

Grievance Subcommittee Update to the Normalcy Taskforce

September 2016

The Grievance Subcommittee, chaired by Sarah Forrest (Office of the Inspector General of Child Welfare), and Kim Hawekotte (Foster Care Review Office), was convened to create recommendations related to a foster youth grievance process under the Federal Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act. The group has met three times and has gathered information and held discussion to begin creating preliminary recommendations.

Nebraska Foster Youth Grievance Systems

The group began with a review of Nebraska's existing grievance systems, and found that public agencies in all three branches of government, and most private agencies and providers maintain a system for collecting and addressing grievances. Information about the individual grievance processes can be accessed at [this link](#). The group agreed that the many avenues are likely adequate to resolve foster youth grievances, but navigating the numerous processes may be confusing and burdensome for youth.

Two surveys completed by young adults who are current or former Nebraska state wards asked questions related to Nebraska's grievance process. A summary of the surveys' major themes and findings is attached.

Foster Youth Grievance Systems in Other States

The group reviewed foster youth grievance systems with navigation processes and found many variations across states. Bodies that accept and investigate grievances can be internal quality and compliance control, or external advisory bodies that provide oversight. Some systems are set up to accept grievances only from youth, and others are broader in scope. One commonality amongst them is that only small numbers of youth access grievance systems in other states. Additional information can be accessed at [this link](#).

Grievance Subcommittee Discussion of Themes and Issues

1. The focus of the grievance process is youth grievances. Grievances should come from youth who have been empowered to understand their rights and how to access the grievance system. Grievances may also come from individuals who are making a grievance on behalf of the youth.
2. Any potential grievance system should address violations of the Youth Bill of Rights. Violations and grievances may be reported at any time, but the length of time between the grievance and the report will factor into the response. The grievance system should also address confidentiality issues so that youth can grieve without fear of retribution, and have clear expectations for who will know that they have made a complaint and the subject matter of the complaint.
3. A major theme of the surveys is that youth do not now know what their rights are, and do not know how to address a violation of their rights. Youth should be noticed of their rights, regularly and repeatedly. Youth empowerment and voice is an imperative part of the grievance system.
4. Agencies with grievance processes should collect and share data to create or identify the most effective process, increase transparency, and eliminate duplicative efforts. The group will

continue working to create recommendations related to data collection and address confidentiality barriers

5. The group will explore partnerships with youth advocacy organizations to promote education about youth rights and grievance processes available to youth. Potential projects include creating and distributing an online video providing grievance process information.
6. The group will continue to research and collect information about Nebraska's current grievance systems and youth access. More information is needed to understand why youth do not access current grievance processes and to create a system that youth will use.

Requested Feedback and Guidance from Normalcy Taskforce

1. **The group requests feedback from the Normalcy Taskforce on the objective for the youth grievance system.** Two potential objectives for a youth grievance system were identified. One objective is the individual resolution of youth grievances. Another objective is to provide higher level oversight of systems and grievance processes for improvement.
 - a. To address the objective of individual resolution of youth grievances, youth in out-of-home care need additional support to make current grievance process more accessible. Suggestions have included a central navigator who can assist youth in accessing existing grievance systems, walk the youth through the process, and provide supports to ensure that the grievance is addressed.
 - b. To address the objective of system oversight and improvement, existing or new grievance systems need a process to collect and report data. Existing grievance systems need to be evaluated for their effectiveness and accessibility for system improvement.
2. **The group requests feedback from the Normalcy Taskforce on the structure of the grievance process.** The group has discussed and explored two different options. The first is the creation of a new grievance structure or process that will be charged with accepting youth complaints. The second is simplifying and increasing accessibility of existing grievance processes. This option could include the creation of a centralized navigator position to help youth access and navigate existing systems.

Bridge to Independence Survey Highlights

The Department of Health and Human Services – Division of Children and Family Services and the Foster Care Review Office undertook a survey of youth involved in the Bridge to Independence program. Forty youth responses were collected.

- **The majority of youth did not know their rights.** When youth were asked what their rights were while in the system, 69% indicated that they did not know.
- **Over half of youth had their rights explained to them while in the foster care system.** 57.5% reported that their rights were explained to them, 35% reported their rights were not explained to them. 7.5% were not sure if their rights were explained to them or not.
- **The majority of youth who had a complaint did talk to someone to try to resolve their complaint.** 78.13% talked to someone about their complaints, and 9.38% acted out or disobeyed rules. 18.75% indicated they did nothing – 6.25% of those youth indicated that they did not do anything because they believed it would not help or that no one would listen.
- **Most youth reached out to a caseworker or caseworker supervisor.** 65.63% of youth reached out to a caseworker, and 15.63% reached out to a supervisor.
- **Just over one third of youth were satisfied with the outcome of their complaint.** 36.67% of youth were satisfied with the outcome, 46.67% percent were not, and 16.66% indicated they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

Youth Bill of Rights Survey Highlights

Youth responded to a survey regarding the Youth Bill of Rights to gain more information about what rights youth consider important. The survey received 36 individual responses on a range of topics related to the youth bill of rights. The summary below includes the information related to the youth grievance process.

- **Youth rated the ability to seek assistance if their rights are not being met as very important or absolutely essential.** On a five point Likert scale, the average rating was 4.46 when youth were asked to rate the importance of this right.
- **Youth indicated they would be most likely to seek assistance from their caseworker, their foster parents, or their judge in court.** Youth were more likely to begin their process here, rather than first reaching out to an outside party or entity.
- **Youth indicated they were slightly more likely to want to make a phone call about a rights violation.** This was compared to two other options, filling out a paper form and filling out a web-based form.
- **Youth indicated in an open ended question that they needed to know where to turn for help when their rights are not being met, and where they could get more information about their rights.** Youth again indicated that the ability to seek help is important for youth in the foster care system.