QUALITY IMPROVEMENT CENTER
ON ENGAGING YOUTH IN
FINDING PERMANENCY

Expert Interviews: People with Lived Expertise

Sierra Wollen
Lori Vanderwill
Jerry Savage
Angelique Day

Children's Bureau

This report is supported by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the United States (U.S.) Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling $4 million dollars with 100 percent funded by ACF/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by ACF/HHS, or the U.S. Government. For more information, please visit the ACF websites, Administrative and National Policy Requirements | The Administration for Children and Families (hhs.gov).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Quality Improvement Center on Engaging Youth in Finding Permanency (QIC-EY) is a cooperative agreement, funded by the Children's Bureau, which is charged with advancing child welfare programs and practice to ensure that youth in foster care throughout the United States are authentically engaged in finding permanence. The QIC-EY is expected to raise awareness and to change the mindsets of social work professionals, court personnel, and other critical entities in order for youth to be recognized as competent, knowledgeable parties who deserve to have input and decision-making power about their lives.

Interviews were conducted with fifteen people with lived expertise representing nine different states by staff with lived experience in the child welfare system from two agencies: the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) and the New England Association of Child Welfare Commissioners and Directors (NEACWCD). The interviews were transcribed, and a framework analysis was conducted on the transcripts to understand whether and how participants were included in planning for their permanency, and what changes they recommended to enhance youth engagement. This report summarizes the experiences and recommendations of fifteen young adults with recent lived experience in the child welfare system. The recommendations outlined in this report will inform the development of

a youth engagement training curriculum for child welfare and court professionals, as well as a coaching model for the child welfare workforce.

Results revealed that people with lived expertise define permanency as lifelong family relationships characterized by love, acceptance, and security. Most participants shared both instances in which staff engaged them as well as instances when staff failed to engage. Participants were more often engaged by child welfare staff, such as their caseworker, than legal staff, such as their attorney or guardian ad litem.

Child welfare staff were most likely to utilize the following strategies to engage participants: 1. Prepare and Inform, 2. Communication & Listening Skills, 3. Advocate for Youth, and 4. Partner with Youth. Top recommendations for child welfare staff included 1. Communicate with and listen to youth, 2. Prepare and inform youth, 3. Building trusting relationships with youth, and 4. Advocate for youth. The top recommendations for legal staff were 1. Increased empathy, 2. Active listening/questioning youth, 3. Encourage youth participation in court, and 4. Spend adequate time with youth.

There were two major recommendations that were frequently mentioned across the literature review, workforce interviews, and interviews with people with lived expertise: ‘Build Trusting Relationships’ and ‘Prepare and Inform Youth.’ Given their prominence, these could be essential leverage points to shift the culture and mindset of the child welfare workforce.

THE QIC-EY

The Quality Improvement Center on Engaging Youth in Finding Permanency (QIC-EY) is a five-year cooperative agreement funded by the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children Bureau. The five partner agencies include Spaulding for Children, the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC), the New England Association of Child Welfare Commissioners and Directors (NEACWCD), the University of Nebraska at Lincoln (UNL), and the University of Washington (UW). Spaulding is the Lead Agency.

The QIC-EY will select 6-8 pilot sites, states, counties, tribal nations and territories, during the first year of the project. Working in partnership with the sites, the QIC-EY will implement and evaluate authentic youth engagement models in the pilot sites and help the sites to make systemic changes necessary for youth engagement. The QIC-EY will also develop a training/coaching model for the workforce that focuses on learning skills necessary for authentic youth engagement. This training/coaching model will be piloted in the sites and then disseminated nationally. The training/coaching model will include capacity building training, tools, and strategies that will serve as a change agent for the child welfare workforce and system to embrace the voice of youth in all aspects of the system of care.

The QIC-EY is expected to bring systemic change that will be reflected through intentional policies, practices, and culture shifts – at first, within the selected pilot sites and, later, to the nation at large. The new center is expected to raise awareness, and to change the mindsets of caregivers, social work professionals, families, court

personnel and other support agencies in order for youth to be recognized as competent, knowledgeable parties who deserve to have input and decision-making power about their lives.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the child welfare system's focus on legal permanency, many youth exit foster care without permanency. According to AFCARS Report #27, over 20,000 children who exited care during 2019 did so through emancipation. Additionally, almost 25,000 children in care in September 2019 had a case plan goal of emancipation or long-term foster care (Avery, 2010).

Prior research indicates that engaging youth in their own permanency planning improves permanency and transition-related outcomes while enhancing both child and agency wellbeing (Salazar, Spiera, & Pfister, 2020). Engaging youth in permanency planning allows youth to gain a sense of control in their own decision-making process and enhances their decision-making skills (Weisz et al., 2011). Youth involvement expands permanency options, resulting in fewer children leaving care without a connection to a stable, consistent adult (Salazar et al., 2018; Schwalbe, 2012).

However, despite the research demonstrating the effectiveness of youth engagement in permanency planning and youth interest in having a say in decisions that impact them, child welfare practice has not historically – nor presently – centered on youth voice or engagement (Saunders & Mace, 2006). Workers need training and ongoing coaching on how to establish relationships with youth on their caseloads, engage them in decision making, and empower them to use their voice (Havlicek, Curry, & Villalpando, 2018). Creating shared

power requires staff to see youth as experts who have important perspectives and innovative ideas to share. Authentic youth engagement requires staff to dedicate time needed to establish a trusting relationship with youth, by listening to them, respecting their opinions and being consistently present.

In early 2022, Wollen and colleagues conducted a systematic literature review of available peer reviewed and gray literature regarding the essential competencies and characteristics of youth engagement workers. The Workforce Systematic Literature Review revealed several key competencies and characteristics of youth engagement workers. The three competencies that were mentioned with the highest frequency in the literature review were 'Partnering with youth,' 'Communication and listening skills,' and 'Building trusting relationships.' The research team also conducted expert interviews with 15 workforce professionals, who identified the following three competencies with the highest frequency: building trusting relationships, communication and listening skills, and prepare and inform youth.

To understand current efforts to engage youth in child welfare settings, as well as barriers to engagement and recommendations to promote authentic youth engagement, the QIC-EY team conducted a series of 15 interviews with young adults with recent lived expertise in the child welfare system. Their perspectives will help guide development and implementation of a training and coaching model for child welfare staff and a training for legal staff.

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

Participants were identified through the QIC-EY National Youth Engagement Advisory Council and were also recruited through partner agencies that QIC-EY grant partners were aware of through other grants. People with lived expertise were contacted to determine eligibility and interest in participating in individual interviews with a facilitator from one of the partner agencies. All facilitators also had lived expertise in the child welfare system and were employed at the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) or the New England Association of Child Welfare Commissioners and Directors (NEACWCD). Facilitators received training regarding the concepts in the interview, how to ask the questions, and how to take field notes.

Participants received a confidentiality agreement in advance of the interview, which was reviewed at the beginning of the interview. Each interview took approximately 60 minutes to complete. All interviews were completed remotely over Zoom. Facilitators asked a standard set of questions. The conversations were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the facilitators also took field notes. Participants were compensated with a $75 Amazon gift card for their participation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The QIC-EY team designed the interview guide with the intent to answer the following research questions:

- How do people with lived expertise conceptualize "permanency"?

- How were people with lived expertise engaged in planning for their own permanency?
- What were the main barriers and missed opportunities to engage people with lived expertise in permanency planning?
- What changes in policy and practice do people with lived expertise recommend to enhance youth engagement?

The present report is organized around these four research questions. Facilitators loosely followed the interview guide, and not all the questions were asked in every interview. Interviewers had the freedom to ask follow-up questions which were not on the interview protocol. People with lived expertise had the freedom to skip any questions they did not wish to answer. See Appendix A for the full interview protocol.

THEME AND SUBTHEME CODING

To extract themes from the interviews, the authors used a framework analysis approach (Goldsmith, 2021). A framework analysis includes a mix of inductive (derived from the transcripts) and deductive (pre-defined) coding. First, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data. Members of the research team recommended preliminary themes based on the interview guide, as well as a previous systematic literature review regarding the essential competencies and characteristics of youth engagement workers, and an online survey about permanency that people with lived expertise took in 2021. The preliminary themes and their definitions created the initial framework for review.

Second, upon reviewing the transcripts, the reviewers had the freedom to add new thematic codes that were distinctly different from the preliminary themes. The coding framework was adjusted in an iterative process as the reviewers scanned the interviews.

Third, researchers coded the interviews in accordance with the pre-determined themes. The researchers continued to expand or modify

theme definitions when the existing categories did not sufficiently represent the material. After the initial review and framework adjustment, the authors reviewed the full set of transcripts again to ensure each interview was reviewed using the final framework of themes. Upon two full reviews of each interview, the researchers then summarized the themes and frameworks provided in the data and interpreted the results through the lens of the previous systematic literature review and workforce expert interviews.

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

Fifteen people with lived expertise participated in interviews between February 8th-March 29th, 2022. The recruitment criteria were people between the ages of 18 and 26 who were adopted, reunified, granted guardianship at 14 years old or older, or aged out of foster care without achieving legal permanency. Recruiters aimed to reach individuals with various geographic, racial, cultural, and social backgrounds.

Age

On average, participants were just under 18 when they exited care for the last time, though one participant was six when they exited care. Participants were around four years removed from their foster care experience, with an average current age of 22 (range: 18-26). See Table 1 for more information.

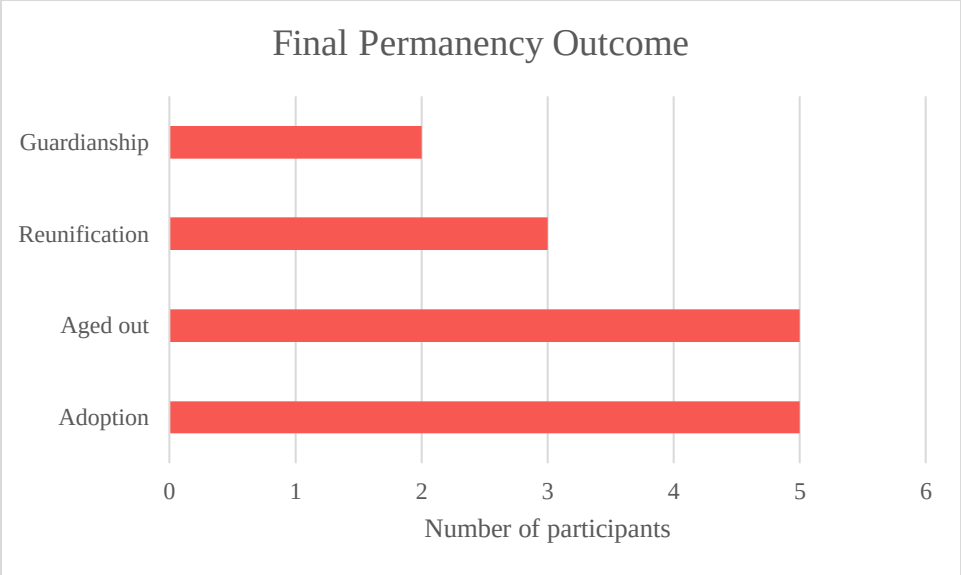
Table 1. Age exited care and current age

Statistic	Age exited care	Current age
Mean	17.8	22
Minimum	6	18
Maximum	26	26

Permanency outcome

The most common permanency outcomes were adoption (five participants) and aged out (five participants). Three participants reunified with their parent(s), and two participants achieved guardianship. When participants shared multiple permanency outcomes in succession, the most recent outcome was reported. See Figure 1 for more information.

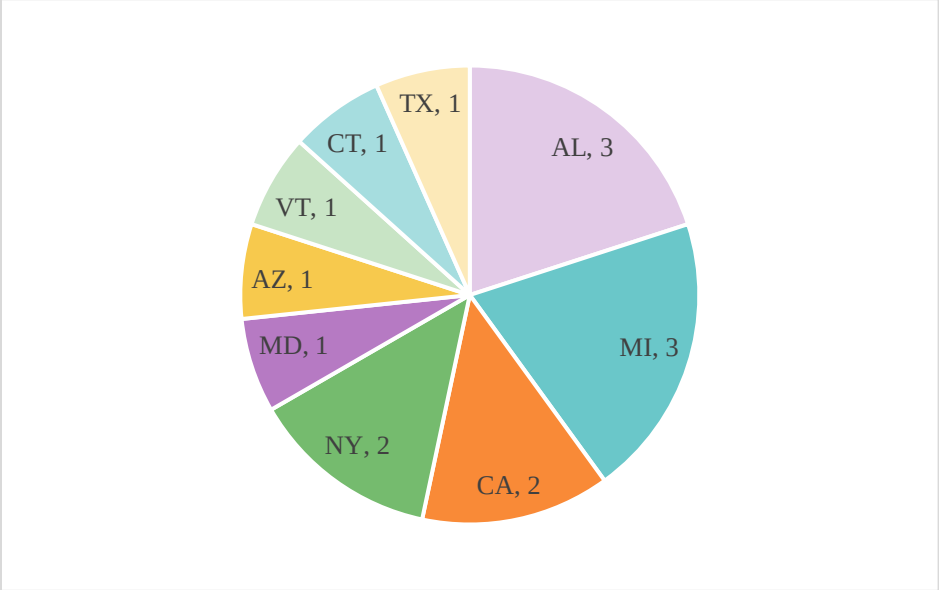
Figure 1. Permanency outcomes



State

Participants were asked which state they lived in while in care. Participants represented nine unique states. The states with the most participants were Alabama (three participants) and Missouri (three participants), followed by California (two participants). See Figure 2 for more information.

Figure 2. State participants lived in while in care



RESULTS

Results revealed that people with lived expertise define permanency as lifelong family relationships characterized by love, acceptance, and security. Most participants shared both instances in which staff engaged them as well as instances when staff failed to engage. Participants were more often engaged by child welfare staff, such as their caseworker, than legal staff, such as their attorney or guardian ad litem.

Child welfare staff were most likely to utilize the following strategies to engage participants: 1. Prepare and Inform, 2. Communication & Listening Skills, 3. Advocate for Youth, and 4. Partner with Youth. Though less frequent, when legal staff engaged youth, they utilized the following strategies roughly equally: 1. Open Communication/information sharing, 2. Active Listening, and 3. Private Meetings. The most common barriers to engagement included the worker pressuring the participant into a permanency plan, making decisions on behalf of the participant, and not providing enough information for the participant to make informed decisions. Participants also discussed the culture of "box checking" in child welfare, in which workers are focused solely on meeting the bare minimum legal and policy standards without taking the time to be present with youth and meaningfully engage with them.

Top recommendations for child welfare staff included 1. Communicate with and listen to youth, 2. Prepare and inform youth, 3. Building

trusting relationships with youth, 4. Advocate for youth, and 5. Partner with youth and share decision making. The top recommendations for legal staff were 1. Increased empathy, 2. Active listening/questioning youth, 3. Encourage youth participation in court, 4. Spend adequate time with youth, and 5. Prepare youth for court.

