

foster
advocates



The Minnesota Promise Report

A Foster-led vision for child welfare systems change





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To Fosters: Thank You

This report was only possible because of all the Fosters who contributed along the way and who continue to be the heart and moral compass of Foster Advocates and this growing Foster Movement.

For those Fosters who participated in the MN Promise campaign, through listening sessions, strategy meetings, and feedback on every draft of this report, we hope we have done right by you and the trust you put in us through this report, and that this honors and reflects the visions and collective efforts of Fosters from across the state.

For Fosters new to MN Promise, welcome! This is a living vision that we know will grow over time, driven by the contributions of Fosters like you. However you choose to engage with MN Promise, we want you to know that your experience and expertise matter and that we are here to offer you community and partnership.

And to all Fosters reading this report: We hope you feel seen, heard, valued, and cared for.

Ariana Chamoun
Interim Executive Director

Elena Leomi
Managing Director
of Movement Building

MN Promise
was the first time
I was in a room
with other
Fosters and it
wasn't something
to be ashamed
of or hide.



Minnesota's Collective Promise to Fosters

When the State of Minnesota removes a child from their family of origin, it makes a promise to that child and to all Minnesotans. The promise is to care for that child better than the family could have done, and to nurture that child every day and guide them towards full, successful lives.

It is a promise the state struggles and, too often, fails to keep.

We see this in the stories of our Foster leaders and in statewide data on Foster outcomes. **The reality is that the current child welfare system status quo is not meeting our collective promise to Fosters.**

All Minnesotans have a collective responsibility for the successes and failures of the child welfare system, but Fosters live them, and when that system is failing them, they are suffering and unsafe.

The disparities and stigmas Fosters experience are not new. They have faced injustices across generations and cultures. These injustices are predictable but never inevitable. And, with collective will and Foster-informed action, they are preventable.

To achieve a shift in imagination and outcomes, we must listen to Fosters.



This report holds within it a grounding vision for the Foster Movement in Minnesota; vision that holds the dreams and demands of Fosters, for themselves, their peers, and future generations. Their experiences and expertise inform the vision for the Movement, in which all Minnesotans have a role.

MN Promise is the first statewide campaign envisioned and led by Fosters to gather and share their bold ideas for systems change. As far as we know, it is also the first such campaign in the country.

MN Promise is a call to action, not just a catalog of harms. It is a roadmap for change and a testament to the resilience, hope, and vision of those who have lived through the foster care system and are living through it now.

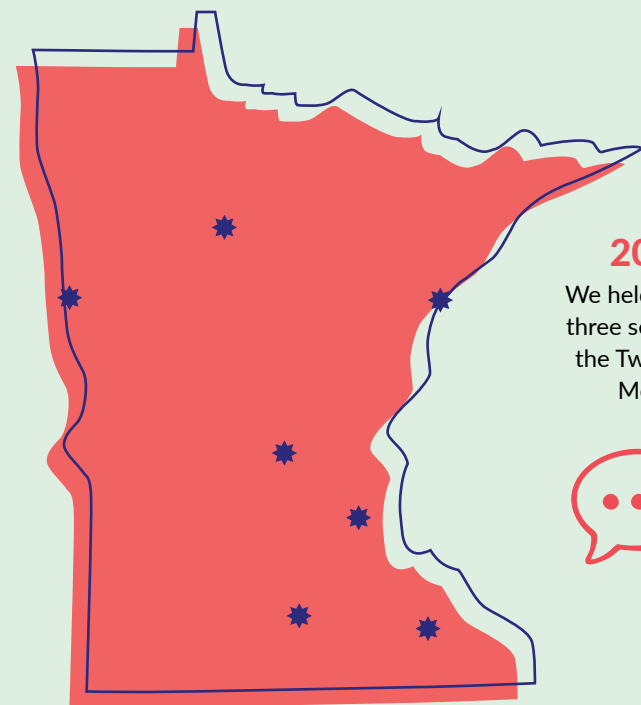
Fosters are demanding a future where they are seen, valued, uplifted, and loved — not discarded. This report is a **BOLD** demand for justice, and a detailed picture of what justice looks like.

Now, we hope you will join us in turning this vision into reality.



A Foster-led Vision for Change

At Foster Advocates, we believe those closest to the problems are also closest to the solutions. We launched MN Promise in 2022 by traveling across the state hosting listening and design sessions with Fosters to document their expertise and answer the question “What would it look like if Minnesota kept its promise to Fosters?”



2022

We held our first three sessions in the Twin Cities Metro.



2023

We hit the road, traveling to St. Cloud, Bemidji, Duluth, Moorhead, Rochester, and Mankato.



2024

We wrapped our final sessions, including an in-person and virtual session focused on Native Fosters.



Age Reach

While most sessions focused on transition-age Fosters ages 18-28, we focused one in-person session on 14-17-year-olds in the Metro and one virtual session for Fosters aged 28 and older.

50

Geographic Reach

In all, MN Promise participants had foster care experience in over 50 of Minnesota's 87 counties.

20%

of participants experienced adoption. Roughly half of those were failed adoptions.

38%

of participants also experienced the juvenile justice system.

50%

of participants had recent experiences with homelessness.

Representing Fosters Statewide

We held 11 in-person sessions and three virtual sessions, reaching 122 Fosters statewide who broadly reflect the demographics of the state's foster care system: over 70 percent were Fosters of color, over 30 percent had a disability, over 30 percent were LGBTQ+ or Two-spirit.

Thinking and Dreaming BOLD

This report is built from expertise shared and ideas gathered what is and is not working within the child welfare system. The gap between Fosters' needs and the care they receive is not due to a lack of solutions; but a failure to engage and center those with lived expertise, to prioritize them, and to take bold, collective action. Those who have been impacted must be given true power to direct systems change, while not being left alone in change-making work.

Challenging the Status Quo

Many of us have heard phrases thrown around such as “the system is broken” or “there are cracks in the system.” At Foster Advocates, we disagree—the system is doing exactly what it was designed to do. So why do we continue to prioritize investments towards the system as it currently stands? Is this really the only way?.

Where Do You Come In?

The actions and visions in this report are bigger than just Foster Advocates. This is a guide for a larger Foster Movement in Minnesota. By engaging Foster leaders and a broad network of community partners, we ensure this change-making work extends beyond our staff and organization. **Fosters have shared their vision for fulfilling our collective promise — how will you help bring it to life?**

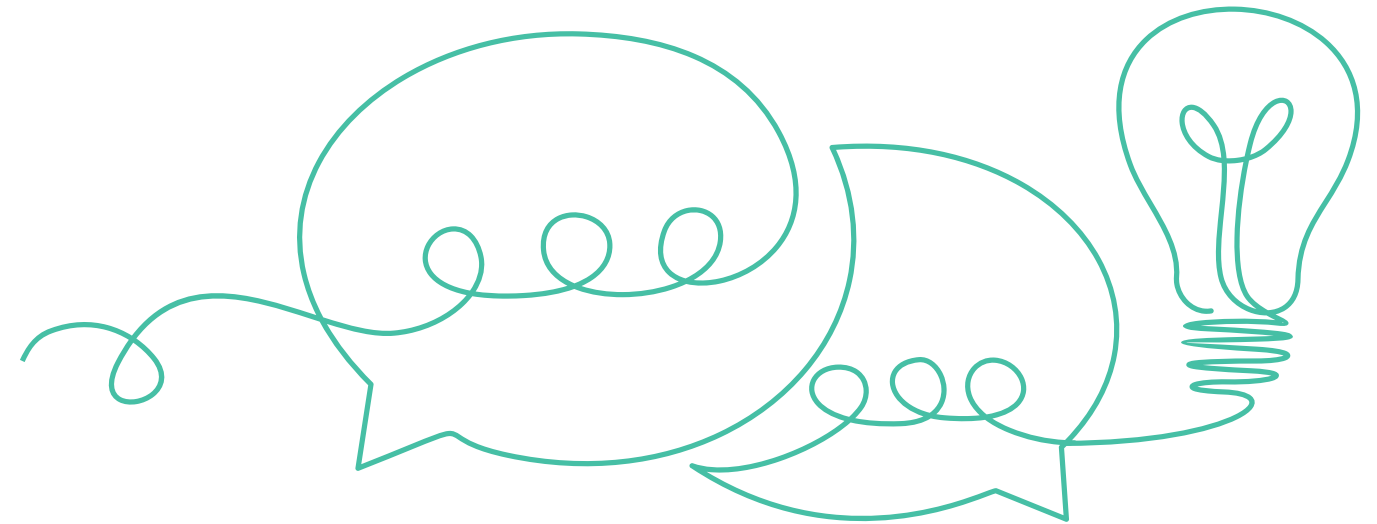


A Letter from the MN Promise Committee

Since January 2023, Foster Advocates has hosted a MN Promise committee, made up of Foster participants from different sessions.

This committee has shifted over time, incorporating new Foster leaders as our road trip progressed. The committee supported session recruitment and peer follow-up, report feedback and design, and planning for the public launch of this report! The following is a letter from spring 2025 committee members:

Being part of the MN Promise committee, seeing all the steps on the backend to bring this report together and contributing to the bigger picture of change, has been exciting. We love that Fosters get to have their voices heard after so many years of being silenced. Our hope is that you — all Minnesotans — will be able to truly see what we've gone through, what we've already accomplished, and what support we need moving forward. We know some of the things in the report may be hard to read, or seem unbelievable, but we refuse to sugar coat the foster care system. We need you to come to the hard truths in this report with open minds, putting aside any stereotypes or biases you have about Fosters. We need you to truly take in the data from our expertise and try to understand this glimpse into what life in the foster care system, and afterwards, is like for us.



Every Fosters' story is different, and all of them are valid. And we hope you recognize that if just one Foster experienced a system failure, that is one Foster too many. **These are our stories, and they are undeniable.**

This is the first report like this that we know of, created for Fosters, by Fosters. Fosters are not presenting their stories for sympathy, or pity, but to make sure what happened to us doesn't happen again, and to make things right for the Fosters coming up behind us. We hope this report inspires the community to join Fosters so that we can all advocate and support youth in the foster care system. This report shows where the harms and challenge points are, AND where the praise and possibilities are. **As you read through this report, ask yourself: what can I do to support the change Fosters are asking for?**

As Foster leaders, we welcome you to the table to be a part of that change. Throughout the report you'll see lots of ways you can engage, and being a part of the movement will look different for everyone. **No one has to do everything, everyone can do something.**

This report is a starting point for conversations and action, to discuss how we make things better and where we go from here. We all need to be working together to change the system. It is not going to happen overnight — but we believe with continuous effort one day that promise will be fulfilled.

Your spring 2025 MN Promise Committee:
Alayna, Aleesha, Izzy, Jessica, Mariah

Thank you to 2023 & 2024 committee members:
Ada, Audriana, Deddtrease, Dezarae, Ja-Vay, Kaliyah, Karen, Katelyn, Lauryn, Lexi, My-Kia, Nia, Ryn, Sage, Shane, Vincent, and Vivianna



Care Note for Fosters

This report holds a mix of hopes and harms. Reading this, especially for those still healing from their foster care journey, may be hard. We urge you to create space and call in support to care for yourself as you dive in. A few offerings for grounding:

Before you dive in

Ground yourself



Do a body scan from your toes up to your head. What parts of your body are active? Which parts need attention? How can you tune back into your body after each section?

Sensory map



What music will support you in the background? Are there smells to help ground you? What sensory supports (fidgets, blankets, crunchy, or soft foods) do you need? Where will you be comfortable?

Ground yourself



Have you had enough water? food? movement? sunshine? Who can you process with after you read?

Breathe



Put your hand on your heart as you take a deep breath in for four counts, hold for four counts, out for four, hold for four.

Remember, you do not have to read this report in order, or in one sitting!

If you find yourself activated UP with anxiety or other flooded emotions, move around and shake, or rub both your arms and pat your legs. Try drinking cold water, or putting a cold washcloth on the back of your neck.

If you find yourself activated DOWN feeling numb or dissociated, try a gentle walk around the room or rocking where you're sitting. Blow bubbles through a straw, or name three things in the room around you.

Remember, Foster Advocates and our Minnesota network of Fosters are a resource as you need! Come have a seat at the table with us.

Do you know your child welfare history?

Every system is perfectly designed to get the results that it does. Given child welfare's history, it is no surprise that we see deeply embedded disparities. In the 250 years since the first case of child abuse was prosecuted in the United States (using animal abuse laws, since those were in place before child abuse in this country), family separation has been wielded as a means of control, punishment, or genocide. Sixteen American Indian Boarding schools separated children from their families and culture starting in 1871 in Minnesota, with forced assimilation causing intergenerational trauma to many Native communities across the state, Minnesota was a key site for Orphan Trains from the mid 1800s-1920s, where children from immigrant or low-income families — often not actually orphaned — were shipped from eastern cities to the Midwest to support farms. Group homes and social safety nets were created for poor white children, excluding Black youth and various immigrant groups over the 1800-1900s.

10,000

Minnesota children experienced out-of-home foster care in 2024, and thousands more experienced a family investigation.





Foster Care Impacts All of Us

This report is not just a guide to those with close proximity to the Foster community. This is a guide for everyone in Minnesota, for our collective responsibility to Fosters. Because the truth is, everyone knows a Foster.

Every Minnesotan has been a child. That is a statement so obvious that it might sound ridiculous. As adults, every Minnesotan has been a parent or aunt or uncle or neighbor to a child. You already know a lot about what can help and what might harm them.

In this way, the issues and vision discussed in this report are for every Minnesotan. Our standards of caring for Fosters should be defined the same as they are for any child. Instead, Fosters are subjected to an often disjointed, disconnected, and dehumanizing system.

The deficiencies of the child welfare system are not the fault of any one group or individual. There are many individuals serving in many different roles, who are working every day to protect Fosters and families, offer guidance, and improve their lives. However, right now Fosters receive that quality care based on luck — and that is not good enough. We all have a role to play in creating a child welfare system that truly serves Fosters. When the system does right by Fosters, it uplifts all those around them.

As you read this report and contemplate Fosters' bold ideas and action steps for the Minnesota Foster Movement, know this: all are welcome — and needed.

These are
our stories.
Systems change
is a process.
Join us!

It takes all of us

To the Broader Public

For those who have not been closely connected to the child welfare system until now, we hope this report helps you to gain a sense of the range of Foster experiences and the power of their voices and bold ideas. This information may challenge some assumptions and public stories about foster care and we hope you can lean into learnings that may be new to you.

For Community Partners

Whatever the focus of your services, you are serving Fosters — you just may not realize it. Fosters are a part of every subpopulation, and deserve to be served as a priority population in a way that meets their individual cultural needs and addresses system-specific barriers. All community partners have not just the opportunity, but the responsibility to become Foster-informed in their services.

For Birth Parents and Extended Family

It is a failure of our systems of support that family separation ever occurs. While this report focuses on the perspectives of Fosters from their time in out-of-home care and beyond, families of origin also have stories that deserve to be heard. The failures of the child welfare system create intergenerational cycles of foster care, and it is important to recognize that

many birth parents are also Fosters. Our Foster leaders encourage birth families to never give up hope of changing the system for future families.

To Kin Caregivers, Foster Parents, and Adoptive Parents

Fosters are asking for caregivers to support them as allies, not as saviors, and to be open to learning from new perspectives and experiences. You all hold an intimate knowledge of the system from the perspective of a supportive adult, and have a powerful opportunity to support Fosters raising their voice for systems change.

To Frontline System Workers

Whether you are a county caseworker, attorney, group home manager, guardian ad litem, Family Resource Navigator, or judge, you came to this work for a reason. We hope the “why” of this report will connect in some way to the “why” of your personal and professional commitment to the work. Fosters hold the deep complexity of recognizing both when adults connected to the system didn’t do right by them or fully meet their needs, and also where supportive adults were doing the best within the parameters of the systems and supervisors above them. The system failures may not be your fault, but they are your responsibility. We hope you can be reminded of your “why” and role within that complexity.

To County and State Agencies

In Minnesota’s child welfare system, the state makes the laws and provides funding, and the counties manage the work. Leaders at both levels experience blurred lines of accountability and duplicated or redundant work. Fosters have seen how, when boundaries of accountability are unclear, neither side acts. This is another failure point in the system. In this report, Fosters describe their experiences of accountability and responsibility gaps with the hope that state and county leaders will take this as an opportunity to change the relationships, policies, practices, and resources within your sphere of control.

To Legislators

For legislators who oversee the promise inherent in the system of laws governing child welfare, Fosters have offered their bold, detailed, and wide-ranging ideas for systems change. These actionable, experience-based proposals come from a constituency that, while in many cases cannot vote, can be easily seen and heard through this report.

8.1

out of every 1,000 children in Minnesota experience out-of-home care.

When we know better, we can do better.

Ultimately, this report is meant for all of us, collectively, as Minnesotans.

Our actions matter. Every decision, every policy, every moment, every word or lack thereof, matters.

We are the village — and it is time we built it to be one that cares for every child as we would our own.

The time to act is now.



How to Read This Report

This report is informed by the experiences, expertise, and bold ideas described by Fosters across Minnesota. We hope you approach the report with a spirit of curiosity, regardless of your own level of experience and expertise.

What is the system?

There is no single “system” for Fosters, whose experiences overlap with or weave in and out of child welfare, the education system, public assistance, and the courts.

Fosters live inside a web of intertwined but not always interconnected systems. In this report, when this report refers to “the system” we are referring to this web. This shorthand also recognizes how, for Fosters, it is sometimes impossible to see or feel where one system ends and the other begins.

On the other hand, when we use “foster care system” we are referring to experiences after one has been placed in out-of-home care by the state. When we use “child welfare system” we are referring to the broader process of family investigation and separation by the state.

Why do you use “Foster” instead of “foster child?”

You will not read the words “foster child,” “foster alum,” or any variation of these in this report about the experiences and rights of children, adolescents, and young adults in the foster care system.

When those children, adolescents, and young adults in the system transition out of it, they will carry its impacts for the rest of their lives — as adults, in middle age, and in their elder years.

In these pages, a person with experience in out-of-home care, at any age or stage, is a “Foster,” capitalized. This identity, chosen by many whose voices and experiences carry this report, is not bound by a developmental stage and, crucially, is not found in laws, guidelines, or the system’s infinite and scattered paper trail.

Whoever else an individual becomes — when they apply for jobs, school and financial aid, housing or food assistance, a name change, a copy of their social security card or birth certificate — they are a Foster. While every individual impacted by out-of-home care deserves the agency to self-identify, at Foster Advocates we name and claim that Foster identity in order to better organize around it.

Why so much focus on harms?

In our listening sessions, Fosters described the ways in which they have been harmed by the child welfare system, and we have worked to communicate those harms in this report. We encourage readers to treat every description of harm as an opportunity to imagine what its opposite might look like. When Fosters describe their experiences of harm, they are illuminating what they believe they deserve, just as when they describe what has helped.

In every MN Promise listening session, Fosters drew from their experiences of harm and offered bold ideas to uplift, enact, and expand their rights. Those bold ideas have informed every paragraph of this report, and are distributed throughout it. They are an invitation to advocacy by individuals, communities, organizations, legislators, agency heads, and others who wish to join the Foster Movement.

What is the promise?

When a child is removed from their biological parents or legal guardians, all the responsibilities of parenting are transferred to the State of Minnesota. The state becomes a parent, and the child becomes its “ward.”

Parenting is a promise to protect and provide as best we are able. In the wake of the upheaval and trauma of a child’s removal from their family of origin, the state takes that promise and portions it out to counties, social workers, group home staff, foster families, and others.

With each portioning of the promise, more people and paperwork are wedged between the child and where they came from. For the promise to survive, it must be durable, robust, responsive, accountable, and informed at every turn by the individuals who have lived through the system. In modeling a Foster-centered process, this report is intended to be a tool for Foster-informed individuals and entities who want to support the state of Minnesota in making and keeping a meaningful and resilient promise.



What about prevention?

There is very little about prevention in this report. Investing in prevention is critical to transforming the child welfare system. However, our focus is on those who have already experienced family separation. There are many examples of prevention efforts with demonstrated impacts including the federal Child Tax Credit, expanded access to food benefits and Medicaid, accessible and affordable childcare, and attention to other parts of the social safety net such as housing, health care, and basic day-to-day needs. We hope to see Minnesota invest more in prevention as well as in Fosters already in the system.

What to know about Minnesota's system before you dive in?

Minnesota is one of nine states with a state-funded and county-administered child welfare system, and has the largest number of child welfare agencies, with 87 counties and three initiative tribes (Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, Red Lake Nation, and White Earth Nation; Red Lake also retains sovereignty over data about their tribal children and families). What does this mean in practice? The same program, like Extended Foster Care (see glossary for definition of this and other systems terms throughout the report) can be experienced completely differently depending on whether you are a Foster in Hennepin or St. Louis or Otter Tail County.

Almost ten thousand young people experienced out-of-home care in Minnesota in 2024 under the purview of the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF). And there are uncounted numbers of Fosters who have left the system, whether through reunification, guardianship transfer, adoption, or aging out. And while Minnesota has seen a decline in the number of Fosters entering care each year, the number of "continuers" in care has stayed stagnant.

36%

of Fosters have a diagnosed disability while in care.

Minnesota has one of the highest rates of racial disparities in care in the country. American Indian youth are 16 times more likely to be in care than their white peers — a data point that has not budged in decades. Black youth are two times as likely to be in care, a rate that has dropped from eight times —but only as the rate of multiracial youth has risen from two to eight times. Hispanic youth are also twice as likely to experience care. And while the state does not measure this, Foster Advocates has documented LGBTQ+ and Two-spirit youth as overrepresented in care, at five to ten times the rate of their peers.

Did you know

One-quarter of all placements in the state are due to caretakers' substance or alcohol addiction, and fifteen percent are due to neglect. Roughly fifteen percent of young people who enter the foster care system are there because of physical abuse or sexual assault. The Foster population is evenly divided across four age groups: ages 1 to 3, 3 to 8, 9 to 14, and 15 and older. Fifty-seven percent of 15- to 17-year-olds who enter care (voluntarily or involuntarily) due to child behavioral health and related reasons.

Fosters by race

Statewide numbers

MINNESOTA FOSTERS		ALL MINNESOTA YOUTH
37%	White	65%
26%	Two or More Races	5%
18%	Native	2%
15%	Black	11%
11%	Hispanic	10%
2%	Asian	7%



” If you don't even know me, how do you know what's best for me?



MN PROMISE COMMITTEE

An Ask from Foster Leaders

When you think of a Foster, what do you picture in your head?
How do you feel about that person? What do you assume?

Fosters name the deep challenge of facing incomplete public narratives about foster care and the stigmas that many people have about Fosters in their head. They have been told that they are just angry, or failures, or problem children. That there is a reason people give up kids, that they are just like their birth parents. That they are irresponsible, or must have mental health issues. That they cannot be trusted. That they carry baggage. That they cannot graduate, or go to college, or get a stable job. That they are too young to understand or do not know what they are talking about when it comes to their own child welfare case.

These negative assumptions have made many Fosters hide this part of their identity, or question themselves and their abilities.

Fosters are asking everyone reading this report to approach it with an open mind, and recognize and challenge preconceived notions of the Foster experience that bring up defensiveness or disbelief. They ask when you think of a Foster to not automatically assume that young person is a problem to be fixed. That you recognize the range of foster care experiences: good, bad, and indifferent. That you believe the examples of real harm happening right now, and also join Fosters in their capacity for infinite hope to dream outside of the current system's limits and forge new paths.



What do Fosters want Minnesotans to take away from this report?

TAKE AWAYS

- That these are organic experiences from Minnesotans who have lived in the foster system.
- How underserved the Foster community is, and how many fundamental issues there are within it.
- That Fosters are actual people requesting certain needs, wants, and desires to be met.
- How we all need to do better. Not just saying that we will, but taking action.
- That Fosters are still human!
- That Fosters may need protection but are not helpless.
- That the "problem" is not solved when kids are removed from their homes, and that the foster care system needs constant and iterative oversight, reflection, and action.





