

## *Foster Care as a Support to Families, Not a Substitute for Parents*

### Lifting Youth Voice and Choice

I am a youth advocate and serve on the Brevard Youth Leadership Council. We advocate for youth voice and choice within policy and practice changes by collaborating with our State and community agencies. Through the work of the council, I became part of a youth voice movement in Florida called One Voice IMPAACT (OVI). OVI seeks to harness authentic youth voice, create space for youth and young adults with lived experience to work alongside system leaders to find solutions to local issues, and provide a platform for statewide collaboration.

Through OVI, I had the opportunity to co-create and co-present a statewide webinar with Dr. Peter Pecora from Casey Family Programs. The webinar “The Value of Youth Voice in Placement Stability” gave me a chance to share my foster care placement transition story and provide recommendations on how listening to youth in care can help maintain placement stability.

I spent 4 years in the foster care system and lived in six different placements—four group homes and two foster homes. One time, my case manager picked me up from school. When we got to the group home, I found my belongings packed in trash bags by the front door and I was told that I was moving. Later, I found that some sentimental items were missing, and I did not get the chance to say goodbye to my friends. I wasn’t told what was happening or where I was going. I was made to feel like it was all my fault.

I had a really hard time moving. I ended up going to five different high schools. These displacement experiences made me feel alone, ashamed, and unwanted. I share my story so that people will think about what they can do to change the system.

I want people involved in the foster care system to know about trauma and adolescent brain development. Instability in foster care can make behavior problems worse. Youth are undergoing physical changes, emotional turbulence, feeling stressed by school, relationships with peers, and their brain is still developing. I learned that the brain does not fully develop until the late 20s, which makes adolescence susceptible to making impulsive decisions and engage in risky behavior. Add trauma and instability to that equation and it is a recipe for disaster.

When there are issues in a foster or group home, youth need someone they can trust that will listen to them. Someone who understands how the adolescent brain works, who understands that youth in foster care feel ostracized, someone who can be trauma sensitive in responding to youth’s behavior. I advocate for youth in foster care because I want them to have a better experience than I did with things like



placement transitions. I hope that by sharing my story, child welfare professionals may become empowered to include youth voice in issues such as placement transitions.

Learn more about One Voice IMPAACT on its [website](#).



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Administration for Children and Families  
Administration on Children, Youth and Families  
Children's Bureau