PERMANENCY OUTCOMES

Permanency definition

Previous research with case workers revealed a tendency to focus on the concept of legal permanency (i.e., reunification, adoption, guardianship and independent living plans) when discussing permanency (Vanderwill et al., 2022). However, people with lived expertise tended to emphasize the emotional benefits of permanency and the desire to develop long-term relationships with caregivers that would provide them with a feeling of safety, stability, love and comfort. Six codes derived from a previous survey of youth with lived experience were used to analyze the definitions of permanency that were provided by participants. Those codes or "themes" are defined in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Definitions of Permanency

Theme	Definition	# Participants	% Participants	Representative quote
Permanent lifelong connections	Permanency is a lifelong connection to supportive adults that provides a sense of emotional stability	13	87%	*"It means just like having a stable environment and being able to feel comfortable and at peace with whatever situation you're in."*

Theme	Definition	# Participants	% Participants	Representative quote
Safety, comfort	Permanency is thought of primarily as a way to achieve safety and a sense of emotional comfort	5	33%	*"For me, permanency was security. So knowing that there was no way that I would've been stripped away from that certain place that I was at. So just knowing that I was landed somewhere… safe."*
Home	Permanency is defined as a feeling that one has a permanent home and will never be forced to move	3	20%	*"Having somewhere you can stay and not have to worry about, oh, well when will I move again? Or how long will this last?"*
Agency/respect	Permanency as viewed as a path to agency and feeling listened to and respected	3	20%	*"And so permanency means consulting with youth, asking where they would like to live, where would they feel safe? Where would they feel comfortable?"*
Unsure of meaning	Not able to define permanency	1	7%	*"Honestly I really don't know what permanency means."*

*The 15 respondents provided a total of 32 definitions all of which were coded as one of the six categories listed in the table.

Thirteen of the 15 participants (87%) described permanency as being permanent and something that provides both stability and lifelong connections. This theme is a good example of how people with lived expertise often framed their definition of permanency in emotional rather than legal terms. The following quote is noteworthy as it helps to explain how people with lived expertise associate "permanency" with love, support and stability but that they may not derive that same benefit from adoptive parents or guardians with whom they have established legal permanency.

- "Permanency to me means like safety and stability and support, I would say. Because, even getting adopted, I don't feel like my family is permanency because, I don't have that support or stability. But, with my friends, I feel permanency because they're like my family."

Most definitions of permanency offered by people with lived expertise included multiple themes within the scheme used to code transcripts. In nine of the 13 definitions that youth provided which were consistent with the 'Permanent lifelong connections' theme, participants also touched on other themes including 'family love and acceptance,' 'safety/comfort' and 'home.' Definitions included:

- "Permanency means for me that, I'll always have a place to call home. I'll always have stable parents to talk to that I never had when I was growing up."
- "It gives me that real good comfort home feeling that no matter where you go in the world, you know you come back to the same place, nothing is going to change. I feel like that's permanency, is having that place where you know you can go across the world and back, study abroad, do this, do that, but this place remains the same. It just is everlasting. It's home."
- "Permanency is a sense of belonging, finding something that's permanent. I think we all deserve a loving and affirming family and I think that in my situation I found that. I didn't age out of the

system or anything like that. I was able to find my forever family who love me unconditionally. We all make mistakes and I definitely have made mistakes. They love me for who I am. My dad always says, "You're imperfectly perfect."”

- “It means just like having a stable environment and being able to feel comfortable and at peace with whatever situation you're in.”

Achieved desired permanency outcome?

Twelve of the 15 participants provided answers when asked whether they had achieved their desired permanency outcome. Around half of participants indicated they did achieve their desired outcome, and another half did not.

Table 3. Achieved desired permanency outcome

Achieved Desired Permanency Outcome	# Participants	% Participants	Representative quotes
Yes	7	47%	*"Yeah. I definitely think I did. Might have been more than I bargained for, with eight kids, but it's great."*
No	6	40%	*"What I would've wanted to see happen was me being back with my mom instead of being at a foster guardianship, whatever you want to call it. Because I really missed my mom after being there permanently because I barely saw her"*

*Percentages sum to less than 100% because only 12 of the 15 respondents answered the question

**One participant stated both yes and no when asked the question on separate occasions

While the quotes in the table above are representative of those that simply indicated they did or did not achieve their desired permanency outcome, the following two participants explain some of the contradictory feelings and perceptions that people with lived expertise may express when considering whether they achieved their desire outcome.

- "That's a tough one too because at the end of the day, do I think that the best decision was made and the safest decision? Yes, but at that moment, was it what I necessarily wanted. No, I wanted to go back home. I felt like I should have been able to go back home, but there was just so many random things that would pop up in these meetings."
- "Unfortunately, no. I mean, I think it was kind of forced on us and then of course we're six and my sister's seven or eight and I think we just kind of went along with it. And then there was times later where I feel like I didn't want to be with my mom. One adult youth can rely on (and all sub codes)?"

All 15 participants were asked if there was one adult they could rely upon and all 15 indicated there was at least one person. Two of the 15 answered the question twice during conversations with the interviewer and participants cited a total of 22 people, with foster/adoptive caregivers being cited most frequently (47%). The representative quotes help explain how participants described reliable adults in their lives. Note that some cited multiple loved ones when answering the question. See Table 4 for more information.

Table 4. One adult to rely on

One adult to rely on	# Participants	% Participants	Representative quotes
Foster/Adoptive caregiver	7	47%	*"One that comes to mind that was my foster mother. Me and her are still very close"; "I never was physically adopted but she is my foster mom. She's my mom. She's the only mom I have, but I just wasn't legally like with papers adopted."*
Sibling	3	20%	*"My mom and my brothers"; "I love my siblings. So they feel more like, I do go to them for things and stuff, sure."*
Parent (bio)	3	20%	*"Yes. That person is my mom. I love her. That is my super hero"; "My mom and my brothers"*
Professional (counselor, caseworker, CASA)	3	20%	*"She was my therapist when I was in foster care. And then we started getting really close, so she sort of became more like my mentor. And I call her for everything over my adoptive parents, even, so. She's just always been there for me. She was my first mom, really, so. And she's never, ever, ever given up on me either."*

Grandparent	2	13%	*"My grandmother and my sister"; "Yeah. So thankfully it was my grandparents on my maternal side, they lived in Maryland"*
Foster care advocate	2	13%	"So social worker, yeah. Foster care advocate"; "I have one, yeah. He was a mentor that actually helped me in my transition from foster care. And he's a older person, a elderly person. I think he's in his 60's or 70's. But he really taught me what a advocate is."
Other kin (e.g., aunts, uncles, cousins)	1	7%	*"Well, I mean, the adult is my auntie." (auntie is also adoptive parent); "That would be my dads" (the two fathers are adoptive parents)*
Romantic partner	1	7%	*"I would say my fiance."*

*The 15 respondents described a total of 22 people as the one adult they can rely on.

Of the 13 participants that provided responses to the question of how they became connected to their reliable adult, two indicated they knew the reliable person through both foster care and their birth family. As one participant explained, her reliable person is her "auntie" who is also her adoptive parent. Some participants also explained that they had this special relationship with a foster parent: "one that comes to mind that was my foster mother. Me and her are still very close."

Table 5. How connected to their reliable adult

How connected?	# Participants	% Participants*
Foster care	8	53%
Birth	4	27%
School	1	7%

**Percentages sum to less than 100% because only 13 of the 15 participants provided an answer to the question

**Two participants provided two responses each

Who talked to you about your permanency options?

All 15 participants provided a response when asked who discussed permanency with them. The question was answered a total of 19 times and participants cited 25 sources of information, with child welfare caseworkers (47%) being the most frequently cited source. Six of the 15 participants (40%) indicated that nobody spoke with them about permanency while they were in care. As one participant stated, "I don't know if anyone ever talked to me about permanency options, honestly."

The quotes included in the table below describe parts of these conversations which in some cases were short but in others involved multiple parties or multiple conversations with a caseworker.

Table 6. Who talked about permanency options?

Source of Permanency information	# Participants	% Participants	Representative quote
Child welfare caseworker	7	47%	*"It was a case manager I had, who kind of shortly talked about it"; "Yes, my social worker. She gave me a lot of decisions that I had when I was about to turn 18. So I did have like a... It was like a six-month meeting prior to me turning 18. And it was like a three-month meeting prior to me turning 18 of like the choices that I had."*
Parent/step-parent	4	27%	*"I remember having a weird converse about it that was not even related to that, it was related to my mom and her boyfriend at the time who's the father of my youngest sister. I remember him coming to me and being like, "Well, who would you rather be with me or your mom?"*

Source of Permanency information	# Participants	% Participants	Representative quote
Other professional	4	27%	*"At first, it was my therapist at the time. In that instance, my dad had came back into the picture, so now more permanency options was actually open to me. It wasn't just return home to Mom, it was, "Here's a opportunity to go live with Dad," that you've never met. So now, permanency looked a little different. I was very intrigued to want to know, what does that permanency look like? Speaking with my therapist and talking to some of my case workers, and even having to confide into my mom and telling her the truth that I would like to live with Dad, helped me with the permanency. It wasn't easy."*

Source of permanency information	# Participants	% Participants	Representative quote
Foster caregiver	3	20%	*"And then, my foster parents, the first set that I had, they talked about it a little bit, but of course, they had adopted nine children and had one biological and we're fostering five at a point in time. And I was like, "I'm going to be honest, this isn't the life I want." So they danced around the idea, but I don't think that they really wanted to adopt anymore. I think they were at that capacity that they needed to be at."*
Nobody	6	40%	*"I don't remember people talking or using the word permanency or anything like that. I wasn't in care for like... Well, the second time I was in care, I wasn't in there long before my parents started the process of the reunification route."*

*The 15 participants answered the question a total of 19 times, citing a total of 25 sources of information

Took part in permanency meeting?

Of the 15 respondents, 12 provided responses when asked whether they attended a court hearing, permanency roundtable, case review meeting, or other meeting related permanency planning. Most (n=10) reported attending at least one such hearing. However, nearly half of

those participants (n=4) stated that they did "not feel they had a say" in the hearing. Seven of those who attended a meeting also indicated that they "felt part of the team" when attending such meetings. Two participants who attended meetings provided both distinct responses. This reflects the fact that youth may be trying to process their own experiences to make sense of unique meetings that have such a profound impact on their lives.

Of the 12 participants that answered the question, three said they did not take part in any permanency meetings and explained they were not given the choice to attend the meeting.

Table 7. Participated in permanency meeting or hearing

Took part in permanency meeting	# Participants	% Participants
Yes	10	67%
Did not feel they had a say	4	27%
Felt part of the team	7	47%
No	3	20%
Did not have a choice	3	20%

*Percentages sum to more than 100% because some participants provided multiple different responses. When participants provided the same response more than once, only one response was included in the frequency table.
**Twelve participants answered a question about attending permanency meetings, providing a total of 23 responses.

Did you feel listened to and respected?

When people with lived expertise were asked whether they felt listed to and respected during meetings or hearing related to their permanency planning, most (60%) said "yes" at least once while 47% said "sometimes" at least once and 27% said "no" at least one time. Six of the 13 respondents also provided multiple responses that

included, for instance, "sometimes" and "yes" or "sometimes" and "no"?

Table 8. Did you feel listened to and respected?

Did you feel listened to and respected?	# Participants	% Participants
Yes	9	60%
Sometimes	7	47%
No	4	27%

*Thirteen of the 15 participants provided an answer to the question "did you feel listened to and respected" when discussing permanency.
**Some participants said no or yes more than one time during an interview. When this occurred, only one of their responses was included in the frequency table.
*** the 13 respondents provided a total of 25 answers to the question

Support for permanency concerns

Six respondents were asked whether they received support when expressing concerns about permanency. Of the six, one person said both "yes" and "no" and while three said "yes" and the remaining three said "no".

Table 9. If you had permanency concerns, did anyone support you?

Support for Permanency Concerns?	# Participants	% Participants
No	4	27%
Yes	3	20%

*Six (n=6) of the 15 respondents answered a question about whether they had supports for permanency concerns. One of the six said both yes and not. Percentages do not sum to 100% because only six participants provided a response to the question.

ENGAGEMENT EXPERIENCES

Summary

Most participants shared both instances in which staff engaged them as well as instances when staff failed to engage. Participants were more often engaged by child welfare staff, such as their caseworker, than legal staff, such as their attorney or guardian ad litem. Slightly more participants shared experiences in which they were not engaged around legal and relational permanency compared to times they were engaged around these topics, and three times as many participants shared that staff failed to help them plan for cultural permanency compared with the number of participants who indicated that staff engaged them around cultural permanency.

Staff were most likely to utilize the following strategies to engage participants: 1. Prepare and Inform, 2. Communication & Listening Skills, 3. Advocate for Youth, and 4. Partner with Youth. Though infrequent, when legal staff engaged youth, they utilized the following strategies roughly equally: 1. Open Communication, 2. Active Listening, and 3. Private Meetings. The most common experiences of non-engagement included the worker pressuring the participant into a permanency plan, making decisions on behalf of the participant, and not providing enough information for the participant to make informed decisions. The most common systemic barrier that participants identified was the culture of "box checking" in child welfare, in which workers are focused solely on meeting the bare minimum legal and policy standards without taking the time to be present with youth and meaningfully engage with them.

Engagement with staff

Staff role

Nearly all participants indicated they were meaningfully engaged by a child welfare staff member, most commonly their caseworker (93%), followed by their counselor (27%). All 15 of the participants recounted times when child welfare staff failed to engage them meaningfully. Child welfare caseworkers and foster caregivers were the most frequently mentioned staff who failed to engage participants. Comparatively, less than half (47%) of participants recounted experiences in which they were engaged by legal staff. Three participants indicated they were engaged by their CASAs and two described engaging interactions with a judge. Participants overwhelmingly recounted disappointing experiences with their legal representative – eight participants described how their legal representative failed to meaningfully engage them, while just two described engaging interactions with their legal representative. See Figure 3 and Table 10 for more information.