COMMON THREADS

Common Threads

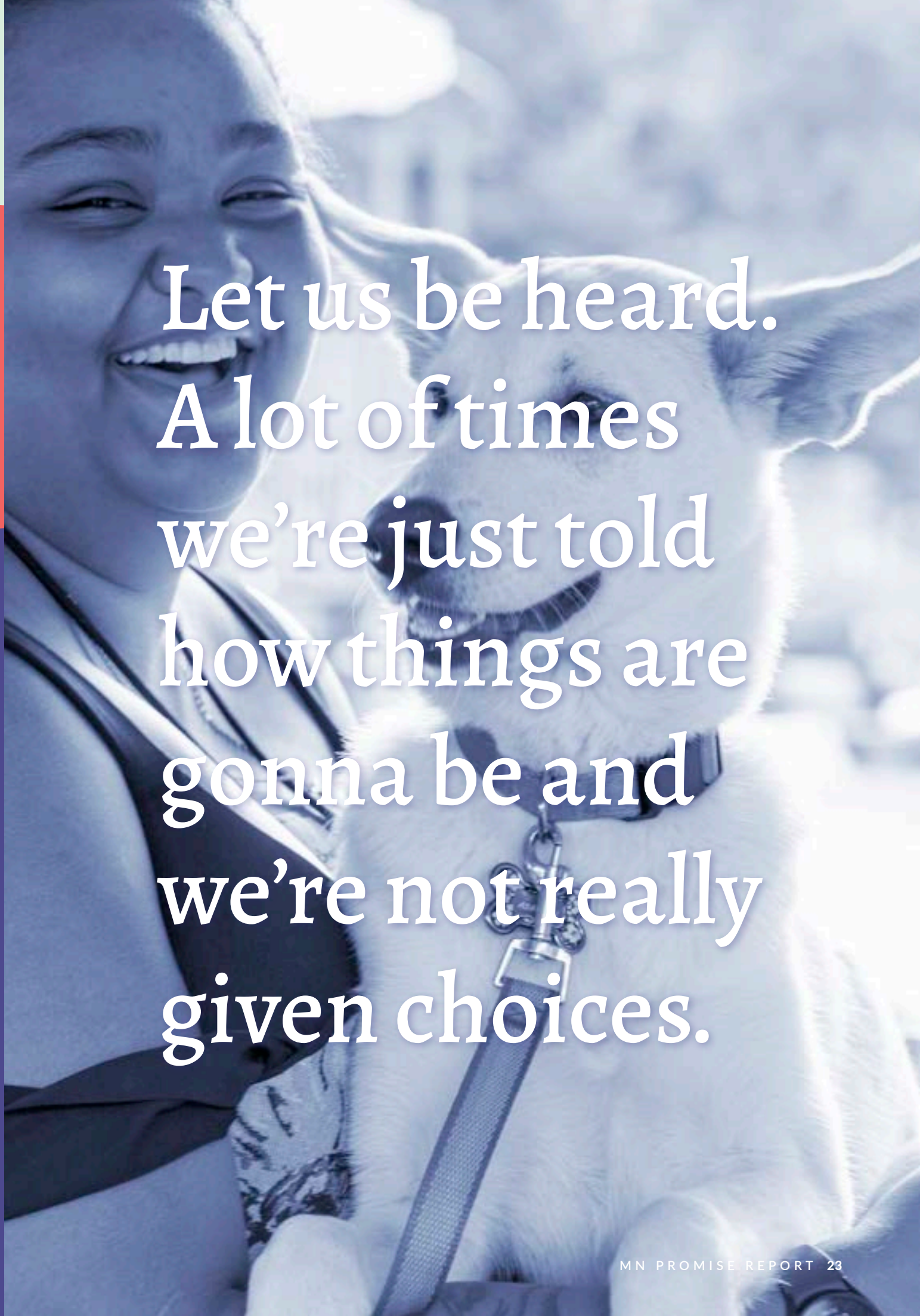
When the Foster experience is described in and guided by the system's language, it is often sorted into stages of experience, such as investigation, removal, placement, and permanency.

Fosters describe something far less linear, a journey marked by the intersections of their experiences and identities. Across our MN Promise sessions, certain areas of experience and identity emerged that are explored in depth in the next section. These are not experienced in isolation or as stages, and do not have to be read in order.

Underlying all those areas are the common threads described below. As you continue with this report, whether reading about education or healthcare or juvenile justice, recognize that these threads are woven across the Foster journey.

Trauma

Family separation is the child welfare system's primary intervention tool for families and youth in crisis, and it is inherently traumatic. The loss of autonomy is another form of trauma, one that shapes Fosters' ability to build stability in adulthood. Fosters also face ongoing and layered experiences of the foster care system, as well as state and structural violence, making them vulnerable to economic and other systemic injustices as they transition to adulthood, no matter how they exit care.



Let us be heard.
A lot of times
we're just told
how things are
gonna be and
we're not really
given choices.



COMMON THREADS

Uncertainty of the Journey

The path of a Foster in the system is not a straight-lined journey, and there is no map. Point A does not always lead to point B. Sometimes, it is A to G to B, and the points will almost certainly intersect or repeat themselves.

To use child welfare system terminology, a foster or group home is a placement. A placement can last years, months, weeks, or just days. For many Fosters, there is not just one foster home. There may be three placements in as many months or six in as many years.

The only thing certain for Fosters is that nothing is certain. For most, their road, however straight or winding, is barely visible and sometimes only truly clear in the rearview mirror.

Lack of Agency

Fosters navigate a constant state of uncertainty — frequent placement changes, inconsistent caseworkers, and a lack of control over major life decisions, which can be described as a lack of agency. Fosters describe how these disruptions erode trust and create a cycle where they must repeatedly adapt to new environments, new rules, and new caretakers, all while having little or no power in the decision-making. Many describe being placed in homes that were emotionally or physically unsafe, where their concerns were ignored or dismissed. They describe a feeling of powerlessness around access to personal belongings, financial resources, or common social activities.

A System of Relationships

Every Foster experiences the system through an entanglement of relationships they do not choose — with foster parents, facility staff, case managers, social workers, therapists, guardians ad litem, child protection lawyers, judges, and sometimes police. Few of these relationships have any permanence, and fewer offer Fosters any power or agency at all over the terms or boundaries or even the feeling of the relationship — loving or hostile, caring or indifferent, safe or unsafe.

Relationships happen in family and group homes, facilities and other placements, office buildings, waiting areas, clinics, facilities, and courtrooms, in unfamiliar or uncomfortable spaces, at long tables, in squeaky chairs, and at service windows.

Sometimes, these relationships are with people who look just like you, but more often, the people look nothing like you at all.

Beyond all of these places and faces, there are relationships at school and in their communities, at places of worship, and in social gatherings — contexts where your experience is barely known and even less understood. Fosters are always aware of the stigmas and stereotypes through which they are viewed and unsure when or how to talk about who they are, or how they are.

Inside the system, every relationship is documented on paper, in digital records, or as data points in file cabinets or on computers scattered across agencies and offices, which may have no direct connection or communication among them.

Lack of Accountability

In a system as complex and dispersed as the child welfare system, accountability — for basic services, harm reduction, and protection from emotional, physical, and sexual abuse — can rest with a single person or a chain of people and entities. Gaps in oversight are everywhere, and integrity in accountability measures has no standard or shared definition.

A Search for Answers

Being a Foster is being in a constant state of not-knowing. Most things that impact their lives — from the day-to-day to their long-term care — are decided in places they cannot see and in a language they do not understand, with few opportunities to ask and even fewer opportunities to be truly heard.

”

Basically, we’re looking for a support system that could help us both physically and emotionally. That’s what we all found that we lacked.

Luck of the Draw

Our MN Promise sessions spanned across the state to reach Fosters where they were at and to see if there were any region-specific challenges. While some issues, especially related to resources, were more prevalent in greater Minnesota, there was no region that was untouched by these common threads or areas of experience. Fosters who didn’t experience certain issues recognized they were the “lucky” ones. Meeting our collective promise to Fosters should not depend on luck or justice by geography.



Access to Information

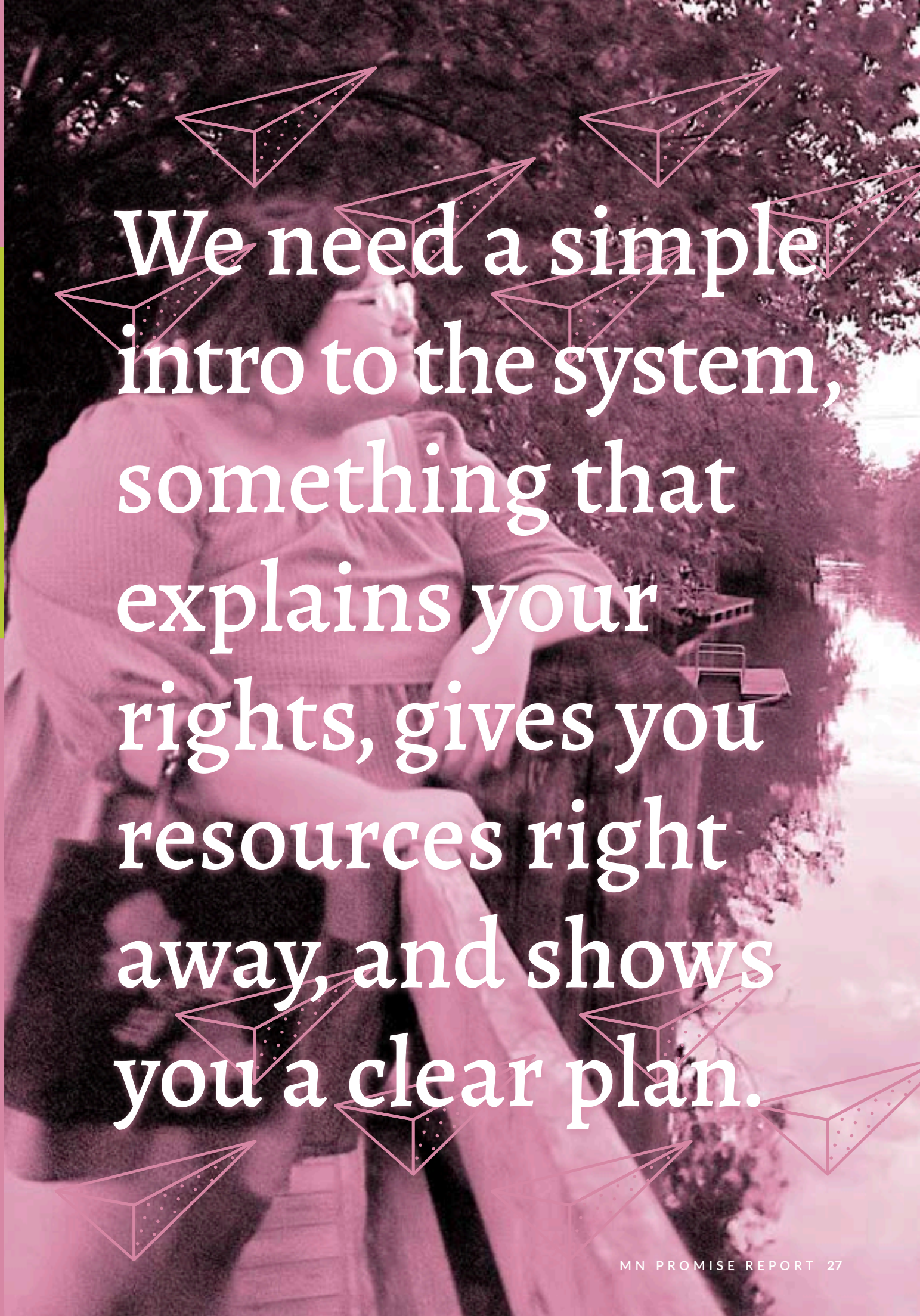
Fosters describe, again and again and in countless ways, a feeling—and, often, the reality—of being isolated from the rest of the world. Whether reflecting on their own journey or on resources they wish they had known about, they illuminate the complicated and opaque flow of information within the system.

The information kept about Fosters — and, as many experienced, kept from them — is often the same: records of every placement, therapy session, medical procedure, payments to foster placements, school transcripts, and court files.

“Keeping from them” can be the denial of a Foster’s request for their records, or lost records, or records a case manager or other accountable professional fails to make known, through indifference, ignorance, or lack of initiative.

By the time a Foster becomes an adult, this and other information is often scattered across multiple counties, each with their own methods of managing and granting access to records.

Access to information about resources or opportunities for guidance, empowerment, and other critical support is often limited for Fosters, either by adults who act as gatekeepers or a literal lack of access to the world beyond their placement. Such resources are pathways to healing, personal power, self compassion, and the agency to live a story beyond the one the system had written them into.



We need a simple
intro to the system,
something that
explains your
rights, gives you
resources right
away, and shows
you a clear plan.



What Fosters Describe

Equity in Distribution and Access

Fosters describe unequal access to resources, often depending on where they live or the experience or biases of their case managers.

Access to Needs-Specific Information

Fosters describe struggles to access information and resources, tailored to specific mental health, cultural, identity-based, and geographic needs (such as urban or rural).

Real-time Access During Crisis and Transition

Fosters describe a desire for easily accessible platforms, such as hotlines or websites, where they can quickly access information and support during times of crisis.

Regular and Reliable Foster-Centered Case Updates

Fosters describe a lack of regular meetings where they are briefed on their case developments and pathways, ensuring they are well-informed and able to advocate for themselves throughout their system experience.

Critical Resources

Fosters describe resource areas they learned about too late, and especially around transitioning to independent living, with or without ongoing financial and other system support.

Legal Aid and Advocacy

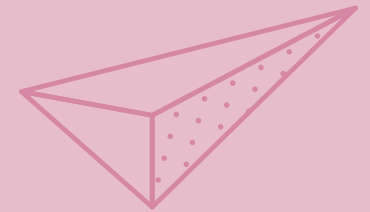
Fosters describe challenges in navigating and advocating for themselves in the legal aspects of the system, including understanding their rights and accessing legal support in general and through court proceedings.

Access to Vital Records

Fosters describe difficulty in accessing their own records, such as birth certificates, medical records, and Social Security information, which are often withheld, redacted, or difficult to obtain, creating barriers to critical needs like obtaining housing or applying for benefits.



What should happen in Minnesota?



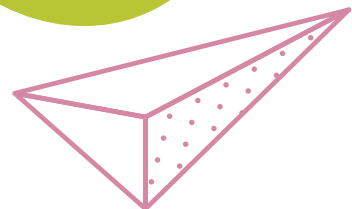
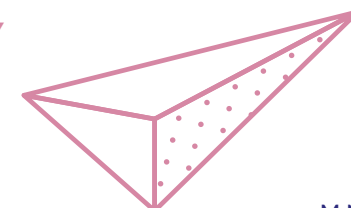
Fosters emphasized frustration that their social workers did not provide them with information and empathy due to burdens of caseload size. While there are ways the system can and should improve caseworker communication to Fosters, there are also opportunities to make sure all Fosters and supportive adults have other pathways to resources. Fosters also flagged the inconsistency of services like STAY depending on where they were placed, and what counties would approve out of possible STAY funding requests.

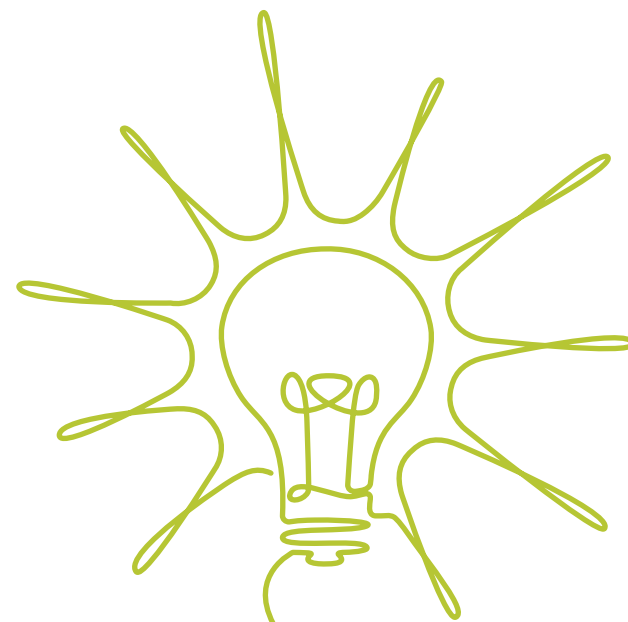


If we don't know what resources we have, not many kids are gonna hop on the phone and Google them.

14-23

Fosters can access independent living services through STAY (Successful Transition to Adulthood for Youth) if they were in foster care after age 14 up to age 23. Minnesota has not increased STAY funding in almost 20 years.





FOSTERS IMAGINE

Bold Ideas

Peer Mentorship Programs

Establish mentorship programs where current or former Fosters can guide and support those currently in the system, providing advice and practical help based on shared experiences.

Tailored Resource Packages

Collaborate with experts, advocates, and Fosters, to create Foster-specific resource packages customized for individualized needs, including mental health services, housing assistance, educational support, and transition planning for adulthood.

Know Your Rights Guides

Create clear guides for Fosters, foster parents, and other workers of Fosters' rights, related to their case, access to services and healthcare, education, and more.

Training and Classes for Foster Parents

Design comprehensive and mandatory training for foster parents on trauma-informed care, understanding the specific needs of Fosters, and how to connect them to appropriate resources.

Regular and Reliable Foster-Centered Case Updates

Design and implement regular meetings where Fosters are briefed on their case developments and pathways, ensuring they are well-informed and able to advocate for themselves throughout their foster care experience.

Cultural and Identity-Specific Resource Networks

Establish cultural or identity-specific support networks, that provide resources tailored to the specific identities and communities of Fosters.

How do Fosters react?

In our 28+ MN Promise session, older Fosters echoed the desire for mentorship opportunities, wishing they could provide the advice, resources, and hope that they didn't receive while in the system or transitioning to adulthood. Below are some of their thoughts when asked what they would say to younger Fosters:

"There are Foster elders out there. Connect. Community is so important."

"Don't give up! Prove 'em all wrong and become the best version of yourself."

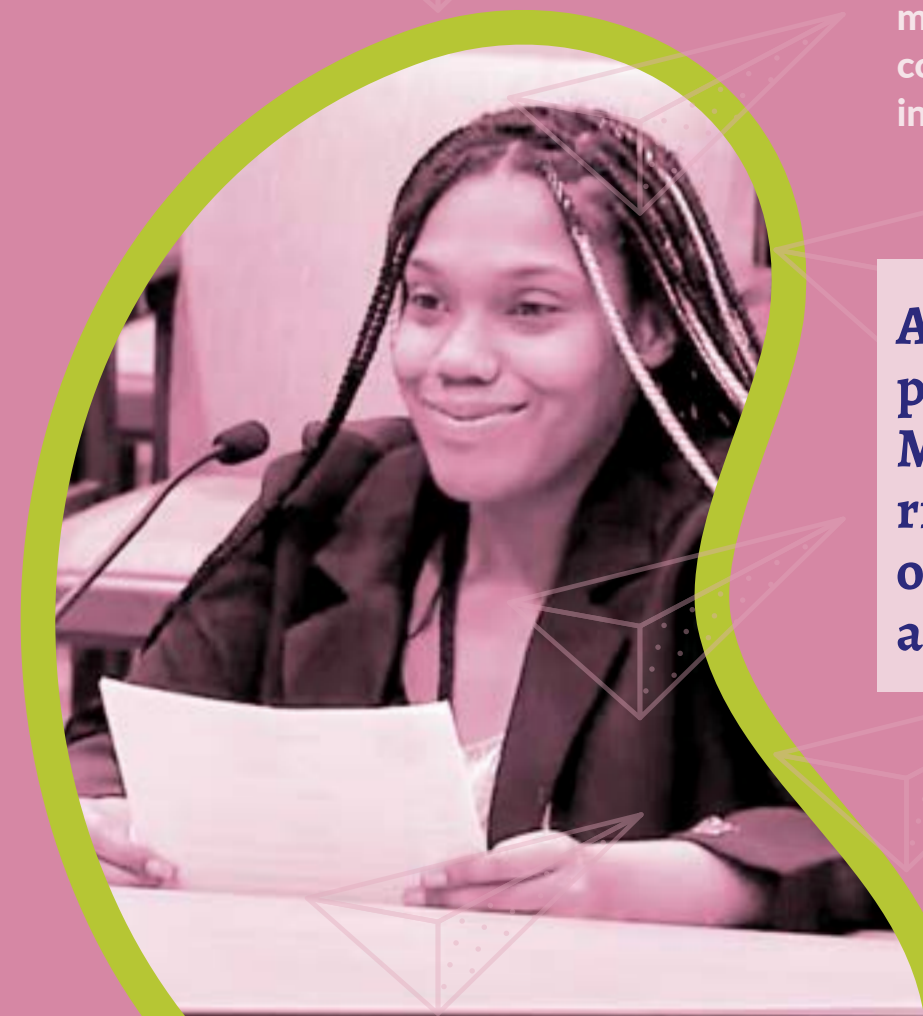
"It is okay to be mad about being in the system. Don't let that cloud of anger follow your journey."

Empowerment Through Peer and Social Connections

Create spaces for Fosters to connect with other Fosters, or supportive communities that could provide emotional support and relationships.

88%

of agencies meet the federal standard for monthly face-to-face contact with children in care.



As of July 2024, all people adopted in Minnesota have the right to access their original birth and adoption records.



Action Steps



What can you do to support Fosters' bold ideas in this area of experience?

All Minnesotans

Think about the importance of access to resources and information for Fosters who seek support from different organizations. What ways can you advocate to ensure that community resources are informed by the experiences and needs of Fosters? All Minnesotans can be a resource if you become more Foster-informed — because you never know when you are interacting with a Foster. Speaking openly and often and making Foster-specific resources visible and accessible makes it easier and safer for more Fosters to access them.

Are you aware of **Foster-specific resources available in Minnesota**, like the Fostering Independence Grants or the Ombuds Office for Foster Youth? You do not need to be an expert — but just knowing where to start can make a real difference for a Foster in your life.

If a Foster asked you, would you help or accompany them to access resources (like you would your own child)? What personal preparation would you need to do to walk alongside them as an advocate?

Stakeholders

System Workers and Community

Partners Reflect on how you share information with Fosters and how you respond when they ask for help finding resources. What support do you need

from supervisors, the County, or the state to better answer Foster questions about their case, available resources, or accessing important documents?

Counties What resources are already centralized for easy access by social workers, foster parents, and Fosters? What resources are difficult to stay current on because of capacity or other obstacles? Are non-child welfare county staff educated on how to answer a Foster's questions about paperwork and records access after they have exited care? Do you have public and easily accessible resources providing guidance for Fosters seeking to access their personal documents?

DCYF Standardize the process for Fosters seeking to access their county case and court records. Create a central state access point for Fosters to get proof of foster care documentation as needed.

Legislators Pass the Foster Bill of Rights proposed by the Ombuds Office for Foster Youth. Develop and pass legislation to clarify and expand the list of documents counties are required to provide Fosters when they exit care, and through every other permanency pathway. Ensure Foster access to those documents throughout their lives.

What's in progress by Foster Advocates

Supporting passage of Minnesota Foster Bill of Rights, led by the Ombuds Office for Foster Youth.

Creating intergenerational connection and mentoring opportunities for Fosters across Minnesota.

Building a website to centralize a Foster resources directory, creating a map of Foster-serving organizations across Minnesota, and creating a calendar of Foster-specific events across the state.

What should happen in Minnesota?

Currently, when Fosters request their foster care records, counties have no formal or systematic guidance for what they are required to provide. What to release or redact is up to the individual, and it is up to each county to decide whether and what they charge Fosters for access to their own information. For those experiencing adoption or a dissolved adoption, there are different processes for accessing records depending on the adoption agency. For Fosters aging out of care at 18, there are federal requirements for documents the county has to provide (like vital records), but there is no requirement for the agency to keep a copy if the Foster needs to access those documents again in the future. And there is no centralized state process for Fosters to receive proof of foster care documentation.





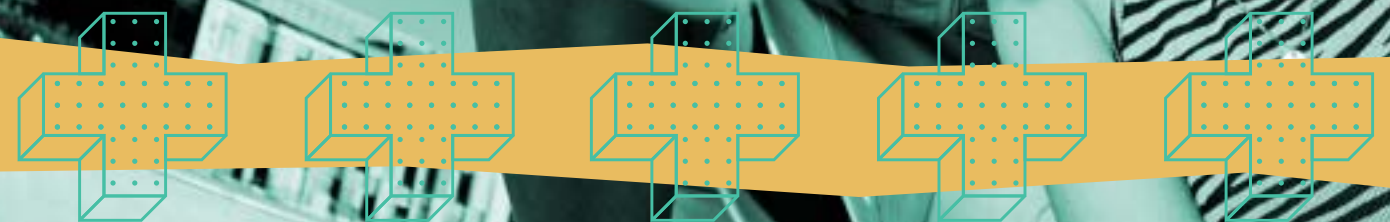
Health & Wellbeing

A Foster is a subject of the state, cared for and controlled by a system of laws, state and private agencies, and appointed individuals, this includes their health and healthcare.

