



**QUALITY IMPROVEMENT CENTER**  
ON ENGAGING YOUTH IN  
FINDING PERMANENCY

# BARRIERS TO AUTHENTIC YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN PERMANENCY PLANNING

**Sierra Wollen**  
**Lori Vanderwill**  
**Clark Peters**  
**Angelique Day**



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 children and youth in the child welfare system throughout the United States are authentically engaged in finding permanence. It is expected that the work of the QIC-EY will bring about systemic changes in how children and youth are authentically engaged as reflected in intentional policy, practice, and culture shifts in the pilot sites. We believe ensuring that children and youth in care are authentically engaged, particularly as it relates to permanency, requires a paradigm shift in how the child welfare system understands and views their involvement in decision-making.

Interviews were conducted with 15 people with recent lived expertise in the child welfare system (Wollen et al., 2022), 15 child welfare professionals (Vanderwill et al., 2022), and 11 court professionals (Peters & Vesneski, 2022). In addition, the QIC-EY Youth Engagement Advisory Council compiled a report of the most common barriers council members with lived expertise had experienced while in care (Gagnon & Santiago, 2022). These groups are referred to collectively as “stakeholders” throughout. Researchers conducted

a qualitative analysis of these four reports, which identified the following barriers to authentic children and youth engagement:

1. Time constraints, worker turnover
2. Policy, laws, or regulations
3. Lack of resources or training
4. Youth lacks psychological safety
5. Worker bias
6. Youth not prepared or informed
7. Workers don't listen to youth
8. Workers and adults retain power

Across all the interviews, the most common barrier to youth engagement was a combination of time constraints, staffing challenges, and legal regulations. Child welfare is an under-resourced field, and overloaded caseworkers report they rarely have the time required to build trusting relationships, elicit information from the child or youth, and advocate for their preferences. People with lived expertise shared that they often felt pressured to accept a "one-size-fits-all" plan developed by their worker because it was presented to them as the only option. All stakeholders explained that child welfare and court professionals often lack training, resources, and scaffolding to teach them how to engage with children and youth and support their relational and cultural permanency in practice.

All of the stakeholder groups expressed a sense of disempowerment. People with lived expertise shared feeling like they had no control over the outcome of their case. Workers felt a similar sense of disempowerment due to federal, state, and agency policies, as well as large caseloads, resulting in limited time and ability to do the "fun" parts of the job and meaningfully engage with children and youth. Court professionals struggled to think of tangible ways to make court a child and youth-friendly space where children and youth feel comfortable sharing their story in an empowered manner. It is the research team's hope that addressing the identified barriers may result in an enhanced perception of voice and choice among children and youth, child welfare staff, and legal staff.

# 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 & 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 children and youth engagement models in the pilot sites and help the sites to make systemic changes necessary for children and youth engagement. The QIC-EY will also develop a training/coaching model for the workforce that focuses on learning skills necessary for authentic children and youth engagement. This training/coaching model will be piloted in the sites, refined as needed, 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 children and 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. It is expected that the work of the QIC-EY will bring about systemic changes in how children and youth are authentically engaged as reflected in intentional policy, practice,

and culture shifts in the pilot sites. We believe ensuring that children and youth in care are authentically engaged, particularly as it relates to permanency, requires a paradigm shift in how the child welfare system understands and views their involvement in decision-making.

# INTRODUCTION

Despite the child welfare system's focus on legal permanency, many youth exit 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). Child welfare agencies also benefit from engaging youth in services through the creation of more effective and relevant policies, programs and services, and improved relationships and understanding between staff and youth (Walker, Seibel, & Jackson, 2017). 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).

To understand the most salient barriers to implementing authentic youth engagement in a child welfare context, several stakeholder groups were asked to share their personal experiences with authentic engagement, as well as the barriers they perceived to implementing authentic youth engagement in their work. Interviews were conducted with 15 people with recent lived expertise in the child welfare system (Wollen et al., 2022), 15 child welfare professionals (Vanderwill et al., 2022), and 11 court professionals (Peters & Vesneski, 2022) between February-May 2022. In

addition, the QIC-EY Youth Engagement Advisory Council compiled a report of the most common barriers council members with lived expertise had experienced while in care (Gagnon & Santiago, 2022). This report provides a qualitative analysis of these four reports to summarize and define the main barriers identified by each stakeholder group.

# METHODOLOGY

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This report is intended to answer the following questions:

- What are the main barriers to authentic children and youth engagement that people with lived expertise, child welfare workforce professionals, and court professionals identified?
- How do the different stakeholder groups conceptualize the barriers?
- What are some possible solutions to alleviate or work around the identified barriers?

## THEME AND SUBTHEME CODING

To extract themes from the reports, the author 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 researcher familiarized themselves with the data. Preliminary themes were scanned for based on the barriers that were identified in each of the four original reports. The preliminary themes and their definitions created the initial framework for review.

Second, upon reviewing the reports, the reviewer had the freedom to adjust, expand, and further define codes if they contained information that was distinctly different from the preliminary themes. The coding framework was adjusted in an iterative process as the reviewers scanned the reports.

Third, researchers coded the reports in accordance with the pre-determined themes. Reports were coded in a hit-or-miss fashion, meaning that if the barrier appeared at all in the report, it was coded as present in that report, regardless of its salience compared to other themes. The researcher continued to expand or modify theme definitions when the existing categories did not sufficiently represent the material. The researcher then summarized the themes and frameworks provided in the data and interpreted the results.

## **SAMPLE DESCRIPTION**

The sample included four reports which summarized the experiences of various stakeholder groups. Interviews were conducted with 15 people with recent lived expertise in foster care (Wollen et al., 2022), 15 child welfare professionals (Vanderwill et al., 2022), and 10 court professionals (Peters & Vesneski, 2022). In addition, the QIC-EY Youth Engagement Advisory Council compiled a report of the most common barriers council members with lived expertise had experienced while in care.

Fifteen people with lived expertise participated in interviews between February 8th-March 29th, 2022. 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). 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. Participants represented nine unique states. The states with the most participants were Alabama (three participants) and Missouri (three participants), followed by California (two participants).

Fifteen workforce professionals participated in interviews between February 2<sup>nd</sup>-February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022. Participants worked in a total of nine states: Indiana (n=3), Michigan (n=2), Alabama (n=2), Nebraska (n=2), Pennsylvania (n=2), California (n=1), Colorado (n=1), Massachusetts (n=1), and Kansas (n=1). Participants were evenly split across public (n=8) and

private (n=7) child welfare agencies. Most participants were child welfare supervisors (n=5), followed by case managers or child and family specialists (n=4), members of executive leadership (n=4), and child welfare administrators/support staff (n=2). Nearly half of participants (47%) had been in their role for five or more years. One-fifth of participants (20%) had been in their role for 3-4 years, and one-third (33%) had been in their role for 1-2 years.

The 11 court professionals interviewed between February 15<sup>th</sup> and April 25<sup>th</sup> and were drawn from ten states: Florida (2), Pennsylvania (2) Arkansas, California, Colorado, Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, New Mexico, and Texas. While some respondents drew from varied professional experiences, they identified primarily as legal advocates (5), judges (5), CASA, or peer advocate.

The QIC-EY National Youth Engagement Advisory Council is comprised of people with recent lived expertise and staff who work for organizations committed to lifting the voices of people with lived expertise in the child welfare system. While participant attendance at the council meetings varies, 13 council members responded to a demographic survey at the March 2022 council meeting. Council members represented nine unique states, with Florida (n=3), Vermont (n=2), and Washington (n=2) having the most representation. Most council members were female (n=9) or non-binary (n=3). Two-thirds of the council members identified as White, one-third identified as Black, one-quarter identified as Latinx, and one-fifth identified as American Indian/Alaska Native (participants could select more than one race). Eight council members were younger than 30, and five were 30 or older. Half of the council members with lived expertise were adopted or achieved legal guardianship, and half aged out of care.