Figure 3. Engagement experiences by staff role

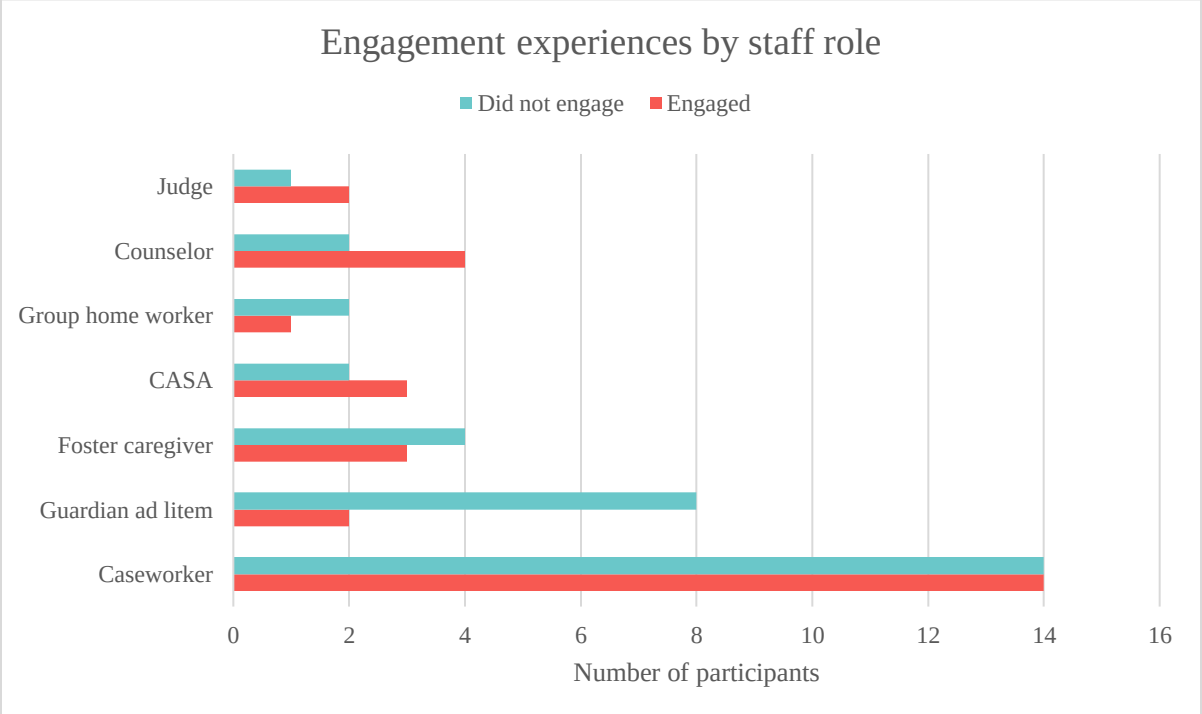


Table 10. Difference between number who were engaged vs. not engaged by staff

Staff who engaged	Staff who engaged youth		Staff who did not engage youth*		
	Number of participants	% of total N	Number of participants	% of total N	Difference between number who were engaged vs. not engaged**
Any child welfare staff	14	93%	15	100%	-7%
Child welfare caseworker	14	93%	14	93%	0%
Counselor	4	27%	2	13%	13%
Foster caregiver	3	20%	4	27%	-7%
Group home worker	1	7%	2	13%	-7%
Any legal staff	7	47%	10	67%	-20%
CASA	3	20%	2	13%	7%
Judge	2	13%	1	7%	7%
Legal representative	2	13%	8	53%	-40%

*Participants could indicate they were both engaged and not engaged by staff throughout the course of their interviews.

**Positive numbers (highlighted yellow) indicate more youth *were* engaged by the staff member than not engaged. Negative numbers (highlighted orange) indicate more youth were *not* engaged by the staff member than those who were engaged.

Engagement topic area

Participants were engaged around a variety of topics relating to legal, relational, and cultural permanency. Most participants (80%) were engaged around legal permanency, most commonly adoption (33%) and planning for independent living (20%). Two-thirds of participants were engaged around relational permanency, most commonly connections with siblings (60%), followed by placement decisions (33%) and connections with parents (20%). Far fewer participants described being engaged around cultural permanency compared with

legal and relational permanency – just three participants described engaging experiences, compared with nine participants who indicated they were not engaged in planning for cultural permanency. When speaking about their experiences in the child welfare system more generally, just over half described being engaged, while two-thirds described experiences in which they were not engaged.

Participants were more likely to describe situations in which they were not engaged around legal and relational permanency, especially in relation to adoption (40%), reunification (40%), placement decisions (60%), and visitation (33%). Child welfare staff overwhelmingly missed the mark when it came to planning for cultural permanency. People with lived expertise explained that staff failed to help them stay connected to their religion (33%), culture (27%), and race/ethnicity (20%) during their time in the child welfare system. In two cases, group home staff actively prevented youth from maintaining cultural continuity example by banning youth from speaking Spanish and attending church. See Figure 4 and Table 11 for more information.

Figure 4. Engagement experience by permanency type

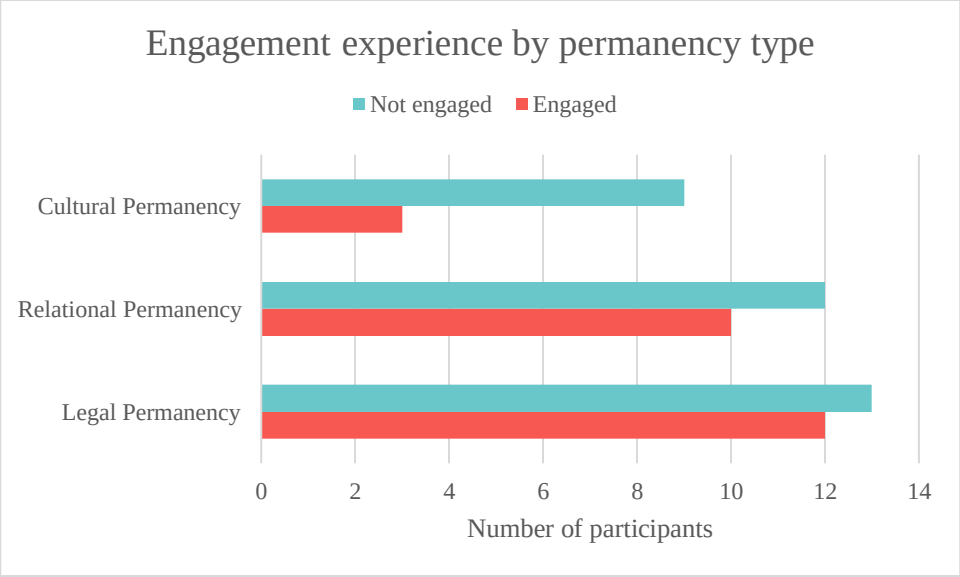


Table 11. Difference between % who were engaged vs. not engaged by topic

	Youth who were engaged around topic		Youth who were not engaged around topic*		
Topic engaged around	**Number of participants**	**% of total N**	**Number of participants**	**% of total N**	**Difference****
Legal Permanency	12	80%	13	87%	-7%
Adoption	5	33%	6	40%	-7%
ILP	3	20%	3	20%	0%
ISP	2	13%	0	0%	13%
Guardianship	2	13%	2	13%	0%
Reunification	2	13%	6	40%	-27%
Relational Permanency	10	67%	12	80%	-13%
Connection with siblings	9	60%	9	60%	0%
Placement decisions	5	33%	9	60%	-27%
Connection with parents	3	20%	1	7%	13%
Visitation	2	13%	5	33%	-20%
Connection with foster caregiver	2	13%	0	0%	13%
Connection with other kin	2	13%	2	13%	0%
General/unspecified engagement	8	53%	10	67%	-13%
Cultural Permanency	3	20%	9	60%	-40%
Cultural fit of placement	2	13%	4	27%	-13%
LGBTQ	1	7%	1	7%	0%
Religion	1	7%	5	33%	-27%
Race/ethnicity	0	0%	3	20%	-20%

*Participants could indicate they were both engaged and not engaged around a topic throughout the course of their interviews. Thus, the engaged and not engaged categories are not mutually exclusive.

**Positive numbers (highlighted yellow) indicate more youth were engaged around the topic than not engaged. Negative numbers (highlighted orange) indicate more youth were not engaged around the topic than those who were engaged.

Engagement strategies

Engagement strategies – child welfare staff

Most of the participants (93%) expressed at least one instance in which they were engaged by a child welfare staff member (caseworker, counselor, foster caregiver, or group home worker). Three participants (20%) stated that agency or state policy required their engagement or consent. The most common strategy staff used to engage was 'Prepare and Inform,' with 60% of participants stating a staff member explained their permanency options, described the permanency planning process, and/or informed them about the implications of their decisions. One person with lived expertise expressed that their "social worker really helped [them] in explaining all [their] permanency options." Participants felt this was a helpful strategy because it allowed them to understand their situation and what they should expect to happen next, and also helped them make informed permanency decisions. For example, "We did talk about the benefits of staying in care versus staying in care and aging out versus getting adopted right after the conversation. I received more benefits staying in care and establishing myself."

The next most frequent strategy was 'Communication and Listening Skills.' Just over half (53%) of participants indicated a staff member listened to them and asked them good questions about what they wanted their lives to look like and/or where and with whom they wanted to live. People with lived expertise valued staff who had meaningful dialogue with them in a way that they could understand, with one expressing the following about their caseworker: "When there's times where I don't understand things, he definitely helps me process through them. That's like his favorite word is process and he uses that all the time. And so, it helps me honestly, when he's able to break it down or put it in a way that my mind processes and not just his." It was important to participants that staff asked them what they wanted, but this was not a common occurrence for many participants.

For example, one participant stated, "And my caseworker asked… 'But where do you want to go?' And, that was the first time, the whole time that I was in the system where someone asked me where I wanted to live."

The third most common strategies used to engage youth were 'Advocate for Youth' and 'Partner with Youth,' with just under half (47%) of participants indicating a staff member utilized these strategies. Advocating for youth could look like the staff member providing logistical support by scheduling meetings, arranging transportation, etc., ensuring the participant was connected to needed resources and funding opportunities, and advocating for the participant's permanency preferences with other stakeholders such as legal staff. One participant explained, "My social worker was very good when it came to communication and updating me. Till this day, she still tells me like... I turned 21, so... I don't qualify for [certain benefits] and stuff like that anymore. But she's very good with telling me like my resources. Even till this day, she told me about the meeting that there was." Staff partnered with youth by sharing decision making responsibilities with them and making them feel as though they had a say in what happened with their case. Simply put, "They included me in on everything, so I feel like they helped me achieve my permanency."

Other strategies included 'Building Trusting Relationships' between staff and youth so that participants felt as though they could be honest and transparent with their worker, 'Consistency' in terms of checking in on youth periodically, 'Authenticity' whereby workers showed up as their real selves and didn't try to sugar coat the truth or hold information back, and 'Flexible' engagement, meaning staff met participants where they were at and adjusted their approach as needed. See Figure 5 and Table 12 for more information about the strategies child welfare staff used to engage participants.

Figure 5. Engagement strategies - child welfare staff

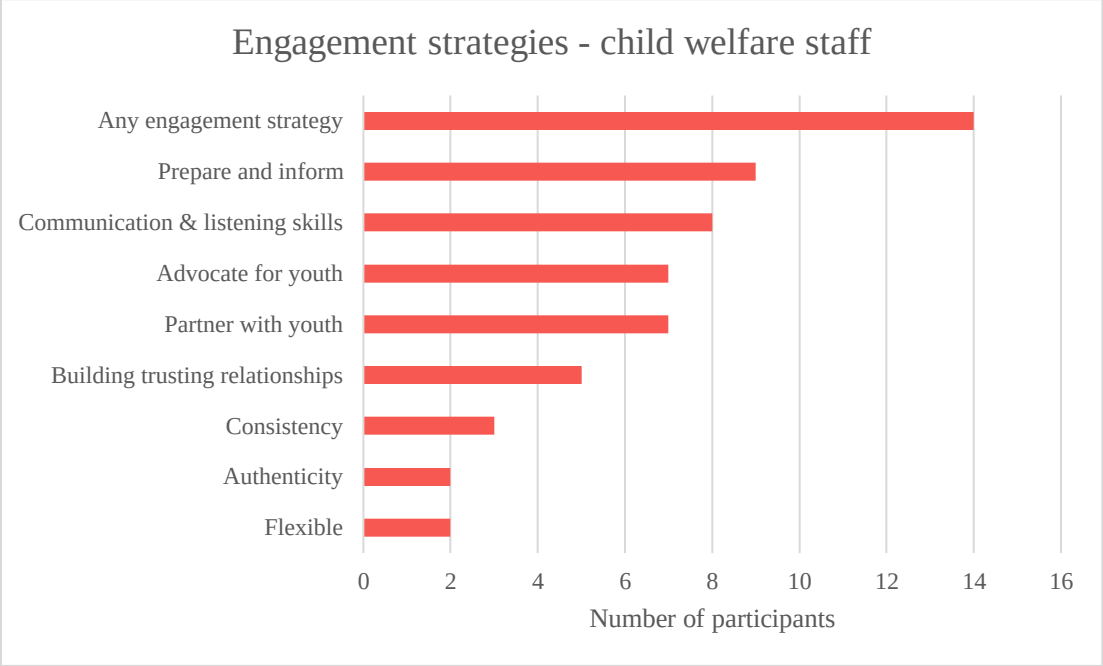


Table 12. Engagement strategies utilized by child welfare staff

Engagement strategy	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Any engagement strategy	Any of the below strategies.	14	93%	
Prepare and inform	Staff provide youth with information to support informed decision making and prepare youth to engage in planning.	9	60%	*"My social worker really helped me in explaining all my permanency options."*

Engagement strategy	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Explain permanency options	Staff lay out youth's options and describe each one in detail.	6	40%	*"She didn't force me to do residential, she didn't force me to do independent living. All those options were on the table and she explained each scenario to me and what my options would be. If I wanted to live on campus, I was able to live on campus. I wasn't going to a group home. I just knew that was all the way out. So she gave me a bunch of different options. At the time, I thought the best fit, what ended up being the best fit was to stay with my foster mom."*

Engagement strategy	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Inform about implications of decisions	Staff help youth consider the implications of different permanency and life decisions so that they can consider how they want to move forward.	5	33%	*"We did talk about the benefits of staying in care versus staying in care and aging out versus getting adopted right after the conversation. I received more benefits staying in care and establishing myself, because again, I didn't want to go live with them. It was pretty much probably the conversation we had about it."*
Communication & listening skills	Staff have open and transparent communication with youth and actively seek youth perspective. Provide up to date information pertinent to youth in a way they can understand.	8	53%	*"It helps me honestly, when he's able to break it down or put it in a way that my mind processes and not just his."*

Engagement strategy	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Active listening, ask good questions	Staff ask youth what they want and listen to what they say.	5	33%	*"When we started having meetings when I was in Huntsville and they were driving up to me, it was always what do I want? Because in the end, they were like, 'We're not going to be here, we're not going to be controlling your life. So what is your plan? What do you want to do? And what are we looking at for the next six months? Not just right now in this time, because in six months you'll be aging out or in six months you'll be close to aging out.'"*

Engagement strategy	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Elicit youth placement preferences	Staff ask youth where and with whom they want to live.	3	13%	*"When it came to transitional housing program…they did actually tell me like, 'Is there specific people that you don't think you would particularly get along with?' And they were very like specific about it and telling me like, 'If you're not okay with it, we'll get somebody else.' But there were very like, 'Are you okay? If that's going to be a problem, we don't want you to be with somebody you're not going to be comfortable with.' Even when it came to being in foster homes and stuff, they always told me, prior to me moving in, to see if I'm okay with it."*