Fosters described having little say over their care, diagnoses, or the narrative passed from system to provider or provider to paper. They told of major health decisions happening around them instead of with them, and of fear — the fear that prescribed pills might lead to addiction, that wrong or missed diagnoses will cause harm.

Fosters call for real, informed consent around medications, a say in reproductive health decisions, and safe, consistent access to therapy that is not driven by quick fixes. They want the right to challenge a prescription if it feels dangerous, the chance to review their records, and the extended health coverage guarantee as they enter adulthood. These ideas are rooted in experience, in harm felt, and in the belief that Fosters deserve more than a prescription slip or a dismissive nod.

You're the one
that knows what's
going on with
you. You might
not know what it
is, but you're the
one that feels it.



What Fosters Describe

Institutional Transparency and Support

Fosters describe barriers to accessing clear information about their health rights, treatment options, and ongoing avenues of support. System transparency is limited, often leaving Fosters to navigate the bureaucracies of health and mental health therapy on their own — a reality that contributes to their distrust of both health care providers and social services.

Medication and Treatment Autonomy

Fosters describe a lack of autonomy over their medical treatments, with frequent feelings and fears of being overmedicated. Fosters report that their concerns about the effectiveness or impact of their medications are often ignored or dismissed, highlighting a need for informed consent and Foster-informed dialogue with health care providers. They describe overprescription as a gateway to dependency, often feeling forced to take medications that can lead to addiction or unsafe behaviors later in life.

Mental Health Access Challenges

Fosters describe the difficulty of accessing mental health services tailored to their needs. They report a lack of continuity in care, compounded by frequent placement changes and overmedication as a default solution. Many feel that therapeutic services, when they are provided, are forced upon them. Culturally competent, accessible therapy remains a significant gap, especially for Fosters aging out of the system.

Difficulty Accessing Medical Records

Fosters describe frustration in accessing medical records, particularly after aging out of the system. They say obtaining their complete health information is often challenging, with many unable to prove past diagnoses or treatments. This lack of continuity hinders effective health care and contributes to redundant evaluations and delays in care.

Transition Gaps in Medical Care

Fosters describe significant gaps in continuity of medical care, especially when transitioning out of foster care. This includes issues with transferring medical records, finding providers that take state insurance, finding affordable health care, re-establishing relationships with former providers, and making connections with new providers.

Reproductive Health Autonomy

Fosters describe experiencing unwanted birth control measures and a lack of agency around reproductive health. They highlight the long-term health and fertility implications of forced contraception, noting the lack of education and autonomy around these life-impacting decisions made without their consent.

Stigmatized and Reactive Health Care

Fosters describe feeling stigmatized as “troubled youth” who need to be controlled rather than supported, without consideration of the stress and trauma they endure in the foster system itself, reinforcing negative cycles and behaviors. Many experience these labels driving medication decisions being made without proper evaluations.

Foster Parent Role in Health Decisions

Fosters describe a dynamic where foster parents often have excessive control over health decisions, including medication and therapy. This dynamic can lead to coerced treatments and a lack of independent consultation, with some Fosters reporting neglect or mismanagement of their health care needs by their caregivers.

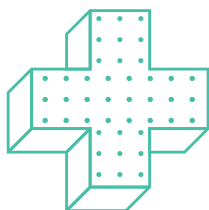
Accountability in Health Care Decisions

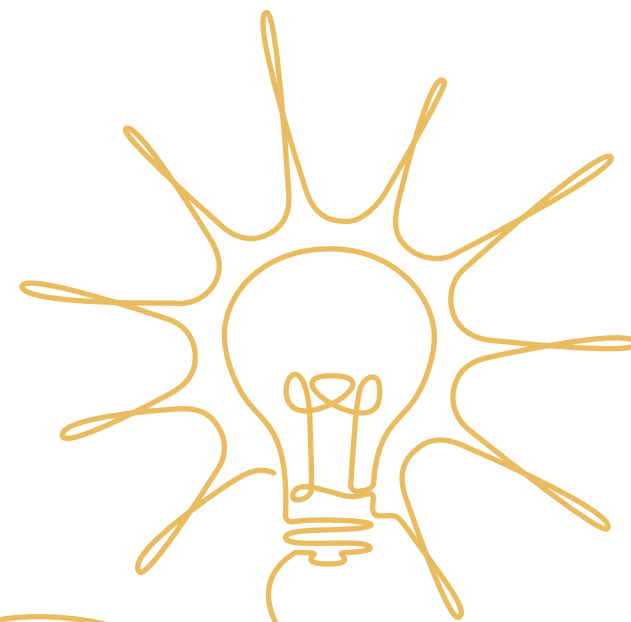
Fosters describe a lack of accountability in health care. Many Fosters believe that social workers, therapists, and foster parents should be more accountable for how they manage Foster health choices.



Did you know?

Child welfare agencies are responsible for Fosters' healthcare, ensuring they receive adequate care as well as determining when biological parents, social workers, foster parents, or the court give consent for health care. Fosters can consent for their own health care without guardian consent on the same basis as other youth in Minnesota, but many do not know those rights. If a Foster is in care at 18, they are automatically eligible for, but not automatically enrolled in, state health insurance through age 26. Many Fosters do not know they are eligible and have delayed medical procedures after age 18 due to lack of insurance.





FOSTERS IMAGINE

Bold Ideas

Youth-Controlled Health Decisions

Allow Fosters greater control and agency over health-related decisions, particularly in regard to mental health medications and reproductive health decisions, including requiring informed consent and education on potential side effects and long-term impacts of treatment.

Birth Control Autonomy for Fosters

Ensure Fosters have the autonomy to make their own choices regarding birth control and reproductive health, alongside access to comprehensive education on long-term health impacts and contraceptive options.

Centralized Medical Records Access

Create a secure, centralized system to give Fosters direct access to their medical records, ensuring continuity of care and easy retrieval of health history — especially useful for those transitioning out of care.

Holistic and Non-Medication-Based Approaches

Instead of relying on psychotropic drugs as primary treatments, *offer Fosters access to holistic health services and non-medication treatments as first-line options,* such as therapy, peer support, and wellness programs.

Extended Health Coverage Post-Care

Extend Medicaid or equivalent health coverage until age 26 (or beyond) for Fosters, similar to coverage under a family's insurance, ensuring mental and physical health continuity during the transition to independent living.



Mental Health Services for Foster Families

Extend mental health services and support to foster families, to create a healthier home environment and reduce the trauma or stress related to placement and adjustment.

Educational Initiatives on Foster Rights and Health

Provide Fosters with developmentally appropriate resources and workshops on their rights, including health and mental health rights, with a focus on equipping Fosters with the knowledge to advocate for themselves and access necessary health and support services.

Open-Access and Foster-Led Foster Records Review

Establish regular sessions with Fosters, social workers, and advocates, where Fosters can review, understand, and even challenge inaccuracies in their health records to ensure fairness and transparency in their documented history.

22%

of Fosters are diagnosed with PTSD after leaving the system, almost five times the rate of the general adult population.

What works in other states?

Nine states have examples of “health care passports” for Fosters to ensure continuity of their medical care between placements, easy access to medical records, and increased Foster agency. Some of these examples are paper packets that “travel” with a Foster, while others are electronic and integrated into the state healthcare system. New Jersey’s program is particularly robust, looping in embedded nursing staff within child welfare offices to coordinate passports, help Fosters navigate medical access, and review and monitor medical records and treatment.



Action Steps



What can you do to support Fosters' bold ideas in this area of experience?

All Minnesotans

Think about What can you do to elevate Fosters in state and community discussions around health care?

Advocate for continued and expanded medical coverage for Fosters, including support for the network of dental providers serving Medicaid recipients.

Stakeholders

System Workers How are you including or empowering Fosters as much as possible in health care decisions? How are you educating and supporting Fosters, their families of origin, and their foster care placements? What are your knowledge gaps around Foster rights related to health care?

Health Care Agencies Provide Foster-informed training to your staff and ensure comprehensive data collection on the foster care history of those you are serving.

Community Partners Create new mental health services opportunities for Fosters, including holistic and non-medication-based resources. Support Fosters in understanding medical insurance, their health care rights and consent opportunities, and in advocating for themselves in

the medical decision-making process. Encourage counties and the state to create resources that are easy for workers, Fosters, and families to access.

Counties Start a partnership with your county public health agency to support practitioners in locating and reviewing records with Fosters and staff. Provide medical navigation support for Fosters and their families. Train workers and foster parents on Fosters' medical rights in care to ensure they are supported by all adults involved in their child welfare case.

DCYF Ensure state child welfare funds can be used to support holistic mental health services for Fosters and families not covered by insurance. Create a DCYF policy or advocate for a state law to create Foster Health Care Passports.

Legislators Update legislation to ensure Fosters' reproductive, mental health, and other health care rights are protected within Minnesota law, and to add requirements around educating Fosters on their health care rights. Create accountability practices to ensure medical consent is honored. Expand Certified Peer Specialist Services so that street outreach workers can be qualified, allowing for non-diagnosis based mental health services to be charged to insurance. Create state oversight processes through the courts and pharmaceutical board to reduce overprescription for Fosters.

What's in progress by Foster Advocates

Building internal healing and wellness capacity, resources, and events for our staff and Foster network.

Working with academic partners ready to dive into Foster-centered psychotropic drug overmedication research and assess best practices from other states to bring to Minnesota.

Advocating for medical insurance opt-out vs opt-in for eligible Fosters.

What do the numbers say?

While there is no Minnesota data, studies from other states show Fosters are overprescribed psychotropic drugs (antidepressants, anti-anxiety medications, stimulants, antipsychotics, and mood stabilizers) at three to four times the rate of their non-Foster peers, and are more likely to experience polypharmacy (multiple prescriptions). Several states have taken action related to this in recent years, creating state oversight processes to reduce overprescription, judicial review practices for prescriptions, and pharmacist oversight committees.

Fosters are more likely than their peers to have dental needs, but have less access to dental care.





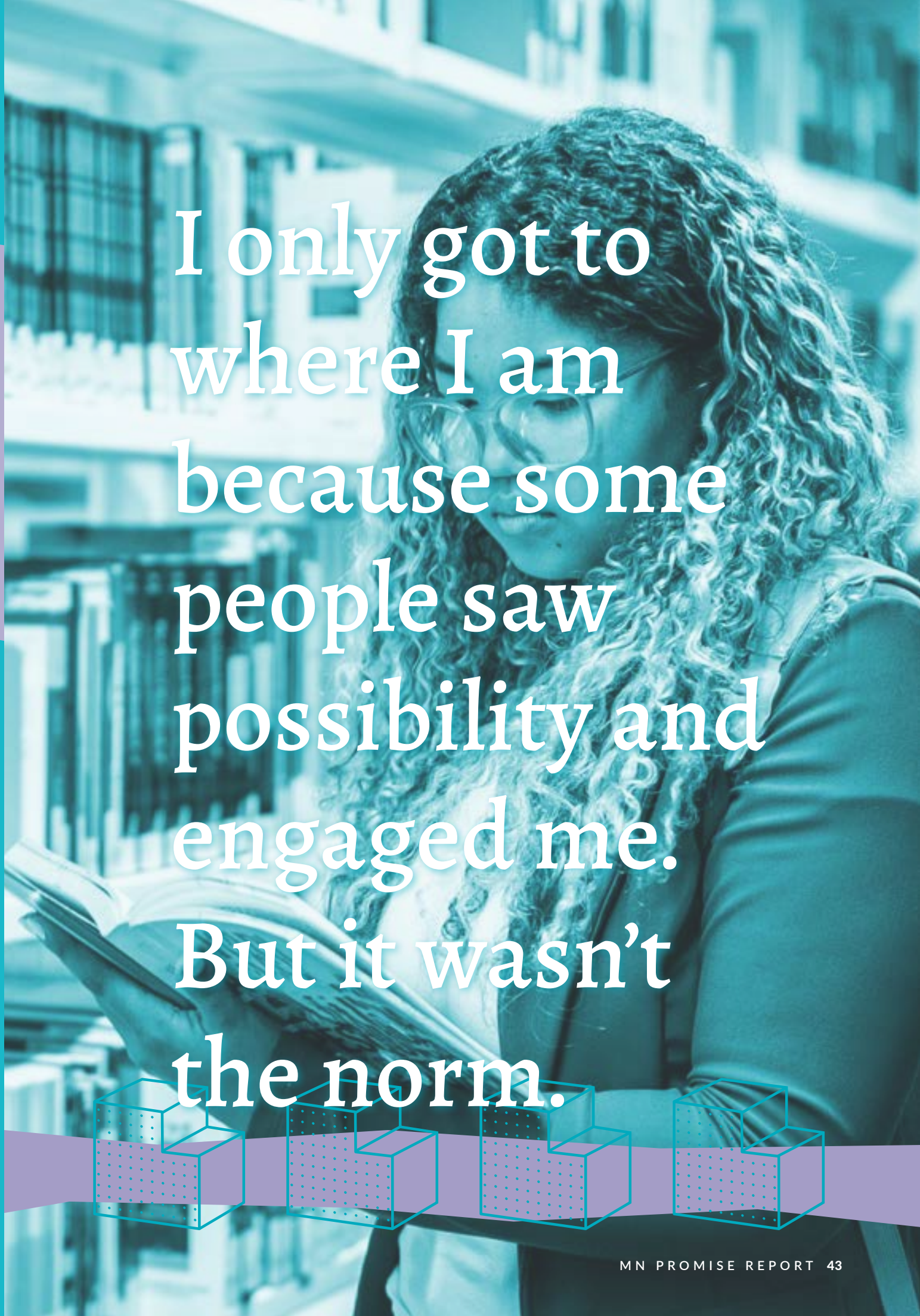
Education

Much of the Foster experience happens inside the bounds of the system — within their placements, at the mercy of judges and other system actors, and in new and changing family systems. Education is another system, but one that exists just outside the core foster care system.

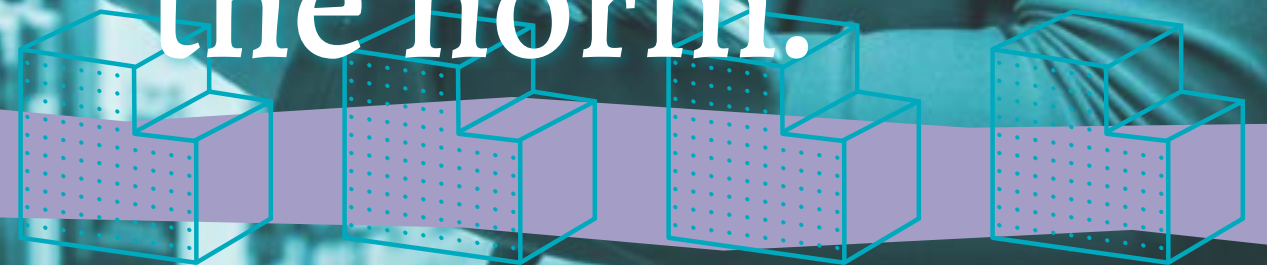
In K-12 education, constants for Fosters include low expectations, being uprooted mid-year or from one year to the next (which results in more fractured or disappeared relationships), and missing out on sports, clubs, and field trips because of placement rules, lack of transportation, or lack of appropriate care.

During the transition to college, Fosters describe obstacles like poor preparation, lack of mentorship and guidance, internalized messages about their potential from system actors and society, and challenges acquiring crucial paperwork spread across counties and even states.

Despite all this, Fosters often describe school as a stable community amidst placement changes outside of their control. Fosters also illuminated the difference-makers: consistent academic support, supportive school environments, and educators trained to understand the foster care system. Or that one teacher, counselor, or social worker showed them what was possible and helped them believe in themselves.



I only got to
where I am
because some
people saw
possibility and
engaged me.
But it wasn't
the norm.





What Fosters Describe

K-12

Low Expectations, Stigma, and Stereotypes

Fosters describe persistent perception that they are not expected to complete high school or pursue further education, with minimal support offered to help them envision or achieve higher education.

Lack of Individualized Attention in Schools

Fosters describe traditional school settings failing to meet their needs. Their individual challenges are not recognized or addressed, leading to a lack of tailored support or interventions to help them succeed academically.

Exclusion from Extracurricular and Normal Social Activities

Fosters describe feeling isolated from normal school activities, such as sports and social clubs, due to restrictions within their placements, exacerbating feelings of being different and disconnected from peers.

Educational Gaps and Interrupted Schooling

Fosters describe frequent disruptions in their schooling, such as multiple placements and relocations, leading to gaps in education and a lack of continuity that significantly affects their ability to succeed and graduate.

POST-SECONDARY

Unmet Basic and Financial Needs

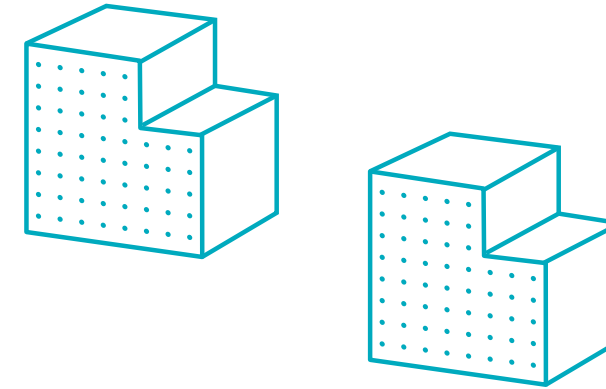
Fosters describe a stark disparity in financial and material support compared to their non-Foster peers. Fosters often lack the basic needs that are critical for focusing on education, like safe and stable housing, transportation, and financial security, which affects their academic performance.

Financial and Logistical Barriers

Fosters describe challenges in accessing financial aid or dealing with logistical hurdles related to education. These include issues in managing expenses like college applications, transportation, and school supplies.

Lack of Awareness and Guidance on Career Readiness and Higher Education

Fosters describe not receiving adequate guidance or information about secondary education options like college or vocational paths. There is often no one to introduce them to the process, help them fill out applications, or to accompany them through the campus visit process and other exploratory steps.



Support in Securing On-and Off-Campus Housing

Fosters describe struggling to secure housing near campus when on-campus housing is not offered or unavailable.

Insufficient Mentorship and Role Models

Fosters describe mentorship as essential for success, particularly in navigating the complexities of goal-setting and decision-making, but also name a lack of available Foster-informed mentors.

Trauma and Emotional Burden

Fosters describe the emotional burden and trauma from foster care impeding educational progress, leading to dropping out or failing to graduate.

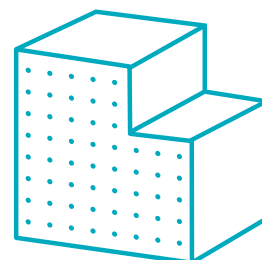


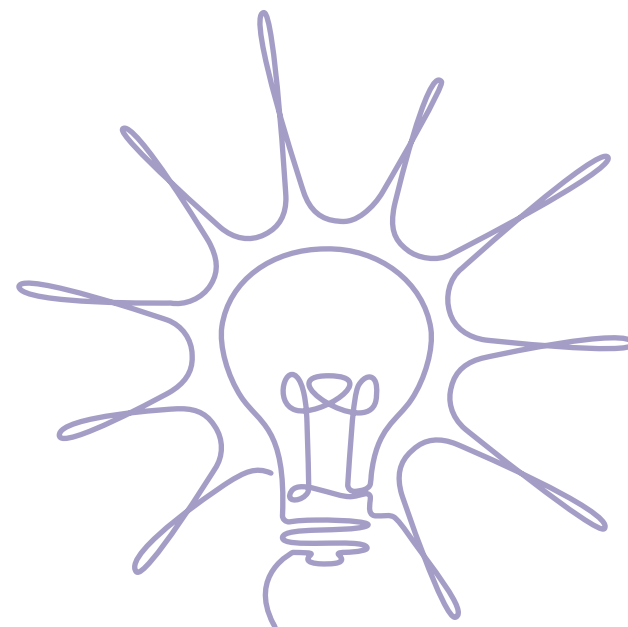
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Fosters are more likely to receive special education services

Did you know?

Every school district must have a designated Foster Care Point of Contact responsible for ensuring the educational stability and rights of students in foster care.





Bold Ideas

K-12

Teach Fosters About Their Rights

Create opportunities in schools to educate Fosters about their legal rights in the foster care system, ensuring they are empowered to advocate for themselves.

Recruit Counselors with Social Work Backgrounds

Employ counselors in schools who are trained in social work to provide better emotional and practical support for Fosters while educating Fosters on privacy and disclosure practices.

Facilitate Participation in Extracurricular Activities

Ensure that Fosters have the ability to join sports teams and clubs outside of their foster home or facility, providing a more normalized school experience.

POST-SECONDARY

Provide Personalized Credit Recovery Plans

Ensure access to programs and personalized guidance to help Fosters recover lost credits due to frequent school changes, and provide tailored academic support with college and trade school preparations in mind.

Provide Funding and Support for Post-High School Education

Support Fosters in the application process, in communications with schools, and provide campus tour funding, transportation, and accompaniment.

Financial and Other Support for Off-Campus Housing

When on-campus housing is not offered or unavailable, provide special funding and other support (apartment search, financial coaching, tenants rights education) for near-campus housing.

It is not possible to address education equity gaps without focusing on Fosters.

SECONDARY AND POST-SECONDARY

Mandate Tutoring as a Standard Service for Fosters

Provide tutoring services and facilitate Foster-specific support groups to help mitigate the negative academic effects of frequent placement changes, school transitions, and in independent living scenarios as young adults and beyond.

Did you know?

By law, every effort should be made to keep Fosters in their school of origin. If a Foster has to switch schools, they must be enrolled in the new school or educational facility within seven days. Once tracking began in Minnesota — a requirement of the Foster Advocates' Keeping Fosters in School Act — 34 percent of placements resulted in a school change, and 80 percent of those moves were timely.

What's working in Minnesota?

In 2021, Foster Advocates advocated for the law that created the Fostering Independence Grants (FIG), which cover the full cost of attendance at Minnesota colleges and universities for anyone who has experienced out-of-home foster care in Minnesota after the age of 13. This bold idea came from our 2020-2021 Education Equity Leaders, and FIG is doing what it set out to: providing funding so that Fosters can get to college and have the same access to opportunities as their non-Foster peers.





Action Steps



What can you do to support Fosters' bold ideas in this area of experience?

All Minnesotans

Think about Do you know about the educational rights, challenges, and opportunities for Fosters? In what ways can you advocate with your district to make local education services Foster-informed? Are your elected school board officials Foster-informed and aware of Fosters' education rights and graduation rates at district schools?

What conversations can you have with school-age children in your life about foster care to reduce stigma and bullying experiences for Fosters in school?

Stakeholders

School Districts What partnerships do you have with your local county child welfare agency? Do you track district graduation rates for Fosters? How can you develop wrap-around educational support for Fosters?

Community Partners Can you offer discounts or transportation support to reduce program barriers for Fosters? Do you have information about FIG, ETV, and other Foster resources readily available, so Fosters do not have to self-disclose to get access?

Counties Are you tracking graduation and proficiency rates across the Fosters you serve? Are you communicating with partner districts about Foster rights and

resources? What is your practice to support all Fosters, regardless of placement, with extracurricular activities and college preparation?

DCYF and MDE There is a deep need for more K-12 Foster data, and DCYF and the Minnesota Department of Education should invest in collaborative research to better understand education outcomes by county and other Foster demographics as well as partner to ensure group and residential facilities align with state education standards and credits transfer.

Legislators Start college savings accounts for every Foster when they enter care. Ensure Fosters are a priority population for Headstart and early childhood education programs. Learn about statewide campus support programs for Fosters to prepare for future legislative proposals to implement similar models.

What's in progress by Foster Advocates

Spearheading a network of Foster-specific campus support programs. As FIG brings more Fosters to colleges, they deserve the support of campus resources related to academics, basic needs, networking, and social connections.

Foster leaders are **building a statewide network through our expanding College Ambassadors program** to connect Fosters across campuses and provide peer social and support opportunities.

Supporting colleges and partners in the Twin Cities Metro with an annual Foster-specific college resource fair.

Preparing for district and regional community conversations about Foster K-12 data to better understand local challenges and opportunities.

How do Fosters react?

Fosters report that while they may have access to a college and career readiness program at their school, these programs are not Foster-informed, which makes them difficult to engage with. For example, when school, college, and career centers have information about the Northstar Promise Grant, but not about Fostering Independence Grants, Fosters say it is hard to trust that they will be understood or their needs will be met.

43% of Minnesota Fosters graduate high school in four years, compared to the state average of 83%. You are more likely to graduate on time if you are a homeless student than if you are in state foster care.