# RESULTS

The four stakeholder groups identified the following barriers to authentic child and youth engagement:

1. Time constraints, worker turnover
2. Policy, laws, or regulations
3. Lack of resources or training
4. Youth lacks psychological safety
5. Worker bias
6. Youth not prepared or informed
7. Workers don't listen to youth
8. Workers and adults retain power

Table 1 provides a breakdown of how each of the four stakeholder groups conceptualized these barriers.

Table 1. Barriers to authentic children and youth engagement identified across all stakeholder groups

Barrier	People with lived expertise		Workforce	
	People with lived expertise	Youth Engagement advisory council	Child welfare professionals	Court professionals
Time constraints and worker turnover	Workers have large caseloads and don't have time to build relationships or engage youth. Workers apply one standardized plan to every case and go through the motions to do the bare minimum required by law. Having multiple workers made it difficult for workers to build relationships.	<i>"Massive turnover in child welfare makes it hard for workers to really have engagement with youth. They often switch plans and start from scratch every time a new worker starts a case...This impacts trust and causes many things to start again from the beginning."</i>	Time constraints and stress due to large caseloads, worker turnover, and policy/agency requirements . <i>"[Workers are] overwhelmed with the caseloads that they have, the amount of work that is required per the state's policy that has to be completed."</i>	Building the rapport and trust (and an understanding of the advocate's role itself) takes considerable investments in time. Regular contact—face-to-face, in placement, and in court—is essential but rare, given low reimbursements and limited time. The legal process works best with stable courtroom teams, which some jurisdictions make difficult to maintain.

Barrier	People with lived expertise		Workforce	
	People with lived expertise	Youth Engagement advisory council	Child welfare professionals	Court professionals
Policy, laws, or regulations limit engagement, choice	<p>Policies and laws regarding placement and benefit eligibility prevented youth choice. Agency policies regarding background checks, kin caregiver age, etc. resulted in kin placements being rejected. Some youth felt forced to age out because of the additional government benefits awarded to youth who age out of care vs. those who achieve permanency.</p>	<p>Visitation policies are not inclusive of fictive kin, siblings, and other chosen family. Termination of parental rights often happens before family has chance to intervene because they were not informed.</p>	<p>Difficulties engaging youth due to barriers created by court orders, visitation policies, and wait times. Placement policy supersedes youth voice. <i>"I also feel like we've got a lot of red tape with just the way our laws are lined out and the way a lot of people's hands are just tied on how cases can progress, should progress, will progress."</i></p>	<p>Respecting youth autonomy (some youth prefer to avoid court or do not want to miss school responsibilities) may require being flexible and finding alternative means for meaningful participation. When in-person attendance was required or desired, professionals reported many challenges, including the lack of clarity on who was responsible to deliver the youth and the problem of some court personnel (CASAs, attorneys) who are generally prohibited by office policy from transporting youth.</p>

<b>Barrier</b>	<b>People with lived expertise</b>		<b>Workforce</b>	
	<b>People with lived expertise</b>	<b>Youth Engagement advisory council</b>	<b>Child welfare professionals</b>	<b>Court professionals</b>
Lack of resources or training	Available resources (homes, community services) prevented youth choice of permanency outcome, couldn't get the support they needed. Workers don't know enough about how to connect youth with needed resources.	Despite youths' desire to maintain sibling relationships, resources dictate that siblings cannot be kept together and reasonable efforts are not made to find them or maintain visits, harming youth trust in workers. Staff not trained in consistent approaches to Family Finding.	Limited access to services and resources. Not enough foster homes that match the needs of youth, so youth have limited options. Workers are not trained on youth engagement and don't know what questions to ask.	Youth in more rural areas may lack internet connectivity to be able to attend virtual hearings or connect with advocates. Professionals did not indicate particular topics that they saw as essential, and suggested that beyond legal requirements, youth should be invited and given space to identify items to get attention.
Youth feels unwelcome and lacks psychological safety	Youth didn't feel comfortable speaking openly or honestly about their experience for fear of repercussions	Difficult to build trust when there is significant worker turnover. Things are not explained in a youth-friendly manner.	Adulthood, or the belief adults know better than a child or youth in any given situation, is rampant in child welfare. Youth don't trust workers.	Virtual hearings raise concerns about privacy, and the inability for youth to connect with their advocates. Difficult to create a physical environment that cultivates youth engagement, recognizing tension between providing a comfortable space for youth and signaling the formality and gravity of courtroom proceedings.

<b>Barrier</b>	<b>People with lived expertise</b>		<b>Workforce</b>	
	<b>People with lived expertise</b>	<b>Youth Engagement advisory council</b>	<b>Child welfare professionals</b>	<b>Court professionals</b>
Worker bias, lack of cultural awareness	Workers were biased against youth and/or their families due to their behavior, identities, or because they were involved with the child welfare system.	Lack of diversity and not enough effort to celebrate youth's culture. Lack of understanding for youth's connection to family. Workers need training on gender, sexual identity, race, racism, and microaggressions.	Workers or supervisors are not supportive of youth engagement. Workers are not trained on how to ask questions about youth's culture. Workers lack training on identity.	Challenge of working across racial and ethnic differences. In some jurisdictions, Spanish fluency is essential for some advocates. Other identities cannot always be matched by the advocate, so open-mindedness, patience, and humility are needed.
Youth not adequately prepared or informed	Worker didn't provide youth with enough information to make informed decisions about their case.	The language used to talk to youth about permanency is not youth friendly. Youth need somebody who can take the time to explain things to them and ensure they understand and know how to use their voice.	Workers lack time, tools, and structure to explain all permanency options in a child friendly manner.	While point of contact varied by jurisdiction, many judicial personnel meet young people only at their first hearings. Some jurisdictions require that advocates meet their clients outside of court before hearings. All rely on advocates to properly explain what transpired in court.

Barrier	People with lived expertise		Workforce	
	People with lived expertise	Youth Engagement advisory council	Child welfare professionals	Court professionals
Workers don't listen to youth	Workers didn't elicit youth perspectives and didn't listen to them if they did provide input. In some cases, ageism and other biases played a role, with workers listening to adults rather than youth.	A recurring barrier to permanency that further triggers and retraumatizes youth is when adults are <i>not actually listening to the youth</i> . It is important to listen to what the youth want versus what the worker believes they should have.	There is not a guidebook for what questions to ask and how to communicate with and between multiple stakeholders. Workers lack time to elicit youth voice and feel they cannot act on youth's wishes.	Court personnel intimated that youth sometimes connect with their cases in unexpected ways, and that colleagues may be helpful in engaging with youth; CASAs, peer advocates, and other court staff may at times be essential helpful in creating an environment conducive to engagement.
Workers and adults retain all power	Youth's worker operated "behind the scenes," making decisions without consulting them.	Case planning meetings and hearings aren't scheduled when it's convenient for youth.	Adults believe they know better than youth. Fear that engaging the child or youth will dysregulate them or cause harm, so they make decisions on their behalf.	Attendance at court comes with costs for children and youth, such as missed school or work, especially in jurisdictions that did not schedule hearings for specific times. Often professionals' schedules are prioritized over those of youth and families.