Engagement strategy	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Developmentally appropriate communication	Staff explain things to youth in a way they can understand developmentally.	2	13%	*"She listened and she honestly, she never made me feel like she never talked to me like a child honestly. She never tried to belittle me or anything like that. She was very relaxed and she would come to the school and talk to me sometimes, pull me out of class and talk to me or she would come to the house of my first foster parents and talked to me and sometimes it would just be a phone call, completely off the record and just talk to me about what happened in school today or what's going on in life."*

Engagement strategy	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Advocate for youth	Staff act as an advocate for the youth, making their desires a reality, and connecting youth to resources in the community.	7	47%	*"She actually ended up having to go as far as…being my educational rights holder, because she couldn't do anything. She couldn't get anything from the school. And that was an important piece during me transitioning into college and even graduating high school because I've went to several different high schools and my transcripts were a mess."*

Engagement strategy	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Logistical support	Staff provide logistical support for youth by scheduling meetings, facilitating, arranging transportation, and communicating with stakeholders	7	47%	*"I had issues with my older sister and she was very good about, 'okay, you guys, come into the office or try to see what's going on. Let's break up the tension' and stuff like that. So she was very like doing meetings and stuff like that to try to communicate with my family members or even my foster parents when I had issues with them."*
Link with services & funds	Staff inform youth of what resources are available to them and help them get connected to services they need.	3	20%	*"There's these funds that we can get whenever I was old enough to start the funds. And made sure I had all my paperwork done and stuff like that. And with me being there, it did make me feel better"*

Engagement strategy	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Advocate for permanency preferences	Staff advocate for youth's desires with other stakeholders such as legal staff and foster caregivers.	2	13%	*"I had a great case worker and she was excellent, I'm still connected with her. She understood me, she understood my frustration and she fought tooth and nail for me and my foster mom. So it was basically smooth sailing. I didn't have any problems with DCF at all because my social worker got things done."*
Partner with youth	Staff and youth make decisions as a team. Each party can make suggestions and decisions and the contribution of each is valued.	7	47%	*"They were like… "Well how do you want to go from here?" And I was like, "Okay, I'm ready to be adopted." And that's when our permanency plan changed, so. I guess that one is when they included me in that decision."*

Engagement strategy	***Definition***	***Number of participants***	***% of total N***	***Representative quote***
Shared decision making	Youth are able to provide input and make decisions about their own lives, when a choice exists.	7	47%	*"I had a relationship with my social worker, so I did feel respected. I did feel heard. And he did exactly what I wanted to do and he included what I wanted to do and what happened."*
Attended team decision making meetings	Youth attended team decision making meeting and felt they had a say in the meeting.	2	13%	*"I think my case manager, we kind of always reviewed the plan as a team… And even though the team was there… that conversation was really led by me and the case manager."*
Building trusting relationships	Staff take time to build trusting and meaningful relationships with youth as a first step to working together.	5	33%	*"My caseworker always told me even when I was younger like, 'Listen, you're always going to have my number. You can always email me.' Now we go out to eat once a month. We talk, she'll send me a text like, 'Did you watch Power?' We talk about everything."*

Engagement strategy	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Consistency	Staff regularly check up on youth.	3	20%	*"They did the regular check-ins, she used to come by my house."*
Authenticity	Staff show up as their whole self and relate to youth in an honest, compassionate, and genuine manner.	2	13%	*"[My therapist was] the only one who was very straightforward with us and I loved it. She never beat around the bush or sugar coated anything."*
Flexible	Staff are flexible and adaptive rather than following rigid rules or having set expectations for how things must go. Outside of the box thinking.	2	13%	*"There wasn't a time where I couldn't attend any of them, because… if we had to do a Zoom call, we would do a Zoom call. If we had to do them all coming on campus, when I was at [school] and we had a meeting in the library or if they had to drive up to [city] and we called pops on the phone because he had a meeting. So they really accommodated for situations that weren't ideal."*

Engagement strategies – legal staff

Overall, less than half (47%) of participants were engaged by a legal staff member (guardian ad litem, CASA, or judge). Legal staff engaged participants using a variety of strategies. 'Open Communication' was mentioned by 13% of participant and involved staff providing participants with updates and information about their case. Another thirteen percent of participants indicated legal staff utilized 'Active Listening' skills by asking them good questions and taking their preferences into account when making decisions. Thirteen percent of participants indicated that legal staff met with them privately to elicit their opinions in a safe environment. See Figure 6 and Table 13 for more information.

Figure 6. Engagement strategies – legal staff

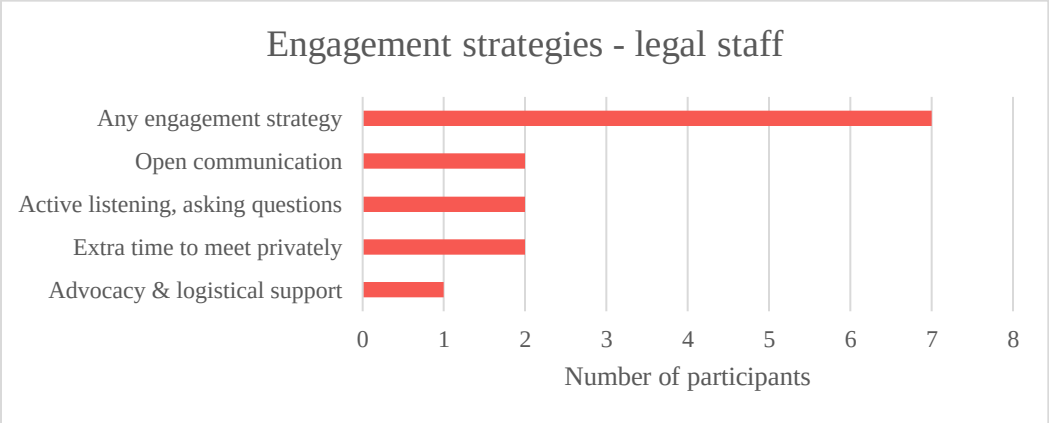


Table 13. Engagement strategies utilized by legal staff

Engagement strategy	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Any engagement strategy	Any of the below strategies.	7	47%	
Open communication	Clear, prompt, open communication and information sharing with youth about the details of their case and what is happening.	2	13%	*"My lawyer and he would tell me where things kind of were in a timeline. So just like, if this doesn't happen by this date, we're probably going to push more towards either guardian or staying longer in the foster care system. So things like that, I feel like he actually was more open to talking with me."*
Active listening, asking questions	Staff ask youth direct questions about their experiences and preferences, listen to what youth say and give weight to their preferences.	2	13%	*"I feel that my CASAs were just another person that would listen to me and so, every time I would need to talk to them about something, they'd be there for me."*

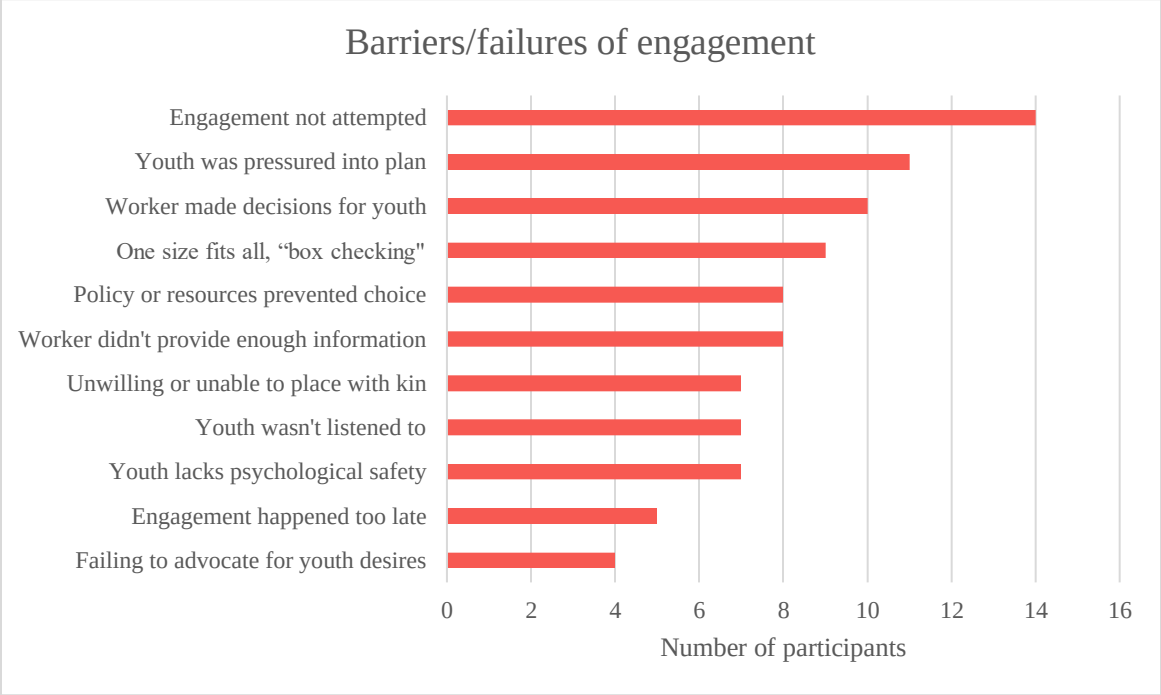
Engagement strategy	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Extra time to meet privately	Private interview with the judge, guardian ad litem, or CASA.	2	13%	*"Out whole termination hearing was actually insane. It was ridiculously long, and it was like days long and no one was agreeing and my birth parents were there acting a fool. So [the judge] finally just pulled us into her chambers and asked us our opinion a little bit. Well, my brothers told me what they wanted and I told her and I think that was when things really did change for us finally being heard, was when she gave us that voice."*

Engagement strategy	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Advocacy & logistical support	Legal staff ensure they have the resources they need to be successful.	1	7%	*"[My CASA] was really helpful in my transition to permanency. She got a registry going and she basically got everything I needed for my dorm to move in."*

Barriers to engagement

Throughout the course of their interviews, people with lived expertise were twice as likely to discuss barriers or failures of engagement than they were to discuss experiences of being engaged. All of the participants shared at least one experience in which they were not engaged by child welfare or legal staff. See Figure 7 for a summary of the most common barriers and failures of engagement reported in the sample, and Tables 14 and 15 for more detail about worker actions/inactions and systemic barriers, respectively.

Figure 7. Barriers to and failures of engagement



Worker actions & inactions

For 93% of participants, there was at least one instance in which staff made no attempt to engage them, and the participant did not specify why they think that may have been. Understandably, in many cases participants can only speculate about the reasons they were not engaged, but they provided information about how it felt to be overlooked. One participant explained, “My ad litems and all of them, they never talked with me and my brothers and asked us what we really wanted. I think what hurt me the most too with them is that, they didn't even know us and they were making decisions for our lives. So even if they would have just come and met with us, like the CASA workers do, I feel like that would've even made a difference.”

Nearly three-quarters of the participants (73%) felt that they were pressured into a permanency plan by their worker, legal staff, family members, and/or foster caregiver(s). One participant expressed, “I think [the plan] was kind of forced on us and then of course we're six

and my sister's seven or eight and I think we just kind of went along with it. And then there was times later where I feel like I didn't want to be with my mom. And at that point it was too late, no one else is asking me that or the decision's already done. So, no, I think it was definitely forced."

Just over two-thirds of participants (67%) provided an example of a time that workers made decisions on their behalf without consulting them. A common sentiment was "I just felt like things were just happening." In over half of the cases (53%), workers didn't provide youth with enough information for them to be meaningfully included in decision making or to understand their full situation. One participant expressed they would have been more understanding of their permanency outcome if workers had taken the time to explain what was happening, stating: "They didn't ever try to actually explain to me why they really wanted me to be adopted and what... I think I would've actually probably listened to them if they talk to me about how my birth dad really was."

Just under half of participants (47%) felt that staff didn't listen to them or care what they wanted, often prioritizing adult perspectives and preferences. One participant explained, "The meetings that we would have, I feel like they paid more attention to the foster parent because they're the adult and it seemed to me as if they're the ones that couldn't lie about something. So it was difficult trying to have somebody hear me out and express how I felt about a situation or about the way I'm even living." The same number of participants felt they lacked psychological safety with staff and/or foster caregivers, leading them to feel they couldn't be honest about what they really wanted for fear of the information backfiring or hurting a caregiver's feelings. It was especially difficult for youth to express what was going on in front of their caregivers when testifying in court or when social workers would check up on them at home. One participant explained, "I feel like I do remember being very scared to say anything that would potentially not lead me to having a family."

One-third of participants (33%) described situations in which engagement happened far too late for them to have any meaningful sway over the outcome. For example, attorneys not meeting with youth until five minutes before their hearing or waiting to discuss an independent living plan until six months before participants aged out of care. Over one-quarter of participants (27%) said that when they expressed a desire to their worker, they were rejected, or the worker failed to advocate for that preference. One participant explained, "[My brother] wasn't really near me. He was a couple hours away. And I still asked if I could have a visit or two with him, at least once a year or something. And they kept saying no on the fact that since he wasn't in care, that they can't really accommodate that." Other less common themes included workers being biased against the participant's parents or being unwilling to reunify; lacking knowledge of how to support LGBTQ youth; giving less time, attention, and respect to youth who were not considered to be "thriving" or who had disruptive behaviors; and racial/cultural insensitivity. See Table 14 for more information about ways that staff failed to engage with youth.