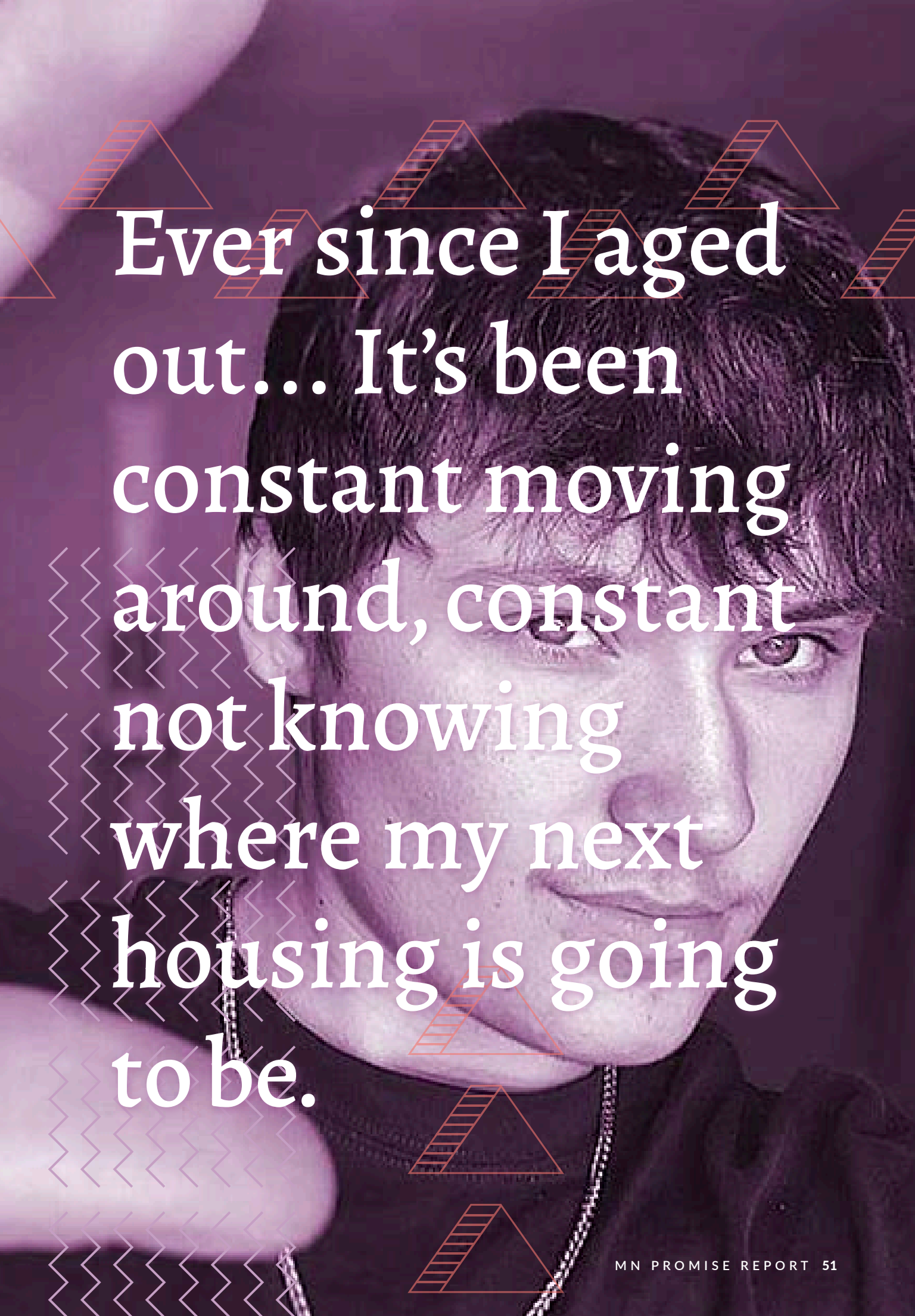
Housing

Perhaps nothing is more everchanging as a Foster's experience and definition of "home," and yet nothing is more crucial to a foundational sense of belonging for children, adolescents, and young adults.

For Fosters, no definition of "home" is sufficient to describe their experiences. Placements only sometimes become something like what outsiders would think of as home. And many Fosters experience multiple, frequent placement changes, disrupting the possibility of a stable sense of home, inside or outside the system.

Older Fosters talk more about housing than home. They describe leaving care with nowhere to go, forced into frantic searches for rentals that require credit history, deposits, or a co-signer. Many Fosters have none of these.

Some cycle from one short-term arrangement to another and are in a constant struggle against time as they also navigate employment, education, and crises of adjustment.



Ever since I aged out... It's been constant moving around, constant not knowing where my next housing is going to be.



What Fosters Describe

Desire for Autonomy in Housing Choices

Fosters describe a desire for greater autonomy and agency when it comes to their housing while in the foster care system, sharing how they often have little say in where they are placed, particularly when it comes to living with peers or in culturally relevant environments.

Financial Literacy and Housing

Fosters describe frequent moves and housing instability as a core challenge, often feeling uprooted and unsure about where they will live next with no safety net.

Barriers to Finding Independent Housing

Fosters describe difficulty securing housing once they age out of care, largely due to a lack of rental history, credit history, cosigners, or stable income. They sometimes face discrimination from landlords and must navigate the housing market with little to no support.

Support Gaps After Aging Out

Fosters describe the sudden loss of support after aging out, when many resources and services are no longer available. Without extended housing support or guidance, fosters can be vulnerable to homelessness and financial instability.

What do the numbers say?

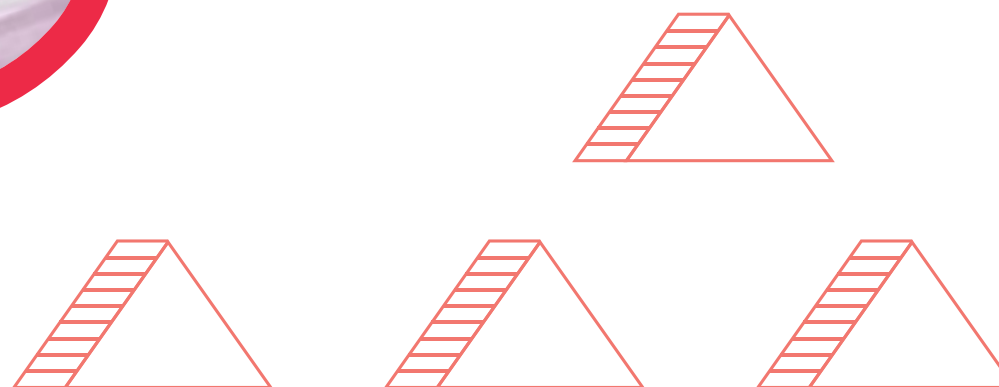
Fosters are more likely to experience homelessness no matter how they exit care. At least 40 percent of Fosters in the Midwest experience homelessness within two years of exiting the foster care system. Nationally, half of homeless young adults who spent time in foster care exited care through reunification or adoption.

Emotional and Mental Health Struggles

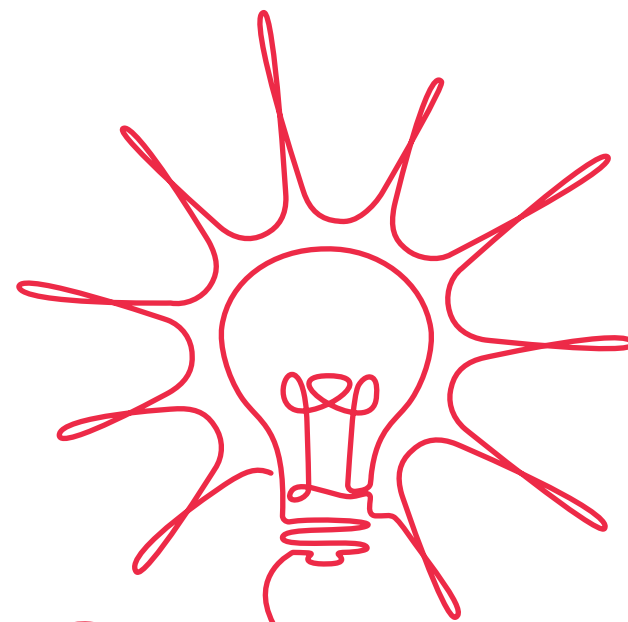
Fosters describe the emotional toll of housing instability, with stress and anxiety increasing as they try to balance finding safe and stable housing with managing other aspects of life, such as work, interpersonal relationships, education, and basic needs like food security. Mental health support is often insufficient in these transitions.

Transitional and Emergency Housing

Fosters describe a need for more transitional and emergency housing options with no barriers to access, particularly during times of crisis or between placements.



A Foster who has not experienced homelessness is the exception. Something so predictable is also incredibly preventable by focusing on Fosters as a priority population.



Bold Ideas

Accessible Emergency Housing

Create an emergency housing network for Fosters, providing information and support, ensuring that no one faces homelessness during transitions or crises.

Make Transitional Housing Universal

Ensure that all Fosters transitioning out of care are automatically eligible for housing support without having to apply or qualify separately.

Joint Housing and Therapy Services

Provide mental health therapy alongside housing services to help Fosters cope with the emotional stress of transitioning out of care.

Post-Treatment Housing Programs

Develop housing programs that specifically cater to Fosters exiting treatment programs to prevent homelessness and support continuity of care.

Create a Dedicated Online Housing Portal

Create an online hub to serve as a central location where Fosters can access resources and support, including listings, financial support, relevant organizations, and emergency housing options.

Ensure Emergency Temporary Housing

Fund and promote emergency temporary housing options for at least one month while Fosters work to secure safe and stable housing.

Regularize Rent Support for All Fosters

Develop a state-wide rental assistance program specifically for former Fosters, guaranteeing rental subsidies for a set number of years.

Lifetime Housing Voucher

Introduce a lifelong housing voucher system for Fosters, ensuring they always have the support they need to find a secure place to live.

Half of Fosters experience more than one foster care placement, and 15% experience three or more moves.

What do the numbers say?

In 2022, around 44 percent of Fosters entered into relative care (foster home or pre-kinship adoption). One third were in a stranger foster care home, 15 percent in a group home or residential treatment center, and 6 percent were in a juvenile correctional facility. The Family First and Prevention Services Act of 2018 reduced the use of congregate (group/residential) care.

Did you know?

When Fosters in care reach the age of 17½, they must create a transition plan with their social worker. Many Fosters come to find that these plans are not realistic, their social workers are not housing experts and are not able to support them on this part of their journey, or that Fosters are penalized for not being able to navigate the housing system. If a Foster chooses to enter Extended Foster Care (EFC), they receive a living stipend — if they have safe housing and are either working part time or in school — or their group home or foster parent receives the stipend on their behalf. EFC delays homelessness, but it does not prevent it.





Action Steps



What can you do to support Fosters' bold ideas in this area of experience?

All Minnesotans

Think about Do you know which local organizations provide Foster-informed housing services? As you engage with local affordable housing discussions or look at housing data, are you integrating a person's foster care history or the overlap between the child welfare system and homelessness?

Support legislators who believe that **Fosters should be a priority population** for vouchers and other housing services.

Stakeholders

Foster Parents, Caseworkers, and STAY Workers Fosters understand the limits of placements while in care, as well as the limited resources after age 18. And there are still many ways Fosters' agency can be supported. How can you offer transparency around those limits and support Fosters however possible in decision-making for their placements? Fosters often need someone in their corner as they step into housing navigation — someone to come with them to meet a landlord so they are not taken advantage of, or something as simple as an address to list on applications.

Judges You have the power to ensure Fosters have reasonable and realistic transition and backup plans to support their housing stability as they exit care. What training and resources do you need to understand how to assess that?

Community Partners In what ways are your housing services Foster-informed, or supporting Fosters as a priority population? How are you assessing foster care history in housing programs and shelters? Do all staff know about Foster-specific challenges and resources within the housing systems?

Counties and DCYF How can you partner with housing authorities to ensure Fosters are a priority population for homelessness prevention and intervention services? What is needed to make Foster-specific vouchers like Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) easier to obtain, or to offer certificates like Rentwise to all transition-age Fosters? Can you collect and advocate for more cross-data on this topic (housing data collecting foster care history, and child welfare systems tracking housing status of current and former Fosters)?

Legislators There are many ways to reduce barriers for Fosters by centering them as a priority population in state housing reform. Some of these include: changing rental history requirements to allow Fosters to list the county as their reference; creating state housing vouchers for Fosters in Extended Foster Care until they can access FYI vouchers; mandating priority access to FYI or other housing vouchers for any Foster aging out of care; and piloting direct cash transfers to prevent homelessness for transition-age Fosters.

What's in progress by Foster Advocates

Creating a series of Foster-informed housing resources, including understanding tenant rights and vouchers.

Advocating for Foster-specific direct cash transfer programs at the county and state level.

Exploring a future directory of landlords committed and trained to provide "Foster-friendly housing" across the state.

How do Fosters react?

Fosters name significant challenges with financial planning, including budgeting for bills, managing daily and monthly expenses, and handling large sums of money from sources like financial aid. Even when they have the funds to secure housing, many Fosters say they don't know how to search for an apartment, determine what makes it affordable, or identify hidden costs. They often don't know what questions to ask a landlord or how to secure a lease without a rental history or cosigner — all things they see their non-Foster peers navigating with support.

80%

of transition-age Fosters in Hennepin County experienced homelessness by age 24.



Siblings and Relationships

Fosters describe relationships and bonds within foster care that are uncertain, everchanging, often artificial, and almost always temporary.

Fosters with siblings, including half- and step-siblings, describe an unbreakable bond, even when that bond is complex and even painful.

Siblings represent a real history of family when much of their story feels like a fiction constructed in real-time by a system incapable of truly seeing Fosters, their deepest individual needs, and their fears.

When those siblings are also in the system but placed apart from a Foster, there can be anxiety, alienation, and a deep longing for connection — to know their siblings are okay, to visit them, to talk with them on the phone, or just to know where they are.

When those needs are ignored or actively denied, Fosters have explained, the system is not just failing an individual, it is failing a family.

At their best, sibling relationships can be a lifeline for Fosters, who describe those relationships as an opportunity to nurture and be nurtured, to protect and to be protected. Family is an identity in a system that assigns and scrambles identity.

I was depressed
and [acting out]
and they're like,
'You don't get to
see your brothers.'
It was constantly
being used as
a punishment.

What Fosters Describe

Sibling Separation

Fosters describe the pain of being separated from their siblings during placements, often without consultation or even communication of basic information about their siblings. Many describe this loss of family connections as one of the most traumatic aspects of entering care.

Placement Priorities

Fosters describe a system that does not prioritize keeping siblings together, instead favoring convenience or other factors. They want the system to recognize and act from the understanding that sibling relationships can be integral to their well-being.

Communication Barriers

Fosters describe challenges with staying in touch with their siblings, and a lack of opportunities to connect through calls, visits, or virtual platforms. They also describe a lack of information about their siblings, beyond what can be learned through visits and other forms of direct communication.

Preserving Sibling Rights

Fosters describe a lack of awareness about sibling rights inside the system and advocate for robust implementation and enforcement of the “Sibling Bill of Rights” and similar policies, including clear communication about these rights and accountability when they are violated.

Sibling Rivalry and Strain

Fosters describe the challenges in sibling relationships, too. These include misunderstandings, jealousy, or competition for resources and attention in care. These issues can be magnified by the system, which may place siblings in unequal or inequitable circumstances, deepening relational tensions.

The Minnesota Sibling Bill of Rights was passed in 2018.

Sibling Connections Post-Aging Out

Fosters describe how sibling relationships evolve as they age out of care. Those aging out can face barriers to staying connected with younger siblings still in the system, such as restricted access or logistical challenges.

Sibling Visits and Support

Fosters describe the value of sibling visits but say they are infrequent and poorly supported. Many advocate for structured sibling visitation plans, similar to parent visitation schedules, and funding for transportation and facilitation to ensure visits happen reliably and meaningfully.

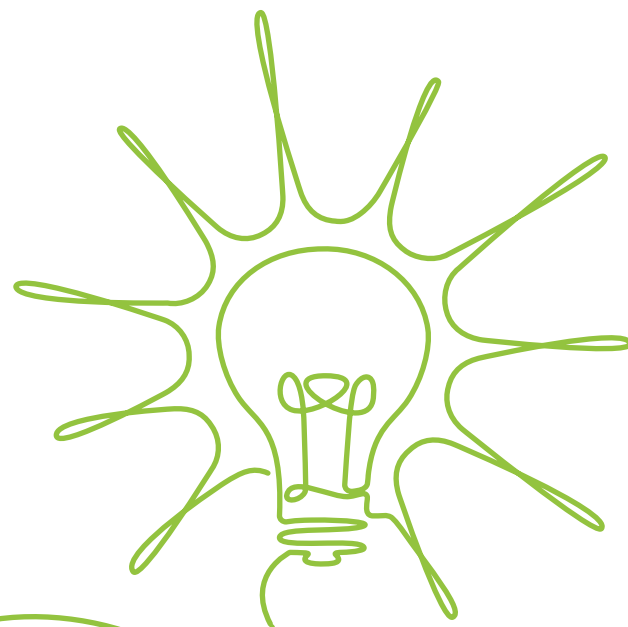


”

My group home made you sit in the living room even when other people were there, and you sit on this chair in front of everybody, and the staff would be around the corner. No one had told me my grandfather had died and so then I had to find out from my brothers who were confused why I wasn't at the funeral.



Bold Ideas



Guaranteeing Sibling Visits

Create mandatory visitation schedules backed by funding for transportation and other logistical support. Visits should not depend on the foster parents' willingness but should be a guaranteed right.

Sibling Reunification Events

Create opportunities to support sibling bonds through reunification programs. These could include sibling-focused events or camps where separated siblings can reconnect in a safe, supportive setting.

Sibling Rights Advocacy

Fosters emphasize the need for clear communication about their sibling rights. They advocate for youth-friendly educational materials that explain sibling placement policies and how to challenge decisions that separate siblings unnecessarily.



It would be easier to communicate to a stranger than it has been with my sister because a stranger wouldn't have this loss and trauma connected to them.



80%

of Fosters nationally are separated from one or more of their siblings while in care, and 85% of Fosters have at least one sibling.



Did you know?

In 2008, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act was the first federal law to recognize the importance of keeping siblings together. It required states to make reasonable efforts to maintain sibling connections unless there is documentation stating why that connection is not in the best interest of the children.

What works in other states?

Several states have models drawing on highly trained, professional caregivers to expand placement options and supports for large sibling groups.

Action Steps



What can you do to support Fosters' bold ideas in this area of experience?

All Minnesotans

Think about Do you know Fosters' rights for connection to their siblings while in and out of care? How would you support a Foster in your life to maintain sibling relationships? *What would you do if you heard a young person in your life was denied a sibling visit (hint: direct them to the Ombuds Office for Foster Youth).*

Encourage your network to provide emergency or long-term foster care placements. The more foster homes there are, the more likely counties will be able to find placements for siblings to stay together.

Stakeholders

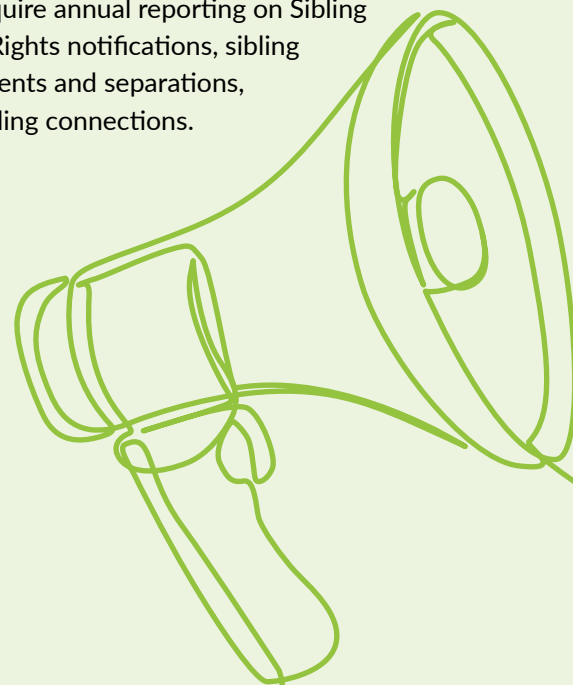
Foster Parents and Caseworkers How are you educating Fosters about their rights related to sibling visitation beyond when they first enter care? How are you ensuring that sibling visitations are not used as an incentive nor being taken away as a behavior-related punishment? Older siblings often take on parental roles leading up to or while in foster care to protect their younger siblings. How are you resetting these roles and allowing that child to still be a child?

Lawyers and Judges Counties, foster parents, and kinship families need support to facilitate transportation, logistics, and options for regular sibling connection. What programs, activities, resources,

or events can facilitate this across a range of ages? What would it look like if sibling connections were held in a supportive and positive community setting, instead of in child welfare offices? What restorative sibling reunification events and healing resources can you provide for those under 18 and for those who are older?

DCYF What support can you provide counties to keep siblings together? Several states have created networks of homes that are open to large sibling groups who can be kept on "retainer" through additional funding alongside additional requirements and training.

Legislators Fosters have flagged experiences where the Sibling Bill of Rights was not followed. Use legislation to address implementation challenges, and require annual reporting on Sibling Bill of Rights notifications, sibling placements and separations, and sibling connections.



What's in progress by Foster Advocates

Creating more Foster connection and healing opportunities for siblings, especially after age 18, to engage and reconnect.

Exploring research partnerships to identify programs, resources, and best practices to support reunification with siblings after a long separation, such as a Foster adopted as a toddler who reconnects with their siblings as a young adult; or a Foster separated from siblings in placements for multiple years.



What would it look like if there was a community space for visitation with siblings, especially if you haven't seen each other for a while, and for that to be in a really lovely, relaxing space?

What should happen in Minnesota?

Per the Sibling Bill of Rights, Fosters should be active in each other's lives if they choose, including frequent and meaningful contact, sharing celebrations and other milestones, being informed about changes in each other's placements, and being included in permanency planning decisions for their siblings. It is best practice that Fosters of all ages are included actively in decision-making about placements and connections with their siblings.

Fosters react

In feedback sessions, Fosters reflected on several additional challenges: wanting to become a guardian for younger siblings and not being supported by the system for that; or turning 18 and then being prevented from seeing siblings who were still in care. There is more to explore on system barriers — intentional and unintentional — that need to be addressed to support relationships across Fosters' journey through care.

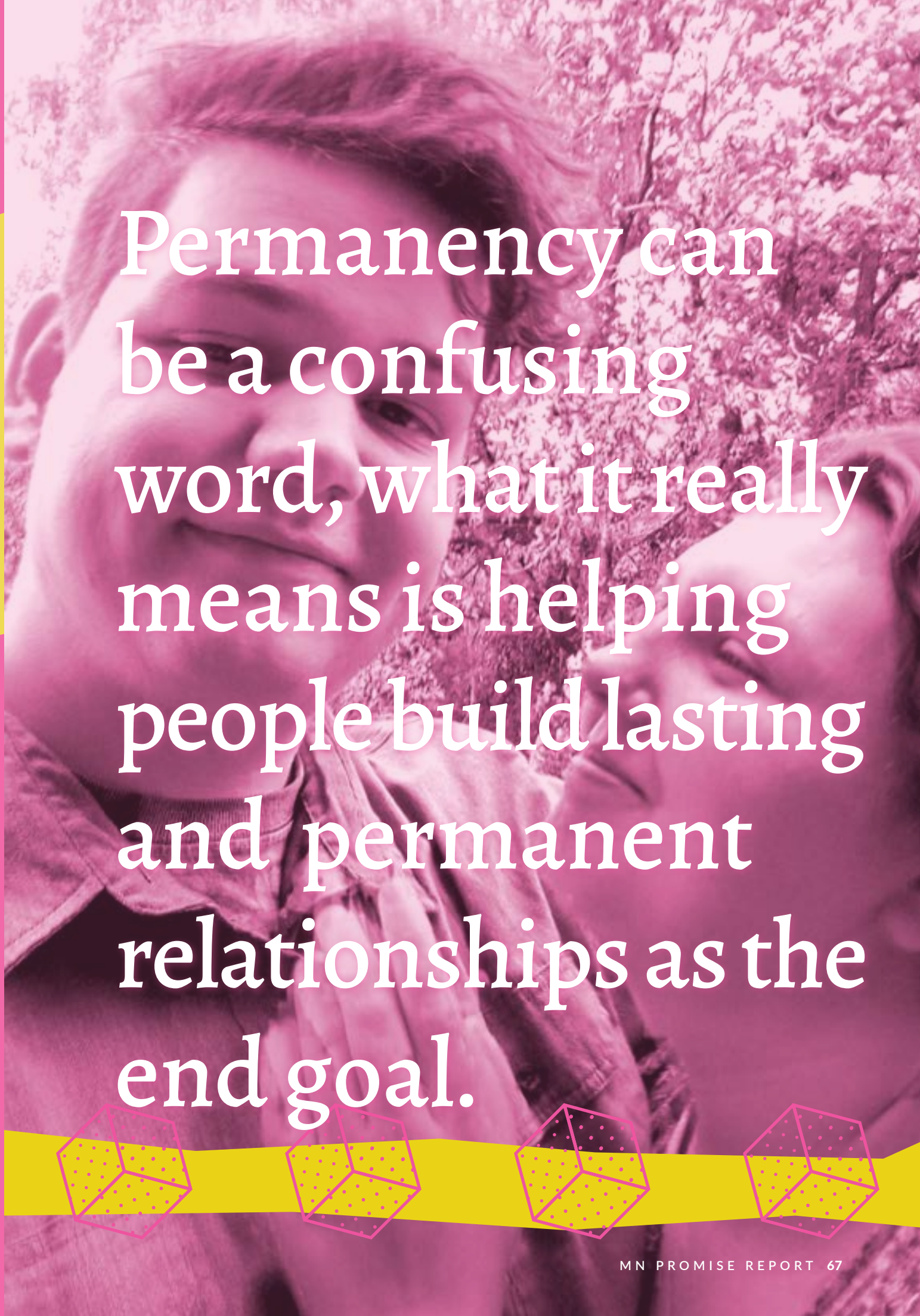


Permanency

“Permanency” is a system-defined term for the transfer of permanent custody to a relative or other caregiver. In describing their experiences, Fosters repeatedly challenged the system’s rigid adherence to its definition and pushed for a redefinition that reflected their needs and realities.

