

**Chafee Advisory Group Meeting  
September 14, 2023**

**Minutes**

**In Attendance:** Niambi London, Kelly Nestor, Ifeanyi Pole, Rachel Barth, Mary Coogan, Safa Simmons, Alicia Ramirez, Nancy Andre, Jonathan Marsh, Vance Stephens, Hailey D’Elia, Tyhesha White, Arian Craig, Eleanor Gilliam, Dan Rhoton, Monique Roumo (on behalf of Konniesha Moulton),

**Absent:** Konniesha Moulton, Randi Mandelbaum, Stephanie Mills, Patricia Jordan, Ashley Tartaglia

- I. Welcome & Introductions – Niambi
- II. Meeting minutes approval – Niambi
  - a. CAG members did not have any edits to its drafted 06/08/2023 meeting Minutes; OAS will post these Minutes on DCF’s website.
- III. Context Setting – Niambi
  - a. Niambi presented a brief overview of DCF’s current Chafee plan.
    - Program Purposes I-Supporting youth 14+ with experience in foster care:
      1. Discussed information about transitional services such as: assistance in obtaining a high school diploma and post-secondary education, career exploration, vocational training, job placement and retention, training and opportunities to practice daily living skills (such as financial literacy training and driving instruction), substance abuse prevention, and preventive health activities (including smoking avoidance, nutrition education, and pregnancy prevention).
    - Who are Chafee eligible youth?
      1. Discussed Chafee eligibility categories.
    - Program Purposes II- Supporting youth 16+ with experience in foster care:
      1. Discussed supports that are to complement the youth’s own efforts to achieve self-sufficiency and to assure that program participants recognize and accept their personal responsibility for preparing for and then making the transition from adolescence to adulthood.
    - Chafee Plan Strategies-Areas of CAG’s focus:
      1. Youth voice. Office of Family Voice – Youth Council but also other opportunities for a broader group of youth to provide input/feedback. OAS will also identify 3-5 Chafee Youth Ambassadors - young people with lived exp in child welfare who want to work directly with our office.

2. Philosophy – Youth Thrive, Healing Centered Engagement, Race Equity – this information is posted on DCF’s website along with resource documents.
  3. Kinship/Permanency/Connections – This is key to youth being successful to focus on kinship placements for CP&P and for youth who we are not successful in obtaining permanency for we need to make sure they have a support network of peers and caring adults.
  4. Services 18+ - housing and LifeSet – both moving forward. FYI program continues to expand and MFP. I do think it is important for the Department to understand over time how these voucher programs are helping or hindering our young people.
    - Chafee Training Plan
      1. Discussed DCF’s existing and proposed new trainings.
- b. Niambi briefly discussed DCF’s timeline and activities for the development of its new 2024-2029 Chafee plan.

#### IV. Information Gathering & Brainstorming Activity

- a. Healing and Dealing with Trauma
  - Many social services bring youth together based on the worst moment of their life (e.g. foster care)
  - It is important that young people have somewhere they can go to daily where they are greeted and feel welcomed, supported and is positive; and where they are missed when they are not there (e.g. unite to play video games and/or basketball). A place where the most important thing is not the worst thing they are experiencing.
  - Some young people do not begin to heal until they are able to get out the environment that they were in; they may feel like they are in survival mode”
  - It is important for young people to be able to connect with people who are not in foster care.
  - It is important to create spaces for young people to feel safe.
  - We should offer young people yoga and meditation programs to assist them with their healing and trauma.
  - Many adolescents do not want to go to therapy anymore, and some have expressed that they feel they are being blamed for the faults of their parents.
  - Some therapeutic activities for youth may include going for a walk/a hike/a bike ride and/or doing artistic things. DCF could focus on providing interactions with youth in a therapeutic way (e.g. cooking classes).
  - It is important to assist young people in developing their engagement skills.
  - There is often a stigma around individual therapy if a young person is not ready to face themselves and deal with what they have experienced.
  - Perhaps teens could be supported in building their coping mechanisms through their schools?
  - Young people should be involved in the selection of their therapists so that they are more comfortable with the partnership (i.e., race/age/etc..).

- Regarding healing, there was a powerful energy for young people being among in a community with shared experiences. From these groups, the youth are able to form relationships and connect. The opportunities for new experiences contributes to healing (e.g. visiting the zoo).
- DCF's Enlightenment Peer Mentoring Program has mentors that provide social support, not direct therapy. Young people can benefit from a social identity and get involved in a community (e.g., music...embrace the arts in a collective way that is not therapeutic.).
- It is important to offer young people different types of therapies (e.g. animal therapy, gardening therapy, etc.).
- How do we engage youth with their mental health and connect them to services?
- To create a culture of healing, this work needs to be executed in DCF's local offices and with the young people's case workers.
- It is important that DCF creates healing within the framework of "normalcy" and offer young people the opportunity to engage in normal activities that youth their age would experience (e.g. taking youth to the beach/boardwalk, take youth to the City to see plays, etc.). The youth must feel normal.

