

Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast
Foster Care Alumni: Making Lived Experiences Matter Part 2 TRANSCRIPT

Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; April Curtis-Rivera, Foster Care Alumni of America; Latasha Pearson, Foster Care Alumni of America; Victor Sims, Foster Care Alumni of America; Kodi Baughman, Foster Care Alumni of America

[Music Introduction] [00:00:00]:

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:00:03]: This is the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, a place for those who care about strengthening families and protecting children. You'll hear about the innovations, emerging trends and success stories across child welfare direct from those striving to make a difference. This is your place for new ideas and information to support your work to improve the lives of children, youth, and families.

TOM OATES [00:00:32]: This is the second of a two-part conversation with members of Foster Care Alumni of America. We've been talking about the deeper impacts behind leveraging lived experience within child welfare policies and programs. This conversation continues as the group provides guidance for other foster care youth and alumni when considering sharing their deeply personal stories - including how to make sure advocates establish boundaries on sharing, how to address the emotional toll of being on display. You'll also hear some detailed thinking toward reforming our current foster care system. Welcome into the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast everyone. Tom Oates here with you again. A reminder, you can subscribe to the Information Gateway Podcast on Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, Spotify, Stitcher and SoundCloud. We appreciate you joining us for the conversations around the perspectives, innovations and insights surrounding child welfare and helping to improve outcomes for the children and family served by the nation's child welfare professionals.

[00:01:34]: We're joined in this episode by members of Foster Care Alumni of America. April Curtis Rivera, FCAA's co-founder and board chair; Victor Sims and Latasha Pearson, both of whom served on FCAA's National Foster Care Youth and Alumni Policy Council; and Kodi Baughman, a member of FCAA's Policy and Advocacy Committee. We pick the conversation back up with Victor Sims addressing the differences between the terms lived experience, lived expertise, and alumni and why it's so important.

VICTOR SIMS [00:02:06]: April will say, I had an argument - probably Latasha and Kodi have seen it too - about people with the alumni word and everyone has their own opinion about it. And I've been very, like, intentional about, like, fighting that. And it's because yes, we have lived expertise, we have lived experience, like that's no question. But to say alumni, it makes me feel like I'm not the only one that has went through it. And that's why I've always associated with that word, even though I use lived expertise, lived experience, like I still use those other two words. I don't think it's to say, like, just because I don't, like, I use those words that I don't agree that I'm also in this category. It's saying I recognize that I have people out, like, outside of myself that I can tap into. I believe when you - the difference between alumni and lived expertise and lived experience is, is having the association with others and being able to have the association with other people in regards to those conversations is why I've struggled through my lived expertise. That's how, most of my healing hasn't happened because of a therapist, it hasn't happened because of, it's happened because I talked to, like, April, I talked to Kodi, I talked to Latasha, I talked to Sam, I talked to Scott.

[00:03:16]: Like, there's a whole list of people. When I'm disregulated, the first thing I think about is not calling a therapist, I gotta call my family, I've gotta call the alumni, I've gotta call those people that understand what I've been through and that can actually give me the answer of how they've made it through. And it may not be like an actual answer. It may just be, Vic, you know, this is a tough time. It's

okay not to be okay. Like, eight months ago when the pandemic first started, - and, actually it's about a year ago, gosh, time's going by - when the pandemic first started and George Floyd, I went through a huge it's not okay moment. One, I'm an African American guy. And then I'm an African American guy that's locked up in a room for days at a time because I've gotta keep myself safe. Same thing that the system teaches us, keep yourself safe. You know, we created a safety plan, and our safety plan was put a mask on and lock yourself in rooms. Don't talk to people. Keep yourself safe from all other people because like the pandemic, like our parents, may, like, affect you for the rest of your life.

[00:04:22]: And that's how I saw, like, the pandemic for at least the first two, three months and then seeing an African-American get shot, I was sitting there, I'm like, how do I deal with this? And, April will tell you, I probably called her at that time every other week because I was just like, I just need to hear your voice. We don't, I don't have anything to say. You know, let's, let's talk to one of your kids. Let's just hear your kids in the background. I don't have anything to say, I just wanna be on the line. Kodi will tell you I sat on the phone with him, like days straight just, hey, how you doing? Don't have anything to say. I might repeat the same thing I repeated for the last week about all I did was get on my computer, go on a Zoom call - that's all I did all day. But at that, like, at that moment, like my biggest therapy has been using the alumni system. And I tell some of my closest friends that aren't in the alumni system, in the beginning of the pandemic, I needed the check-ins, I needed the random chats. And, April will tell you, I reach out to the policy account, so like on numerous times, like let's just get everybody together. Because at that moment I knew like, I didn't need anything else in the world except to see people that had the same experience, that could have raw discussions about things.

