



Family Voices on Mental Health Support

The Family Voices United campaign brings together the voices of young people, birth parents, and relative caregivers with lived experience in the child welfare system to drive change in foster care. Learn more at familyvoicesunited.org.

Why Mental Health?

The passage of the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 now provides states, tribes, and territories with the option to use federal child welfare funds for prevention activities, including mental health services. These services can be provided to children at imminent risk of placement into foster care, pregnant or parenting youth in foster care, and parents and/or relative caregivers of children at imminent risk. As mental health services are being implemented across the country, it's critical for leaders to consider the perspectives of individuals who have first-hand experience with the child welfare system.

WE ASKED:

“Would mental health services have helped your family stay together, or shortened time in the child welfare system?”



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A collaborative project of The Alliance for Children's Trust & Prevention Funds, FosterClub, and Generations United with support from Casey Family Programs.

“Mental health services could have created stability, a safer living environment, and most importantly, I wouldn’t have ended in the foster system.”

- Jaci Cortez, Foster Alumni from California



“As a parent who is a trauma survivor, it would have helped me **if a caseworker had shared the services available during the first contact** we had. Knowing what’s available could have led to receiving help for mental health issues. Understanding helps families heal.”

- Karen Ezirim, Birth Parent from Ohio

“The services in place weren't addressing my issue specifically. Things I said in confidence were repeated in family therapy, which made things worse. I felt like I had no one.”

- Kayla Bailey, Foster Alumni from Nebraska

"Absolutely, my parents had several mental health issues. Though child welfare workers suggested services, my parents weren't provided direct support in getting there. **I believe intentional conversations explaining how necessary mental health services were for my parents to keep their children should have resulted in a different story for my family.** Maybe my dad would be alive, and maybe my mother wouldn't still be an addict."

- Brian Morgantini, Foster Alumni from Pennsylvania



“Mental health services would have made a world of a difference for my family. My biological mother struggled with depression and other mental health issues. She was able to find good employment and stable housing to get her three children back. However, when my siblings and I sat with our bags packed on her step to go home permanently, she had disappeared and was not heard or seen from for years after. Since then, she has told me that she was suicidal at that time and did not believe she could be a good mother or provide what was needed. While my mother was given services for substance abuse, housing and employment she did not receive any or adequate mental health services. I truly believe if she has mental health support/services I would have been reunified with her.”

- Amanda Davis, Foster Alumni from Ohio



“I adopted my grandson, Chad, who was in counseling as a toddler and diagnosed with PTSD at age four due to neglect and abuse. His first counselor utilized a lot of play therapy with him and suggested trauma-based parenting techniques for myself. She earned Chad’s trust by asking his permission before sharing with me confidences or things they discussed in private. However, due to his age, she and I also talked individually about what had and was happening, in his and my life—which was almost as good as having my own counselor.

When Chad was in high school, he began experiencing significant challenges following his parent's relapse. We were able to find a counselor who helped Chad recognize triggers and develop techniques to defuse his anger while dealing with his past. Family sessions improved our understanding of what Chad was thinking and better ways to talk with him and incentivize positive behavior. **Having access to Mental Health Care services saved our sanity and our family.**”

- Joan Dingle, Kinship Caregiver from Oregon

“Growing up, ever since my early years, I knew that my mother had some type of mental issues. As time went on, it had become so stressful but, at the same time, the norm, that I didn’t know what to do, so I didn’t care to know. If I received education about what my mom was experiencing earlier on it would have made me look at things differently and try to figure out how to help her myself. I didn’t learn until I was an adult that my mom had a lifelong chronic mental disorder. I firmly believe **mental health services would have helped my mom and helped me figure out how to support her.** As African Americans, I think it’s backwards that we don’t talk about mental health issues or admit to challenges until something bad has happened.”

- *Ramond Nelson, Foster Alumni from Pennsylvania*



“As the parent of an adult who developed bipolar at 22, having **access to support groups and information** through groups like the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) helped our family understand the illness. With support and knowledge from NAMI, I was able to help my adult son obtain services and take measures that prevented my now 7-year-old grandson from going into the Child Welfare System. My son is now 27 and I can unequivocally say that mental health issues impact the whole family and it takes the guidance, support, and efforts of the entire family to prevent bad things from happening during a crisis. I pray that individuals who develop mental health issues have the family and community supports needed to help them and their children live safe, healthy and productive lives.”

- *Wendi Turner, Kinship Caregiver and Community Partner from Ohio*

“I’ve gone through 15 years of abuse and actually talking to people that care to listen really helped me feel like I wasn’t alone. Everywhere I looked I saw everyone that supported me through my journey. I’m grateful to learn more about others and more importantly myself. **Knowing that I wasn’t alone by hearing people story really helped me grow into a stronger person.**”

- Daisy Cook, Foster Alumni from Oklahoma

“During the time that my 4-year-old child was in out of home care due to my substance use disorder (SUD), I knew I was also **dealing with an undiagnosed mental health situation**. I would have episodes of being unstoppable followed by days or weeks of not being able to be motivated to do anything or being able to see anything as a success. I was able to recover from SUD and reunify with my 5-year-old, but the ups and down continued. I was **terrified about having my treatment/child welfare team learn I also had bipolar** because I thought it would completely derail the progress of my case and wouldn’t give me enough time to stabilize. I white-knuckled it, reunified and *then* got the help that I needed to address bipolar disorder. I’m lucky I dodged a bullet, but I wish that I would have felt supported to address *all* of the major barriers/needs to quality parenting during the life of my case. Instead, I reacted with fear and stigma that the system would have made it impossible for my family to come together again.

- China Darrington, Birth Parent from Ohio



“Behavioral health services could have helped my mother when she was told by the court that she couldn’t go to our home during a 30-day reunification trial with our father. My mother stopped by our house to leave money and food, helping my father cover bills for all 7 of us. She only spoke Spanish and didn’t fully understand the court orders; she knew my father didn’t have other supports and wanted to make sure we were ok. **No one told her that her decision could impact our family for the rest of our lives or offered to help her figure out how to provide support while following court orders. If someone had, I believe my family’s story would be different.** My four younger siblings wouldn’t have been adopted right after this happened.”

- Jacqueline Leonard, Foster Alumni from California

How to use this paper

Our hope is that young people, parents and relative caregivers with lived experience in the child welfare system, community organizations, state Family First implementation teams, child welfare agencies, and other stakeholders will use this document to inform discussions about how to maximize support to families. If you are interested in using the quotes or perspective contained in this document or if you would like to bring young people, parents and relative caregivers to your event or project, email the Family Voices United team at info@familyvoicesunited.org or call 503.717.1552.



FAMILY VOICES UNITED

About the Family Voices United campaign

The Campaign elevates the voices and perspectives of young people, parents, and kinship providers, collectively known as family voices or “constituent voices”. Individuals with lived experience in the child welfare system are currently sharing their stories and expertise to educate, inform and transform the systems that serve children, youth and families - both in policy and practice. With new federal legislation - the Family First Prevention Services Act - states, tribes, and territories have new opportunities to implement changes that many constituents have identified are needed to fully support keeping children safe in strong, supported families.

Join the movement! Sign up at FamilyVoicesUnited.org