## TIME CONSTRAINTS AND WORKER TURNOVER

### Large caseloads

Child welfare staff, court staff, and people with lived expertise, including Youth Engagement advisory council members, all indicated that there was insufficient time for workers to authentically engage youth given staffing challenges, large caseloads, and extensive regulatory requirements. One person with lived expertise explained, “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.” Often, people with lived expertise felt that their worker only had time to do the bare minimum of what was required of them, which did not include communicating with youth:

- “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.’”

Workers corroborated the perceptions of people with lived expertise. Many indicated that there was no time in their day to even see youth, let alone meaningfully engage them. The time that workers had with youth was necessarily dedicated to triage support and meeting regulatory requirements.

- “The average worker spends an hour a month with a kid, one hour a month. They go in, they visit, they see them. And so that's 12 hours a year that they're invested in that kid. That's half a day. Out of 365 days, the average worker is spending half a day with the kids in their caseload. And I don't know that a lot of change is going to take place on 12 hours out of the year.”

For the minority of workers who did engage youth, they stated that they were forced to do so on their own time: “By engaging the way I want to with youth, that requires me to work late, work on the weekends.” Workers felt disappointed that they did not have more time to spend with youth because they knew it had negative impacts on their ability to understand what is happening for youth and build trust. Workers felt they couldn’t show up as their ideal selves due to being overworked.

- “The caseload sizes that we have and have had are substantial. They're far from ideal for allowing the relationships to be built that should be built so that we can have those ideal relationship, an authentic involvement from us and from the people we serve.”

In some cases, workers struggled to spend adequate time with youth because they were placed out of county. Workers described having to travel an entire day just to see one child, meaning that they couldn’t serve other children:

- “Some of these visits that we're doing are like four or five hours away from our county base. You're trying to see all these kids make sure that they're safe, but at the same time, you're not being able to sit and really engage with them like you would like to.”

## **Worker turnover**

Worker turnover was also a significant barrier to authentic youth engagement. “Our workforce is so diminished right now. Everybody's doing triple duty, so it's really hard to hold case workers to a high standard for engagement with youth when they're doing three other jobs at the same time.” When workers are in survival mode, it is challenging to do the slow and subtle work required to build trust and engagement with youth. People with lived expertise felt the impact of having multiple workers in rapid succession:

- “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.”

## **POLICY, LAWS, OR REGULATIONS**

### **Rules, regulations, and paperwork**

Workers also struggled to engage youth in decisions about their case due to agency, state, and/or federal policies and court orders. Decisions related to visitation, placement, and permanency were often dictated by court order and getting a hearing to request a change to the court order could take months. Many workers felt that they had to choose between spending time with youth and sacrificing the regulatory requirements of their job, or spending less time with youth but meeting the regulatory requirements:

- “I didn't realize until a couple of months into working that I was spending probably three times the amount of time as my coworkers doing home visits. And I was having trouble keeping up with the other requirements of the job, the paperwork, the report writing, but it was obvious that I had a much better relationship with the children on my caseload.”
- “I feel like some of the paperwork and things that we do is just overly repetitive, that really doesn't help the kids. Again, it's mandated, but I think that some of it is a little over the top”
- “We're so inundated with processes and procedures and policies”
- “. . . and then the next question is when you have the time are you effectively engaging with them in a way that is

giving the space to tell their story? And then...once you get those stories, like what are you doing with them? How are you using them in court or out of court to make sure that the voices of youth are heard?"

Consistently, workers described how a focus on policy and paperwork was at odds with authentic relationship building and didn't help youth or families: "[There is a] compliance view of treatment planning as opposed to a relationship building lens. Sometimes it really becomes check the box as opposed to sort of looking at more qualitative things that are happening." Workers felt that it would be challenging to add even more requirements on top of what they are already expected to do:

- "I think it starts with us being able to create an environment that actually allows people to be able to genuinely engage someone. But it's kind of hard to do that when you know you've got a lot of other mandates expected of you."

### **Policies prevented youth choice**

People with lived expertise also felt that policies were a barrier to having a say in what happened with their lives, and expressed a desire to have more flexible policies that allowed consideration of the child or youth's unique context:

- "If the process, and the policies, and the people making the higher decisions are aware of what that child is going through and the impact it's going to have their life, I just think that the policies also need to be informed by the context."

People with lived expertise provided numerous examples of policies which were overly restrictive and prevented them from having the permanency outcome they wanted. Some expressed they did not want to reunify but attempting reunification was required by law. A worker stated, "When it comes to reunification, I don't know how many of our kids can say, hey, I

don't want to go home." Several people with lived expertise shared that they weren't able to be placed with relatives because of the results of their background check, the caregiver's age, or reasons unknown to the youth at the time. One lived expert expressed, "I did [try to be placed with family members], but they got turned down because of their history...I think there was one that had a misdemeanor if I remember correctly, one had a felony." Another example described by the Youth Engagement advisory council is the fact termination of parental rights often occurs prior to family members being informed. This allows no time for family or fictive kin to intervene before the child or youth is placed, even if the child/youth is requesting this. The Youth Engagement advisory council also described limitations with visitation policies. Specifically, visitation policies are not inclusive of fictive kin, siblings, and other chosen family members, which may directly clash with the stated desires of the children and youth in care.

Another lived expert said that they didn't want to live with their aunt, but that they did so because they were able to get a scholarship if they were in a guardianship placement:

- "I don't know if I would call it pressured but... We really didn't want to live with [my aunt] but then with the kinship guardianship, I could get that scholarship. And that scholarship pays for everything. So that was a pretty big deal."

Lived experts commonly described making permanency decisions not based on desire or best fit, but on the resources and benefits that the arrangement would make them eligible for. Many people with lived expertise indicated that they opted to age out of care in order to retain foster care benefits, including funds to attend college. People who did not age out stated they wish they had known that being adopted would mean losing access to entitlements they could have received if they had aged out, even stating if they could go back in time, they would have rather aged out.

Court personnel emphasized the low floor of law and policy and that meaningful participation requires additional time and effort; one judge stated that:

- "... you need to have been able to build enough rapport with your client to represent them accurately and effectively in court... my expectation is that my lawyers at a minimum follow the law if you are zealously advocating you have done more than you need to just follow the law and built a relationship so having the seeds planted in building that relationship with the client for kids, especially."

## **LACK OF RESOURCES OR TRAINING**

### **Lack of community resources**

In many cases, youth choice was limited by the resources available in the community. Most commonly, people with lived expertise and workers brought attention to the shortage of foster homes. One person with lived expertise stated, "I would say that my prior social workers didn't really give me that option [to have input on where I was placed]. They just moved me where there was space, which I understand." In some situations, the foster home shortage was so severe that "50% of the foster youth in the State of Alabama are placed outside of their county of care." Placement out of county can have significant impacts on workers' ability to check in with youth and makes it more difficult for youth to maintain cultural and relational permanency.

- "For most of our young people, placement decision is more based on what's available than it is about, where do you want to go? I don't know that there's very many cases at all if I would go, hey, look, here's three foster homes. Which one would you like to go to? That probably never happens. It's probably more like, hey, I think I have this family that will take this kid, or hey, I think this program will take them."

This lack of placement options was reflected in feedback from the YE council who stated siblings were not able to be placed together when there are not enough homes that are available to take on multiple children and youth at once.

People with lived expertise felt that their worker could have done more to connect them with needed resources and inform them of benefits they may be entitled to. In some cases, people with lived expertise regretted that they did not know enough to make an informed permanency decision.

- “I didn't even know about any of independent living, anything. Apparently, it wasn't as much of a thing back then, but it was a possibility, and nobody told me about it. They didn't tell me about all of the benefits that I would've gotten. Like they told me I would've got college paid for, but they said I would've had that regardless of being adopted or not, so. But they didn't tell me about any benefits, any other helpful like resources or anything.”