[00:05:27]: And, in those discussions, like, there were a lot of things that were pulled out about how people felt like the foster care system prepared them for the pandemic. And they were seeing those same trends and themes, whether it was, you know, going in a grocery store and seeing there was no food on the shelves, reminded them of the shelves that were like, that, that were empty at their own homes when they were growing up in care. And, different things like that, was like open and raw, but like where did we have that setting. Like, I could not have explained those same feelings to a therapist saying, now, I just don't know why I don't feel okay with this, And, all the therapist would have told me was, oh it's because you know, we're in a pandemic and now you're sitting here, now you're by yourself, compared to let's dig -

APRIL CURTIS-RIVERA [00:06:05]: So, I want to be able to say, Victor, make no mistake, you guys. Many of the names that he mentioned are doctorates, are therapists, are social workers, are clinicians, so make no mistake that it wasn't just I'm reaching out to, you know, his family, but we're, they all have different variances of experience as well as professional degrees. He may not call it a therapy, and we may not have said we're in a therapy session, however, but we're there. And what I heard the most - and, Tasha, you could, you could chime in, as well is - he said, I needed the seat at the table versus an agency needing us to have a seat at the table. That's what made it a safe space. So, if an organization is bringing people to the table - those with lived experience - understand the need. I needed a seat at the table. Tasha, what you think?

LATASHA PEARSON [00:07:00]: I definitely, I wish I had that, 'cause I totally understand where Victor is coming from when all that stuff was happening. I, because I had been disconnected, it's been harder to reconnect, honestly, for me because I'm such a different place than I was. And, I don't immediately have a lot of people around me or had the, I guess, years to connect with as many alumni as I wanted. I wish I had. But I definitely think that having conversations as us direct it really does give us that sense of community, that sense of people we can go to, rather than just only coming together when an agency

requires us to. So, I definitely think giving young people a choice to direct the conversation, when they would like to have the conversations is very crucial, as well.

TOM OATES [00:07:56]: First off, I want to pause and thank you guys for, for A, choosing to do this together, because anybody who's listening can tell the relationship and the bond and the strength that you guys have and, and, and the list of others that Victor mentioned. A couple of lessons that as you guys were talking that resonated with me was the term being on display. And to be able to say, if you're an agency and you are working with alumni, that they are not always on display for you or for anyone. Just like you would have your own personal story, no matter who you are, you choose who you share and who you don't share with. And that's just everybody has their own circle of family or tight friends. Those who are a little farther out and things you tell people at your job are different than things you tell your best friend over, who has been your best friend for 20 years. And recognize that somebody's experiences are, they're more than just there to be on display.

[00:09:03]: And the way you were describing it, I would say from what I hear, alumni are people. Expertise and experience are things. And alumni have those things. But it's the gathering together of say, here, here's who we are. I need my, my - alumni are peers, right, it's this group. Yet I have expertise and experience and so I will use that when I choose to use that or when I'm, you know, compensated for it. So that's, that's kinda like the lessons that at least I hear taking away. So, for, for, for those who are still in care or alumni who are out there, no matter where they are in their journey, guys, I want you to start to, to be able to maybe bestow a bit of advice on those who may be considering or being asked to contribute their voice or their perspective. Latasha, if I could start with you, what would be your advice for these folks? Just to make sure that when they choose to share their voice, that their voice is heard and, and, and leads to, and has some merit and leads to something that drives change.

LATASHA PEARSON [00:10:13]: I would definitely remind people to be open to evaluating where they are prior to sharing or whenever they are offered opportunities to share, I think it's important to acknowledge where you are in your own personal journey. Even if you are being presented opportunities, just to make sure that you keep yourself intact along the journey of advocacy. And then also just like I said, to be open to reaching out to other peers when you have questions or you may not know what to do in working with organizations. And the adults that also are around in those organizations, be open to the advice they try to bestow upon you. If you're given an opportunity to meet a rare gem like April, I definitely think she is an example of what a lot of organizations should have when it comes to connecting with young people and have someone there that cares about their personal development as well as their professional development.