*b.* Preparing for Adulthood

- It is important for youth to have supports to fall back on. Many young people experience a lot of pressure at age 21 when they are not making good wages. DCF should work with young people practice budgeting their stipend at least 6 months before they age out of care to help them better prepare for their transition to adulthood.
- A lot of young people lived experienced a stable housing when in care but are learning that it is hard to get into housing programs.
- Many youth experience a difficult time managing their money when they have limited resources and/or funds. Life connections very important to find for many youth who have been in care.
- Most young people are not earning a living wage to support their housing and other needs when pursuing their career with a "right now job" while earning a minimum wage.
- Many youth experience the pressures of the real world once they leave care (e.g. bills, housing, medical insurance, healthcare, inability to sustain a good wage, etc.).
- Youth typically experienced more stability when they lived with someone then when they tried to live on their own.
- Income assistance for young people would be extremely helpful; the thought of trying to afford to live on their own could be terrifying for many young people they do not have the funds to live on their own.
- Budgeting assistance for young people is not as helpful when they do not have the money to budget.
- Young people being able to have the support financially and emotionally is required.

- It is important for youth to build life connections so they can seek support when needed.
- Many youth are finding employment for the 'right now job' as they need a sustainable job to build the money that is needed to maintain their lives prior to being able to prepare for a career.
- There needs to be employers that are willing to provide youth a good living wage.
- Many youth do not have the basic skills like opening a savings account, how to fill in answers on a job application, filling out doctors' forms on their own, and have not had the opportunity to practice/experience these things on their own. Also, some youth could be at a lower reading level. It is important for youth to be able to practice these life skills and not feel ashamed.
- Many youth in care do not have the opportunity to learn certain life skills by watching the adults in their lives. It is important for DCF to 'normalize' youth not knowing a life skill and create space for them to practice and learn these skills. Some possible models could be resource parents, caseworkers, teachers, and/or other adults.
- Many young people do not think about housing before they turn 18. It is not realistic that youth would be able to afford to live on their own in New Jersey.
- Regarding bank accounts, most youth have someone who is willing to connect them to a financial literacy skills course.
- Youth may be able to receive information and resources on housing from legal service organizations (e.g. leases, what is reasonable rent, what happens if your apartment is not habitable).
- CASA is starting a program that has mentors in Bergen County that can help to mentor youth, help them fill out applications, and provide them transportation.
- It is important that young people think about safe, stable, and affordable housing.
- It is important for youth to be connected to employment training programs.
- Some local chambers of commerce are willing to set up internships for youth which may be an opportunity to build connections in local communities.
- Youth may connect with a workforce development board specific programs for high school students and have the opportunity to receive career experience. Also, youth may wish to explore technical schools for their career path.
- You may explore pursuing post-secondary education.
- Montclair State University's Red Hawk Fellows program provides mentorship and professional development; perhaps this program can be replicated at other universities?
- It is important to discuss with youth how they can you start making money with the degree they are getting from a college or university.
- Some youth may experience a lack of (e.g. taking 4 years to get through a GED program).
- Youth may experience 'imposter syndrome' and a feeling like they are not supposed to experience and/or achieve success in their lives.

- c. Social Connections -Building a Supportive Network
- Some youths' experiences outside of the child welfare system helped them to thrive and receiving support from trusted adults.
  - How do you teach youth to maintain and keep relationships? Youth need informal supports even if systematic supports are helpful (e.g. work, education, community, church league, extracurricular, etc.).
  - Young people's plan of supports should include questions of connections like, "Do I have someone to call at 3am if flat tire vs do I have supports?"
  - Youth have to be the ones that direct their connections; this may be hard for youth that have had a history of being let down by people. For example, if a youth needs a ride home from a sports practice, the youth could practice contacting the coach to ask for a ride.
  - Youth should be informed that they could lose their connections because if they do not maintain their contacts with others (e.g. a young person practicing to talk to their college professors, etc.).
  - It is useful to ask young people these types of questions to help them build informal adult connections: 'Who would you call for good news? Who would you call for bad news? Who would you call for a cup of sugar?'
  - Some of the youth are not high functioning and some young people have never seen a healthy relationship. It is important for DCF to model healthy relationships for young people in care; we have to help youth deal with their trauma in order to help them build relational permanence.
  - The goal is for young people to experience healthy relationships, but it is important to meet the youth where they are. It is about working with the youth on a consistent basis and build toward that goal.
  - Perhaps youth could experience this support through mentor programs (e.g. CASA mentorship, Enlightenment mentorship, Trenton street teams).
- d. Supporting specific populations (undocumented, parenting adolescents, LGBTQI youth and victims of human trafficking)
- Groups did not have the opportunity to discuss this topic.

V. Discuss Themes/Gallery Walk- Review of Themes

- a. Healing and Dealing with Trauma
- Discussed thinking outside of the box when creating therapeutic experiences for young people (e.g. yoga, meditation, animal therapy, art, etc.).
- b. Social Connections -Building a Supportive Network
- Discussed young people connecting with mentors or someone with lived experience.
  - Discussed young people having somewhere to go where the worst thing that happened to them is not the most important thing that they share.

c. Preparing for Adulthood

- Discussed the importance of assisting young people to ‘thrive’ and not just ‘survive.’
- Discussed young people needing stable housing and knowing their rights as a tenant.
- Discussed connecting young people with their employment/career opportunities and helping them practice their budgeting/financial skills.

d. Supporting specific populations (undocumented, parenting adolescents, LGBTQI youth and victims of human trafficking)

- Groups did not get an opportunity to discuss this topic.

VI. Next Steps and Remaining Questions

- OAS will continue to get input/feedback from stakeholders
  - Youth and Young Adults
  - CP&P Staff
  - Adolescent Contracted Providers
- OAS will review the data
- OAS will conduct a literature review to see what is happening in other states that could be helpful or something to consider as we develop the next Chafee Plan?

*All ideas reflected are not endorsed by the agency.*