There was also a significant lack of community resources (or knowledge of resources) and/or foster homes to support cultural continuity and identity development for LGBTQ youth and youth of color. One person with lived expertise stated that they struggled to find a home that accepted their LGBTQ identity:

- “I was willing as far as going for adoption or foster...But I think it's that I'm gay. I was open about it, which again, should not be a barrier, but it was. And I did have a foster family that was going to, as far as them being like a adoptive family. But there was a halt on it.”

Workers expressed that the ability to provide cultural continuity for youth “comes down to, again, availability, what resources are available.” Even when resources were available, wait times and bureaucracy made it challenging for youth to access them:

- “They have funds that are available. So we have to complete a referral, submit the referral. For example, a service that they can pay for is driver's training. We can do the referral; I'll use today as example [February]. It's possible, the referral will not be approved until September.”

## Lack of training

Workers and people with lived expertise alike expressed a need for workers to receive more training on how to authentically engage youth and build their cultural humility and competency. One person with lived expertise stated:

- “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.”

Workers also wanted more general training about how and why to engage youth, stating “One [area] that we do need to improve on, is that engagement is helpful when we understand the importance of it and we understand how and have strategies of how to engage.” Court personnel emphasized the lack of guidance available for court processes that encourage engagement, which is especially important as a buffer against the rigidity of traditional court procedure. Another worker shared:

- “Even with new workers who are eager to get out in the field and have a relationship with their kids or with their families, they're not taught how. It's more so they're taught how to do paperwork, but they're not taught how to engage with different age groups or what some might label as a difficult child is really not a difficult child.”

The Youth Engagement Advisory Council stated that lack of training for workers in utilizing consistent approaches to family finding is another area that prevents full engagement with children and youth to support relational permanency.

## **CHILD OR YOUTH LACKS PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY**

### **Child or youth fears repercussions of sharing**

All the stakeholder groups expressed that children and youth often did not feel safe or comfortable enough to engage. This was most pronounced in settings in which youth were expected to speak in front of a group – at court, family team meetings, or during a home visit in front of their caregivers and/or siblings. As one court professional stated: “I think that many of our youth in our systems feel completely shut out of the process.” People with lived expertise were often afraid to be honest with their workers about what was going on or what their preferences were for fear of negative repercussions or hurting people’s feelings.

- “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.”
- “I felt bad. I mean, I think it took some time for me to like to verbalize that because I didn't want anyone to be upset with me or think that I'm ungrateful that these people have taken me in.”

Youth’s fear of speaking openly and honestly was driven by their lack of trust in the staff who had power over their case. People with lived expertise did not trust workers with their honest feelings. One worker explained,

- “There are some kids that just, they don't want to have anything to do with us, you're CPS, you're going to just come in to take me. I can see that as systemic because they have that mindset, it's been ingrained in them, don't ever

talk to CPS, they'll just come and take you away. All those things which is probably generational in those families. But not being able to kind of bridge that barrier with those kids prevents them from being actively involved in their case if they just don't want to have anything to do with us.”

In discussing the courtroom environment, one judge noted:

- “You know...you can't ask people to stretch to do new things until they feel safe. And I feel like that applies a lot to this world in child welfare that we're asking kids to do something...and if they don't feel emotionally safe in the process, they're not going to do it and I think that starts with what courts look like. [It] starts with ...walking through security in the beginning...and what the waiting room is like and how timely proceedings are. And then, once you get in the courtroom is the judge towering over you? There's nothing that says a judge needs to sit over you. I mean we could be sitting around a bunch of couches...like something that's more of a conversation...there's nothing in any court rule that I've seen that mandates that that judges and lawyers have to speak before families.”

### **Workers aren't honest with youth**

Workers being inconsistent, dishonest, or not following through on what they said they would do contributed to youth's lack of trust in workers and their unwillingness to open up to them. This included using language that the child or youth does not understand and/or having an “adults know best” approach. A person with lived expertise wished that workers would prioritize:

- “Showing up, listening and following through, following up and following through...because just [more often] 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."

Workers shared similar sentiments about why children and youth often do not trust workers enough to engage with them:

- "If you've got a kid that's had eight, nine, 10 different case managers, some of those conversations fall through the cracks, it gets lost in translation. One worker will say, 'Yes, absolutely. We'll do that.' And then couple weeks later they leave, or they get a promotion, or whatever. And the next worker has no idea that conversation happened. And then this gets like, 'See, you guys just lie. Nobody's going to do these things for me.'"
- "If the worker does not... care for teens, teens are very smart. [The teens] pick up on who's genuine, who's not"
- "[Sometimes] the social workers or staff are afraid to be honest with young people, especially, if they feel like something is bad news, because they think it will lead to dysregulation."

The enduring challenge remains, as one court professional stated:

- "How do you create processes that really make them feel safe that ...they want to share and then, how do you ask them questions and to get them to open up to you, and then, once they share something with you, what are you doing to validate them and to...And to give kids the true sense that something is have will happen, based on the information that they share."

However, the early stages of court proceedings typically have limited operation and face hard deadlines that prioritize expediency over depth. As one court professional noted about initial shelter care hearings:

- “There's not a lot of room to ask more questions. There's rarely an opportunity for the parents to ask their own questions and it's, like, enraging actually”

## **WORKER BIAS, LACK OF CULTURAL AWARENESS**

All stakeholder groups expressed that worker bias and lack of cultural competency were barriers to youth engagement.

### **Worker Bias**

Some people with lived expertise felt that workers were biased against their family and expected their parents to jump through unreasonable hoops, which impacted the youth's trust in their worker.

- “A lot of these things that they were asking [my mom] 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.”
- “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."

Some people with lived expertise shared that they felt their worker was biased against them because they were struggling:

- "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."

If children and youth do not feel accepted by their workers, it is much more difficult to form a trusting relationship and engage in planning efforts together.

### **Culture and Identity Awareness**

Many people with lived expertise shared that they did not feel their worker understood or accepted their racial, cultural, gender, or sexual identity, which prevented them from engaging with their worker. This was reflected by the Youth Engagement advisory council which reported a lack of diversity in the workforce and no concerted efforts to celebrate the child or youth's culture.

- "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."
- "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.”

Workers’ lack of awareness also impacted some youths’ ability to maintain cultural continuity and explore their identity.

- “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.”

Workers expressed a desire to receive more training on culture and identity and how to address their biases:

- “What does it look like to explore culture, identity? How to talk through and work through biases.”
- “I think the one thing that isn't probably discussed or clearly taught is, we also have a culture of substance abuse, and we have a culture of folks with domestic violence in the whole. We have a criminal culture and that has its own implications. And those just aren't really things that are clear cut.”

The Youth Engagement advisory council stated workers need training on gender, sexual identity, race, racism, and microaggressions. Court personnel also emphasized the importance of recognizing how young people identify themselves:

- “Sometimes, especially if their parents are not actively involved, I would like to know how [the youth] self identifies their race and ethnicity. And that’s the kind of information you gotta get from having a conversation with your client and understanding that. Also important for me is to know [and]... to be mindful of pronouns and what pronouns the youth go by and again, you have to have the kind of relationship where you are able to have that information ready for the Court.”

However, another legal professional expressed her opinion that many jurisdictions have still a long way to go: “You know, preferring the child's preferred identity in language and otherwise. Courts haven't gone there yet.”