[00:11:17]: And so I just, because a lot of people go through a lot of different things and we may come very guarded. For some, I think just being open to feedback from adults that do show an interest in you and do show that they care about your journey, as well as making sure that you also acknowledge where you are is gonna key for you to stay the course for years and years if it is something that you plan to do for a long time. That's my advice.

APRIL CURTIS-RIVERA [00:11:46]: You know, Tom, I'd like to - I know Kodi's on hand and we've said his name a couple of times. Kodi's been in a different role and has transitioned. He was a council member and now he's supporting council members. I'd love to just hear from him what that has meant for him. What, how has, what changes did he have to make or did he make changes in showing up and being supportive. Because he went from being, from us supporting him and now he's supporting other council members that are going to be hearing this, right? We actually have a open application of council

members coming in and a new shift. So, what does that mean for you, Kodi? I know I'm impromptu, Tom, but you gotta love me.

KODI BAUGHMAN [00:12:29]: Yeah. So, it's been actually wonderful. So, it goes back to the kind of experience, right? And when we talk about dual roles and everything like that, that's something that I really value, right? Being able to understand all the perspective sides of it all. Because when you go from going into the system and then working with the system and then you go from local to state and then you go state to national, there's like all these different things to it, right? Different barriers, challenges, experiences. What I love is that this past year, being able to just support young people in a new way, right? Not try to elevate my voice. Not trying - because I get, I've had opportunities to do that, right. And this is something I love to do. And I don't necessarily shy away from it, but I do love the aspect of elevating others and being able to come at it at a different approach of just being there purely as a support. Because I want to see them grow. Because the challenges of growing into, you know - that's why I love FCAA. Because accepting people at all ages, there's things that I never knew when I was 19 that I know now. And there was things that I would never have been able to be trained on to ever prepare me for that. And the knowledge that I bring is completely different than it used to.

[00:13:59]: The first time I was on the council, I knew I didn't know what that arena was truly like. I didn't know how to really participate until a year or two into the actual program, like counsel, right. Like I was just like, you know, what is my role, like how do I step up? Because it was intimidating at first, you know, you step on this board and there's people with bachelors, masters, and they have all this worldwide knowledge and I was like, they're all leaders in their own right from their own state. How can I compete with that, right? And then I was like, It's not a competition. It's just about elevating each other, right? And so now that I'm in this new role, it's like, how can I continue to do the best work possible for the system? Not just what, you know, maybe it's best for me, but how can I elevate to truly create that change that I want to see? So, it's definitely been a gift this past year to be able to work alongside the council and just other foster youth in general and, and being able to have opportunities like this, to be able to extend the, you know, arm out and try to bring them back to the table is, has been amazing. So, I've loved it.

[00:15:12]: It's definitely been something that has helped me grow professionally and be able to see all the work that happens on the back-end. That you don't see all the writing and the editing and all the, the like, some really hardcore work that happens behind the scenes that I, as a youth kinda took for advantage and I didn't truly appreciate that hard work that came in and the hours that you would log when everybody else is going to bed and I'm sending out emails at like 1 o'clock in the morning and didn't get to appreciate that, so.

TOM OATES [00:15:47]: Kodi Baughman, thank you for, for joining in and, and, April, you are welcome to play traffic cop at any time. I do want to continue a little bit about the advice for those, for those alumni, especially because earlier in our conversation, you had mentioned just reliving or sharing someone's story can, can be traumatic. It can, it can really - I mean, these are personal stories. These are stories that involve trauma. They involve loss. They involve questions. So when those other, let's say youth or alumni are considering contributing their voice, what's the guidance you would give them on how to navigate their emotions that may come out of revisiting their experience.

APRIL CURTIS-RIVERA [00:16:34]: I think the task is, there isn't a one size fit all. But I think that the best thing is to do the work. And what I mean by doing the work? There's not, you're not going to find that in the books. You're going to do the work to heal, to understand your journey, to understand how you

want to show up. How do you want to be present? And that's not always taught in a book. And, you got to understand that your passion, your drive can be easily mistaken for someone who's just not ready to speak when in the wrong presence of people. So, if someone doesn't appreciate your greatness for what you're bringing to the table, they may view it as, oh, that's a broken person or that's a, that alumni is still hurting, they're still dealing with it. Well, I have some news for all the young adults out there and for those that are my age and still going through it - just equivalent to those who face trauma that did not touch the child welfare system, they had to do the work. It didn't just start and end with them. They had to do the work along the way.