Table 14. Worker actions and inactions – failures to engage

Worker actions & inactions	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Engagement was not attempted	Participant indicates no attempt was made to engage them and does not speculate as to why.	14	93%	*"No one was really explaining to me what is supposed to be going on. I just know I'm supposed to show up here. I just know I'm supposed to do this, but no one's really explaining the why, and it really feels like I'm being penalized for what my family has done. I don't even understand exactly what my family has done."*

Worker actions & inactions	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Youth was pressured into plan	Participant indicates their worker, foster caregiver, family, etc. pressured them to move forward with a permanency plan rather than asking what they wanted.	11	73%	*"I felt pressured from everybody to be adopted, like everyone. My brothers, even [my counselor] all of them because, I mean, I was still holding onto my birth parents cleaning up their act. And I understood, they were trying to get me to understand that they never were. But they pressured me a lot to where, it made me want to not listen to them. So instead of understanding what they were saying, I was just like, 'You guys just want me to be adopted.'"*
Worker made decisions for youth	Participant indicates the worker operated "behind the scenes," making decisions without consulting them.	10	67%	*"They kind of already told me what was going to happen, rather than, 'Oh, okay. You about to be 18, and here's what's going to happen.' I'm like, 'Okay. I'm just trying to hang on, but okay.'"*

Worker actions & inactions	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Worker didn't provide enough information	Worker didn’t provide youth with enough information to make informed decisions about case.	8	53%	*“I didn't feel like I had any other options because they didn't tell me about anything else that could have been a possibility. So I think for that reason alone, I just felt like I had to say yes because I didn't know anything else. I wasn't told about anything else. So in my mind, it was either this option or you go through it all again.”*

Worker actions & inactions	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Youth wasn't listened to	Workers didn’t elicit youth perspectives and didn’t listen to them if they did provide input. In some cases, ageism played a role, with workers listening to adults rather than youth.	7	47%	*“One of the hugest times that they didn't listen to me was when I was in an abusive foster home. I was in there with my two little brothers… when she started abusing us, I tried to tell, but because of my behaviors, they didn't listen to me. And the only reason why I ended up getting removed from that house is because, the foster mom claimed that and it's literally in my files, where she claims that I'm not eating, but she was refusing to feed me and my older brother. That was her version of physical punishment because she couldn't physically hit us.”*

Worker actions & inactions	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Youth lacks psychological safety, feels they can't be honest	Participant didn't feel they could speak openly or honestly about their experience for fear of repercussions.	7	47%	*"I was young so I didn't really feel comfortable talking to them because you just think like, 'If I say something it's going to go back to the wrong person or they're going to take it the wrong way.' So I really didn't speak up."*
Engagement happened too late	Engagement happened to late for youth to impact the outcome.	5	33%	*"Why was the meeting happening two weeks before I aged out? My plan was kind of set in stone."*

Worker actions & inactions	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Failing to advocate for, rejecting youth desires	When youth expressed a desire, workers rejected their idea, worked against them, or failed to advocate for the preference in a meaningful way.	4	27%	*"He didn't really try to hear me out when I tried expressing my feelings towards trying to stay closer to home, especially because I was about like three months pregnant at the time. I was young, so it was like, to me, everything was new. I didn't know what it felt like to be a mom, let alone a single parent at the time. So being away from even my family, like my grandmother and my sister, was very difficult because when I wanted somebody to talk to, I couldn't because I didn't even have a phone because, I mean, obviously, I couldn't afford one."*
Worker didn't gather enough information	Worker didn't elicit information from youth and so made uninformed decisions about case or allowed harmful situations to continue.	3	20%	*"I think that they could have been more aware of situations that were going on."*

Worker actions & inactions	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Bias against family	Worker was biased against participants' parents, resisted reunification	2	13%	*"We were still in care for at least a year, but while my family are trying to get us out of care. I don't know what happened in the year that they had to prove. I know my mom was in rehab. That takes a while, but my dad, I don't know. Maybe they thought, "Why is this guy coming back?" You got to understand some of their biases is a part of the process."*

Worker actions & inactions	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
LGBTQ insensitivity	Workers lack awareness of how to support youth who come out as LGBTQ.	2	13%	*"I really think that they struggle to kind of probably get past a little bit of their own personal bias. In a sense, I feel like they could have found resources… I was 14 years old and I was coming out of the closet and facing bullying and discrimination and suicidal thoughts and all that kind of stuff. And so I just felt so alone and I really don't think that they were helping me in the way that they should have instead of just sending me to hospitals and putting me on medications and things like that. So they could have done their research and explored more."*

Worker actions & inactions	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Rejecting "non-compliant" youth	Workers give less time, attention, respect, and decision-making authority to youth who are "acting out."	2	13%	*"The youth that are seen as not thriving or problems or may have different kind of issues, they're not given the same respect, the same engagement and the same prioritization that somebody that doesn't have those issues and stuff."*
Racial/cultural insensitivity	Worker prevented youth from practicing their culture.	1	7%	*"I am Hispanic and I grew up speaking Spanish and because of the foster care system, the way it was back then, I was [not allowed] to speak Spanish because the staff didn't know what we were saying. So they told us we weren't allowed to speak Spanish, so I ended up actually losing my language."*

Systemic barriers

Thirteen participants described systemic barriers that prevented staff from effectively engaging with them. The most common barrier described was workers "going through the motions" and "checking the boxes" required by the child welfare agency and state and/or federal policy. Many participants expressed that, while they know this is "just a job" for workers, it's important for agencies to create conditions

under which workers have the time and latitude to be present with youth rather than focusing on paperwork and regulations. Many participants expressed feeling as though there was a standard plan that was applied to every family regardless of their unique situation. Similarly, just over half of participants (53%) described how agency and state/federal policies prevented them from having a real choice in their permanency outcome. Certain permanency choices did not allow participants to receive benefits they needed, and in many cases foster homes and needed resources were not available, so the participant did not have much to choose from.

Participants explained it was particularly challenging for their family members to "jump through the hoops" that the child welfare agency required in order to be a kin placement or to reunify. There were several instances in which the agency denied a kin placement because they claimed the caregiver was too old, but youth were later placed with foster caregivers who were even older than their denied family member. Family members were also often denied due to criminal history, and many participants did not know why their family members were denied as placements.

Other barriers included participants not being invited to meetings discussing their case and thus not having an opportunity to provide input; worker turnover, resulting in participants feeling as though workers didn't know them or what was best for them; lack of resources to support family preservation and reunification; prioritizing legal permanency in the quickest time frame possible without consideration for relational or cultural permanency; workers having too many cases to engage with youth; and the agency or court failing to include meaningful adults in decisions about the participant's plan. See Table 15 for more information about systemic barriers that prevented workers from meaningfully engaging participants in their own permanency planning.

Table 15. Systemic barriers that prevented authentic youth engagement

Systemic barriers	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Any systemic barrier	Any of the below systemic barriers.	13	87%	
One size fits all, "box checking"	Workers apply one standardized plan to every case and go through the motions to check off agency and state/federal requirements.	9	60%	*"It was just, 'Your mom's ready to get you guys back and wants to have you guys back,' and that's how the decision was made. I don't think it was anything more than checking a couple boxes, unfortunately, I think it was just, 'Oh, this is what's going to happen and now you guys are going back.'"*
Policy or resources prevented youth choice	Available resources and/or policies (foster homes, community services, benefit eligibility) prevented youth choice.	8	53%	*"I don't know if I would call it pressured but the whole, like I said, my aunt. We really didn't want to live with her but then with the kinship guardianship, I could get that scholarship. And that scholarship pays for everything. So that was a pretty big deal."*

Systemic barriers	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Agency unwilling or unable to place with kin	Agency policies regarding background checks, kin caregiver age, lack of procedures to place with family resulted in possible kin placements being rejected.	7	47%	*"I did, but [my family members] got turned down because of their history…I think there was one that had a misdemeanor if I remember correctly, one had a felony and those are the only two that I can remember."*
No opportunities for youth to contribute	Youth were not invited to meetings in which they could have shared their perspective.	3	20%	*"I would've appreciated being allowed to be at my staffings and stuff like that. Knowing what was going on, where my brothers were, where the case was. Because we were always wondering, and it was an exhausting feeling, knowing that everyone was making the decisions for your life."*

Systemic barriers	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Worker turnover	Youth express that having multiple workers made it difficult for workers to understand them and their case and their permanency outcomes suffered as a result.	3	20%	*"Living there for two years, we probably had five or six different case workers that came in and out and I would say right, that's attributed to the turnover, high turnover in these fields. And so it was almost like a case worker came in, they kind of learned about you and then boom, they were putting their two weeks in, dipping out. Peace. So I would say that was probably the big part of it."*

Systemic barriers	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Not prioritizing family preservation	Agency does not prioritize helping youth's parent(s) get the support they need to reunify.	3	20%	*"A lot of these things that they were asking of her to do, they weren't being sensitive to the situation of she just had a stroke, she can't do things like she used to and we already didn't have a lot of the certain resources before then. So to already put all of that on someone and expect them to do that and then call them an unfit mother when she just can't do it because of health reasons I saw as wrong. And I remember them telling me, we don't want you going back home because your mom should be taking care of you and you shouldn't have to take care of her. And that hit me because I was like, well, what if I was never in the foster care system? And I would've had to take care of her anyways, you know? …So I just think that they were just trying to pick reasons to say that it was unfit for me when in reality it was just a special situation."*

Systemic barriers	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Focus on legal permanency over relational and cultural permanency	Agency is focused solely on achieving a legal permanency outcome for youth in the shortest possible timeframe and doesn't consider other aspects of permanency such as relational and cultural connections.	2	13%	*"They listen to me whenever I would be like, "Well, I'm not going to even know these people." And so that's exactly what I'm saying, whenever like my treatment team were the ones saying, "Let them get to know these adoptive families slowly because they just lost their parents." But that they were like, "No, they need permanency." They didn't understand that, just being in a home is not enough."*
Worker lacks time to engage	Workers have large caseloads or work for agencies that are far away and don't have time to engage.	2	13%	*"I don't know that I was necessarily listened to or heard. I think that what so many children in care face is the fact that these social workers have very high volumes of caseloads. And so to them, we're really just a number I feel like."*

Systemic barriers	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Important adults not included in planning	Agency or court doesn't collaborate with every important stakeholder in the youth's life.	2	13%	*"[My CASA] had to make sure she was included because I feel like oftentimes they forget about the CASA worker and maybe other important adults in a youth's life. So she was there, but she had to make sure she was included."*

Negative outcomes

While participants were not specifically asked about negative outcomes resulting from not being engaged in their own permanency planning, nine participants spontaneously provided this information. Most participants expressed that not being included in planning or asked what they wanted caused trauma, dissociative episodes, or otherwise damaged their mental health. In many cases, not knowing what was going on and feeling disempowered led to participants engaging in "disruptive behaviors" which in some cases had long term negative impacts for participants, such as aging out without finding a family, or having their caregivers request they be moved elsewhere.

Many participants discussed being placed in homes that did not accept them or with caregivers who mistreated them, and when concerns were raised with their caseworker, they were dismissed, or quickly moved into another placement which also failed to meet their needs. Placement instability also resulted in educational instability for two participants who had to put school "on hold" while in care. Two participants expressed regret that they don't know anything about their culture, and two were disappointed they weren't able to have a

"normal childhood" as a result of being involved in foster care. Some participants also expressed disappointment that they didn't know their own rights while they were in the system, and that their lack of involvement in their own planning made it difficult for them to plan for their future after leaving care. See Table 16 for more information about negative outcomes resulting from non-engagement.

Table 16. Negative outcomes resulting from non-engagement

Outcome	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Damaged mental health	Youth express mental and/or emotional distress, trauma, etc. as a result of not being engaged while in foster care. Some experience lingering mental health effects.	7	47%	*"There was one visit that my brother showed up because we just didn't know that he wasn't allowed to be there and they told him he had to leave. So it was very weird to me as to why that was happening… they completely didn't want me to see them at all. And I just found that really weird and it just added more trauma to the situation, in my opinion."*
Multiple, harmful placements	Youth experienced placement instability of non-affirming placements as a result of not being asked what they wanted or needed.	6	40%	*"I had three social workers before her. The first one was not a good social worker at all. He put me into a home and they hid a lot of food from me. Other things that went on when I was living in that home that wasn't supposed to and he ignored it. So that was not good."*

Outcome	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Educational instability	Youth experience school instability as a result of not being meaningfully included in planning efforts.	2	13%	*"I moved out in October, so it was frustrating having to do with because my plan was to get myself settled into a daycare for my child where I was moving to. So everything was just rushed and I moved out within two weeks and I was trying to go to school and then still be able to find out who was going to take care of my child. So I did have to stop school for a little bit because I couldn't do that."*
Lack of connection to, knowledge of culture	Youth lose connection to their culture, including language, religious traditions, cultural identity, etc.	2	13%	*"I have a Hispanic last name, I look Hispanic, I'm not ashamed of being Hispanic. I just don't know much about the culture... At times like when the holidays come around, I don't really know about Three Kings Day. Just stuff that I feel like I should have been aware about when I was younger I just don't know about it. I do feel it could've been taught, but like I said, with resources I was limited."*

Outcome	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Lack of normalcy	Youth express feeling as though they couldn't have a normal childhood as a result of child welfare system involvement.	2	13%	*"I wish that I had a voice when I was younger…I really wish that I could have had a better childhood. I never played sports, I never got to play an instrument, I never took swimming lessons. Just all the things that people talk about, and it's just like, 'Wow, you did that? I never did that.' …I felt like I lost my childhood card just for the things that I had to do or I had to endure throughout my childhood."*
Youth unaware of their rights	Youth didn't know their rights while in system and were impacted by decisions that were made for them.	2	13%	*"Maybe I should just never [have been] adopted and got all those benefits, so that way I could have really committed to college and stuff."*
Unable to plan for future	Youth are forced to focus on meeting their basic needs and crisis planning as a result of not being prepared for permanency.	2	13%	*"School takes the back burner, friends take the back burner, everything future goals, take the back burn burner. Then when you're released out of care, you thinking it's going to be roses and daisies because you fantasized about this. Then you realize real life happens and it hits you freaking hard."*

*Nine participants provided information about negative outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The top recommendations for child welfare staff included 1. Communicate with and listen to youth, 2. Prepare and inform youth, 3. Build trusting relationships with youth, 4. Advocate for youth, and 5. Partner with youth and share decision making. The top recommendations for legal staff were 1. Increased empathy, 2. Active listening/questioning youth, 3. Encourage youth participation in court, 4. Spend adequate time with youth, and 5. Prepare youth for court. See below for a detailed description of each theme.

Child welfare staff

Communication & listening skills

All of the participants (N=15) discussed the importance of child welfare workers communicating with and actively listening to the youth they are serving. Participants stated workers need to really hear, understand, and retain the youth's responses. The participants recommended workers do what they can to understand the full context before trying to move into solutions. Participants recognized that the worker may have information the youth does not, and they wanted workers to know that the information that they get from other adults in the situation, such as foster caregivers or their parents, may differ from their own experience or understanding of the situation.

- "Understanding the situation a little more and just sitting down with us and really trying to figure out what was going on. I feel like it was a lot of hearsay and it would probably be like me telling someone something and then translating that to somebody else instead of them just asking me, hey, what happened? So I could tell them about how I was feeling, because things get lost in

miscommunication if you hear it from somebody that isn't the direct source."

- "Listen, always listen to the child from the beginning, day one… Try to be more involved in what the child wants to do or... Obviously some children are going to want to stay with their birth parents or whatever and that's not a good idea for the child. But just listening to them and what they want to do, I think, would make a big impact on the child. I feel like a lot of people don't really care."
- "I feel that workers could not jump to conclusions and hear out what the child is saying and not always go with what the caregiver is telling them."

In addition to active listening, participants stated that eliciting information from the youth is also critical in understanding the youth and what they want for their future. Participants described being asked early on what they wanted as a permanency outcome, but feeling unprepared to fully answer those questions. Due to this, participants recommended that child welfare workers have specific and intentional questions that will help the youth understand themselves and be in a better position to advocate for their own needs.