## **CHILD OR YOUTH NOT ADEQUATELY PREPARED OR INFORMED**

Across the board, people with lived expertise felt that they did not have nearly enough information about what was happening or why throughout their time in the child welfare system. This was very traumatic for many interviewees:

- “[I wish I had] a say from the beginning. 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.”
- “I don't think it was until my second foster home that I realized that I was in foster care. I didn't know exactly what was happening to me. 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.”

A member of the Youth Engagement Advisory Council shared:

- “I lost about 90% of my rights when I entered the child welfare system. I really was not informed of my rights and had little knowledge of the system or what was taking place. As a result, I was not very engaged.”

Workers explained that they often do not include youth in conversations prior to actions being taken on their case:

- “If a case permanency plan changes from just reunification and they add a concurrent plan of termination, I have seen, more often than not, that's not ever discussed with kids... They're not really having those conversations with them until we get to the point where termination is actually happening, and adoption is really a conversation. And it almost feels like we're just not even allowed to talk about the possibilities and what ifs until that plan has changed. And the kids are definitely not brought into that conversation early on.”

Workers stated that worker turnover, compounded by a lack of time, tools, and structure to assess the child or youth’s understanding of their case and options were barriers to engagement. As a result, workers often assumed that children and youth were more informed than they were and neglected to update them on their case:

- “And it's also common for us, as workers or adults, to guess how kids are feeling and getting insight of what the child is feeling or what they know about the case. Just asking them, ‘Do you know what my job is? Do you know what I'm here for?’ Or I think, sometimes, when we take over a case for somebody else, we may assume that the child knows these things, but they may not. It's really common for children to

think I'm a CPS worker. And I have to tell them, 'I'm not a CPS worker. I'm a foster care worker,' or just allowing them to ask questions about their case."

In addition to not being informed about their case, youth and their families were also not prepared for major transitions:

- "[We didn't get any] suggestions of how to adjust and return home, no, or mental stuff that may have been happening, no. Any briefing for our parents about what we might've been going through, the type of language to avoid because we got ripped away from our families... I don't know. It just felt so weird. It was taboo to talk about it after a while."

The context of legal representation and courtroom environments can present special challenges. One legal professional noted that:

- "I think the real challenge is that children do not believe that the adults want to take the time to listen and until we can convince them that we really are interested, and we really will pay attention and respond, it's always going to be a challenge. Teenagers don't really like to talk to adults."

The challenge of engaging young people, court personnel emphasized, is to connect with them authentically "where they are" and to do so in the first steps of the legal process:

- "Unless we're willing to simply disregard the likelihood of a child not participating in the plan after court or after the planning meeting, we ought to involve them now. If what we really want is performance and cooperation, as a kid the best way to get that is to engage their participation."

## **WORKERS DON'T LISTEN TO CHILDREN AND YOUTH**

All stakeholders described concerns with workers not listening to children and youth. The Youth Engagement Advisory Council explained that workers

not listening to children and youth retraumatizes youth and leads to further disengagement with workers. As discussed above, workers stated this is sometimes the result of policies that dictate pathways rather than allowing the child or youth to have a voice. Additionally, people with lived expertise described how workers do not elicit child or youth perspectives. Even if the child or youth perspectives were elicited, ageism or other biases often prevented the worker from actually hearing them and incorporating their feedback into a plan.

- “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.”
- “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.”

Workers also reported ageism as a barrier to listening to children and youth. Additionally, workers cited not having clear guidance on what questions to ask and in what ways they would be able to utilize the child or youth's desires in planning.

- “I just don't know if they always listen to them, I guess. It's more like the adults are figuring this stuff out, and they're kind of a sidebar sometimes.”
- “I had a worker who had the best intentions, and she promised this kid everything, every time she talked to him, and her intention was to do everything she said, but she never did anything. [The child] was so conditioned. He's like, ‘Yeah, my worker's going to... But she probably won't.’”

## **WORKERS AND ADULTS RETAIN ALL POWER**

Power dynamics are an important consideration when examining barriers to child and youth engagement. Workers have some power over how the case will move forward, however, there are of course limitations set by policy and court orders. Often, children and youth were not invited to or allowed to attend meetings in which other people, such as court staff, caseworkers, and/or foster parents, were making decisions about their lives. People with lived expertise felt that their input wasn’t considered at all when making decisions and desired more inclusion in conversations that had major implications for their lives.

- “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.”
- “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.'"

- "But, my ad Litem 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."

Workers also indicated awareness of inherent power dynamics in child welfare in which children and youth are not given decision-making power or rights to know what is happening and have input. These power dynamics can impede relationship building if workers are not aware of them and willing to name them:

"The fact that you're in a position of authority. No matter what, that is the system. And so, building trust and rapport sometimes takes longer. Getting them to understand that you're not there, you're not the bad guy, you're not trying to be that person, I think that's probably the biggest fear. That and the fact that most of them, with what they've gone through, they're definitely... Oppositional defiance is a pretty accurate term for a lot of teens. You want them to do one thing, they're going to do the opposite."

Collaborating with the various decision makers outside of the child welfare department can also be problematic, as not all stakeholders are working towards the same goal or at the very least, are not following the same pathways to get to a common goal.

- "Probably the biggest challenge is interacting with others who are not on the same page as we are. Because we're there saying, this is what the kid needs, they're telling us they need this, and then you run up the against people who have the power to make decisions, like about meetings or

about their placement or things like that, and they're not on the same page as us.”

Too often the processes that purport to serve the needs of the young person at the center of the proceedings instead are organized by the needs of the professionals involved. Court processes often disregard the needs and preferences of the children and families involved:

- “Now, taking them out of court four times a year and four times a year taking them out of school four times a year to sit in the waiting room all day. And then they go into a room where in many of the cases...they’ve got to hear their parent’s bad mouthed... That's not a positive picture.”

In this context, judges can set expectations, but, as one put it, a judge cannot change norms without considerable cooperation:

- “I think it's very important and we're working as a team and we're trying to do better, as a team and it's a little bit of education for them to understand where I'm coming from”

# DISCUSSION

Child welfare workers, court professionals, people with lived expertise, and members of the National Youth Engagement Advisory Council identified eight major barriers to engaging children and youth in planning efforts:

- Time constraints, worker turnover
- Policy, laws, or regulations

- Lack of resources or training
- Youth lacks psychological safety
- Worker bias
- Youth not prepared or informed
- Workers don't listen
- Workers and adults retain power

Lack of time and restrictive regulations led to workers doing only the bare minimum to satisfy agency and legal requirements, which did not leave space for building trusting relationships with child or youth or engaging child or youth in an authentic manner. Limited time and legal requirements related to legal permanency, but not relational or cultural permanency, resulted in relational and cultural permanency being deprioritized. This focus on legal permanency and placements over relationships is concerning since children and youth consistently express that relational and cultural permanency are more important to them than achieving legal permanency.

There was a marked sense of disempowerment among both workers and children and youth – workers felt their hands were tied due to policy requirements, large caseloads, and lack of resources or training, and children and youth felt disempowered because they were not informed, respected, or listened to. There is a culture of adultism in many child welfare offices, meaning that workers feel as though children and youth do not know enough to be engaged, or will be harmed if they are engaged. Often, what mattered most to children and youth did not align with the “one size fits all” approach the agency took with cases, meaning that child or youth’s relationships with their families, communities, and culture suffered. Workers and people with lived expertise expressed a desire to have more flexible policies that allowed workers to consider the child or youth’s unique context. Workers expressed if they had more time, training, and flexibility, they’d be able to do the fun parts of their job more – engaging with families, building relationships, learning about community resources, participating in trainings, and working with children and youth to find creative ways to help meet their permanency goals.