[00:17:33]: And so depending on how serious you want to be taken at the table or in your workforce or wherever you're at, you got to understand that there's a part of you that, it will always be refreshed. I just sat on a panel - so to hear Victor talk about, you know, the adoption and you, as a privilege - I was just on a panel about adoption three days ago, and I had literally paid homage to my uncle dad, and he passed away two days later. And so I understand what it means to show up. That doesn't mean that I'm suppressing the emotions or that I'm an emotional wreck, right? It means that as I have grown older, I've had to learn ways to be able to support myself in my healing and my family and practice those things. I'm not perfect at it. I call - just as you'll hear Victor or Kodi or Latasha talk about, they call upon me - I equally support and call upon them to show them that I'm human. They're made, they think there's a super cape somewhere or superwoman here somewhere. I don't have - I'm still doing the work, but that doesn't mean I'm not capable of doing the job. And that's the part that people have to understand.

[00:18:50]: There are true human beings out there doing the work and they're very capable of doing the job. But, they, you got to understand that the healing comes from within. Moving away from the concept of, you know, you're broken, you're damaged. You're none of those things. You're just in process, you're in transition. And so, you may not have the information. I remember the advocate I wasn't 19, 20 fighting for sibling Bill of Rights. It took 10 years to pass. And, had I had given up for it or just walked away from it, I don't know where, you know how I would process that. But, several gray hairs later - and yes, I have gray hairs - it passed. But it's because I stood with it, right. And so, understanding with our young leaders today, it's not going to change right away just because we're fighting for it or standing on the front lawn or we're advocating for it. Your advocacy may impact and will impact lifelong those that are going to continue to come into our child welfare system. We're just hoping to be at the back door to be able to put those pillars and the cement and add the foundation in place so that you don't have to go through what we went through. Do the work.

VICTOR SIMS [00:19:50]: I think one reason that we all call upon April a lot if because of consistency. She has consistently been here for me longer than foster parents have, longer than providers have. I mean, we take 18-26, that's eight years and, I remember my 24th birthday. I thought it was the greatest thing. It's like, oh my gosh, I've had a family for half my life. You know, that's such a crazy thing to celebrate. But to me like that was like the biggest milestone is just so I can say like, I've had a family for half my life. And, for April, like, I'll say I got, when I got the Seek award last year, the first person I called was April, texted, I don't even know if I was allowed to even tell people yet. But I didn't care. I didn't tell my mom yet. I didn't, like all I did was tell April.

[00:20:49]: And, it was because to me, that award for me, like wouldn't have been there if it wasn't for April. There was no way I would have been the person I am, accomplished what I accomplished, and one, had the confidence. April will probably tell you. I was probably the quietest person the first time I went there. I, matter of fact, the first three times I was in person with anybody, I brought my computer, I brought my laptop and every now and then I would just randomly say something. And, it was my way

of saying like, I don't know if I like you guys, I don't know if I trust you guys, but I do know that people on the other side of this e-mail or on the other side of Facebook or whatever I decided I wanted to be on during all the council meetings or at all the foster club meetings - whatever I was going to I knew that that was okay. And April told me once, she was like I know you're doing that because it comforts you. But it's okay to close it, even if it's just for 10 minutes. And, her, one being able to like, being willing to say like, hey, we're safe enough. And she actually sat beside me. And not sitting beside me as a teacher, but just sitting beside me as I like went through that stressor of like overcoming, it's okay to feel comfortable in this room. And, working through that with me.

[00:21:56]: And then my first time flying out of state, like her being willing to like cry and say, - well, she didn't cry until she figured out where I was sleeping and how I was going to get picked up and all that kinda stuff. But, like, she had this whole strong front of it's okay, you're going to make it to your graduation. You don't have to yell at anybody. I'll handle it. We've already got a flight. You're going have to have this connection, connecting flight. You're going to go the opposite way before you go to Florida. I mean, she figured it all out. And mind you I didn't call my mom. I just had them like, yeah, I'm not going to come trying to pretend like I was calm. But with April, I was freaking out. Like, I was no, no, this is my graduation, I only have one graduation. I just need something to go right in life. And, April was like it'll be handled, it'll be okay. Let's call your principal, let's let them know what's going on. It's okay, Vic. And, and she did and she allowed me to one, be okay with stressing out and then, two, be okay to know like, hey, we can handle this as a team. And mind you, like another kid to the side like they weren't going to fly out because I wasn't flying out.