This rigidity can sometimes include a stubborn, years-long focus on adoption or despite observable and documented red flags or complications, pursuing versions of permanency without consulting or even informing the Foster, or otherwise informing them suddenly that they were up for adoption or facing some other imminent, seismic change. Others felt that the push for reunification lingered so long that it kept them from exploring real opportunities for stability. They told stories of reunification without mental health support and of being alone to navigate complicated feelings and trauma, and of reunification with families unable to support them physically or emotionally.

Fosters themselves described permanency as not about paperwork or legal statuses but about genuine, lasting relationships. It is about being surrounded by people you trust and who will not disappear with the next court order. It is about building a durable network that can support a Foster through all stages of care and into adulthood.

A photograph of a young boy with curly hair, smiling and looking slightly to the side. In the background, the face of a woman is partially visible, looking down. The image has a soft, pinkish-purple tint.

Permanency can be a confusing word, what it really means is helping people build lasting and permanent relationships as the end goal.





What Fosters Describe

Feeling Disconnected from Family and Community

Fosters describe a pervasive sense of disconnection from both biological and foster families, often intensified by frequent moves and placement changes. This lack of sustained relationships creates feelings of isolation and weakens connections to cultural roots, contributing to a fragmented sense of self and belonging.

Experiencing Limited Agency

Fosters describe limited control over decisions that affect their lives throughout their system experiences. From placement choices to medical interventions, they often feel their voices are overlooked, leading to feelings of disempowerment and exclusion in a system that should be supporting them.

Struggling with Initial Adjustments

Fosters describe the initial transition into care as disorienting, marked by unfamiliar environments and routines. The lack of clear orientation or guidance on their new circumstances can leave Fosters feeling lost, struggling to adjust to the system's demands while yearning for stability.

Forming (and Losing) Connections in Temporary Placements

Fosters describe their relationships within temporary placements as fleeting and often tenuous. They report an ongoing struggle to form genuine attachments, knowing that placements are likely to change. This cycle of attachment and loss could impact their capacity to trust and build relationships later on.

Balancing Complex Emotions in Kin Placements

Fosters describe kin placements as comforting yet complex, with family ties both providing familiarity and also surfacing past traumas or unresolved dynamics. Many Fosters express relief at remaining within their cultural or familial communities, even as they may be navigating emotionally charged relationships with kin caregivers.

Grappling with Unmet Promises of Permanency

Fosters describe the state's promises of quality of care as often unfulfilled, with unmet expectations around safety, stability, and support. This theme of broken promises, from initial placements through adoption failures and other stages, result in a sense of betrayal that shapes Fosters' views of the system.

Anticipating and Experiencing Disappointment in Permanency Outcomes

Fosters describe hopes for permanency — through adoption or reunification — frequently met with disappointment when placements fail. Failed adoptions and re-entries into care are experienced as deep emotional setbacks, which can reinforce their sense of instability and uncertainty in finding a permanent home.

Searching for Identity and Self-Worth

Fosters describe an ongoing quest for self-identity and self-worth, complicated by limited control over their lives and disruptions in family connections. Without consistent relationships or cultural grounding, Fosters often struggle to form a stable identity and sense of personal agency and value.

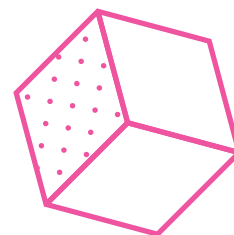
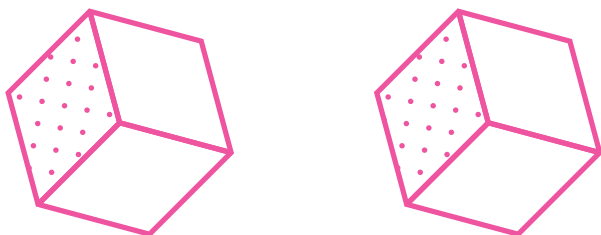
Navigating the Transition to Independence

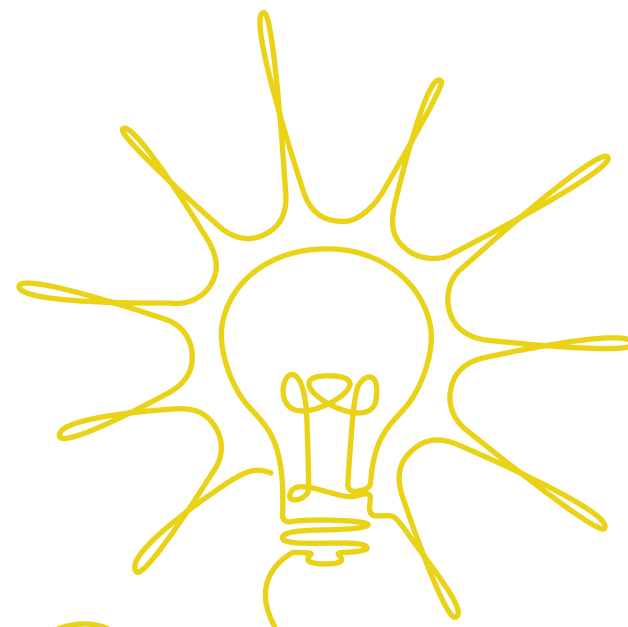
Fosters describe aging out as one of the most challenging stages of foster care due to the sometimes abrupt end of structured support and interpersonal relationships, as well as limited guidance in building life skills. The lack of gradual transitions leaves many Fosters feeling unprepared for the financial and emotional demands of independent living.

What should happen in Minnesota?

In recent years, Minnesota has increased placement connections with relatives and community, with 66 percent of total foster care days spent in kinship care. While 52 percent of placements end through reunification, there is a clear gap in post-reunification services, as 16 percent of Fosters re-enter foster care within a year of reunification.

Post-reunification practices from other states include permanent supportive housing and wraparound housing stabilization supports, as well as 12-month post-reunification plans that include child-parent therapies, in-home services, and parent mentors.





Bold Ideas

Ensuring Agency

Create mandatory programs that educate Fosters on their rights and provide opportunities to practice self-advocacy. This includes teaching young Fosters, in a developmentally appropriate manner, about legal rights and how to exercise agency within placements and case planning.

Youth-Inclusive Intake Processes

Develop intake processes that allow Fosters to voice their placement preferences and articulate their needs to establish and model agency and reduce early trauma upon entering care.

Guaranteed Mental Health Support for Initial Placement

Assign dedicated mental health professionals who specialize in trauma-informed care to provide immediate support to Fosters during the initial placement phase.

Guaranteed Mental Health Support During Placement Changes

Include a series of mandatory therapy sessions as part of every placement move to address the emotional impact, help the Foster process the transition, and mitigate the trauma of frequent disruptions.

Concurrent Planning with Foster Input

Allow Fosters to participate actively in planning for goals and next steps, including adoption or reunification pathways, by including them in court hearings or family team meetings.

Transparent Adoption Processes

Improve adoption tracking and transparency by giving Fosters the option of regular updates on their status and the adoptive family selection process. This should include the opportunity for Fosters to provide documented and integrated input.

What do the numbers say?

There is no state or national tracking of adoption breakdowns, which happen via disruption — ending before adoption is legalized — or dissolution — which means ending after legalization. The best estimates for Minnesota are that at least 20 percent of adoptions experience breakdowns, with national research showing that the largest reason for breakdowns is unrealistic expectations, lack of flexibility from adoptive parents, and lack of system support post-adoption.

Track and Prevent Adoption Disruptions

Monitor disrupted and dissolved adoptions to offer immediate support and potentially avoid re-entry into the system. Develop a program that focuses on stabilizing placements post-adoption.

50%

of Fosters in the state are “discharged to permanency” (reunification, living with relatives, guardianship, adoption) within 12 months of entering foster care.

69%

of Minnesota Fosters who age out of care at 18 were in foster care for over a year.





Action Steps



What can you do to support Fosters' bold ideas in this area of experience?

All Minnesotans

Think about What are your preconceptions about reunification and adoption, and how will you educate yourself about the current realities in Minnesota beyond this report?

Are you prepared to be a mentor for a Foster in your life? What would this look like for Fosters at different ages and stages, and what resources and support would you need to provide Foster-informed mentorship?

Stakeholders

Caseworkers and Supportive Adults

How can you boost Fosters' voices, involvement, and consent in the permanency decision process? A Foster can only legally consent at 14; for younger Fosters, how can they assent and have a voice in all parts of the process?

Community Partners

How can you partner with child welfare agencies to provide additional mental health support, placement changes, and upon reunification?

Counties

With federal legislation leading to more kinship placements, how are child welfare agencies prepared to support healing and restorative practices with immediate and extended kin? Are there local partnerships within county behavioral health units or with community partners

to help ensure the success of reunification, guardianship, and adoption?

DCYF

Implement SOUL Family or another similar program to ensure Fosters have legal relationships upon exiting care. Support state and local contracts focused on mentorship relationships for Fosters. Pilot expanded mental health services.

Legislators

There is a huge need for additional mental health and healing services across care, especially to support reunification. With legislative direction and support, Minnesota could pilot programs that test "restorative circles" or other healing modalities that address factors leading to foster care reentry. Use legislation to improve data collection around reentry and adoption disruption, and require that data be included in SSIS and annual reports. Ensure adoption subsidies follow the Foster if adoption dissolution occurs.



What's in progress by Foster Advocates

Expanding services within our own support and leadership programs to support Fosters in healing from their foster care journey, no matter how they choose to involve themselves with our systems change work.

Expanding intentional in-person and virtual community building opportunities for Fosters for the opportunity to build and maintain a larger "chosen family" network that includes identity peers.

Advocating for the SOUL Family program to come to Minnesota.

How can you partner with child welfare agencies to provide additional mental health support, in addition to therapy, for Fosters and families at the initial placement, during placement changes, and upon reunification?

Any Foster age 14 or older in Minnesota gets to legally consent to adoption.

What works in other states?

Fosters who exit care without permanent legal relationships face numerous barriers. Without those relationships, Black, Hispanic, and multiracial youth are more likely to leave care. The SOUL Family program establishes a legal connection between a young person (age 16 and older) and at least one caring adult, to ensure that Fosters aging out of care have a permanency support system as they transition to adulthood. Unlike adoption or guardianship, SOUL Family allows young people to make these new connections without severing legal ties with birth family and siblings.

Fosters reflect

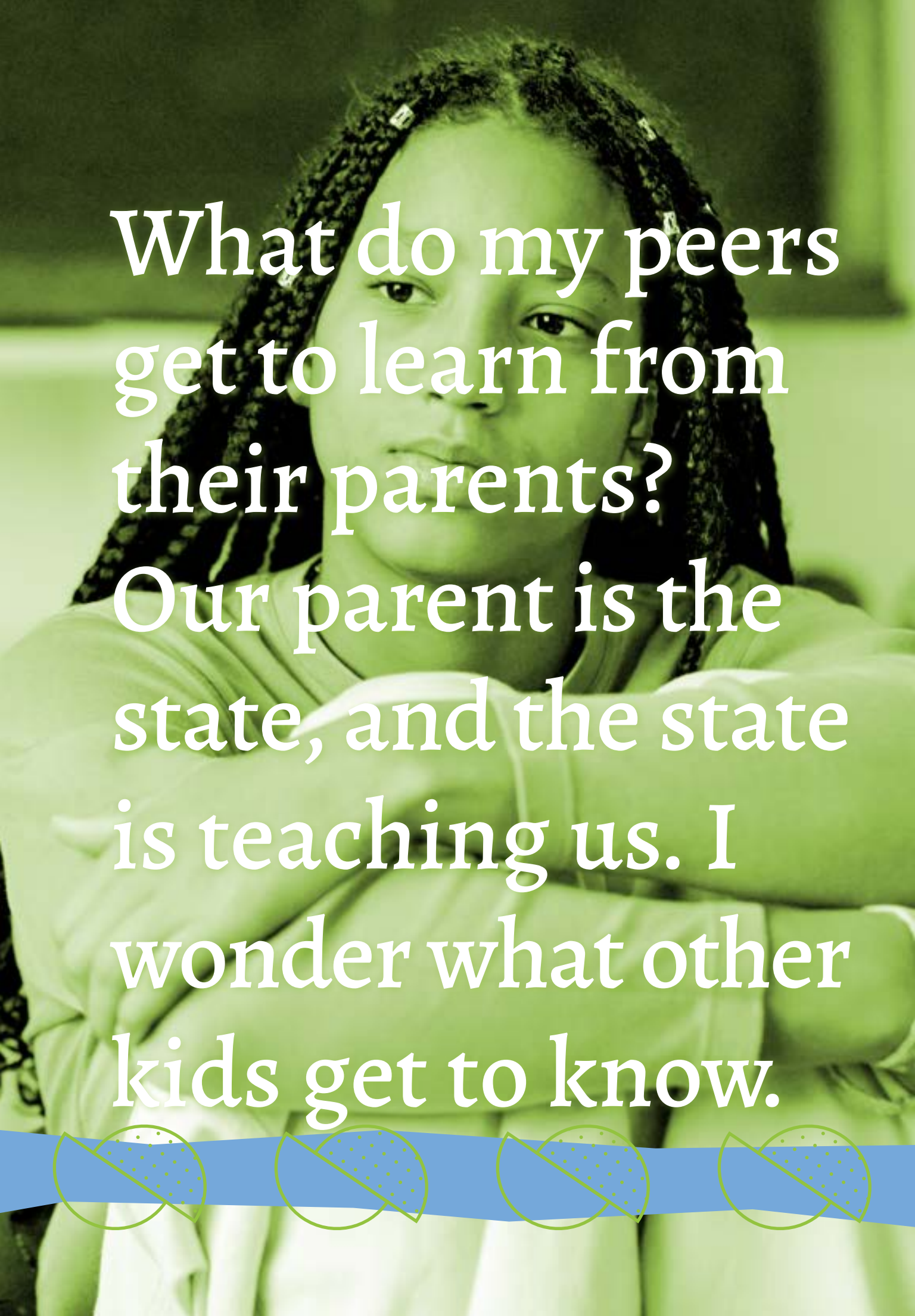
In feedback sessions, Fosters reflected that there are not always multiple placement options available and their caseworkers are faced with difficult decisions. They emphasized the desire for caseworkers and other adults to be transparent about that difficulty, and to give Fosters as much agency or choice as can be provided related to placements and placement moves.



Normalcy

Fosters experience life under an entirely different set of rules than most of their peers. In the simplest terms, “normalcy” is about missed experiences and lost opportunities.

It is about wishing for and wondering about what you perceive as normal based on what you see in the lives of your peers. It is what you see all around you and do not have access to: after school activities, money for prom or sports equipment, a phone, a driver's license, a car. The idea of normalcy is about more than just fairness; it is about belonging, stability, and having access to everyday experiences that shape identity and independence. Many Fosters report feeling excluded from after-school activities and unable to maintain friendships. And the struggle for normalcy continues into adulthood, where they must navigate the world without safety nets, mentors, or basic knowledge.



What do my peers
get to learn from
their parents?
Our parent is the
state, and the state
is teaching us. I
wonder what other
kids get to know.

NORMALCY

FOSTERS DESCRIBE

What Fosters Describe

Access to School Activities

Fosters describe experiencing barriers to participating in school events, extracurriculars, and social outings.

Developing Friendships and Personal Interests

Fosters describe being denied opportunities to develop and maintain friendships and personal interests, making them feel even more isolated and different from their peers.

Trusted Adults and Mentors

Fosters describe a desire to connect with an adult they can ask for advice, especially in young adulthood.

Punished for Normal Behaviors

Fosters describe feeling controlled rather than cared for when they are punished for normal teenage behaviors or denied access to normal teenage things, like phones, social media, and drivers education classes.

Unequal Treatment in the Home

Fosters describe being treated differently than their foster parents' biological children, leaving many feeling like outsiders in their own homes.

Inappropriate Financial Expectations

Fosters describe concerns about how some placements or caseworkers used funds intended for the Foster's care, with common experiences noted of not having enough clothes or being required to pay for their own hygiene products or cell phone (even when they were not allowed or able to have a job).

Disappearing Supports

Fosters describe a world of supports dropping off after exiting care, or if they are unable to (or decide not to) pursue college or vocational school.



<3%

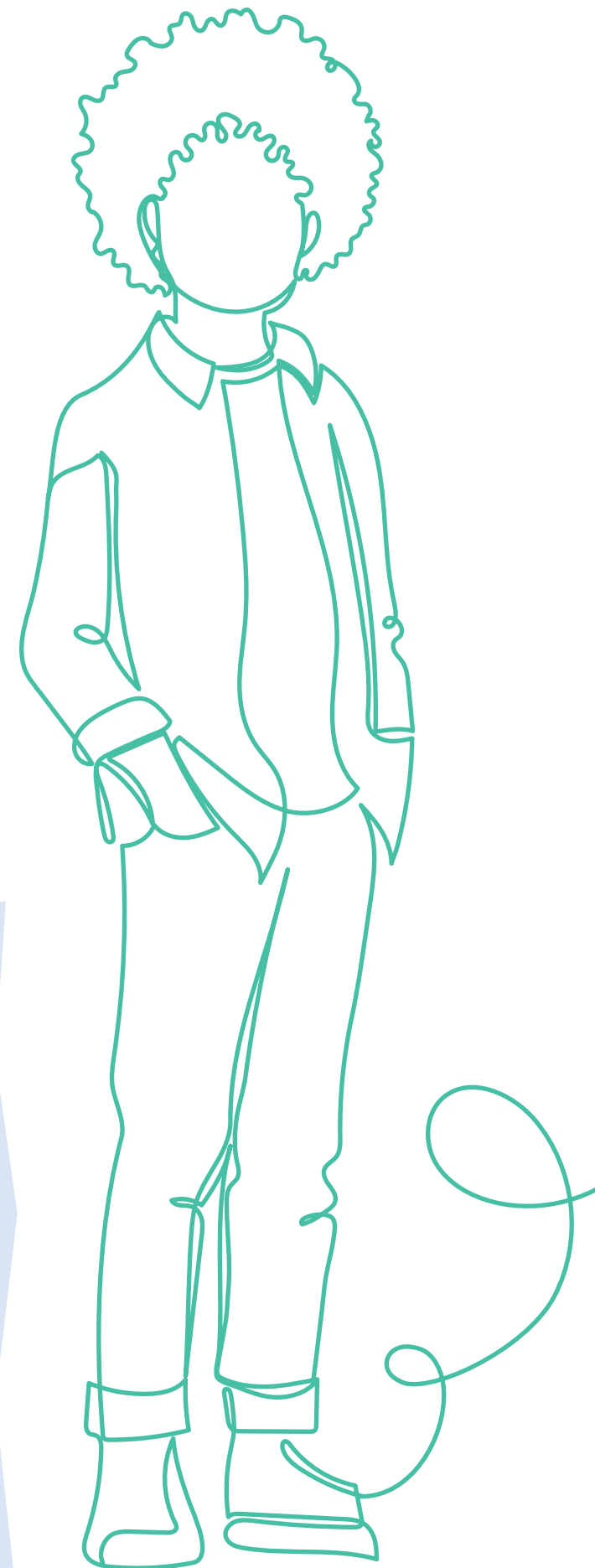
of transition-age Fosters in Hennepin reported receiving financial literacy services in 2021.

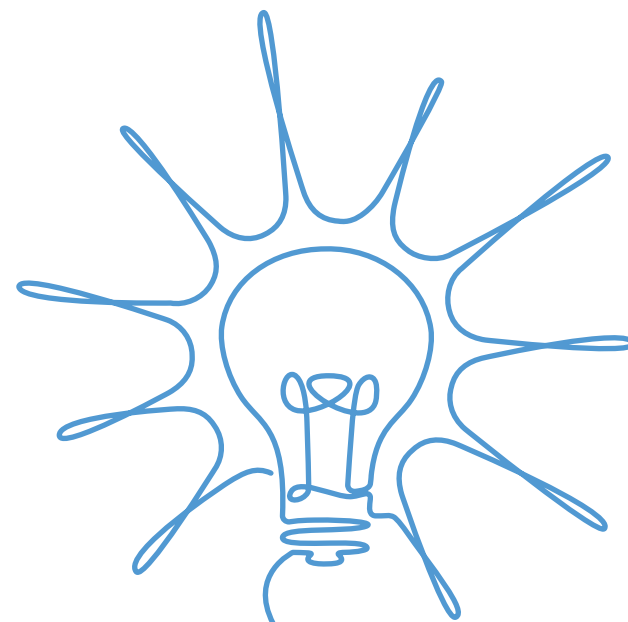
66%

of transition-age Fosters in Hennepin wanted to receive financial literacy services in 2021.

What do the numbers say?

Nine states have examples of "health care passports" for Fosters, to ensure continuity of their medical care between placements, easy access to medical records, and increased Foster agency. Some of these examples are paper passports, packets that "travel" with a Foster, and some of these examples are electronic and tied in with state healthcare system. New Jersey's example is particularly robust, looping in embedded nursing staff with child welfare offices to coordinate passport, navigate medical access, and review and monitor medical records and treatment.





Bold Ideas

Information Distribution

Ensure high school students have timely information around extracurriculars and related expenses, selecting classes, and college prep.

Financial Support for Special Activities

Create a fund for school sports equipment and expenses around special events like field trips or prom.

Guaranteed Transportation

Provide guaranteed rides to jobs, events, friends' homes, and family visits, including funding for rideshare services. Ensure all Fosters have access not only to drivers education but behind the wheel training and support getting their permit and insurance coverage.

Guaranteed Phone Access

Provide a phone to every Foster above a certain age (if there are no technology safety concerns), to ensure connection to friends, family, and resources.

Life Skills Training

Offer classes for Fosters of all ages covering fundamentals like home and vehicle maintenance, financial management, and personal well-being.

Banking Supports

Offer special support for setting up and maintaining checking and savings accounts.



52%

of Midwest Fosters had a bank account at age 21, compared with 81% of the general population at the same age.



Fosters have to worry about going to court or talking to your guardian ad litem. You have to be aware of all the problems that you're facing at home, write them down or remember to talk about them.

What works in other states?

The Florida Keys to Independence Program supports the permit, training, license, and insurance requirements for Fosters to get a driver's license, including covering costs for insurance. Results of the program have found Fosters with the license or permit are more likely to complete their GED, high school diploma, and enter college, and more likely to be employed than Fosters without a permit or license.

Washington DC provides a monthly personal allowance of \$100 to youth between the ages of 15 and 21 to support their discretionary spending and ensure that monthly payments to placements cover basic necessities. In order to receive the allowance, Fosters are required to meet case planning, behavioral, and household engagement criteria.





Action Steps



What can you do to support Fosters' bold ideas in this area of experience?

All Minnesotans

Think about What conversations can you have with coworkers, neighbors, and friends about foster care to normalize Fosters as members of our community and a priority population for services?

For any service provided to a child in your life, **how are you advocating for the state to ensure that same service is provided to a Foster?** Are your local and state elected officials Foster-informed and advocating for this equity in your community as well?