Some recommended changes are potentially beyond the scope of this grant, including reducing caseloads, reducing turnover, and adjusting policies to require less reporting and paperwork. Beyond these systemic reforms, there are numerous opportunities to change the culture of the child welfare workforce to support authentic child and youth engagement. The following recommendations were synthesized from the major barriers identified in this meta-analysis, as well as specific recommendations provided by each of the stakeholder groups:

9. **Inform children and youth about what is happening using child-friendly language and tools.** Define any terms that children and youth may find confusing, especially in a court context. Give children and youth as much lead time as possible so they aren't caught off guard and so they have time to process the information and ask questions. Debunk the myth that lying to children and youth or not sharing information protects them.

- "Many youths don't know their rights, and don't understand the child welfare system and the intersectionality into other systems. Not knowing what they can and can't do can cause a lot of confusion. It's important to have ongoing, age-appropriate, and in-depth conversation about permanency using youth friendly language to explain what is happening. The way we talk about permanency options can impact how a youth will engage."
- "Youth need to be prepared for the process. They need to have information about what is taking place and why in youth friendly language."
- "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."

10. **Take the time to build trusting relationships with children and youth.** Trust is built when workers are honest, compassionate, consistent, genuine, informative, inclusive, accepting, aware of power dynamics, and when they follow through on what they tell the child or youth they will do.

Even if workers are unsuccessful in their efforts, it is important to follow up with the child or youth to explain what they tried and why it didn't work out. Workers can use this as an opportunity to work together with youth to brainstorm what to try instead.

- "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 felt genuinely cared."
- "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"
- "I will make clear to the kids that they have a right to be there and to listen, but if they don't want to it's okay if they leave their lawyers will listen for them, and if they decide they want to get up and leave at any point that's okay...For the kids in the dependency cases I don't require them to talk to me, I really rely on the lawyer child relationship, and if the lawyers want them to then we do."

11. **Provide training for staff about the definition, importance, and purpose of authentic child and youth engagement.** Share examples of what engagement is and is not, as well as the benefits of engaging children and youth in their own planning. Ideally, presenters would include people with lived expertise to help workers build empathy for children and youth and understand the felt impact of non-engagement.

- "I think by showing case workers, supervisors, administrators, that this came kind of directly from youth is going to give us more buy-in to any sort of a curriculum or a training."

- “When they are involved...you see less disruptions in their placements. You see permanency quicker when they are involved.”
- “Right, no one's teaching them how to professionally talk...and modeling that...so by being on those calls with them, they can see how we speak to people to get the things that we need, and they can really kind of learn from that. ... one of my favorite things is just doing three way calls or going with them to the visits on their appointments, because I think a lot of youth learn by seeing...copy what you see. I would say that's probably the best way to do it, but if you [have to] have time to do that, you know just really explaining to them, you know or breaking it down right.”

12. Provide tools and structured questions for workers to use with children and youth to help assess who is important to them and what aspects of their culture matter most to them. Provide training about what to do with any information that is gathered and communicate next steps with children and youth during the interview.

- “We have others for the older kids where they can do more of a combination of short essay and yes or no questions so that the judge can get a sense of whether or not they feel good with where they're at and are they seeing the family they want to see, and how often? Is that contact good? Is there somebody they want to talk to that nobody knows about that they want to see as far as the family maintaining a connection?”
- “I believe that this is an area of opportunity. I think that a lot of emphasis is placed on finding appropriate placements or just finding placements at all, that a lot of a cultural identity is typically placed on when a family initiates that conversation or a child initiates that, rather than the agency

initiating those questions to try to identify that, at least at the onset. As the case progresses, I think that those questions may come out later, but I do see this as not as much being an area that is a focus.”

- “I think it's helpful of course if you have some diversity in your courtroom right now my courtroom team is all white. [There is a] mix of women and men, my staff is black, which I think is helpful. You know...I do these immigration cases. I have a lot of cases with interpreters. I think it just comes back to basic respect.”

13. Provide tools and structured questions for workers to use with children and youth to help them make difficult decisions about different permanency options. Such tools could include information about the implications of different decisions. Ensure that children and youth are adequately prepared to participate in team decision making meetings and court hearings and offer alternative means of participation when possible. Always try to find ways big or small for children to have a choice and a voice in the outcome.

- “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.’”
- “When you can give them the options, leave the decisions open to them. When they have something they want, like an objective or goal that they want to complete, laying out everything in front of them so they can see what's required to actually meet that goal.”
- “[We 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 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. And there's a couple models that are used from other states.”

14. Train staff on trauma-informed care, including how trauma affects the brain, how trauma can present in childhood and adolescence, and strategies for engaging with children and youth who have experienced trauma. Coach workers to identify children and youths’ strengths and to consider reasons they may be exhibiting undesirable behaviors.

- “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 don't think children need a psychiatrist. If we know that we're being traumatized and everything like that, get more therapy, get more self care.”
- “In our early childhood court, we have toys, we have puzzles, crayons, stuffed toys. I mean it's all trauma friendly, child friendly, so it's I think it would be great if all of our courtrooms could start looking like that...And I know some people want to argue that we kind of minimize the importance of the fact that you know they committed a crime, and there is a victim in the case. No, we're not doing that, but it doesn't mean that we can't still be human and we can't still acknowledge these are human lives that we're dealing with and just change the environment of it all.”
- “I think training would be important for all individuals working with children, regarding trauma-informed relationships, trauma-informed work that each individual professional does with that said youth.”

15. **Train staff on cultural humility and provide information about culture, class, race, gender, and sexual identity and how these identities show up in the context of the child welfare system.** Provide tools for workers to explore their own identities and identify and address their biases.

- “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.”
- “I think it really just boils down to the non-discrimination. I think that I really felt that in the system. I was discriminated for being black and for being gay. I think that

it really just goes down, it just boils down to more comprehensive training when it comes to sexual orientation and gender identity. And I think that's what probably would've improved my experience in the system. But I think that it really was about the lack of knowledge and the fear of unknown...I don't think that there's enough training and I think that's kind of what leads to harmful situations and all of these untrue stigmas that surround people who are LGBTQ. And so it just really boils down to the training, having those conversations and asking questions and finding the things that can best serve that child.”

- “One of the things that we're trying to really showcase is that when we're going into the space and talking to your youth, we're introducing ourselves with our pronouns...just coming in and introducing yourself with your pronouns can make a big difference.. being pro youth...is being open to meeting the youth where they're at...”
- “I think that the cultural aspect, that we have an opportunity to better understand... We've added, as a part of our mission, about culture and diversity. I think that for a long time we saw culture as just race. We have now been just discussing LGBTQIA+, but we have not also been discussing culture in all aspects of values and norms and belief systems. And even when discussions are held, there is no follow through, so... I think that there's an area of opportunity for us to discuss each person and environment. And I think there's also opportunities for us to discuss our... and explore our biases in a safe environment. I really continue to push safety because I would like to see us all feel comfortable with being able to acknowledge that we all have biases, acknowledge that they exist and be okay with us being able to move forward with how do we work through those?”

# SUMMARY

Child welfare workers, court professionals, people with lived expertise, and members of the National Youth Engagement Advisory Council brought attention to eight major barriers to engaging children and youth in planning efforts: (1) time constraints, worker turnover; (2) policy, laws, or regulations; (3) lack of resources or training; (4) children and youth lack psychological safety; (5) worker bias; (6) children and youth not prepared or informed; (7) workers don't listen to children and youth; and (8) workers and adults retain power. While some of these barriers are beyond the scope of the QIC-EY project, many can be addressed through intentionality, agency policy, and trainings for staff and supervisors. At the heart of all barriers is the desire for children and youth to be seen and heard as they are, and not as the adult in the room determines them to be. Authentic engagement with children and youth provides a pathway to do just that.

