and our family faced as a single mother raising a child with complex mental health needs. someone to walk with me in a positive and solution focused manner

-Birth Parent, NY



**When exploring placements for children and young people, more thorough searching for existing family members and more resources to these family members should be required**

## Listening to lived experience voices

- Kinship and relative caregivers deserve equitable supports to those of foster parents
- Willing family members often aren't contacted or aren't permitted to temporarily take children and young people into their care
- We need stronger vetting of foster families to ensure they are able to best meet the needs of the children and young people in their care



# Searching for Family Members



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*Quotes from lived experience voices*

Grandparents are using their savings and retirement funds to raise grandchildren with no financial assistance from the state or the bio parents. I know some grandparents that have gone homeless trying to care for their grandchildren. I spent all of my savings but thankfully I have a good job. But it is still never enough

-Kinship/ Relative Caregiver, KY

My grandchild was placed in foster care at one month of age because there were no relatives to take her. YES there was! Me! But paternity was not established until child was at least four months old. The foster mother planned to adopt as child was nine months old before I was even able to meet her and over one year old before I was able to FOSTER her. Why did I have to be a foster parent when I am her grandmother? -

Kinship/Relative Caregiver, NY

Perhaps, if welfare had reached out to family members, foster care could have been the last option for consideration instead of the first.

-Youth in/from care, MI

A local agency that would have helped me navigate the informal, fictive kin, journey I was about to take. Since that wasn't in existence, I petitioned our child welfare system to help. They refused, and offered no other supports or direction for me to try.

-Birth Parent, Kinship/Relative Caregiver, Adoptive Parent, Foster Parent, MA

Providing more family members options on how to help

-Youth in/from care, WA



## Community wrap-around supports and services are essential to preventing interaction with child welfare

### Listening to lived experience voices

- Families need supports in stress reduction tactics

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- The system must understand that poverty does not equal neglect

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- There are often situations of generational trauma that families need supports to navigate

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- Mentorship, peer supports, and connecting families to their communities and each other is powerful!

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- Father are often left out of services, and deserve uplifting supports

# Community Wrap-Around

*Quotes from lived experience voices*



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My father receiving uplifting support would have helped. This includes funding, transportation and housing.

-Youth in/from Care, KS

The wrap-around-approach is a service and support that could have helped prevent my siblings and I from entering the foster care system. This is an approach that allows family and community to share perspectives on youth that require services within the community.

-Youth in/from care, MI

I need access to a peer (parent partner, parent ally or child welfare impacted peer). I needed them in pregnancy, at birth when the social worker came to put a hold on my twins.

-Birth Parent, WA

If many families who live in poverty were helped more they wouldn't be labeled neglectful and have their children taken from them, many caretakers are wonderful parents but just don't have the right tools, resources and supports in the community. If we were to advocate more for families who live in poverty (they just need an extra push and resources) less youth and children would enter the foster care system.

-Youth in/from care, MN

Supports to my single parent household that built connection between the family and community and through that connection resources could have been provided on needs.

-Youth in/ from care

Looking back it is hard for me to blame my mother. Instead, I believe that if she was able to have the proper mental health services she needed, she would have chosen a different path. I see evidence through my sisters. Growing up in such harsh environments pushed them to substance abuse as a way of coping with their own traumas. As they got older and had children, they both lost their kids due to substance abuse. Today, when I talk to my sisters, the number one thing I hear them say is that they seek to forget the things that have happened to us. Drugs help them forget, but it also ensures that the next generation has less of a chance to break the cycle. All of which could have been prevented if my mother, and then sisters had received proper mental health treatment.

-Youth in/from care, CA



## Mitigating biases and judgments must be prioritized in order to equitably meet families needs

### Listening to lived experience voices

- Stereotypes and institutional oppression compound barriers for families in the system and prior to child welfare interactions

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- Resources offered to families may appear numerous, but often do not address core equity issues and oppression

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- Stigmas around mental health can have devastating impacts on families abilities to navigate challenging times

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- Initial systemic norms of alienating children and their families are harmful and do not set families up for reunification pathways

# Supporting Children, Young People, and Families

Quotes from lived experience voices



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The lack of support, and the harsh judgement from people who don't understand mental illness, can be devastating for a family trying to overcome hard times.

-Youth in/from care, NV

My mother struggled with having the support that she needed to cope with many of her own stressors and life factors. She lacked the support than many other families have access to. Additionally, as a larger, multi-racial family, she faced various stereotypes and forms of institutional oppression that made our situations far more challenging.

-Youth in/from care, MI

When the police arrived after I called for a welfare check on my daughter I also stated I was on my way from out of state. The intake worker that arrived set the tone and began the alienation process between my daughter and myself resulting in three children being placed in two adoptable foster homes. Barriers we face against the system as families are numerous and often financially unattainable.

-Kinship/ Relative Caregiver, CO

To some, they think that there are so many resources available to families that are struggling. There are resources. But unfortunately, these resources do not consider equity in comparison to equality and often are part of larger systems of oppression. Often times, when families are left with no support, and exhaust all resources (as my mother did: from food assistance, family first programs, housing assistance, homeless shelters, family, friends, etc.), they tend to fall into what most consider unsafe.

-Youth in/from care, MI/ Potawatomi Peoples

# How to Use this Report

## Share with your Networks

The themes and priorities from this report can help others gain further insight into the child welfare system from the perspective of those who have lived experience. It may also help those in your networks to better support constituents in their work.

## Elevate to Policymakers

The people making laws and decisions must hear from those who have experience with the systems they impact with their actions. Nothing about us without us.

## Highlight to Lived Experience Leaders

Creating community amongst lived experience leaders starts by sharing stories and identifying common experiences. Please share this report with constituents you work with or others in your networks with lived experience.

THANK YOU TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE, BIRTH PARENTS & KINSHIP CAREGIVERS, AND CHILD WELFARE COMMUNITY MEMBERS FOR ANSWERING OUR "SHARE YOUR PERSPECTIVE" QUESTION, AND FOR PROVIDING YOUR LIVED EXPERIENCE EXPERTISE TO THE FIELD OF CHILD WELFARE.

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