Stakeholders

Foster Parents and Supportive Adults

Reasonable and prudent parenting laws support Fosters experiencing childhood in ways similar to their peers. Fosters should have the same opportunities as their non-Foster peers. How are you advocating for Fosters in your life around this expectation? What support do you need to ensure Fosters have access to cultural activities, food, and haircare products, extracurricular activities, drivers licenses, and more?

Caseworkers Are you familiar with Maya's Law and the requirement to ensure Fosters are able to talk with you privately? Are you checking with Fosters directly on activities they may want to do but are not being offered or allowed to do, especially for cultural connections? Do you know

Fosters' rights around normalcy and how to support Foster parents in those decisions?

Community Partners Are you familiar with your local STAY provider for referrals? How can you make services related to normalcy Foster-informed? How can you partner with counties to uplift Fosters as a priority population for access to services? If you offer culturally-specific services or activities, how can you support Fosters as a target population?

Counties Fosters are extremely vulnerable to identity theft during and after care. Although Fosters over the age of 14 receive annual credit checks through DCYF, there is no system in place to protect them throughout the rest of the year. How are you supporting Fosters or foster parents with credit freezes or initial fraud alerts? Do you have partnerships with local banks or credit unions to support Fosters setting up checking and savings accounts?



<5%

of Fosters who age out of care obtain their driver's license, compared to 75% of all high school seniors.

Judges and Lawyers How are you ensuring adherence to Minnesota's Reasonable Prudent Parent Standard Guidance? What would it look like to create a "normalcy contract" as part of court hearings to document requirements for things like phone or bank account access?

DCYF Pilot a program to ensure Fosters do not face barriers obtaining their drivers license and insurance. Research how many Fosters experience identity theft while in or transitioning out of care. Implement a monthly allowance program for Fosters to ensure equity across the state for Fosters' discretionary spending and supporting financial literacy.

Legislators Sponsor a comprehensive normalcy bill for Fosters, that includes requirements for driver's license and insurance support, financial literacy training, extracurricular funding, phone access, and more.

What's in progress by Foster Advocates

Working with financial partners to create a network of Foster-informed financial institutions across the state, as well as resources to support Fosters who are unbanked or underbanked.

Advocating for increased funding for STAY and for future normalcy legislation around supporting Fosters with driver's license, bank accounts, and phone access.

What works in other states?

The California Lifeline Program ensures eligible Fosters ages 12 to 21 get a free phone and monthly service plan, ensuring access to texting, calls, and internet.

Texas is piloting a program to provide bank accounts and financial literacy mentorship to teenage Fosters across the state. States, counties, and cities across the country are partnering with local banks or credit unions to support Foster bank accounts, and 16 partner sites across the country implement Opportunity Passport, which includes a matched savings investment for Fosters who have moved through financial literacy training and goal setting.



Navigating Life after Care

When Fosters reach adulthood and begin their life after care, some have the support of their foster placement or biological family, a mentor, or other kinds of caring accompaniment.

But many feel like they are at a cliff's edge or staring into a thick fog. If services and other support exists, they do not know how or where to find them. The list of things they wish somebody had prepared them for grows fast: How do I create a budget? How do I find housing? What documentation am I missing? If I'm in crisis, who do I call and what are the limits of what I can ask of them? I have heard there are organizations and programs to help me, how do I find them? How can they find me?

A photograph of two young women with long hair, seen from behind, looking out over a calm body of water towards a distant shoreline with trees. The image has a light blue tint.

There's a demand for ongoing assistance. Many of us are still left isolated and struggling into our 30s and beyond.





What Fosters Describe

Barriers to Life Skills and Transition Support

Fosters describe transition programs that vary widely by county, leading to inconsistency in life skills education, making it difficult for Fosters to receive the training and resources they need to navigate adulthood, such as financial literacy and independent living skills.

Inconsistent and Limited Support for Extended Foster Care (EFC)

Fosters describe a lack of clear communication and consistency around Extended Foster Care options and the support available beyond 18. Fosters in Extended Foster Care report limitations in funding, support in finding independent living situations, and confusion around eligibility criteria.

Housing

Fosters describe significant barriers in accessing housing support, particularly during and after the transition to adulthood, no matter how they exit care. Many have struggled with homelessness or unstable housing, citing a lack of information about transitional housing programs or rental assistance.

Emergency Financial Support

Fosters describe the difficulty of covering urgent financial needs during their transition to independence, suggesting emergency stipends or grants to help meet immediate expenses, especially during times of crisis.

Education and Vocational Training

Fosters describe inconsistent access to educational resources, particularly for those who are not pursuing traditional college pathways. They report a lack of vocational training, job readiness programs, and educational support for those who are aging out or choosing alternative careers.



Think about

When should the state stop parenting? One in three non-Foster adults aged 18 to 34 live in their parents' house, and 50 percent of parents provide regular financial assistance, supporting adult kids' monthly groceries, cell phones, and discretionary spending and vacations.

Healthcare and Insurance

Fosters describe challenges in accessing healthcare as adults, sometimes unaware of eligibility, unsure how to find and connect with healthcare providers, and lacking experience managing their health records.

Life Skills

Fosters describe feeling unprepared for adulthood, lacking training in essential life skills such as budgeting, finding and securing housing, and managing finances. They emphasized the need for structured programs to help build these skills before aging out.

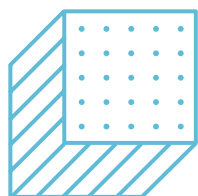
Ongoing Comprehensive Support

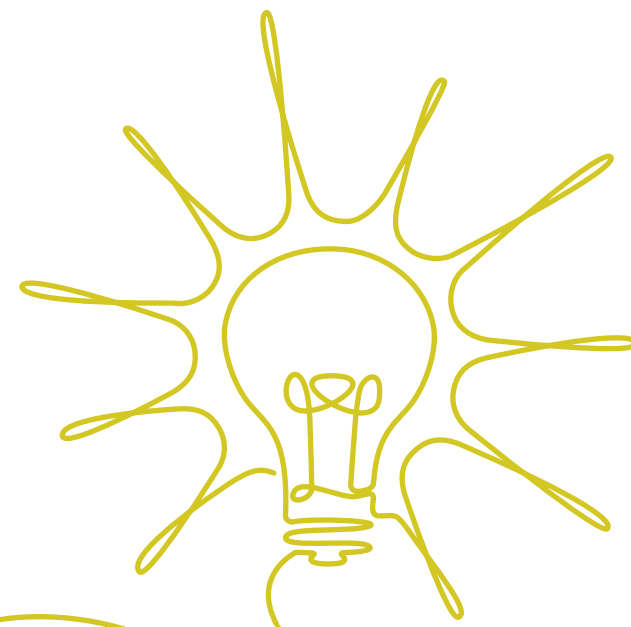
Fosters describe the need for extended access to support, pointing to services such as housing, education, and mental health care. Ongoing mentorship and emotional support were identified as critical to their success in transitioning to independence.



40%

of Midwest Fosters experience homelessness within two years of exiting foster care, and are more likely to experience homelessness no matter how they exit care.





Bold Ideas

Tailored Resource Packages

Collaborate with experts, advocates, and Fosters to create Foster-specific resource packages customized for individualized needs, including mental health services, housing assistance, educational support, and transition planning for adulthood.

Extended Health Coverage Post-Care

Extend Medicaid or equivalent health coverage until age 26 (or beyond) for Fosters, similar to coverage under a family's insurance, ensuring mental and physical health continuity during the transition to independent living.

Joint Housing and Therapy Services

Provide mental health therapy alongside housing services, to help Fosters cope with the emotional stress of transitioning out of care.

Legal Services

Introduce adult Fosters to legal support systems, including opportunities for free services and how to access them.

Two-Year Transition Mentorship Program

Provide all aging-out Fosters with a life coach or mentor starting two years before they leave care, supporting them in building life and professional skills, connecting with resources, and navigating the transition to adulthood.

Cultural Liaisons

Support Native Fosters through 'cultural connection mentors' as an identified person or agency they can go to for questions, to facilitate connections to tribal and cultural resources especially over the age of 18, and support them finding and going to different cultural events.

Financial Support Through Age 26

Instead of a benefits cliff as a 21st birthday present, *continue Extended Foster Care services and provide a ramp down of financial assistance between age 21 and 26*. Create direct cash transfer programs available for Fosters that are not eligible for EFC up to age 26 to support their transition to adulthood.

Restorative Reunification Resources

Provide trauma-informed healing circles and other restorative supports for Fosters, reconnecting with bio parents, siblings, and other extended family both while in care and after they turn 18.



90%

of transition-age Fosters in Minnesota report having less than \$500 available to them in an emergency, from savings, gifts, or loans.

What do the numbers say?

The Minnesota child welfare data system does not track how many Fosters in care at 18 are eligible for and utilize Extended Foster Care benefits. Limited data does show that only one in four Fosters who participated in EFC remained in the program until the maximum age of 21. Minnesota is also not tracking how many Fosters are reunified or adopted — achieving “permanency” in the eyes of the system — but then kicked out of their home as teenagers or young adults.



Action Steps



What can you do to support Fosters' bold ideas in this area of experience?

All Minnesotans

Think about What would you want and expect for your child, relative, or neighbor after they turn 18? Which supports would you want to taper off and which would you want to end? How can you advocate for Fosters to be a priority population for prevention and stabilization services, so we invest in their transition to adulthood instead of opening the pathway to prison or homelessness?

What skills or community resources do you need to learn about to support Fosters in their transition to adulthood, regardless of how they exit care?

Stakeholders

Caseworkers For teenage Fosters, are you starting transition conversations before age 17 ½? If a Foster lives at a placement past 18, how can that placement set them up for success by providing "rental history" and teaching them how to budget their EFC stipend between living expenses and other costs?

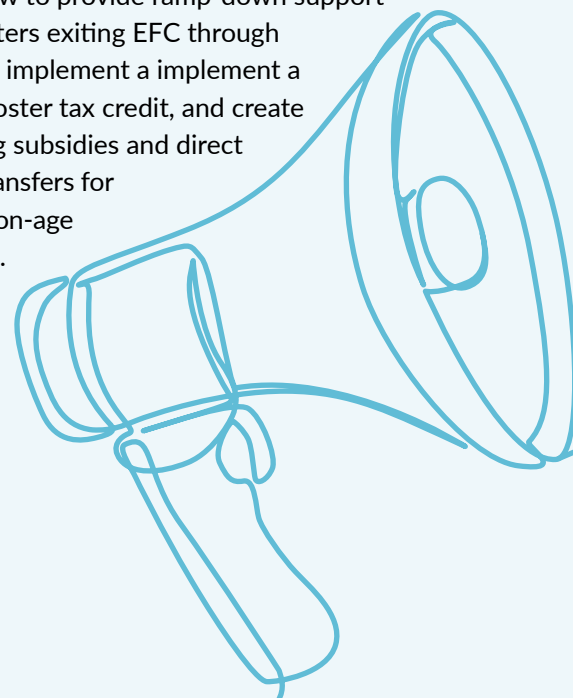
Community Partners Fosters have broken support networks because of the system, and should be a priority population to support with networking for career planning, financial stability, navigating resources, and connection to cultural events and activities like Juneteenth or the Annual Gathering for Our Children & Returning Adoptees Powwow.

Counties What training, practices, and policies support caseworkers and foster families to better understand independent living planning and housing navigation, so there are no gaps in EFC access or in housing stability?

Judges What does a realistic transition plan look like, for those reunifying, being adopted, or aging out?

DCYF What is the system's responsibility to ensure post-permanency stability? Right now, Minnesota pays for the cost of supporting transition-age Fosters in shelters, emergency rooms, and jail. What would it look like to invest instead in extended life skills and transition support, regardless of how a Foster exited care?

Legislators Pass a Minnesota "Beyond EFC" law to provide ramp-down support for Fosters exiting EFC through age 26, implement a state Foster tax credit, and create housing subsidies and direct cash transfers for transition-age Fosters.



What's in progress by Foster Advocates

Advocating for Extended Foster Care to be opt-out versus opt-in to more eligible Fosters know about and access this service, and for eventual extension beyond age 21.

Working with partners to increase inclusion of foster care history in data collection, to better understand the outcomes of transition-age Fosters based on the different ways they exited care.

Continuing to expand our leadership programs, available to any transition-age Foster across the state, to help them build their individual and system advocacy skills.

”
I pushed through it all on my own; future generations should not have to go through the same.

Fosters reflect

In feedback sessions, Fosters noted that even in cases where their parental rights were terminated, they were told by caseworkers that they expected the Foster to go back to their biological family at 18 as part of their transition. And for those reunified or adopted, many wished they had check-ins afterwards, or knew who to reach out to for support if there were challenges with that permanency resolution.

What works in other states?

Counties in California have started providing Fosters with direct cash as step-down support when they exit Extended Foster Care. Nationally, groups like Pointsource Youth and Chapin Hall have shown the impact of direct cash transfers as prevention for homelessness for transition-age youth. History with foster care, no matter how someone exited care, should be a priority eligibility consideration for direct cash programs.

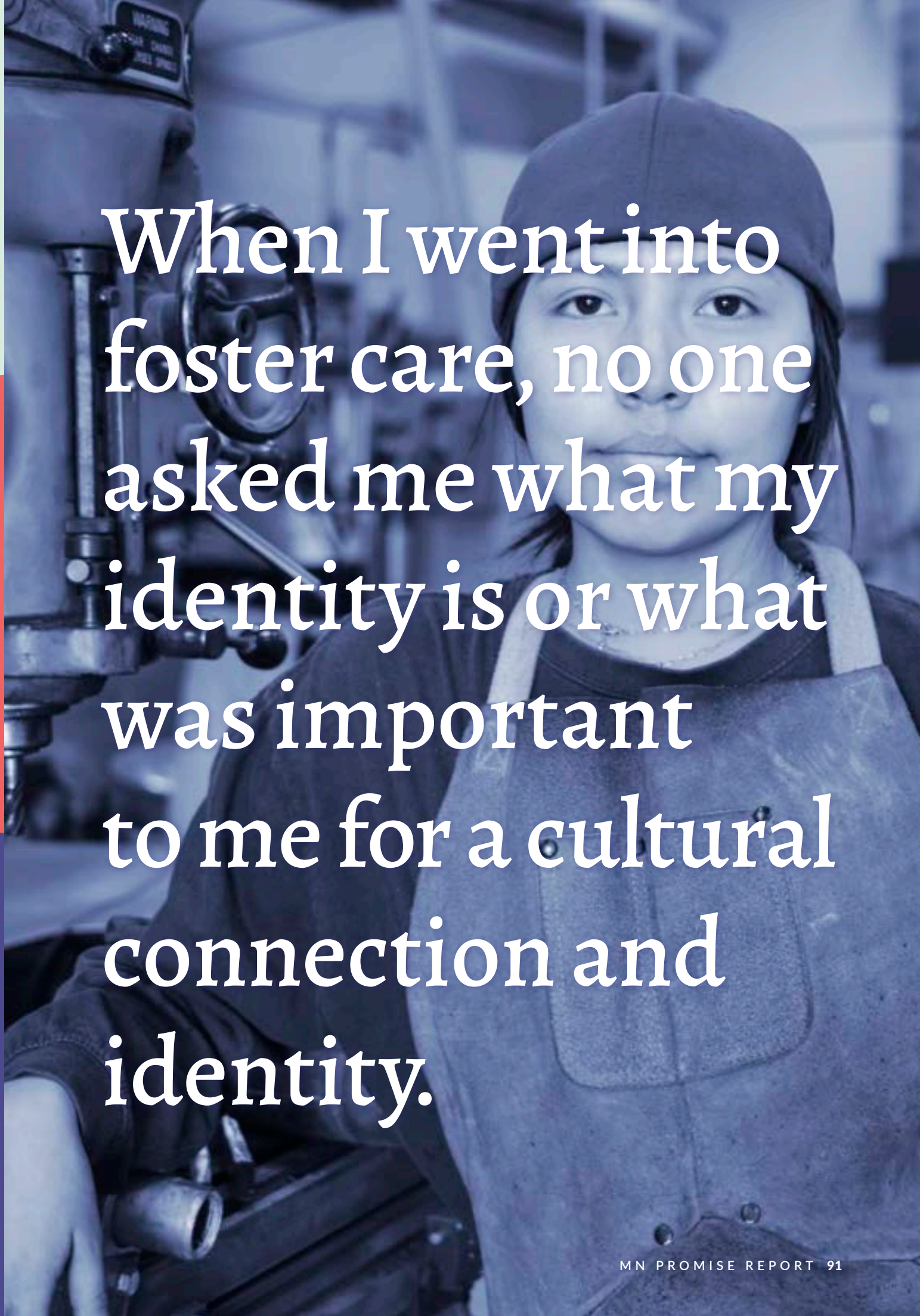


AREAS OF IDENTITY

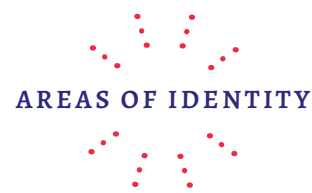
Other Areas of Identity and Lived Expertise

Separation from family can also mean separation from history, culture, and identity. Fosters have described a lack of cultural competence, community connection and support.

Fosters in Minnesota are as diverse as the state itself. In the MN Promise sessions, there were specific areas of identity that came up in powerful ways from individual experiences and need additional attention and focus. In this first stage of MN Promise, Foster Advocates was able to convene sessions specifically for Native Fosters — with or without Indian Child Welfare Act eligibility — as well as for Fosters ages 28 and up. In the work ahead, Foster Advocates plans to host sessions and leadership design programs for Fosters with the other specific identities in this section, and uplift local organizations focused on these intersections.



When I went into foster care, no one asked me what my identity is or what was important to me for a cultural connection and identity.



AREAS OF IDENTITY

Pregnant/Parenting

Pregnant and parenting Fosters name a strong desire to be good parents for their children, and the challenges of overcoming the impacts of their own experiences of family and parenting in the system and outside it. They face a lack of basic support and parenting education and constant scrutiny because of their history and status as Fosters.

Fosters Describe

Young mothers being pushed out of placements and denied parenting resources, while young fathers are ignored entirely. Fosters who are also parents describe having investigations started just because they are Fosters, as well as being coerced into voluntary termination of parental rights or facing child removal without representation or resources. Alongside all of this, they are still experiencing the systemic harms common to all Fosters, and anxiety over the potential short and long-term impacts on their lives.

Fosters Imagine

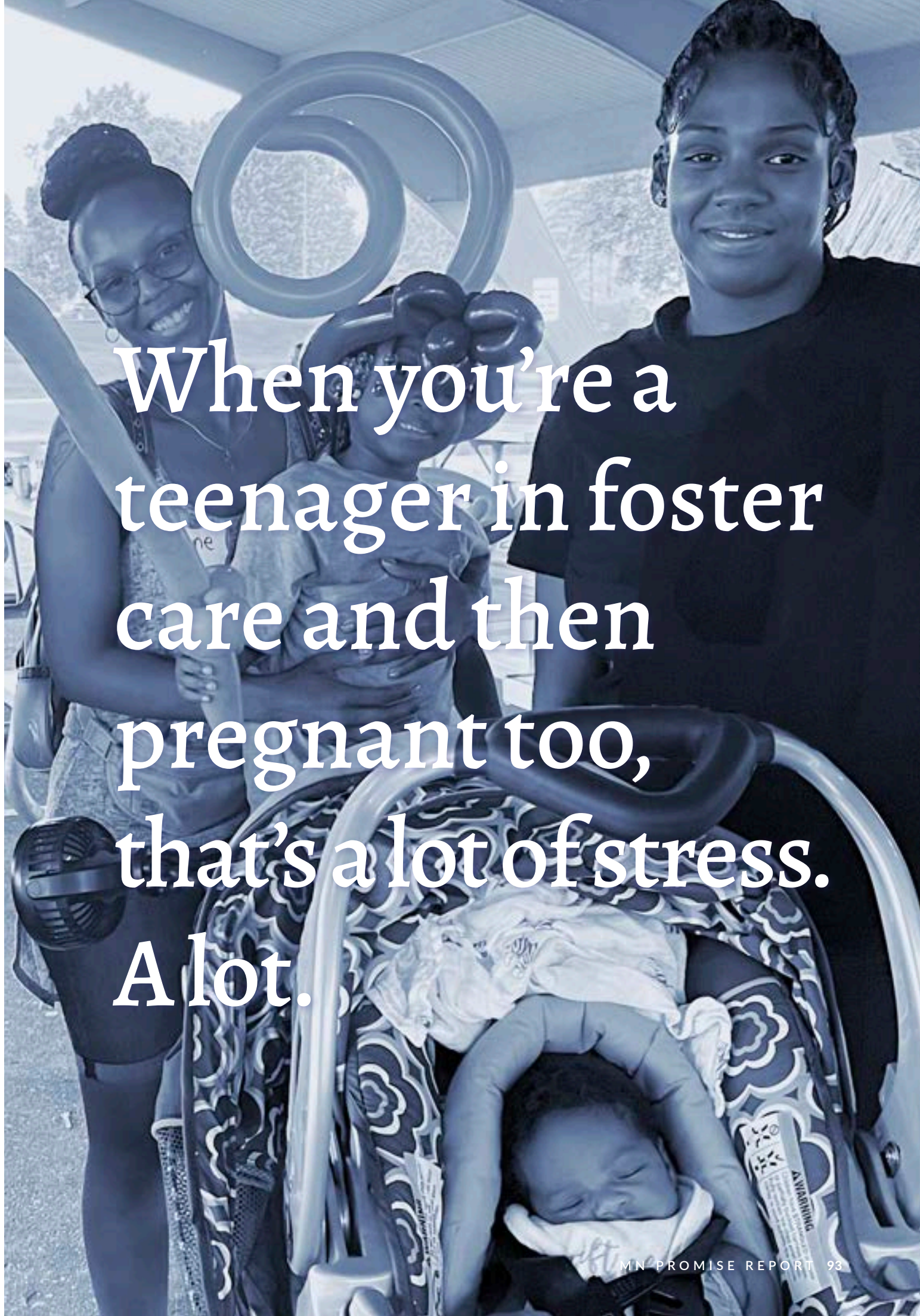
A system that supports them to build stable lives for their children through parent education, community building, childcare, housing supports, financial support, and legal protections.

5x

born to mothers who are in foster care in California are more likely to be reported to child protective services.

What do the numbers say?

Minnesota does not track or report on the number of Fosters who become pregnant while still in foster care or in Extended Foster Care, or how many parents involved with child welfare investigations are themselves Fosters. Without this data and a targeted look at prevention and support for Fosters who become parents, we are reinforcing a cycle of family separation.



When you're a teenager in foster care and then pregnant too, that's a lot of stress. A lot.



AREAS OF IDENTITY

Juvenile Justice

Many Fosters have experienced “dual-system” involvement in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Often, their entanglement in the juvenile justice system is not merely a response to behavior or actions, but a failure to understand and give space for symptoms of trauma, injustice, and the emotional swings common to any adolescent.