- "Actually thought-out and very intentional in the way that they ask the questions. Not that it's a question that they have to ask as a check box… actually have a whole hour conversation in a visit about it, and kind of helping me or the youth understand what do I need for them or how can they help them in support of their funding and permanency."
- "I think just asking people what they want, I think asking them and letting them know that their opinion is valuable maybe hitting on their interests, having the conversation somehow acknowledge who they are as a person…I think you have to really show them that you see them and just making things relatable for them."

- “Ask the right questions. And those questions should be formed by people with lived expertise or their insight, make sure they're appropriate questions.”
- “Are you just asking them the questions going down the line, asking them the questions that you need to ask them? Are you using their input and what they want? Are they happy? Literally asking them, are you fine with this decision? This is what's going to happen. Are you okay with that? And checking in with them through those months, because as I say, situations change.”

Additionally, participants described the importance of the workers then using that information to support the youth desired outcomes. Participants recommended that workers remain open to the desires of the youth and at the very least do not shut them down or try to manipulate them.

- “Talk to us and listen to what we're saying. Don't try to manipulate our words or be like, "Are you sure it's this? Or can you make this work?"”
- “I think just being asked and follow-ups, following up with them and continuing to let them speak and whether that's at a court hearing or directly to that parent, or to the person they're currently living with, I think just allowing them to speak and be heard and valuing their statements and valuing their opinions in the court.”

Participants recommended that child welfare workers be well versed in utilizing developmentally appropriate language with the youth they are serving. Participants recommended using basic language to describe situations to make things less complicated for the youth to understand, “break it down in layman’s terms.” Even if youth are young, participants expressed the importance of helping provide some understanding of the events.

- "I don't know because they thought we were too young that we couldn't comprehend if they broke it down to us what was happening to us."
- "Sometimes we feel like a child should stay in a child's place, of course. We don't want our children, our youth to grow up before their age. But they do need some transparency examples to get them started."

Lastly, participants recommended workers be attuned to nonverbal cues of the youth they are serving. Youth may feel afraid to answer questions, be anxious about the workers potential responses, or be disengaged from the conversation often due to a trauma response. In addition to the youth's nonverbal cues, workers also need to be aware of their own body language and what that may represent for the youth.

- "I would teach them to watch nonverbals cause nonverbals always display what we truly feel."
- "Being careful with their language and their body language because sometimes you may make a certain gesture and then you make the kid feel uncomfortable."

Prepare and inform

Effective communication involves preparing and informing youth to support decision making and youth engagement in planning. Participants (N=13) recommended that workers 'Prepare and Inform' youth consistently. Participants described a few ways workers could go about this. First, participants discussed the importance of youth understanding how to plan for the future, what resources may be available, and being informed about what decisions they will need to make and when. Participants recommended that workers support youth engagement in the planning process as early as possible because this will teach the youth how to problem solve and make

decisions when they are on their own. They caution workers not to wait until the youth is older to start having these conversations; rather, the workers should encourage life skill building and relational permanency to ensure the youth will have a stable adult in their adult life.

- "At least trying to understand, hearing them out and then like telling them why that's not an option. Why that wouldn't be a good thing for them, why that decision that they think is not a good decision. Treating them like, they are actually a part of all the decisions in their lives now. Because when I work with kids who are now aged out, they don't even know how to make decisions and because everyone's always made decisions for them."
- "Maybe later on in life this feeling might come up and if it does, this is where you can go because it's completely normal…. So I think just ways to make sure that if they do age out of the system or even if they don't, ways to prepare them for the future so they can be better acclimated into the world."
- "One thing that's very important is prepare youth for the real world. Meaning like once they're 18, when they're actually on their own."

In addition to preparing youth for adulthood, participants (N=13) recommended workers explain all permanency options to the youth. Participants also expressed the need to understand the implications of their permanency decisions. Having someone who knows all the options and can explain this to the youth is highly recommended. Participants wanted workers to be problem solvers with the youth and help them overcome barriers that may arise as well as prepare them for what to expect.

- "I think in order to make a decision, you have to be informed. I think you have to know of all the different options and what that's going to look like, so I think first and foremost, that's the most important thing, especially as an adolescent being aware of what the different options look like for their life in the long term saying,

"This is what could happen with this, or this is what this means for you."”

- “It does help having a youth have a mentor who has the lived and professional experience that guide them in their planning for adulthood, and in the sense that ensuring they have those conversations about what's going to happen as far as when they do age out. Or if they don't want to age out, what are other options that are available for them? Ensuring that they let them know that they can be as involved and engaged as they want to be. And that their team should support them in that choice.”
- “I feel like they need to know all their options they need to have. Especially between 17 and 18 when you're getting out of high school, I think they should have a plan like, "Now that you're 18, let's talk about post-secondary education. Whether that's going to be going to college, going to trade school or going straight into work. These are the requirements for each option. If you're going to go to trade school, you do this program. And if you still are struggling on of finding a job, let's get you into community college, you take a couple courses maybe in business or whatever you deem that you want to do, you could get your free housing.”

Lastly, in order to fully prepare and inform the youth they are serving, child welfare workers need to answer the questions that youth are asking. Participants described feeling frustrated or unheard when their questions went unanswered. Participants recommended that workers be prepared to answer questions that youth may have, even if they are difficult questions to answer, be transparent.

- “Talk to us more about what was happening. We had a lot of questions as far as when are we going to see our mom?”
- “I was asking questions like, why am I here, like all of those different things. I think it just really boils down to communication and answering the questions and talking with me.”

Build trusting relationships

Many participants described not having a trusting relationship with their worker. Participants (N=13) stated that building a trusting relationship with the youth was crucial to allow the youth to feel safe and able to share their true feelings and wishes. Participants recommended workers allow space to get to know the youth and letting the youth know who they are and to avoid rushing the process. Participants recommended workers make sure they are not treating the youth like a checklist. Participants also stated it is important for workers to be transparent and demonstrate their understanding of the youth's desires and opinions through action and reaction.

- "Creating a space for youth to be able to feel comfortable sharing what they're wanting, sharing their experiences, sharing what's going on in their mind. Sometimes they might be fearful, and I think that kind of establishing a sense of security in those spaces is really important."
- "[Youth] want someone who's going to actually listen and take their opinions. So I think, I would say that they need to let them slowly get to know them and then, start trying to make decisions with them and stuff like that, include them on all of that stuff."
- "It's a slow burn with foster kids, is how I feel like. You can't just rush it and you can't rush them. You need to let them observe you and get to know them. It takes time, but that's how they'll feel more comfortable."
- "I would say build more of a relationship with them. Don't force it, but at least try. Because I feel like I was able to be more open once I knew I had a social worker that I seemed genuinely cared."

One common theme that emerged through the interviews was the need for workers to interview youth one on one rather than expecting them to be fully transparent in front of caregivers and other adults who they may not know or fully trust. Participants expressed that they

would have felt a lot more comfortable if workers had taken them aside to check in with them rather than expecting them to speak out in the open.

- "I think that whenever me and my siblings went back to stay with our grandma, we lied to the GAL, the case worker, the CASAs and everyone and told them that everything was good even though it wasn't because we were scared. And so, I feel like just having that one-on-one time without that person scaring you or always being behind you to contradict what you're going to say next, would be a good thing to have. Just you and the case worker or you and the GAL or you and the CASA talking without the guardian or the parental figure there, because then you can tell them whatever is going on."
- "I feel like whenever she's talking to us or whenever she did talk to us, then she could have taken us to a different room or outside or something to talk."
- "I feel like a lot of the times kids are scared to speak up because the foster parent or whoever they are living with at the time is there. Maybe take the child, meet up after school, talk on the ride home and then you have another meeting with the parent, "This is some concerns, this is what the child was saying. I have some concerns about this. They're saying that they're sleeping here or whatever.""

Advocate for youth

Participants (N=12) discussed the need for workers to advocate for youth by teaching youth their rights, entitlements, and self-advocacy skills (N=9), linking them with services and resources (N=7), and advocating for their preferences with other stakeholders (N=4). Participants expressed unequivocally the desire for workers to coach them on how to advocate for themselves rather than having other adults speak for youth. Participants would have felt more empowered

if they had understood the rights afforded to them and if they had the knowledge and skills to speak up for what they wanted confidently.

- [Workers need] a bill of rights for foster children. So it's something that's actually written out that allows foster children to know what their rights are when it comes to their cases and how they can communicate and who they communicate with. So I feel like if I had something like that at that time in the system it would've been so helpful. To know that I do have a right to know what's going on in my cases, I have a right for my caseworker to answer my questions and things like that with also a list of different resources that can be outlined in that as well, just so they can be pointed towards specific things that can help them along this journey.
- I guess accountability is a huge thing to be able to say, hey, you can speak up for yourself and just someone that will advocate for them. And then also just... I don't know how this would really happen, but the tool to learn how to properly advocate for themselves. So whether that is communication skills in classes that they're in that just allow them to speak out and speak for themselves and against injustice that they see going on. But whenever you're traumatized, you feel like you can't say anything.
- I would want to at least have a training for youth, even, as well, so they're kind of aware on how to be your own advocate. And that's really the best way is... You can't advocate for others if you haven't advocated for yourself. And that's what I believe, is that you take care of yourself before you take care of others, because then down the road, you're going to have hiccup and it all will come back on you.

Coaching youth to advocate for themselves does not mean that workers sit back and force the youth to do all of the work – workers play a crucial role in ensuring youth feel empowered, sufficiently informed, and safe.

- Advocates. I think they need advocates for them to explain to them, to put it in their terms. Tell them what they should be looking for. To go to those meetings with them so they could debrief afterwards

Participants emphasized the importance of workers knowing about resources and being willing to do their research so that they could help youth get connected with whatever support they needed. Many youth felt their experience would have been better if they had had knowledge of and access to more supportive resources while in care.

- I think that resources should be put in place that are aimed towards progressing foster children. And if those resources are put in place, the foster children should know about them.
- It's all about doing the research, finding the resources and the support groups, because the very interesting thing was that I was at a hospital and they tried to get me to go to a support group that was PFLAG for parents and families with older people. And I said, "That's not a support group for teens who are struggling with being..." Not that I was struggling with being LGBTQ, I just didn't know anyone else and I felt so alone going through my own mental illness and just feeling worthless and things like that. And so I feel like they could have done more and they just didn't.

Partner with youth

Just under three-quarters of participants (73%) expressed the importance of workers sharing decision making power with youth. Not only did participants want to be at the table, they wanted to be meaningfully included and for their perspective to be heard and valued. Participants understood that it is not as simple as doing whatever the youth say they want. Participants wanted adults to hear what they were really saying and help them understand any safety concerns in a compassionate and respectful manner. If a particular plan was not possible, youth wanted workers to explain why and to

provide alternatives that still meet the youth's needs. Participants emphasized that the youth is the one who will live with the consequences of the decisions that are made, so they have a right to be at the table.

- Being able to be a party at the table I think is important, especially when it is your case and it is your life. At the end of the day, you do just want a family. And so you need to be included and you need to know the options and you need to know all the information. I think that it's important for kids in care to be a part of those conversations and to be able to make sure that their voice is heard.
- They should go in with that mind of you don't necessarily have to agree with everything, but you definitely have to make space for these kids and their ideas, and their thoughts, and their processes.
- Ensuring that the youth has as much of a voice and as equivalent as those on the team.
- Ensuring that youth are supported in planning for adulthood, that they're involved as much as they want to be involved, no questions asked. And I want to see youth are paid, actually, in being involved in their planning for their adulthood. That could be, as a start, a gift card or something.

Youth reiterated the importance of not only being present at team decision making meetings, but also having some say over how the meeting is run, who attends, and who speaks and in what order. In addition, one participant expressed they did not want youth to be brought in as a token participant when their presence was required or convenient for the adults.

- Not that the adults are less important in the meetings, but that the youth should have more say as far as in how the meeting happens or who goes first and whatnot. And I think the youth should have that right

- When they do facilitate these meetings… don't only involve youth in the times that they need youth… So if there was an incident happen with the youth at home or at school, so then the first half an hour, it's only them as a team without the youth. But then they involve the youth in the last half an hour. And I'm like, "So why aren't the youth involved in the whole meeting of the team?" That way, there's full accountability and transparency.

Empathy

Participants (N=10) wanted workers to show empathy for their situation and to consider what they might be going through. This was closely related to the 'Building Trusting Relationships' and 'Authenticity' themes. Participants felt workers could do more to make youth feel seen and understood.

- Just them being supportive in our decisions, not judging us. I think, one of the things where I really don't feel permanency with them is because, anytime I've made a mistake, they judged me off of it rather than realize I'm a human being and not only am I a human being, I'm someone who has trauma in their past and is learning.
- If you're going to do a residential, try to make it as homey as possible. Train your staff to be loving, to be understanding.
- We need people that look like the actual communities that they're representing and making decisions for. How are you make a decision on my behalf when you never walked a day in my life?
- When I was taken, I was taken from school at seventh period. My brothers were sitting in the back of a car. Do I have much of a say so now? Do you think I really want to talk to you now? Do you think I think you're going to listen to me now? No. All bets off the table. You just took me out of what I've known to make me adapt to something I don't. You basically treating me like I'm in jail.

Authenticity

Participants (N=9) also discussed the need for workers to show up in an authentic manner, stating that youth will see right through workers who are just there to do their job and not to help. Participants wanted workers to give them the whole truth without sugar coating, lying, or omitting information they think will upset youth. Participants wanted workers to show up as their whole selves and to share their own life experiences, even if they did not have lived experience in care.

- Well first, they have to not always be, "I'm your social worker." You don't got to always come to my house dressed up in a three piece suit and a briefcase. Just be calm. Calm, cool and collected. My social worker, like I said, we had a really good relationship. We connected. I felt like it was meant for me to be on her caseload. So I just feel like social worker, take your job serious but serious enough to the point where the child or youth's needs are being met in not such a by the book type of thing. I'm not just case number whatever, whatever.
- I think being straightforward and telling the kids what's happening and treating them like they are a part of the case is more important, especially if they're old enough to understand like teenagers and stuff.
- I think that you can easily say, well, that's not possible.

Flexibility

Just over half (53%) of participants discussed the need for workers to treat each case in an individualized manner rather than applying the same template or formula to every family. Participants wanted workers to take the time required to see all of the nuances of their situation and to consider creative solutions that would meet youths' needs. In addition, workers can consider alternative ways of engaging youth depending on what they need.

- In these permanency meetings, if you don't feel comfortable, you can ask for either I or someone else to sit in those meetings. If it's virtual, we can do it virtual. We can bring our phone or our laptop and sit and you know, we can mute it and be like, "Did you understand what they said?
- It’s going to look different for every youth. Foster care youths’ experiences are so complex and multi-layered, and they're just so different than the next foster youth. So what's going to work for one is not going to work for the other. And that's why social work is a hard profession to be in, you know? And I think it's attributed to why there's high turnover and stuff like that.