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# APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL: PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERTISE

## 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?
2. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
  
7. 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.)?
  
8. Do you think being at any of these meetings could have or did help you achieve legal, relational, or cultural permanency? How?
  
9. 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?
  
10. 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?
  
11. 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?

# APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL: CHILD WELFARE WORKFORCE PROFESSIONALS

## For Child Welfare Workers

**Introduction:** Insert Script from UW

**Add to Intro:** I am going to ask you a number of questions about youth engagement and permanency. Before I begin, I want to define that **youth engagement** is the meaningful involvement of youth (of all ages) in decision making and planning around their own cases. When I ask about **permanency**, I am referring to reunification, adoption or guardianship.

### **Demographics:**

Date of interview:

Interviewer:

Name of Agency:

Is Agency a public or private child welfare agency?

City/State where you work:

Job title:

How long have you been in this job:

- 1) Does the engagement of children and youth in their own permanency planning in your child welfare system vary based on the child's age? Please explain, providing any detail on age that makes a difference on how a child/youth is engaged.  
*(reminder for interviewer - this question is focused on differences in engagement based on age)*

- 2) In your agency or system, how are children and youth engaged in the following activities? What does engagement look like for each?
  - Placement decisions
  - Permanency discussions related to reunification, adoption, and guardianship
  - Relational permanency
  - Cultural permanency
  - Case planning
  - Court hearings
  - Decisions related to visitation
  - Decisions related to sibling placements and ongoing connection
  - Other
  
- 3) When children and youth are authentically engaged in their own child welfare case, what does that look like?
  - What are the benefits of authentic engagement?
  - What is the “best case scenario” for engagement in child welfare?
  
- 4) *What systemic challenges stand in the way of authentic youth engagement? (reminder for interviewer - probe as needed: staffing, training, worker turnover, lack of supervisor support, other competing priorities)*
  
- 5) How do you think these challenges could be alleviated and/or removed?
  
- 6) *I am now going to ask you a few questions about your comfort level in working with older youth (14 and older) on your caseload:*
  - a) How comfortable are you in working with youth 14 and older on your caseload?
  - b) How comfortable are you with talking to youth 14 and older about their birth family, the circumstances that lead to their placement, and permanency decisions?
  - c) What do you enjoy about working with older youth?
  - d) What do you find most challenging in working with older youth?
  
- 7) What do you think is needed to build relationships and authentically engage youth?  
*(reminder for interviewer - probe as needed: specific skill-based training, more time, more leeway in how they manage visits etc.)*

- 8) Have you engaged children and youth in case plan development (yes/no)?
  - a) If yes, how have you engaged children and youth in case plan development? (What worked, what didn't work well?)
  - b) If no, why not?
- 9) Are there any skills or knowledge you wish you had that could help you authentically engage with children and youth?
- 10) Do you feel supported by your supervisor to effectively engage youth? Please explain.
- 11) Do you think youth who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community have needs related to engagement that are different from other youth? (if yes- how so?)
- 12) Do you think children/youth of color have needs related to engagement that are different from white youth? (if yes- how so?)
- 13) Have you received training on how to authentically engage children and youth?
  - a) If yes, what was the training?
  - b) If yes, did this training include specific information for engaging children/youth of color or are from LGBTQ+ community?
  - c) What about the training did you find most helpful?
- 14) If you were to design a training to help child welfare staff learn how to authentically engage children and youth,
  - a) What would you include? What would be most useful to staff?
  - b) How would the training be delivered, for example remote, in-person, asynchronous? (*reminder for interviewer - if needed define remote as a facilitator live but on line, in-person as live in a classroom and asynchronous as no facilitator, working independently on assignments*)?
  - c) Do you have any additional advice related to the development of this type of training?
- 15) Are you familiar with any youth engagement practices or service models? If so, what are the names and would you recommend them?

16) What have we missed? What else should I know about the involvement of children/youth in child welfare?

### **For Child Welfare Supervisors**

#### **Introduction: Insert Script from UW**

**Add to Intro:** I am going to ask you a number of questions about youth engagement and permanency. Before I begin, I want to define that **youth engagement** is the meaningful involvement of youth (of all ages) in decision making and planning around their own cases. When I ask about **permanency**, I am referring to reunification, adoption or guardianship.

#### **Demographics:**

Date of interview:

Interviewer:

Name of Agency:

Is Agency a public or private child welfare agency?

City/State where you work:

Job title:

How long have you been in this job:

1) *Does the engagement of children and youth in their own permanency planning in your child welfare system vary based on the child's age? Please explain, providing any detail on age that makes a difference on how a child/youth is engaged. (reminder for interviewer - this question is focused on differences in engagement based on age)*

- 2) In your agency or system, how are children and youth engaged in the following activities? What does engagement look like for each?
- Placement decisions
  - Permanency discussions related to reunification, adoption, and guardianship
  - Relational permanency
  - Cultural permanency

- Case planning
- Court hearings
- Decisions related to visitation
- Decisions related to sibling placements and ongoing connection
- Other

3) *When children and youth are authentically engaged in their own child welfare case, what does that look like?*

- What are the benefits of authentic engagement?
- What is the “best case scenario” for engagement in child welfare?

4) *What systemic challenges stand in the way of authentic youth engagement? (reminder for interviewer – probe as needed: staffing, training, worker turnover, lack of supervisor support, other competing priorities)*

5) How do you think these challenges could be alleviated and/or removed?

6) *How do you support the staff you supervise in ensuring that they authentically engage the children and youth on their caseloads?*

7) *As a supervisor, what do you see as challenges direct service level staff are facing in authentically engaging children and youth on their caseloads?*

8) What do you think is needed for staff on your team to build relationships and authentically engage youth? *(reminder for interviewer – probe as needed: specific skill-based training, more time, more leeway in other areas, etc.)*

9) Do you feel like you have the knowledge and skills to train and/or coach your staff on how to authentically engage children and youth?

10) Do you feel like you have the time and opportunities to support your staff in authentic youth engagement?

11) Have you received training on how to authentically engage children and youth?

- If yes, when and what was the training?
- What about the training did you find most helpful?

- 12) *How do you support your staff to engage LGBTQ+ and children/youth of color?*
- 13) If you were to design a training/coaching that helped supervisors support their staff in authentically engaging children and youth,
- a) What would you want to include? What would be most useful to you?
  - b) How would the training be delivered for example remote, in-person, asynchronous? *(reminder for interviewer: if needed define remote as a facilitator live but on line, in-person as live in a classroom and asynchronous as no facilitator, working independently on assignments)?*
- 14) What recommendations do you have related to the development of a training to help supervisors coach their staff on how to authentically engage children and youth? What advice do you have for the designers of this training?
- 15) *Are you familiar with any youth engagement practices or service models? If so, what are the names and would you recommend them?*
- 16) What have we missed? What else should I know about the involvement of children/youth in child welfare?

## **For Child Welfare Administrators**

### **Introduction: Insert Script from UW**

**Add to Intro:** I am going to ask you a number of questions about youth engagement and permanency. Before I begin, I want to define that **youth engagement** is the meaningful involvement of youth (of all ages) in decision making and planning around their own cases. When I ask about **permanency**, I am referring to reunification, adoption or guardianship

### **Demographics:**

Date of interview:

Interviewer:

Name of Agency:

Is your agency a public or private child welfare agency?