[00:23:04]: So, like, it's okay. Like, April didn't get mad, like, okay, you want to support, Vic, good. It was just, like, it was probably the craziest first-time experience leaving the state of Florida. Mind you, I had no parents with me. Like, all I had was the people I went with. And I think if April, one, didn't create that safe space, I wouldn't have known who to call. Because, mind you, April wasn't even my person to call. Like, April was just a person I trusted to call. And, like, a complete difference and it would stay constant, consistent, you know, Vic, how are you showing up today. Is this a day you actually want to talk or is this a day, you know, you want to listen? And, it's okay to want to listen. And being okay with that, you know. There are times when she's like no, no, Vic probably needs to skip, which is why he's not saying anything. Don't, don't try to get it out of him. And now I just won't shut up. And, so, you know,

APRIL CURTIS-RIVERA [00:23:54]: Yes, we know. But what I got, my nuggets from Victor, Tom, is that note for young people and young adults out there is know your team or build your team. And that's okay. And that we're always building and we're adding and adding to our toolbox. But that it's and when you're an agency working with young people and young adults and bringing back alumni. They, understand that they have, they show up in different shapes, sizes, and emotions. But they show up. And that's the part that we have to do is embrace when young adults and leaders come to the table, they're showing up. And often times we have this high expectation that they're graduates or they're on honor role, or that one young adult that's made it out of North Carolina, yay, we got them. And all we do is we keep pulling on them. So, make sure you diversify who you're working with. And that you also understand that you may be, until they build their only team, a part of their team. So, you're their CEO, you're their governing board. And what does that look like? And so how do you show up for them as being their board of directors?

TOM OATES [00:25:02]: I'll repeat, April, some of your words though, you didn't say them, Victor said them on behalf of you. But for those, for those alumni - know your story and own your story and how you, how you bill, how you do you, how you, you know, either build your team and navigate your own

emotions is, is your way. It's the work that has to be involved is yours. But it's like you said, it's not going to be something exactly by the book. Because as you're all alumni, you have your expertise, you have your own experience, and that's, and that's where you have to apply those, those strengths. Wrapping up here, the policy council sets a series of priority areas for foster care reform. So, I'd like to look forward and I'm curious really as of now, 'cause it is, it's the spring of 2021. We're still kind of in the grass of the pandemic and just off the heels of the entire tumult of 2020. What do you, all three of you, what do you view as the most important areas for reform looking forward?

VICTOR SIMS [00:26:15]: All of them. No, I think, I think part of it is, I will say this. I believe the day will see the most amount of change is when we put people with lived expertise in those chairs. We say that when we're talking about every other diversity group, diverse group. I will say I even made a call at the organization I work for specifically like put lived expertise as a caveat of their experiences outside of just education experience, but also when we recruit, we talk about race, ethnicity and all that kind of great stuff when we're looking at job descriptions because federally, we have to do it. But to be truly, you know, informed and conform to where we need to be going, we have to, one, be okay with having, having people who have a different kind of knowledge. And that's, that's one thing when I first went into the field that I had to continually preach to program directors. Like, I probably should've been fired 15-20 times at my first job, if I'm honest with you. And it was just because I was very straightforward. Yes, I understand what the books say, I understand what this says, but common sense says like, the siblings to be together. I don't care if there's three babies underneath the age of five in that house because common sense says they need to be together.

[00:27:36]: Like, I will sign the safety plan that says I make the decision, if something happens in this home, I'm okay with it being my fault. Like, what I'm not okay with is separating siblings. We say we want siblings together. Not our fault mom had three kids underneath the age of five. So, just because we make up this random policy and procedure, like, we have to have common sense at some point. And that's, like, I did stuff like that. You know, kids turning 17, he's about to be 18, grandma committed a crime 28 years ago and we're not going to, like, place the child with her? No, that's crazy. When this child turns 18, he's going to go with grandma anyhow, I think he's gonna age out, like, he's going to deny all services because we haven't told him that we're okay with him being with family. I think that's it. We say we're family-focused. We create a system that says it's family-focused, but we don't deliver family-focused ways. And that's straight, straightforward. We want to say we tackle, to tackle congregate care, we want to tackle foster home. Well, if we're paying a group home, you know, a hundred, two hundred dollars a day and this grandma who can get her kid, her grandkid, we're afraid to pay rent and we want to see all these receipts on how are we gonna pay rent? Let's be honest, we're paying rent for the group home, we're paying for, you know, food for the group home, we're paying the beds at the group, we're paying everything, like, light to the group home and we can't send \$500 so grandma can get the beds and get caught up on her on her light bill?