Consistency

Seven participants (47%) discussed the importance of workers being consistent and following up with them regularly. This was related to the concept of ‘Building Trusting Relationships’ – in order to build a trusting relationship, it’s important that youth know what to expect from the relationship. Consistent follow up would also allow workers to pick up on any changes in the situation that could impact permanency planning. Participants also described an element of consistency related to ‘Communication and Listening Skills’ – information should be consistently shared with youth and families when there are important updates about their case.

- Definitely having exercise built activities, just picking my brain to see exactly how is things in the home? How is things with visits? Where can we do better at assuring that you feel like your case is being seen? I didn't feel like I got any quality reassurance on that. That might be just agency protocols, but I feel like as a national base, you should be checking up daily on your clients to see how they're doing.
- And so having… those continued conversations every month, I would say a year before you're going to age out or a year before

you need to come up with your permanency plan, these conversations should be had with social workers, all the other supportive adults in the youth's life and engaging them and making sure they're there

- There needs to be consistency in making sure that information is getting out to foster children and their families as well.

Cultural humility and competency

Seven participants (47%) described the importance of workers being humble and culturally competent regarding race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, and foster care experience. Overall, youth desired significantly more engagement regarding their cultural needs, specifically when considering where they were placed. Participants wanted workers to ask them about what was important to them culturally. Workers also have a key role to play in training foster caregivers around important elements of the youth's culture so that the caregiver is better able to understand, support, and accept the youth in their care.

- Honestly, finding a good foster to home it's kind of tricky. I feel like does the race and stuff like that matters? I feel like it more so matters how adaptable the foster care family is. Are they willing to let you express yourself and things of that nature and maybe just making that more so of a thing to train them on.
- Yeah maybe ask our religion, or would we rather a Black home, or people who look like us. Taking consideration of just how we felt when we got into those places. That would've been helpful.
- I don't want them assuming that I'm a part of the LGBTQ community, so make sure that they not assume and ask. But also, have conversations if I'm willing at that time…. And kind of make sure [I] understand what it means as far as being part of the LGBTQ [community]

- I would train them on…race, class and gender. Those type of trainings because sometimes these little ethnic girls are placed with white people and they don't know how to maintain hair, they don't know how our bodies are shaped different, they don't know how to... Just teach especially young girls how to properly groom themselves and take care of themselves. So I feel like you've got to start from the ground up with a lot of caseworkers.

Support youth mental health

One important way participants wanted workers to 'Advocate for Youth' was by considering and supporting their mental health. Damaged mental health was the top negative outcome that participants (N=6) discussed as a result of not being engaged in their own permanency planning. Participants wanted workers to retrieve training on empathetic engagement, trauma-informed care, suicide prevention, and safety planning. One participant pointed out this sort of training is especially important for LGBTQ youth, as they are at higher risk of self-harm and suicide.

- not calling kids bad kids. I hate that so much, so much. When I'm training new staff, that is the main thing that I hit on. These kids are kids with trauma and pain and anger. And it may come out in ways that yours may not come out or they may take it out on you, so don't take it personal. But they are just because they do these things does not mean that they are bad children, they're hurt you and they deserve a chance regardless of their behaviors. Try and understand the reason behind the behavior before you decide that they're a bad child.
- I wish it was more mental health. More mental health workshops, self care workshop. I wish there was still ongoing support. Either way, regardless if you return home, you still disrupted a family. You know what I'm saying?

- work with the youth and the families and then two just have everybody have an understanding. Like I said, talk to the foster parents about how to work with traumatized kids.
- I would just train on emotional intelligence, I think that's really important for every human's life. And I feel like a lot of the times issues that we deal with is because we're not processing emotions properly, we don't know how to handle them effectively, and that's when they turn into those maladaptive coping mechanisms and effect people later in life.

Adolescent development

Five participants discussed the importance of workers considering youths' developmental stage and engaging with them in a developmentally appropriate manner. Participants also explained that adolescents are in a life stage where rebellion is expected, and thus they may not be model participants in planning activities. Participants also indicated that workers should be patient with youth as they may need more time to process what is being said. In some cases, workers may re-word explanations in a way that is more relevant to youth.

- Children need to be children, that's funny part. Children do not care about things like this. They care about if the girl down the hall likes them, if they're going to get the new sneakers that dropped. Are they going to get the new games? That's what children should care about, and that's what I feel like is so unfair that they don't get to care like. That's the thing that children needs is to be children. But unfortunately they don't get that.
- I would teach them to just take their time and be patient with kids, because they're not going to always open up immediately about how they're feeling or if they feel like it's the right decision or not. So, they might not put their opinion in, or just go with whatever everyone else is saying.

Self-awareness and reflection

One way that workers can engage authentically with youth is by practicing self-awareness and reflection. Participants expressed that they did not want workers to come in with biases, pre-conceived notions, and a false belief that they know what is best by virtue of being a caseworker. Participants wanted staff to take time to reflect on how they are showing up with youth and to challenge any biases they may have about a youth's situation. Participants also expressed a desire to be paired with social workers who have lived experience in foster care themselves, when possible.

- Listen, put your biases aside, understand trauma. Understand what's going on in the world, understand poverty, understand how that could affect the family. Just more understanding, and more open-mindedness, and adjustability.
- Maybe the social workers, some of them, because after all they are the ones that like, they're like our mentors in a way. And if you don't have the right one, then you won't feel, you'll be at a loss. You'll feel like the world is against you basically. And I feel like you should always have that comfort space. And there was one time where my social worker kind of hurted my feelings cause like she had attitude, but I also have to realize that people do have their own lives too, but they should still be able to switch between personal and work mode.
- Because a lot of case workers it's people that just go to school to get a bachelor's in social work and then get a master's and then think they know everything. This is what I learned in school and this is what I studied in the field but it's like... Not to say that every case worker needs to grow up in a system or know someone that grows up in a system, but just be more sensitive to the fact that you're dealing with kids that are disappointed and let down from the time they are born if you think about it, being neglected.

See Figure 8 and Table 17 for a summary of participants' recommendations for training the child welfare workforce.

Figure 8. Recommendations for child welfare staff

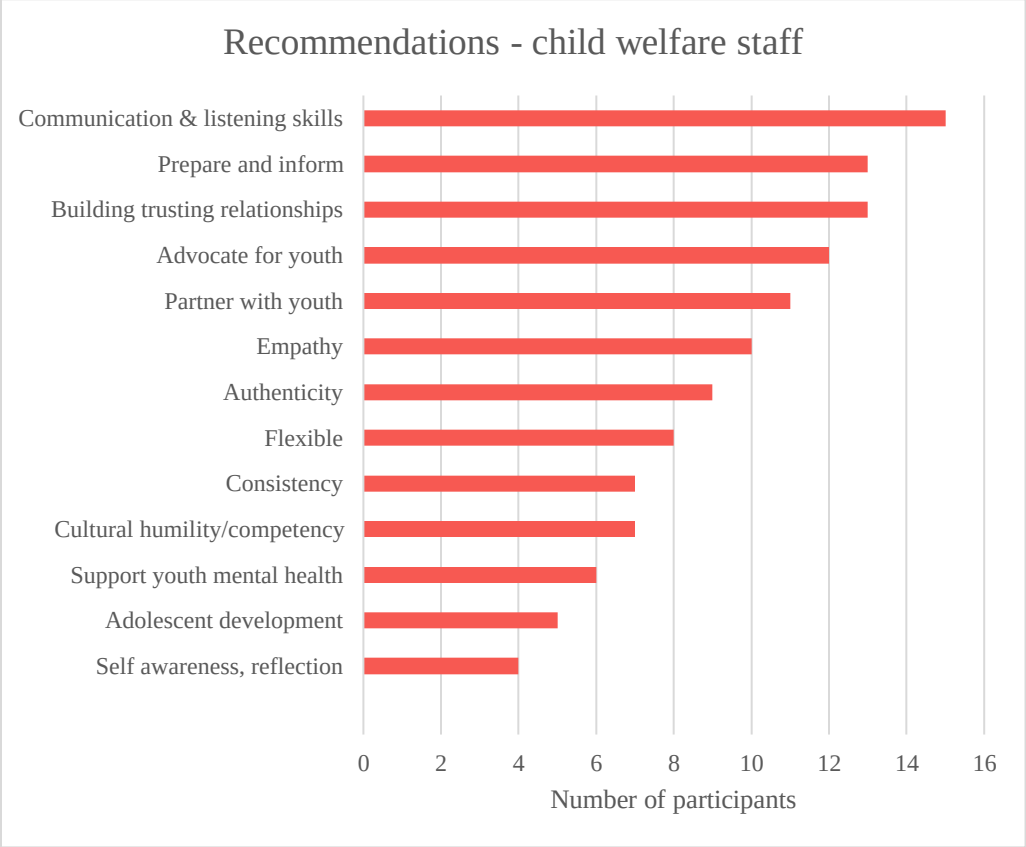


Table 17. Recommendations for child welfare staff – training & practice

Recommendations for child welfare staff	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Communication & listening skills	Staff have open and transparent communication with youth and actively seek youth perspective. Provide up to date information pertinent to youth in a way they can understand. Workers are trained to hear what is not being said and to look out for "red flags" that something is wrong.	15	100 %	"Are you just asking them the questions going down the line, asking them the questions that you need to ask them? Are you using their input and what they want? Are they happy? Literally asking them, are you fine with this decision? This is what's going to happen. Are you okay with that? And checking in with them through those months, because as I say, situations change."

Recommendations for child welfare staff	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Prepare and inform	Staff provide youth with information to support informed decision making and prepare youth to engage in planning. Staff help youth understand what is coming up so that they can prepare and make informed decisions, lay out youth's options and describe each one in detail, and are available to answer questions.	13	87%	"I think in order to make a decision, you have to be informed. I think you have to know of all the different options and what that's going to look like, so I think…that's the most important thing, especially as an adolescent being aware of what the different options look like for their life in the long term saying, "This is what could happen with this, or this is what this means for you."

Recommendations for child welfare staff	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Building trusting relationships	Staff take time to build trusting and meaningful relationships with youth as a first step to working together. Workers do not rush any part of the permanency process and move at a pace that is comfortable for youth. Worker talks with youth one on one in an environment in which the youth feels safe. Engagement is authentic.	13	87%	"Trying to build an actual genuine relationship with the youth because…You know they're just getting paid and doing their job… But I would say build more of a relationship with them. Don't force it, but at least try. Because I feel like I was able to be more open once I knew I had a social worker that I seemed genuinely cared."

Recommendations for child welfare staff	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Advocate for youth	Staff act as an advocate for the youth, making their desires a reality, and connecting youth to resources in the community. Workers teach youth how to advocate for themselves and inform youth of all of the rights and benefits afforded to them in the child welfare system.	12	80%	"Advocates. I think they need advocates for them to explain to them, to put it in their terms. Tell them what they should be looking for. To go to those meetings with them so they could debrief afterwards"

Recommendations for child welfare staff	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Partner with youth	Staff and youth make decisions as a team. Each party can make suggestions and decisions and the contribution of each is valued. Youth are able to attend team decision making meetings, and are equal members of the team.	11	73%	"I think of that kind of similar to the power-sharing model. So I think that the workers should ask people if they want to be as involved as they want to be in the meeting. And what I mean as involved, that if a youth feels empowered and supported by their team, that they co-facilitate a meeting. And that is really how you show you can really engage authentically with the youth in their planning for adulthood."

Recommendations for child welfare staff	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Empathy	Workers are empathetic and try to put themselves in the shoes of youth and families. Workers express compassion and care towards youth.	10	67%	"I guess just acknowledge what I'm already going through and just how difficult that is. So, I mean, just seeing that my brother being there wasn't this horrible thing and that it was actually super helpful that he did show up. So just humanizing the situation rather than I guess seeing it as while it is a job, but seeing it as more than just a job and sticking by the book, realizing that I'm a human and this is a very difficult situation."

Recommendations for child welfare staff	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Authenticity	Staff show up as their whole self and relate to youth in an honest, compassionate, and genuine manner.	9	60%	"I definitely feel like they should include them in a sense of just being real, being as transparent as possible. Not giving them false hope. Not lying to them. It's simple."
Flexibility	Staff are flexible and adaptive rather than following rigid rules or having set expectations for how things must go. Outside of the box thinking. Create individualized service plans.	8	53%	"Knowing that each struggle looks different. Because, what one family may need, another family may not. It's not a one size fits all type of regimen… Definitely just training them on different struggles and understanding that one family system won't fit another family system."

Recommendations for child welfare staff	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Consistency	Staff regularly check up on youth and are consistently available for youth.	7	47%	"Showing up, listening and following through, following up and following through with whatever it says, because just so often times than not people think they're engaging the youth and they're asking them all these questions and stuff and there's no follow. And so then the youth is left feeling like, "All right, I just got interviewed and nothing's going to come out of this." I feel like it disengages the youth because then they're less likely to talk to you. They're less likely to share their ideas if you're not following through, following up with what you're saying you're going to

				do. So listening, following up, asking questions and following through with what you say you're going to do and how that information's going to be used."
Cultural humility or competency	Staff are able to engage with youth from a diverse set of backgrounds and understand how to continually reflect and take action to address biases. Staff are educated about LGBTQ youth.	7	47%	"A lot of times I feel like, in my community, my brown and black community, we look at them as fear because we don't feel like we can turn to them for help. We feel like they're going to judge us. They don't understand the struggle, so why turn to them? They don't know what my help look like. They're just going to show me what their help look like, and what their help look like is not helpful."

Recommendations for child welfare staff	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Support youth mental health	Workers consider ways to support youth's mental wellbeing and engage in trauma-informed care, suicide prevention, and safety planning	6	40%	"The teenagers would very much benefit from having some of the training that staff do. Like trauma informed care and just like a few like normalcy, like a few of those. And I say that because, having the training myself, it makes me so much more self aware of all my behaviors. Like, whenever I was a teenager, I hated acting up, I hated how angry I got. I hated how like, mean that I was and how just completely angry and hurt and depressed that I was, and I didn't understand it. And I think that youth now, if they have the trainings that I do, they would be able to start understanding themselves and be able to heal more and be more like, self-aware."

Recommendations for child welfare staff	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Adolescent development	Workers understand the adolescent development stage and are able to relate with people in this life stage. Use developmentally appropriate language.	5	33%	"I think asking them and letting them know that their opinion is valuable maybe hitting on their interests, having the conversation somehow acknowledge who they are as a person, whether it's just acknowledging them for who they are and I don't know, I think that's really important with adolescents. I think you have to really show them that you see them and just making things relatable for them, I think that's kind of what can grab somebody and embrace them from work experience as well."

Recommendations for child welfare staff	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Self-awareness, reflection	Staff have personal awareness of their own biases, values, and idiosyncrasies. Able to reflect on positionality and how the partnership is going.	4	27%	"Listen, put your biases aside, understand trauma. Understand what's going on in the world, understand poverty, understand how that could affect the family. Just more understanding, and more open-mindedness, and adjustability."

Legal staff

Participants' recommendations for legal staff revolved around the need for attorneys and judges to have more time to slow down and see children as people, not cases, and to ask youth direct questions in safe, private settings.