Fosters Describe

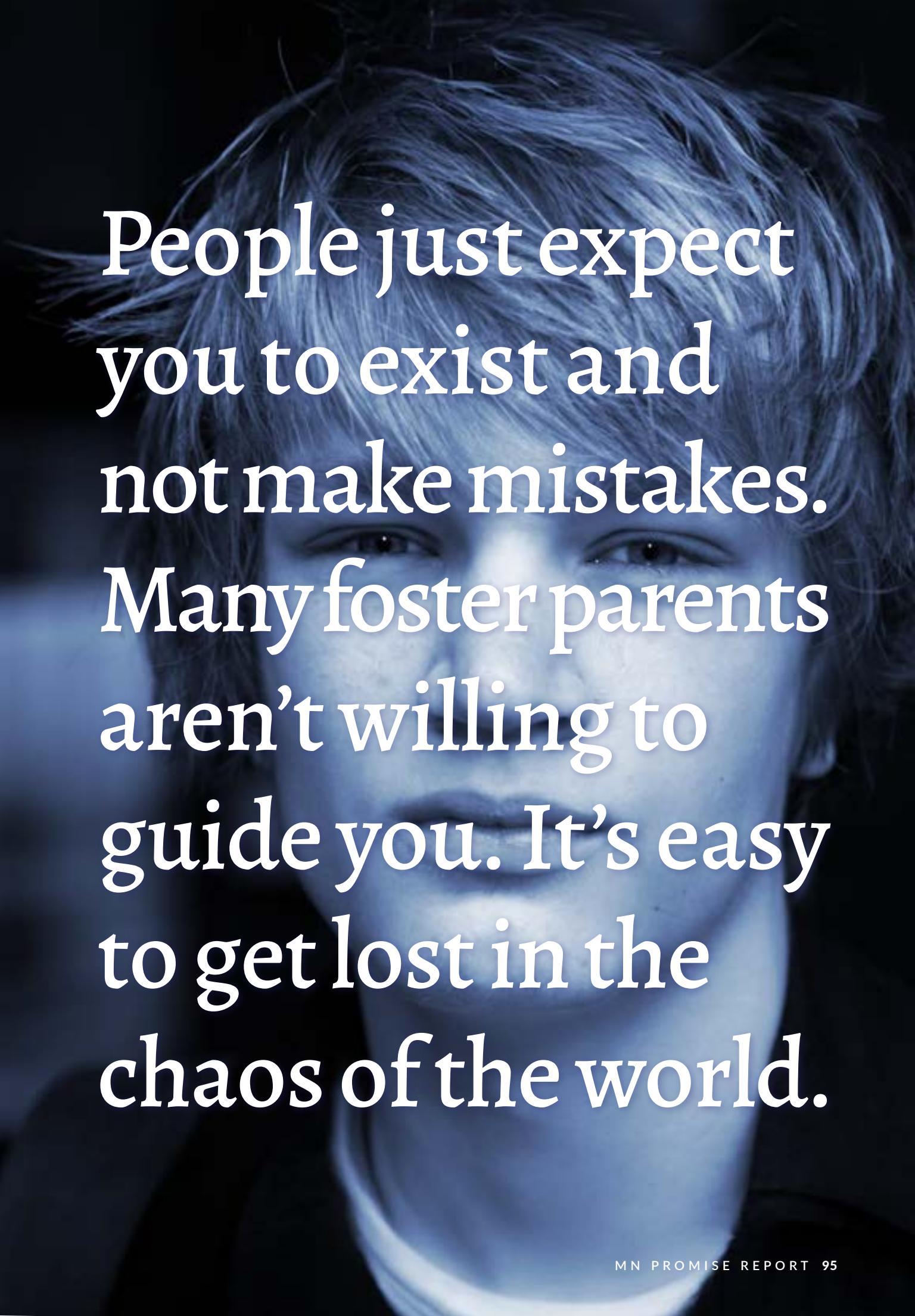
The permanent consequences of going through the juvenile justice system, including criminal records that can block future access to housing, jobs, and education. And they experience the punitive nature of juvenile justice in the context of a child welfare system that itself can feel like punishment.

Fosters Imagine

A system that defaults to expanded care rather than punishment and is constantly re-centering itself around stability, mental health support, alternatives to incarceration, and addressing root causes of behaviors and actions.

What should happen in Minnesota?

A disturbing number of MN Promise participants revealed they had ended up in detention facilities not because of something they did, but because there was no suitable foster care placement available. Some then caught a charge while in that detention facility because of behaviors driven by self-defense. There is currently no Minnesota data on how many Fosters in locked facilities have a corresponding juvenile justice record, but it is estimated nationally that 90 percent of crossover youth (those involved in juvenile justice and foster care) originated from the child welfare system.



People just expect you to exist and not make mistakes. Many foster parents aren't willing to guide you. It's easy to get lost in the chaos of the world.



AREAS OF IDENTITY

Native Fosters

Despite Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) and Minnesota Indian Family Preservation Act (MIFPA) protections for those who are eligible, Native Fosters often experience forced separation and subsequent cultural erasure from their communities, often being placed in non-Native homes where their traditions are dismissed or actively suppressed.

For Native Fosters who are not a registered member of a tribe, the lack of ICWA services and any supportive relationships for connection to their culture and heritage is especially challenging.

Fosters Describe

Being denied access to tribal connections, language, and ceremonies, leaving them feeling isolated and disconnected from their identity.

Fosters Imagine

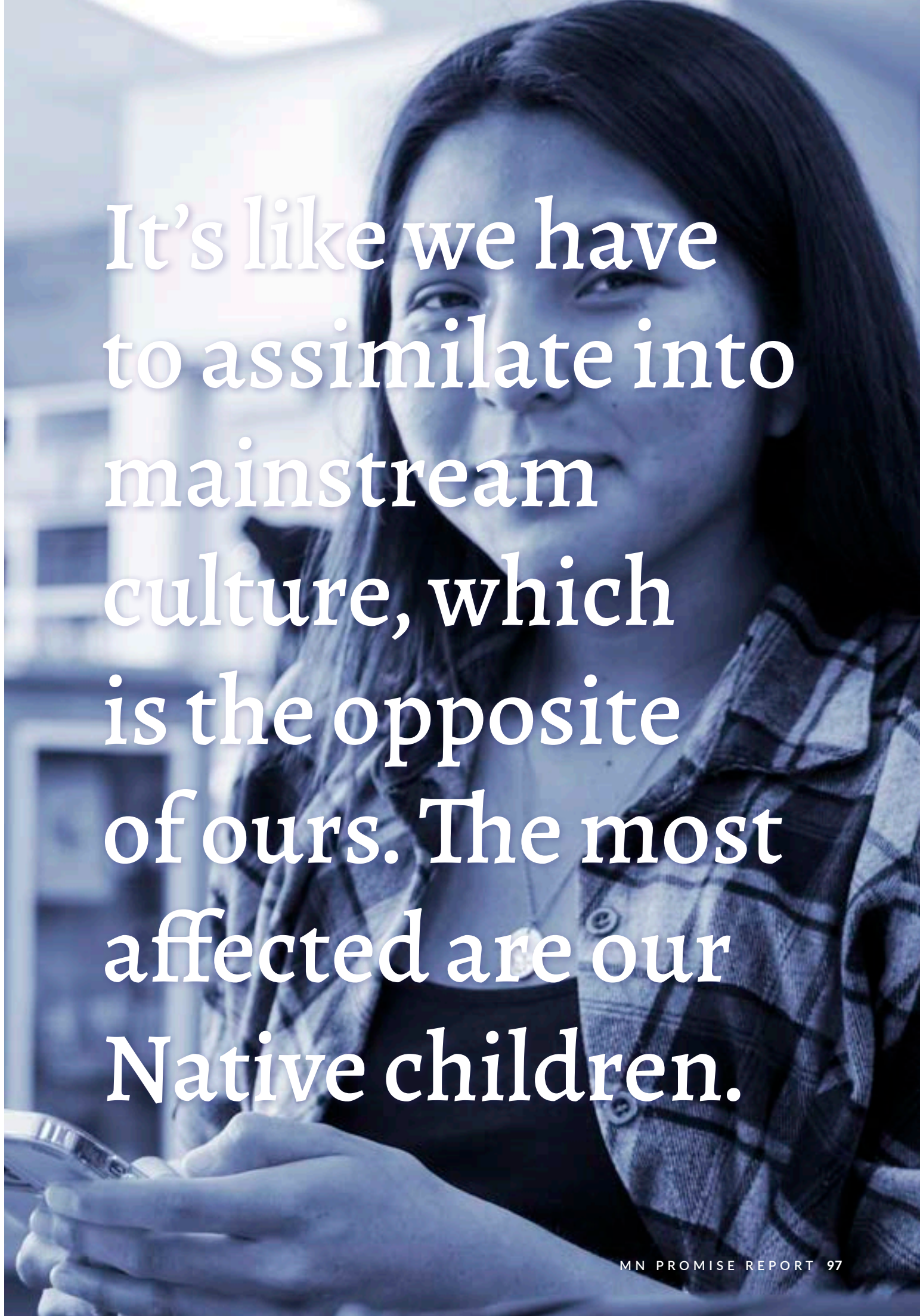
A system that prioritizes culturally competent placements, Native-led foster care programs, and protections that ensure Native youth grow up with open access to their heritage and traditions.

Did you know?

Recently, child welfare services for children and families living on Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, Red Lake Nation, and White Earth Nation reservations was transformed to a tribal delivery system.



Once you age out of foster care, you should get resources to get more involved with your tribe or where you're from or your heritage.



It's like we have to assimilate into mainstream culture, which is the opposite of ours. The most affected are our Native children.



Black Fosters

For Black Fosters, life in care is often governed by white foster parents and providers. They may be placed in environments where their culture and individual needs are not recognized or are explicitly denied, which has a direct impact on mental and physical health, success of placements, and contributes to erosion and erasure of identity, perpetuating systemic racism in the child welfare system and society at large.

Fosters Describe


A life in care where their bodies, culture, and voices are misunderstood or dismissed, with white families who do not know how to care for Black hair or skin, and where therapists and other providers do not share or relate to the experiences of Black Americans.

Fosters Imagine

A life in care where their differences are honored, not erased. They imagine foster parents who understand the weight of identity, therapists who do not need racism explained to them, and an education system where “Black talk” is accepted and respected, not corrected. They see spaces where learning how to care for Black hair and skin is a given, not a battle. They imagine being placed with intention, not out of convenience.

Did you know?

The Minnesota African American Family Preservation and Child Welfare Disproportionality Act (2024) establishes additional standards to address overrepresentation in child welfare based on race, culture, ethnicity, income and disability.



I’m Black, but I learned absolutely nothing about how to take care of my skin, my hair, any of that other stuff.



AREAS OF IDENTITY

LGBTQ2S+ Fosters

LGBTQ+ and Two-Spirit Fosters are often placed with families unequipped or unwilling to support their identities. Many are forced to hide who they are or face subtle punishments or open hostility.

Fosters Describe

Placements where they faced hostility, shaming, and isolation because of their identities. They describe a lack of mentorship and support that respects and affirms them.

Fosters Imagine

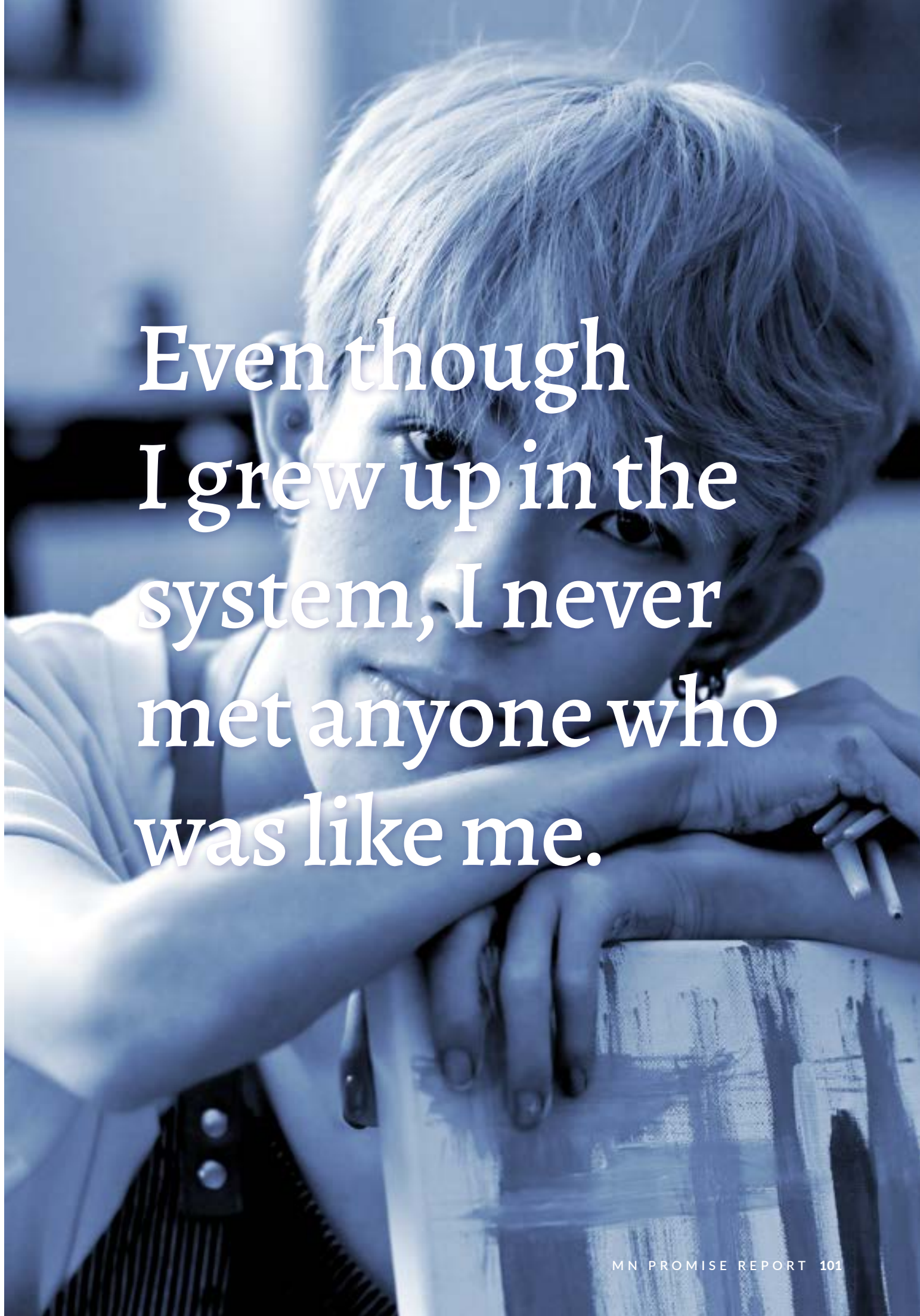
Being placed with foster parents who share or can otherwise relate to their identities and experiences, resources and supports that are readily available and do not have to be discovered or sought out by Fosters, and mentors with shared identities or experiences.

<30%

of Minnesota Fosters
are LGBTQ2S+

Did you know?

Our 2022 LGBTQ2S+ Leaders created the first Know Your Rights guide for LGBTQ2S+ Fosters in Minnesota, and presented recommendations to DCYF including updating data, training, and policy guidelines. One BOLD idea from those leaders was establishing “LGBTQ2S+ champions” at the county, regional, or state level, so that anyone (from Foster to caseworker to foster parents) could call to get support for providing affirming care and community resources.



Even though
I grew up in the
system, I never
met anyone who
was like me.



Missing Voices

Future Areas of Exploration

There are some Foster populations we were not able to reach in this first stage of MN Promise. These missing voices are critical as part of the larger Foster Movement, and Foster Advocates looks forward to future opportunities to intentionally engage with these Foster populations in the future:

Fosters Currently Incarcerated (as Juveniles or Adults)

The state fails its duty to Fosters with such a large foster care to prison pipeline, and those lost in it are uncounted. Foster Advocates plans to host future sessions with Fosters currently incarcerated and urges the state to improve data collection on dual-system involvement.

Fosters Missing From Care

If a Foster runs away from care, it is for a valid reason. They believe they will be safer on their own than under the care provided to them by the state. While it is difficult to reach Fosters currently on the run, Foster Advocates aims to host future sessions for older Fosters with this experience while in care to illuminate the unique challenges and needs of this population.

Immigrant Fosters

While several MN Promise participants flagged the importance of the state ensuring permanent citizenship status for eligible Fosters before they turn 18, there is a need for more state data and Foster stories to understand the experience of Fosters who enter care under a range of immigration statuses.

Fosters With Disabilities

While many Fosters talked about the impact of mental health and trauma, given that 30 percent of Fosters have a diagnosed disability there is a need for more state data and Fosters stories to understand the impact and opportunities with disabilities services as part of their foster care experience.

Fosters Exited to Adult Foster Care

Of Fosters in care at 18, roughly 30 percent are not 'emancipated' out of the system to either independence or Extended Foster Care, but exit straight to adult foster care. More state data and Foster stories are needed to assess how these decisions are made, when Fosters have agency around that decision, and how these Fosters can engage with peer supports and connections.

Fosters in Hospitals or Treatment Facilities

While this was a common experience among MN Promise participants, they named the importance of understanding current experiences of Fosters under this restrictive care.

Fosters Under 14

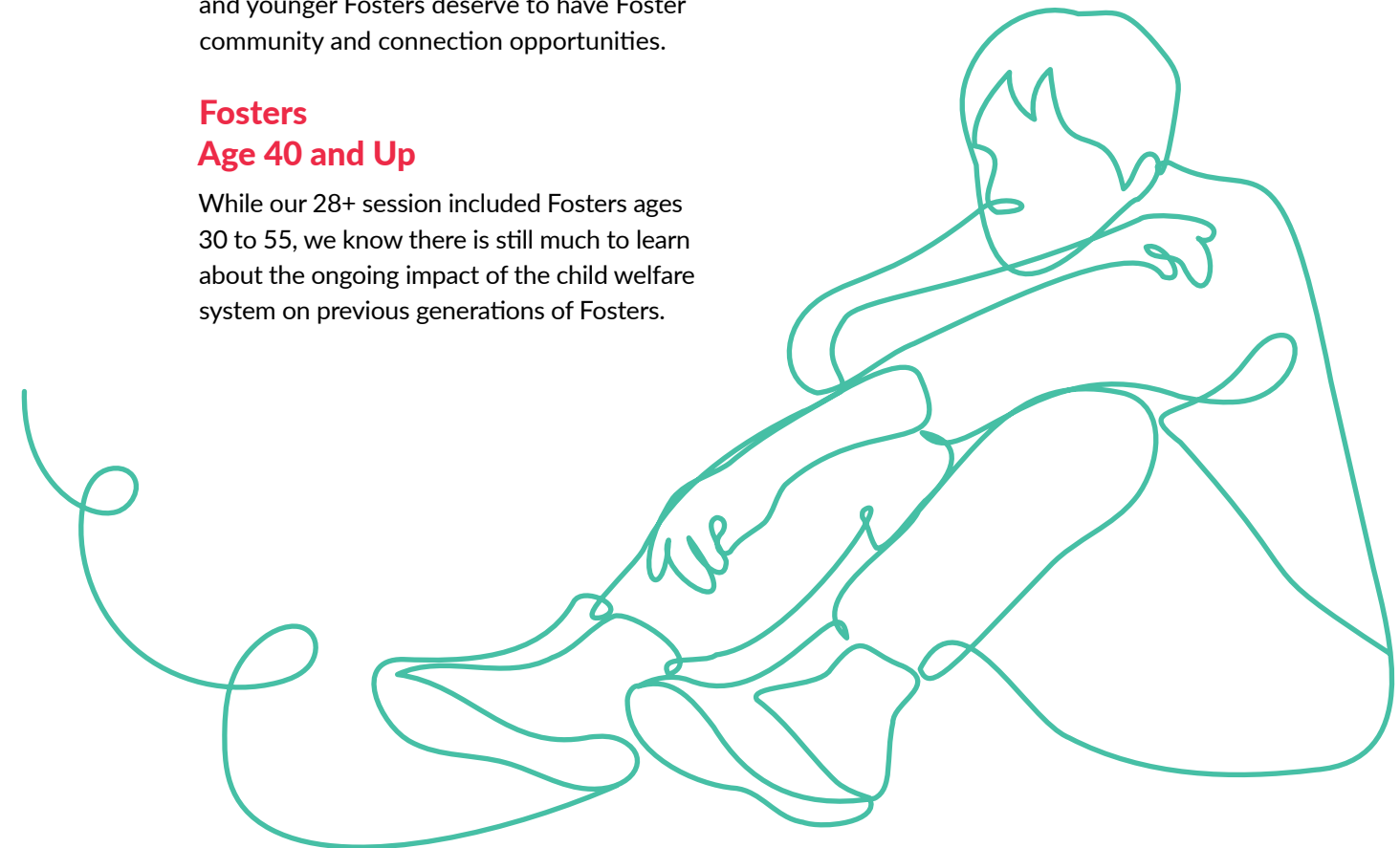
Age is not a parameter for expertise: Young people are experts now and deserve to be heard. There is much to learn from younger children if done in an age-appropriate way, and younger Fosters deserve to have Foster community and connection opportunities.

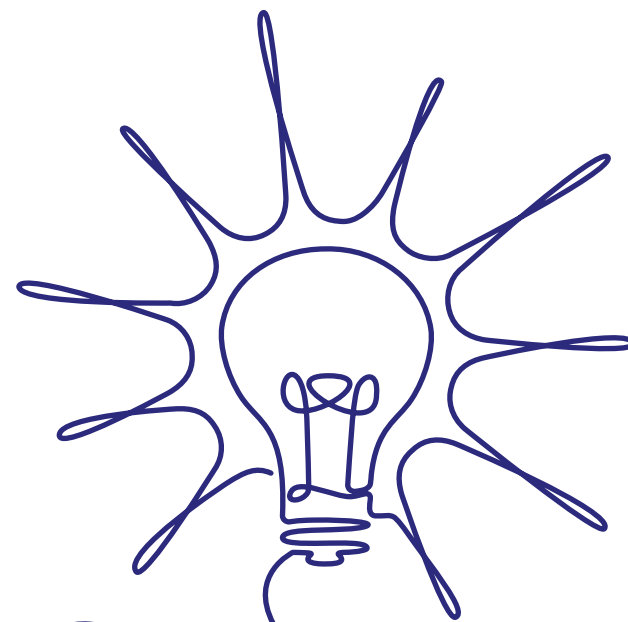
Fosters Age 40 and Up

While our 28+ session included Fosters ages 30 to 55, we know there is still much to learn about the ongoing impact of the child welfare system on previous generations of Fosters.

What should happen in Minnesota?

We measure what matters, and it is critical to keep pushing the child welfare system for publicly-available outcome data on all of these intersecting populations. And, there are many places where community groups or systems focused on these other populations can collect cross-data on Fosters. What would it look like for juvenile justice, or immigration services, or disability programs to collect data on foster care history? How could that shine a light on areas where the state needs to fulfill its promise to Fosters?





FOSTERS IMAGINE

Bold Ideas

Culturally Competent Therapists and Healing Programs

Build a network of Foster-informed therapists with cultural backgrounds that allow them to better understand and support the Fosters' unique needs. Develop family-centered healing programs that address trauma, with rituals that cater to the diverse cultural needs of Fosters.

Genetic Testing for All Fosters

Provide access and counseling around genetic testing if Fosters choose to learn about their family tree, identity, and family medical history.

Identity-Specific Mentorship Programss

Develop mentorship programs that connect Fosters with mentors who share their cultural or identity background to provide guidance and support.

Cultural Support for Native Youth

Create resources like virtual platforms or local gatherings for Native youth to connect with their tribe and stay involved in their culture even while in foster care, especially if they are in placements far away from their tribal community.

Education for Fosters Who Become Parents

Create an Early Childhood and Family Education curriculum and support networks informed by and tailored to Fosters who become parents while in care or after.

Expungement of Juvenile Records

Enact automatic sealing or expungement of juvenile records for Fosters turning 18, or institute mandatory legal support to Fosters who enter adulthood with juvenile records.

Did you know?

Minnesota does not track or report on intergenerational foster care, and how cycles of investigation and removal follow families. This information would be critical to highlight better intervention points to provide families with basic resources to break this cycle, or test how providing supports like culturally-informed healing and mentorships can prevent future child welfare involvement.



51%

of midwest Fosters have an encounter with the juvenile justice system by age 17

Racial disparities do not just occur in the Metro; Native, Black, and multiracial Fosters are over represented in every region of the state.



AREAS OF IDENTITY

FOSTER ADVOCATES

Action Steps



What can you do to support Fosters' bold ideas related to these areas of identity?

All Minnesotans

Do You Know the history of the Native boarding schools and the Indian Adoption Project in Minnesota? Orphan trains? What about how the child welfare system has impacted people who share some of your identities?

Normalize talking about Fosters and foster care in various spaces, which can make it easier for Fosters to share that part of themselves in those spaces.

Think About What can you do to support Fosters connecting with resources or community mentors related to all aspects of their identity?

Stakeholders

Research Partners There is a strong need for cross-data on Fosters. If you are researching cultural communities or experience areas, are you collecting foster care history? Doing so supports the work of affirming Foster experiences and identifying needs across and within communities and identity groups.

Community Partners If your services focus on these populations, how are you assessing and supporting Foster identity? Are you asking about foster care history as part of trauma-informed services, and to identify Foster-specific resources? How are you outreaching specifically to Fosters for culturally-specific services?

Counties and DCYF What resources are you directing to cultural resources and services for Fosters, and how are you collecting data on these identities and experiences within care? There are key opportunities for prevention in intergenerational cycles of child welfare and in the pipeline from foster care to incarceration. How are you partnering with Fosters and communities to take advantage of those prevention and intervention opportunities?

What's in progress by Foster Advocates

Foster Advocate's next leadership design program will focus on pregnant and parenting Fosters, to further understand the challenges these Fosters face, gather more data, and reveal more bold ideas for this population.

Seeking funding to pilot a statewide LGBTQ2S+ Resource Liaison for Fosters and their supportive.

Building research partnerships to gather state data on the overlap between foster care and juvenile justice and reveal places for prevention and intervention in that pipeline.

Future MN Promise sessions focused on these identity populations and each of the missing voices groups of Fosters, to elevate their expertise and ideas for support and change!

How Do Fosters React?