City/State where you work:

Job title:

How long have you been in this job:

- 1) *Does the engagement of children and youth in their own permanency planning in your child welfare system vary based on the child's age? Please explain, providing any detail on age that makes a difference on how a child/youth is engaged. (reminder for interviewer, this question is focused on differences in engagement based on age)*
  
- 2) *In your agency or system, how are children and youth engaged in the following activities? What does engagement look like for each?*
  - Placement decisions
  - Permanency discussions related to reunification, adoption, and guardianship
  - Relational permanency
  - Cultural permanency
  - Case planning
  - Court hearings
  - Decisions related to visitation
  - Decisions related to sibling placements and ongoing connection

- Other

- 3) *Based on your opinion, when children and youth are authentically engaged in their own child welfare case, what does that look like?*
  - What are the benefits of authentic engagement?
  - What is the “best case scenario” for engagement in child welfare?
  
- 4) *What systemic challenges stand in the way of authentic youth engagement? (reminder for interviewer – probe as needed: staffing, training, worker turnover, other competing priorities)*
  
- 5) How do you think these challenges could be alleviated and/or removed?
  
- 6) *What are some of the implementation supports you think need to be put in place in order for your child welfare system to emphasize authentic youth engagement at all levels? (reminder for interviewer - probe if needed: policies, accountability measures, laws)*
  
- 7) *Do you support and encourage the staff you supervise to ensure children and youth are authentically engaged?*
  - a. *If yes how?*
  - b. *If no why not?*
  
- 8) *As an administrator, what do you see as challenges staff face in authentically engaging children and youth on their caseloads?*
  
- 9) *What do you think is needed for workers to build relationships and authentically engage youth? (interviewer reminder – probe as needed: specific skill-based training, more time, more leeway in how they manage visits etc.)*
  
- 10) *Have you received training on how to authentically engage children and youth?*
  - a. *If yes, when and what was the training?*
  - b. *What about the training did you find most helpful?*

- 11) If you were to design a training/coaching that helped supervisors support their staff in authentically engaging children and youth,
- a. What would you include? What would be most useful to staff?
  - b. How would the training be delivered for example remote, in-person, asynchronous? *(reminder for interviewer: if needed define remote as a facilitator live but on line, in-person as live in a classroom and asynchronous as no facilitator, working independently on assignments)?*
- 12) Based on your experience, what recommendations do you have related to the development of a training to help supervisors coach their staff on how to authentically engage children and youth? What advice do you have for the designers of this training?
- 13) *Are there specific tools you think would help supervisors coach their staff on engaging youth in permanency efforts?*
- 14) *Are you familiar with any youth engagement practices or service models? If so, what are the names and would you recommend them?*
- 15) What have we missed? What else should I know about the involvement of children/youth in child welfare?

# APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL: LEGAL PROFESSIONALS

## Court System Personnel Youth Engagement Interview

### Demographics:

- Date of interview:
- Interviewer:
- County & State of court
- Current role in the court:
- How long have you been in your current role?
- Do you have regular contact with youth that you represent/preside over before each court hearing? Yes / No
- What % of your cases would you say you regularly connect with youth 14 and older that you represent/preside over before/during each court hearing?

### Questions:

**This Interview is broken into categories: What happens before, during and after court, and what are the big picture issues around youth engagement in court.**

### I. Before Court Questions:

#### Preparation for Court:

1. What are best practices to build and maintain rapport with your clients?
1. What are promising practices that you use to prepare youth for court?

[OBJ]

#### For in-person court hearings:

1. How does your office prioritize transportation to court?

1. Who is responsible for addressing logistical questions such as transportation and time away from school?

[OBJ]

1. What are some of the different methods and fallback methods for ensuring youth have successful transit to court?

**For online court hearings:**

1. What are some of the different methods and fallback methods for ensuring youth are able to access the online system and are able to have a confidential space to attend court online?

[OBJ]

1. Have there been any promising practices to ensure youth who are attending court online from school or their placement have a safe/confidential way to do that?

[OBJ]

**Advocacy:**

1. Do you have tools or checklists for covering the topics most important to the youth?

[OBJ]

1. How might your preparation and youth engagement for court change based on whether you are in a best-interest or expressed interest jurisdiction?

[OBJ]

**II. During Court Questions:**

[OBJ]

1. What barriers have you identified that prevent children/youth from engaging in the court proceedings? How have you addressed these issues?

[OBJ]

1. How are youth incorporated into court?

[OBJ]

1. Are youth sworn in as witnesses or not? If so, does doing so have a chilling effect or not?

[OBJ]

1. Where does the youth sit in court?

[OBJ]

1. Do judges and referees remain on the bench or do you come to be at eye level with the youth (ex. at counsel table)?

[OBJ]

1. Do your court permit ex-parte contact with the youth? Under what circumstances?

[OBJ]

1. How is youth engagement in routine hearings (ex. review hearings, permanency hearings) differ than in evidentiary hearings (ex. adjudication trials, TPRs).

[OBJ]

1. Are your court hearings open to the public, and how might that impact youth engagement?

[OBJ]

[OBJ]

### III. After Court Questions:

[OBJ]

1. Do you spend time with the child/youth after the court session to ensure they understand the outcome and next steps?

[OBJ]

1. How should youth be supported and debriefed after court?

### IV. Big Picture Questions:

1. Does the engagement of children and youth in your court system vary based on the child's age, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, or pregnant or parenting status? Please explain, providing any detail on age that makes a difference on court involvement.

1. How are children and youth engaged in the following proceedings within your court system? What does engagement look like?

- Hearings concerning visitation
- Permanency planning hearings
- General case planning

1. Based on your opinion, when children and youth are authentically engaged in their own child welfare case in court, what does that look like?

- What are the hallmarks of authentic youth engagement in preparing for and in conducting court hearings?

- What is the “best case scenario” for engagement in courts? What is the ideal?

1. What systemic, staffing, training or other barriers stand in the way of authentic youth engagement in child welfare legal proceedings in your own court system? How do you think these barriers be alleviated and/or removed?

1. What personnel or volunteers in your court (attorney, CASA, caregivers, social worker, peer youth advocate, Judge) are the most likely able to ensure children/youth are engaged in court decisions?

1. Where have you or could you learn about children and youth engagement in court proceedings?

- Trainings? Which ones?
- Other jurisdictions? Which ones?
- Leaders in the field? Who?
- Other, please explain.

[OB]

Follow up question here - **Do you have materials which help explain the process to youth?** For example role plays, diagrams of the legal process, or pamphlets which explain players, legal jargon, or acronyms. **If so, could you share those materials with our team?** We're interested in seeing if we can review any trainings and materials aimed at youth engagement specifically that already exist on preparing youth for court including topics like child development, interview techniques, cultural competence, building report for example, If you have any materials built for training lawyers or court personnel to engage in authentic youth engagement we'd love access to review those materials).

[OB]

1. If you were to design an online training that helped court personnel work to engage children and youth in legal proceedings,

-What would you want to know? What would be most useful to you?

- How would the training be delivered?
- Who would you want to hear from? (Judges? Lawyers? Social Workers? Youth?)
- What topics or issues would be of most value to you?

1. Based upon your experience, what recommendations do you have related to the development of a training to help engage children and youth in court proceedings? What advice do you have for the designers of this training? [OB]

[OBJ]

1. Have any particular programs, policies, statutory changes, or court rules led to higher rates of youth attending court and speaking in their own cases?

[OBJ]

1. As laws, times, and needs change, how should the courts ensure youth engagement policies are formed and adapted by youth?

1. What have we missed? What else should I know about the involvement of children/youth in child welfare court proceedings?



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 website, Administrative and National Policy Requirements at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/administrative-and-national-policy-requirements>