Empathy

60% of participants recommended that legal staff be more empathetic and understanding of their situation. Attending a court hearing was a very stressful experience for participants, as they often did not know what was happening and were forced to speak poorly about family members who they cared about. One participant explained how court can feel for youth: "And so then how does the youth feel? They're sitting there like, 'All these people are making these decisions on my

behalf and not even asking me what I want because they're not even talking to me.'"

Participants wanted legal staff to see them as people who are doing their best, not "just another number." One participant recommended teaching legal staff "basic courses on empathy and engaging with the youth that are there talking to them and not acting like we're just trying to pump them in and out. I got 30 cases to see today and it may be like that, but don't make it look like that." Another participant recommended that staff ask questions in a more considerate manner, stating:

"It just goes back to them not really putting themselves in my shoes and thinking what's the best way to go about this rather than having [me] bash [my] mom who [I care] about in front of her…? You know? So I understand that at the end of the day they were concerned about my safety, but I just definitely feel like there was a different way to go about a lot of the setup and the way that questions were formed and things along that line."

Active listening, asking questions

Just under half of participants (47%) recommended that legal staff be trained in listening to youth and asking them good questions. One participant wrote, "Just let the kids... Listen to them, let them have a voice. And I think that's just one of the most important things and being supportive in them. Or if you really do think that their decision is wrong, explain it to them, treat them like a person." Participants also emphasized the importance of giving weight to youth perspectives and not treating their voice as less important than adult voices: "Not just taking one person's word for it or that the social worker's word is more valuable than the parents or more valuable than the kids."

Encourage youth participation in court

One-third of participants (33%) recommended that legal staff do what they can to make the court environment more welcoming, comforting, and inclusive for youth. Strategies included having stuffed animals available for younger children, or directly addressing youth in the courtroom in a welcoming manner. One participant recommended that judges:

Make sure that they address the youth and sometimes maybe before even getting into what the hearing is about that day or what the meeting is about and just kind of talking to them and being more personal about it. And I get a lot of judges see a lot of kids, but it shouldn't just be, a child shouldn't or youth should not feel like they're just another case on your workload or another case on your docket.

Another participant recommended that staff be compassionate as a strategy to encourage them to feel safe and open up in court: "I would say just to have open arms and make a young person feel comfortable because 9 times out of 10, they're probably trying to hold it together with whatever they're going through."

Spend adequate time with youth, prepare youth for court

Over one-quarter of participants (27%) recommended that legal staff spend adequate time with youth. Some participants recommended that legal staff meet privately with youth so that they feel more comfortable speaking openly about their experiences. Twenty percent of participants also discussed the importance of staff meeting with them in advance of their court date to help them prepare. See Figure 8 and Table 18 for more information.

Figure 8. Recommendations for legal staff

Table 18. Recommendations for legal staff – training and practice

Suggestions for legal staff	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Empathy	Staff put themselves in youths' shoes and try to understand what they are going through. Don't treat youth as "just another number."	9	60%	"Empathy is a huge thing…a lot of people focus on the job rather than the person. So I think with cases where you're dealing with a human life, it is super important to know how to be at least sympathetic. But if you can, to be able to empathize with them and just put yourself in their situation to make the decision that yes it is the safest, but also considering what they want at the same time."

Suggestions for legal staff	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Active listening, asking questions	Staff ask youth direct questions about their experiences and preferences, listen to what youth say and give weight to their preferences.	7	47%	"I want every judge who presides in the court hearing, they have a set of questions they're asked of that they're required of asking, because most times the judges only ask questions about the adult in the room and not necessarily the youth. And so really, the youth are then left out of the conversation, especially if it's all around them. So I think I'll make sure that there's a set of questions that are made for the judges."
Encourage youth participation in court	Workers encourage youth to attend and participate in court hearings and create a youth-friendly court environment.	5	33%	"I know they have little stuffed animals for the little kids. I don't know. It feels so formal and scary and not welcoming. You just feel like something bad is going to happen. At least for me that's what I felt."

Suggestions for legal staff	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Spend adequate time with youth	Provide adequate time to meet with youth. Organize private interviews with the judge, guardian ad litem, or CASA.	4	27%	"I never went to court, but I'm sure the children would have to be up there on the stand in front of everyone. The children or the child is not going to say what they need or want to say necessarily if their parents or whoever they're staying with is sitting right there. They're going to feel pressured. So I feel like it would need to be one-on-one with the judge, if it's not that way already. I don't know if it is or not, but... Because I know if my sister had to go up there and talk about like, "Hey, I don't want to live with her anymore." And then she had to go home with her, there's no way she could have done that."

Suggestions for legal staff	Definition	Number of participants	% of total N	Representative quote
Prepare youth for court	Legal staff ensure youth are adequately prepared for court and understand what is going to happen and what their role is. Meet with youth in advance.	3	20%	"Attorneys. I know that their cases are higher, are high or the same as the case worker. But seeing if they can actually have more quality time with the client, rather than having them... They meet the client five minutes before court hearing. And ensuring that the attorney or the CASA or GAL has adequate time in asking the youth, how can they help them in a court hearing? Or what do they want happen in the court hearing?"

DISCUSSION

Summary

Youth definitions of permanency focused primarily on the emotional benefits of permanency rather than legal permanency. For people with lived expertise, cultural and especially relational permanency were more highly valued than their legal permanency outcome. However, more people with lived expertise in our sample were engaged around legal permanency than relational and cultural permanency. Unfortunately, three times as many participants shared that staff failed to help them plan for cultural permanency compared with the number of participants who indicated that staff engaged them around cultural permanency.

For youth who age out without a legal permanency plan, it could be useful to create alternate permanency plans that help youth formalize relationships with adults in their life that youth can turn to for advice as they grow older and seek answers to common questions, such as: "How do I find a decent job? How to I apply for school? Where can I get emotional support when in crisis? Where do I go for the holidays?" One promising intervention which may support relational permanency is called a Permanency Pact, developed by FosterClub (2006), which workers can use as a resource guide to help youth make connections with supportive adults.

Participants were more often engaged by child welfare staff, such as their caseworker, than legal staff, such as their attorney or guardian ad litem. Child welfare staff were most likely to utilize the following

strategies to engage participants: 1. Prepare and Inform, 2. Communication & Listening Skills, 3. Advocate for Youth, and 4. Partner with Youth. Though less frequent, when legal staff engaged youth, they utilized the following strategies roughly equally: 1. Open Communication, 2. Active Listening, and 3. Private Meetings.

The most common experiences of non-engagement included the worker pressuring the participant into a permanency plan, making decisions on behalf of the participant, and not providing enough information for the participant to make informed decisions. The most common systemic barrier that participants identified was the culture of "box checking" in child welfare, in which workers are focused solely on meeting the bare minimum legal and policy standards without taking the time to be present with youth and meaningfully engage with them.

Top recommendations for child welfare staff included: 1. Communication and listening skills, 2. Prepare and inform, 3. Building trusting relationships, 4. Advocate for youth, and 5. Partner with youth. It is encouraging that staff were already using all but one of these strategies when engaging with youth in practice. 'Building Trusting Relationships' was a major growth area – few people with lived expertise reported having trusting relationships with their caseworkers, and this was a top recommendation for how workers could better engage youth.

Top recommendations for legal staff included: 1. Empathy, 2. Active listening/questioning, 3. Encourage youth participation in court, 4. Spend adequate time with youth, and 5. Prepare youth for court. In practice, legal staff were rarely using these strategies. Empathy was especially missing – people with lived expertise felt they didn't know their legal representatives, and that often when legal staff talked with them, they lacked understanding of or care for their situation. It is important for legal staff to move beyond basic case updates and try to get to know youth and express understanding, empathy, and a genuine desire to hear their perspective.

Comparison to systematic literature review

Wollen and colleagues (2022) conducted a systematic literature review of the essential competencies and characteristics of child welfare staff, which yielded the following competencies most frequently: 1. Partner with youth, 2. Communication and listening skills, 3. Building trusting relationships, 4. Strength-based approach, and 5. Prepare and inform youth. Many of these themes align with the recommendations people with lived expertise provided: 'Communication and Listening Skills' and 'Building Trusting Relationships' were frequently mentioned themes in both the interviews with people with lived expertise and the systematic review. It is crucially important that staff have the time and training required to engage with youth authentically, build trusting relationships with youth, and thus create an environment in which staff and youth can have open and honest conversations about important topics related to permanency.

Interestingly, people with lived expertise brought up concepts related to 'Partner with Youth,' such as shared decision making and power sharing, less frequently than was mentioned in the literature. Instead, people with lived expertise emphasized the need for staff to 'Prepare and Inform' them to participate meaningfully in decision making, for example by providing and explaining a list of permanency options and the implications of each decision. While 'Prepare and Inform' was a less frequent theme in the literature review, given its prominence in the interviews with people with lived expertise, it is possible this is a key leverage point which could enhance youth engagement in permanency planning.

People with lived expertise also talked about the need for workers to 'Advocate for Youth' more often in their interviews than was brought up in the literature. This set of people with lived expertise felt that a key barrier to engagement in permanency planning and getting a desirable outcome was that they did not know the rights and entitlements afforded to them through system involvement. Through

preparing and informing youth of these benefits, providing referral to needed services and resources, and teaching youth to advocate for themselves, many people with lived expertise felt they would have had a more desirable outcome.

Comparison to workforce interviews

A series of 15 interviews were conducted with workforce professionals one month prior to the interviews with people with lived expertise (Vanderwill et al., 2022). In the interviews with people with lived expertise and the interviews with workforce professionals, it was abundantly clear that planning for cultural permanency is not part of workers' standard practice. Workers did not know what questions they should be asking youth, and didn't feel they had the resources or skills to help youth if they did elicit information about important aspects of their culture. People with lived expertise corroborated this experience, with just three participants discussing instances in which workers supported their cultural continuity.

A primary theme of the workforce interviews was lack of time and unmanageable caseloads. People with lived expertise extensively discussed the culture of "box checking" among child welfare workers, which is likely in part due to workers' lack of time to meaningfully engage youth. Hiring more workers and reducing caseloads is a crucial intervention that would allow workers to know what they "should" be doing – building trusting relationships and having open, honest conversations with youth about what they want their lives to look like.

Overall recommendations for training and coaching

There were two major recommendations that were frequently mentioned across the literature review, workforce interviews, and interviews with people with lived expertise for training and coaching: 'Build Trusting Relationships' and 'Prepare and Inform Youth.' Given

their prominence, these could be essential leverage points to shift the culture and mindset of the child welfare workforce.

Building trusting relationships with youth can be especially challenging for child welfare and legal staff because it requires taking time to get to know youth and check in with them consistently about how they are doing. The child welfare workforce is chronically starved for time, with caseloads that often force workers to prioritize their workload and do the bare minimum needed for each case. Overworked caseworkers and legal staff are unlikely to have the energy and time required to build trusting relationships with youth, and this trend is exacerbated when workers leave the agency and youth are forced to start all over again with a new worker who doesn't know them or their story. While workforce training could offer strategies and techniques to build relationships with youth despite their working conditions, such as by meeting with youth privately, having outings in fun or casual settings, etc., it is also important to change the conditions that force workers to spend inadequate time with the youth on their caseload.

The second recommendation that came up frequently was 'Prepare and Inform Youth.' People with lived expertise in the child welfare system, as well as workers, researchers, and practice professionals agree that youth need information about their case, the permanency planning process, and their options in order to make informed decisions and meaningfully participate in planning. In some ways, this could be a more immediately actionable strategy than 'Building Trusting Relationships,' as it is possible to develop resource guides that provide developmentally appropriate information about different permanency options, as well as the implications of each decision for the youth's legal relationships, benefits, and entitlements. Tools could also be developed to help youth think about and make decisions about important areas of their lives.

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APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

For Former Youth in Care

Demographics:
Date of interview:
Interviewer:
At what age did you exit care:
What state(s) did you live in when you were in foster care:
What was your legal permanency outcome:
Current age:

Survey Questions:
*Interviewer: Please simplify questions as needed.

1. Is there at least one adult in your life that you can rely on?
    a. How did you get connected to this adult?

1. How were you involved in decision-making about your life and future? Did you feel listened to and respected?

3. What does permanency mean to you?

1. Who talked to you about your permanency options?
    a. What did they do to help you understand what permanency meant and the options available to you?
    a. What could they have done better to help you understand these options?

1. How did child welfare staff include your race, culture, sexual orientation, gender identity, and religion in your permanency planning?
    a. What could they have done better?

1. How did the system/staff help you maintain relationships with your siblings, extended family, friends?
    a. Are there other people who were important in your life that you wish you had stayed connected to?
    a. What could staff have done to keep those connections?

1. Did you ever attend a court hearing, permanency roundtable, case review meeting, or other meeting related to your permanency plan?
    a. If yes,
        - Which meetings and how were you a part of the discussion?
        - Did the adults in the room treat you like you were a real part of the team? If so, how?
        - What could they have done to ensure your voice was heard and that you were part of the decision-making process?

a. If no,
   - Was it your choice not to attend?
   - Why did you not attend (were there barriers related to school, transportation, mental or emotional health, etc.)?

1. Do you think being at any of these meetings could have or did help you achieve legal, relational, or cultural permanency? How?

1. How did staff (outside of your lawyer, CASA, GAL) work with you on your permanency plan? How much did they include you in making the plan happen?
   a. What did they do right?
   a. What did they do wrong?
   a. What could they have done better?

1. How did your legal representative (lawyer, CASA, GAL) work with you on your permanency plan? How much did they include you in making the plan happen?
   a. What did they do right?
   a. What did they do wrong?
   a. What could they have done better?

1. Did you get the permanency outcome you wanted (legal or relational)?
   a. If you had the permanency outcome you wanted, what contributed to that?
   a. If you did not have the permanency outcome you wanted, what were the barriers?

12. If you achieved legal permanency, how did staff prepare you for it?
    a. If you were reunified with your birth parents, how were you involved?

13. Did you ever suggest adults/family members as legal or relational permanency options that weren't considered?
    a. What were the reasons you were given?
    a. Was any work done to overcome the barriers?

14. Did you ever feel pressured to accept a permanency option?
    a. What made you feel pressured?

15. If you had concerns about legal permanency did anyone support you?
    a. What did they do that helped?
    a. What could they have done?

16. How can workers authentically engage youth in shared decision-making?

17. What (systemic) changes do you think need to be made so that youth will be authentically engaged?

18. If you were training child welfare staff about how to authentically engage children and youth, especially related to permanency, what would you teach them?

19. What would you like judges and court staff (CASA, GAL, child's attorney) to be trained on to improve the way they authentically engage children and youth?

20. What do children and youth need to prepare them to be authentically engaged and involved in shared decision making about permanency (training, mentorship, honesty, etc.)?

21. What have we missed? What else should I know about the engagement of children/youth in decision-making about their life and future?