In both MN Promise sessions and feedback on the report, Fosters emphasized the deep impact of trauma — from family separation, disconnection from culture and identity, and abuse within the system. They described how common it is for Fosters to turn to alcohol and drugs as a way to cope. A third of 17-year-old Fosters are referred for substance abuse treatment while in care. The state does not track how many Minnesotans struggling with addiction have a history in foster care. Fosters also highlighted how addiction affects not only them as individuals, but also contributes to cycles of family separation and intergenerational involvement in the child welfare system.



You can take me away from my culture, but you should bring me back to it or bring it to me.



Roles and Responsibilities

Every adult involved in a Foster's life has choices. Fosters have described the impacts of those choices, and have informed these examples of how these adults can show up with care, consistency, and respect.

Foster Parents/Guardians

Can Choose to create safe, affirming, Foster-informed environments with a sensitivity to individual and context-specific needs.

Caseworkers

Can Choose to seek resources to help maintain cultural and familial ties, and offer care that honors their own needs alongside those of the Fosters in their care.

Child Protection and Placement Workers

Can Choose to advocate for continued contact, recognizing the fact that sibling relationships can be a source of stability, connection, and emotional support.

Psychiatrists and Therapists

Can Choose to educate themselves on the unique needs of Fosters, advocate for non-medication-based interventions when appropriate, and ask Fosters about how treatments are feeling and to share their questions and concerns.

Healthcare Providers

Can Choose to implement communication protocols that ensure Fosters understand their medical rights and histories, and train staff on the unique challenges Fosters face in understanding and retrieving their medical history.

Caseworkers and Social Workers

Can Choose to advocate for manageable workloads, be honest with themselves and their supervisors about their limitations, and prioritize trust-based relationships with Fosters by ensuring consistent, individualized support.

Child Protection and Placement Workers

Can Choose to prioritize Fosters' influence and agency in placement decisions and, when safe, advocate for family preservation.

Guardians ad Litem

Can Choose to engage Fosters in decision-making processes and advocate in court based on their needs and expressed wishes.

Attorneys

Can Choose to provide Fosters regular, developmentally appropriate check-ins with clear legal guidance.

Judges

Can Choose to actively seek Foster input and consider the long-term impact of legal decisions on their present and future.

Foster Facility Staff

Can Choose to create environments that prioritize emotional safety, consistency, and agency for Fosters.

School Counselors and Administrators

Can Choose to educate themselves and each other on ways to ensure Fosters have access to tutoring, extracurricular pursuits, and accommodations.

Front Desk Workers and Office Staff

Can Choose to facilitate clear and direct communication between Fosters and decision-makers.

Mentors and Coaches

Can Choose to provide stable, Foster-informed, and affirming guidance.

Work Supervisors

Can Choose to create inclusive, supportive workplaces that accommodate the unique needs of Fosters.

Community Elders and Faith Leaders

Can Choose to be a safe, culturally-affirming support system.



A Researcher's Perspective

The Indian author and social justice activist Arundhati Roy wrote: “There's really no such thing as ‘the voiceless.’ There are only the deliberately silenced or the preferably unheard.”

In a three-decade career of story gathering and telling, I’ve never encountered a project like this one. My role in this report was to absorb and analyze the transcripts and notes from the MN Promise listening sessions and then to write what I’d learned. At certain points in that process, I would share what I was seeing in the data with the people closest to the work, to discuss what I found and to help me calibrate my understanding. Then I would write the parts of the report I had been assigned.

This project involved a level of collaboration I could have never imagined. At every step, I received feedback on my writing not only from Foster Advocates staff, but from a committee of Fosters whose expertise and leadership carried me in my efforts to be as true as possible to their stories, needs, and bold ideas.

Throughout the process, my curiosity and assumptions as a non-Foster with limited knowledge of this aspect of the child welfare system were welcomed. In a way, I served as a stand-in for many of the audiences I was helping to write for. It is a responsibility well beyond any I have experienced in a career of seeking collaborative meaning-making in my work.

I hope my role in this collaboration has contributed to an illumination of calcified or poorly-informed assumptions, and has uplifted the power and lived expertise of Fosters in the State of Minnesota.

Jeff Severns Guntzel
TerraLuna Collaborative

Foster Advocates Founder Reflection

The MN Promise Report is more than what I could have ever imagined, and it is hard to capture that in words. Nearly every conceivable thing we collectively know about the foster care system that needs to be changed is here.

When I founded Foster Advocates in 2018 and as I left in 2023, people would say, “I wish I knew what the answer was,” or that “the solution must be out there somewhere.” The solutions are not being kept secret. We just have not been asking the experts — Fosters. The people who know the systems best. This report asks the right question: “What will it take to DO RIGHT by our young people?”

It is healing to know that our stories are not only being told, but also our solutions. We know that Fosters are tough, we know that Fosters are experts, and now we know we can dream of better possibilities, too. This report shows us how.

Hoang Murphy
Founding Executive Director of Foster Advocates



Foster Advocates' Board Reflection

This report lays out in stark and comprehensive detail what systemic failures in the child welfare system look and feel like for Fosters, in their own words, and provides a clear blueprint for a future where Fosters receive the care, love, and support that they inherently deserve and that we promise them collectively.

By listening to Fosters and taking their lead, we can build that future together. It is going to take all of us, and this report helps us find our place in the growing Foster movement.

The report outlines strategic priorities for Foster Advocates' in the coming years and we will be building community power and progress together. Whether it is showing up at a day of action, writing to your legislators, organizing your people, volunteering at an event, moving money, or offering other talents and capacities, we can each find our unique role in fulfilling the MN Promise.

How will you join us?

Ed Morales

Chair of the Foster Advocates Board of Directors

Thank You

When we first envisioned the MN Promise campaign back in 2022, our staff were hoping to be able to move beyond individual issues to a more comprehensive policy agenda. What came out of these sessions was so much more — a true vision for comprehensive systems change, by Fosters and for Fosters, and a mandate to organize a larger Foster Movement in Minnesota to ensure this vision becomes reality.

Our 2022-2023 Community Board approved our initial vision for this campaign, and gave key ideas for how to make our session road trip as accessible to as many Fosters as possible. Over 120 Fosters participated across the sessions, trusting Foster Advocates staff and their peers with their experiences, expertise, and ideas. Since early 2023, our MN Promise Committee, made up of Fosters who have participated in sessions, provided guidance to support our ongoing sessions, report feedback, and envision this report launch.

We are deeply grateful to Terraluna Collaborative, particularly Jeff Severns Guntzel, for their amazing values-aligned partnership with this report, and to Cathy Solarana of Wheelhouse Collective for her amazing design! Since fall 2022, we were also supported by former staff members, report test readers, and a range of volunteers whose vision and

contributions live throughout this report. Thank you to Ziigwan, Iván, Hoang, Nicole, Sage, Izzy, Christy, and Tenelle.

Thank you to the organizations that supported our listening sessions. Without you, we would not have been able to host Fosters across the state for meetings, let alone dream about the future. You allowed our team to get this audacious idea off the ground and over the finish line. A big thanks to:

- **2025 Launch and Movement Building Sponsors:** Sauer Family Foundation, McKnight Foundation, Pohlad Foundation, John and Denise Graves Foundation, Sparkplug Foundation
- **Listening Session Sponsors:** American Indian Community Specific Board, Duluth-Superior Area Community Foundation, Initiative Foundation, Ordean Foundation, Ramsey County Social Services, Sauer Family Foundation, Women's Foundation of Minnesota
- **Listening Session Hosts:** 180 Degrees, American Indian Community Housing Organization, Cultivate Mankato, Headwaters Music and Arts, Indigenous Roots, Metro State University, Quarry Hill Nature Center, Minnesota State University Moorhead, St. Cloud State University, University YMCA

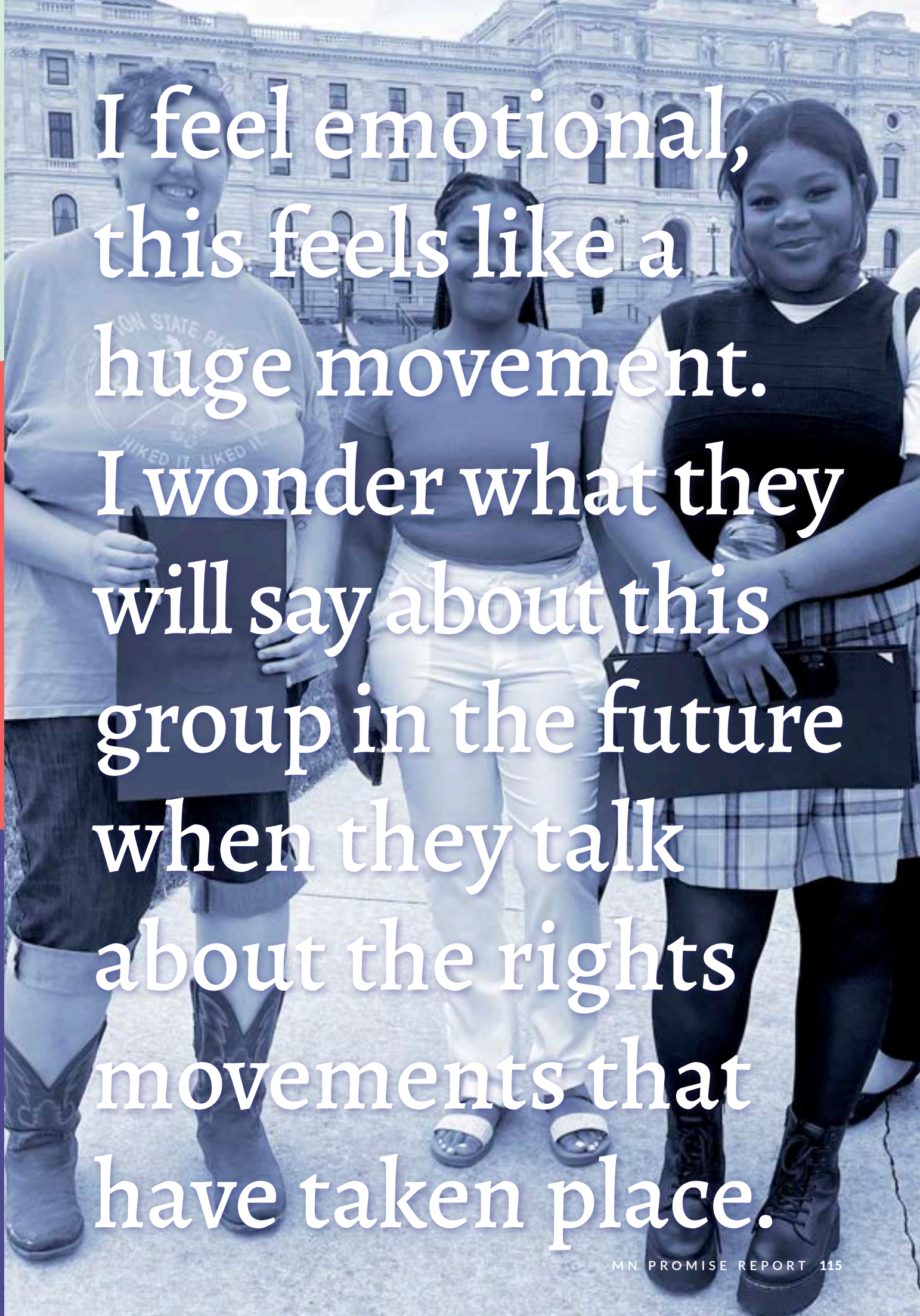
Looking Forward: MN Promise 2035

Since its founding in 2018, Foster Advocates has had profound success in elevating Fosters' ideas on individual issues and turning them into reality — playing a critical role in the passage of seven laws in our first six years focused on education equity, state investment in Fosters' futures, and systems accountability.

These meaningful and hard-won policy changes are important, and we are proud of the roles Fosters and Foster Advocates have played. MN Promise represents a shift towards a more comprehensive vision for systems change. While this report is a static capture of Fosters' experience in this moment of time, the vision laid out here is dynamic, and the Movement is alive and ever growing.

Our child welfare system is rooted in a history of policing families, where, too often, the act of child removal has been carried out as a punishment for the child's family or community of origin. Through MN Promise, Fosters have illuminated the ways the child welfare system continues to feel punitive in their lives through its approaches

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A photograph of three young women walking towards the camera in front of the Minnesota State Capitol building. The woman on the left is wearing a light blue t-shirt and dark pants, holding a black folder. The woman in the middle is wearing a light blue long-sleeved shirt and white pants. The woman on the right is wearing a black vest over a white shirt and a plaid skirt, also holding a black folder. They are all smiling. The background shows the large, ornate facade of the Minnesota State Capitol building.

I feel emotional,
this feels like a
huge movement.
I wonder what they
will say about this
group in the future
when they talk
about the rights
movements that
have taken place.



MN PROMISE VISION 2035

to placement, health care, information sharing, and other areas.

They see and have shown an urgent need for a shift from a punitive model of foster care to a model designed around restorative and healing principles.

The truth is that the state is not meant to raise children. The child welfare system is designed to intervene when children are in danger, not to provide the healthy love, support, and stability Fosters need to stay safe and to thrive.

How do we get to this restorative and healing model? We can begin by designing and implementing policies and practices rooted in loving care. This is our obligation.

To begin building that model, over the next ten years Foster Advocates will be strategically focused on:

Ensuring Foster-informed priority access to community resources (housing, education, mental health, workforce development, and more).

Continuing to develop the leadership and identity of the Foster community.

Opening a pipeline of opportunities for Fosters as leaders in the child welfare space and beyond.

Initiating and supporting easily accessible local, regional, and national research that values Fosters' experience and intuition.

In order to ensure

Fosters are empowered and hold power in the halls of the Minnesota Capitol, and their expertise is recognised nationally.

A living, evolving Foster Movement that is connected to and supported by other community movements.

An intergenerational Foster community is established, valuable, and thriving.

Eventually, the state will no longer need to be a parent. Instead, we will have a model that supports community care for Fosters, as well as restorative and healing practices and resources for chosen families.

Foster Voices

What do you hope comes out of MN Promise?

I HOPE

for visibility and a more informed public.

the change we envision for the Fosters who come after us becomes reality.

for noticeable change for the next generation of Fosters.

we give Fosters still in the system hope for their future.

it helps Fosters and adopted Fosters who are not currently in the system to reflect and heal from their past trauma, and that they understand their voices do matter.

that in the future, Fosters are safe and given the same chances to succeed as everyone else. I hope that they aren't forced to choose between terrible & worse.

conversations are sparked that move elected officials and child welfare representatives towards identifying initiatives and solutions that improve the lives of Fosters across Minnesota.





RESOURCES

Glossary

The child welfare system has its own set of terms and acronyms. See definition of common terms below alongside general resources related to Minnesota child welfare. For a more detailed glossary, visit: fosterclub.com/glossary-terms

For the methodology and full list of references for this report, visit: fosteradvocates.org/mnpromise

Adoption

Adoption is a legal process that can be completed by a relative or foster parent to voluntarily accept a child as one's own. It is the preferred permanency option for children who cannot be safely reunified with their parents.

Adoption Breakdown

Adoption breakdown refers to an incomplete adoption, either because of disruption — ending before adoption is legalized—or dissolution — ending after adoption is completed legally.

Aging Out

Aging out refers to a young person who did not achieve an alternative permanency pathway and exits foster care because of their age (at 18 or at 21).

Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF)

The Child Safety and Permanency Administration is a division of DCYF, overseeing child welfare investigations, placements, and permanency processes across the state. For specific resources for Fosters age 14 to 25, email dcyf_csp_adolescents@state.mn.us or visit dcyf.mn.gov/foster-youth-transitions.

Child in Need of Protection or Services (CHIPS)

A court case and intervention brought by the county when there is concern for the health, safety, or wellbeing of a child or children.

Child Welfare System

A continuum of state and county services designed to receive and investigate reports of possible child abuse and neglect; provide services to families that need assistance related to child safety; manage foster care placements; and arrange for reunification, adoption, or other permanency pathways.

Congregate Care

Also referred to as group homes or residential facilities, these are placements that host multiple unrelated Fosters together in the same building.

Continuer

A Foster who entered out of home care in the year(s) before a report or referral for them, and have continued in care into the current year.

Education and Training Vouchers (ETV)

A federal funding source to support Fosters under 26 with attending higher education, providing up to \$5,000 a year. In MN, ETV is run by Youthprise: <https://bit.ly/MN-ETV>

Extended Foster Care

MN law allows Fosters in care prior to their 18th birthday to receive additional case management and funding support through age 21: bit.ly/MNDHSEFC

Foster Care

A temporary living situation for children whose parents or guardians cannot provide for their safety and care as determined by local child welfare agencies and court proceedings.

Fostering Independence Grants

A grant that covers the full cost of attendance at eligible MN colleges for anyone who was in MN foster care after the age of 13. See more details at: bit.ly/OHE-FIG and bit.ly/FIG-FAQ

Guardian ad litem (GAL)

A person appointed by the court in a CHIPS case to advocate for the best interests of the child. Most Fosters will have an appointed GAL to their case, however this is dependent on the GAL program in their county.

Guardianship Transfer

A permanency path for exiting foster care; guardianship (the legal responsibility to care for a minor or someone unable to care for themselves independently) is transferred by the court from a biological parent to a willing relative.

Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)

The Indian Child Welfare Act, passed in 1978, provides guidance to states regarding the handling of child welfare cases involving tribal members or the children of tribal members. The Minnesota Indian Family Preservation Act (MIFPA) affirms and expands ICWA within state statute. Learn more at: icwlc.org/ or bit.ly/MNDHSICW.

Initiative Tribe

A MN compact between tribal, county, and state governments allowing for transfer from county to tribal delivery system of child welfare services for children and families living on tribal reservations. Currently, Leech Lake, White Earth, and Red Lake are initiative tribes.

Intergenerational

Occurring between multiple generations. The impact of out-of-home care placement does not just impact a child, but has current and future intergenerational impacts.

Kinship Care

A foster care placement with an extended family member or someone who has a significant prior relationship with the Foster.

Office of the Foster Youth Ombudsperson (OOFY)

OOFY addresses complaints and concerns from young people about their rights, care, safety, and placement in Minnesota foster care: mn.gov/oofy

Out-of-home Care Placement

A placement (foster home or congregate care) outside of a child's home of origin.

Reunification

The process of a Foster returning

from out-of-home care to their families of origin.

Permanency

A permanent, stable living situation, achieved through reunification or through another court mandated process such as guardianship transfer or adoption.

Successful Transition to Adulthood for Youth (STAY)

Independent living services for Fosters age 14 to 23 currently or formerly in foster care. Learn more: bit.ly/MNDCYFSTAY

Termination of Parental Rights

If the court finds a child cannot be reunified safely, it may rule to sever the legal rights of the biological parents to the child, and transfer permanent custody to the state.

Transition from Care

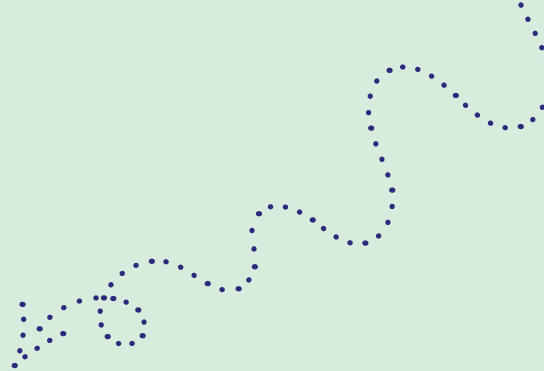
A pathway referencing an exit from foster care, including: reunification, guardianship transfer, adoption, or aging out.

Two-spirit

A term used by in Native communities to broadly refer to a person who embodies both male and female spirits, which can refer to gender identity or sexual orientation.

Ward of the State

When the county deems a child is in need of protection or services (CHIPS), they will file a petition with the court. If the court agrees, they can grant temporary custody to the county or child welfare agency, and the Foster becomes a ward of the state. This is more commonly used after there has been a formal termination of parental rights.



Other Resources

MN Child Welfare Data Dashboard
Reporting on state and federal measures for the child welfare system: bit.ly/MNCWDD

MN Out-of-Home Care and Permanency Report

Access annual state and county performance reports:
bit.ly/MNCWreports

MN Department of Education

Foster care point of contact list:
bit.ly/MDEFPOC

Foster Adopt MN

for information on licensure, support for foster, kinship, and adoption communities, and post-adoption resources:
fosteradoptmn.org

Federal Children's Bureau

acf.gov/cb

Federal Child Welfare Information Gateway

childwelfare.gov/

National Youth in Transition Database

bit.ly/CB-NYTD

Annie E Casey Foundation Child Welfare Resources

aecf.org/work/child-welfare

Chapin Hall Child Welfare Research

chapinhall.org/impact_area/child-welfare/

About Fosters Advocates

Foster Advocates is not just our name; it's our mission. We foster advocacy, policy change, and organizing with and for Minnesota Fosters. We envision a Minnesota where everyone involved in the state's foster care system has the same access to opportunities and outcomes as their peers, and Foster voices are respected and community expertise is sought in every aspect of the child welfare system.

Founded in 2018, Foster Advocates is Minnesota's only Foster-led and Foster-focused organization dedicated to transforming the child welfare system, led by and for those who have experienced out-of-home care. We serve the 10,000+ current, and uncounted former, Fosters across Minnesota, where low-income, Black and Indigenous, and LGBTQ2S+ communities are overrepresented, through stabilization services and leadership development, participatory research, and opportunities to step into individual and systems advocacy.

In just seven years, Fosters Advocates has made tangible progress in shifting the Minnesota child welfare landscape. In addition to our MN Promise campaign, example wins include:

- 2020 Keeping Fosters in School Act (reducing K-12 education disruption and tracking school move data)
- 2020 COVID-19 Impact Report (first state-specific report on the impact of the pandemic on Fosters)
- 2021 Fostering Higher Education Act (created the Fostering Independence Grants)
- 2022 Office of the Ombudsperson for Foster Youth (created Minnesota's first ombuds focus specifically for those who have experienced foster care)
- 2022 Maya's Law (ensures children have a right to be interviewed separately from adults in the home during child welfare notifications)
- 2024 Survivor Benefits Notification (requiring county agencies alert and keep a record of Fosters who are eligible for federal benefits)
- 2025 Fostering College Connections Pilots (supporting four colleges piloting Foster-specific supports on their campuses)

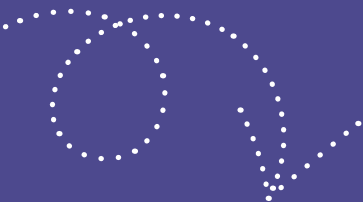
Learn more at fosteradvocates.org

This report holds ideas gathered through MN Promise sessions held between 2022-2024.

Thank you to the following Fosters for their participation and contributions:

Ada, Adonai, Ahlaysia, Alastor, Alayna, Aleesha, Alexandra, Alexis, Aliah, Allyson, Amber C., Amber S., Angel, Angelo, Anny, Antania, Armada, Armando, Ashley, Audriana, Ayan, Ayrreyannia, Beth, Brianna, Cameron, Cassandra, Charie, Chaska, Cherokee, Chloe, Christian B., Christian K., Christy, Cynthia, Deddtrease, Deja M., Deja P., DeShawn, Destiney, Destiny, Devin, Dezarae, Diamond, Djuan, Dominyck, Donovan, Duvan, Edin, Edson, Erica, Erin, Fernando, Geno, Godwin, Icis, Isaac, Iyana, Izzy, Ja'Vay, JahAirius, Jaime, Jasmine C., Jayda, Jazmine, Jenni, Jennifer, Jenny, Jessica, Justin, Kaija, Kaliyah, Karen, Katelyn, Keeasia, Keiko, Kerry, Kiana, Kylee, Kyli, Latashianna, Lauryn, Madalynn, Madelyne, Malia, Margarita, Maria, Mariah, Marqueishia, Monica, Mya, Naomi, Nashauna, Nia, Nick, Oakley, Queayla, Ryan, Ryn, Sabian, Sage, Samantha C., Samantha K., Selena, Sennai, Shalen, Shane, Tamarrah, Tamia, Tarji, Tatiana, Tatiyanna, Tay'Lahna, Tekia, Tenelle, Tiara, Tonya, Tramia, Vincent, Vivian, Vivianna, Winona, Ziigwan

Those impacted by the systems must be given true power to direct systems change, while not being alone in change-making work.



The MN Promise report is a Foster-led vision to transform the child welfare system. Any and every Minnesotan has a role to play in the Minnesota Foster Movement. Dive into these pages for Fosters' descriptions of challenges and opportunities across their foster care journey, bold ideas for systems change, and concrete action steps to fulfill our collective promise to Fosters.

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advocates