[00:28:56]: Well, the problem is, is that we're not family-focused, we're family-focused whenever it's convenient. We're going to ask for the tax returns for grandma, like, you know. I will tell you, like, I work for an agency that, that brings kids in. And nobody asks me, oh, Mr. Vic, let's see, you know, what, how much money you guys currently have in your bank and see if like this rate for this kid is necessary. They say, okay, we'll give it to you and you've got a bed for him. Great. And no other questions are asked. And I think that's our problem is, our system of care, our foster parenting licensing system is, is highly systemically racist. We want a, a picket fence, we want a two-parent household and we want income out the wahzoo. And then we'll put them in a kinship home and we'll pay them half of what we pay a foster parent and then when they're ready to discharge then or disrupt them, all of a sudden, we've got

all these services that should have been in place. All of a sudden, we can all of a sudden pay rent. We can all of a sudden pay light bills. Well, we should have supported in the beginning. Because when a, when a family member comes to you and says they're done, like you're almost at a losing battle.

[00:30:03]: Like we, we expect this moral compass to come from families. And the same thing should be happening within our - I call them recruited and sign-on. So, you know, our recruited people are the ones we have to find out. Those are the family finders. that's grandma, that's aunts, that's uncles - like we're recruiting them. When we're looking at foster parents, those are people who were like, you know, I'm signing on to this team, whether you guys want me on this team or not, like, I'm qualified to be on this team, I'm a free agent. And being okay with investing in where we really say we want to invest in. If we want to be family-focused, we have to come up with creative, innovative ideas around it. It's cool to say we want to disband Title IV-E. It's cool to say that we want to upend the foster care system. It's going to do all of that. But, if we're going to upend those systems, we have to have true, tangible ways to provide support. You know, when I read the hidden foster care, like the problem there is because we're afraid to support people. So yes, we've got this hidden foster care system because well, now we don't have to pay for this. Now we don't have to do this, like we reduce our cost. And then this family suffers and we find out it was a hidden foster care because, you know, a year later grandma needs to do this and like all of a sudden, we're up in arms because we don't want to support grandma. We want to say grandma, like, this is your grandchild. You should be doing this because this is your grandchild. Not because, you know, like you're providing a service to us. Like, it's a service to say like, I need you to step up in this time of need.

[00:31:30]: And that's why this foster care system, our foster care system has become what I call a false temporary system. It's temporary in the words of, we will say it's temporary, you're only here for X amount of time. And then we will create all these barriers that, that I will tell you when I was working at my last two agencies, I would continue to say you are one of two things, you're barrier builders or you're barrier busters. You can't be both. And I was always like, I said, Tom, I got in a lot of trouble. But but all the trouble I got, like I got into, they ended up getting me awards for things in the long run because all of a sudden, like, oh, you're a reunification hero. You got 84% reunification. Well, that's because I didn't follow, like, all the policies and procedures to a T, I said like, this is common sense. I'd say, you know what, like mom's been doing okay with this child for 15 years. Like, does it make sense to remove this child? You know, why are we removing for weed in Florida and in Seattle, Washington we're not.

[00:32:27]: Well, it's the same maltreatment. Let's be real. And since I've been involved with child welfare, people have been trying to figure out what, what abuse - and I can't think of the exact word, but there's a specific terminology that everybody's been trying to get defined within child welfare. And everybody's, like yeah, that's a good point. And here we are eight years later and nobody has still defined that word. And maybe April can tell you what word it was. I can't think of it on top of my head. Basically, like what levels, like, abuse and reaches that certain level before a child's removed and making criteria around it. I can't think of it right now, any other time I can think of it.

LATASHA PEARSON [00:33:06]: For me -

VICTOR SIMS [00:33:07]: Oh! Imminent risk.

LATASHA PEARSON [00:33:08]: Oh, yes! Imminent risk. Yeah.

VICTOR SIMS [00:33:11]: Yeah. It's like, I could figure it -

LATASHA PEARSON [00:33:14]: I definitely would say that, oh man. I definitely would say that moving forward to see reform, as Victor mentioned, that we definitely need more diversity in terms of those who are defining what changes should be made within the system as a whole. I think that the problem that I've seen, I've seen the same types of individuals in the department head seats since I started advocacy. And so, a lot of times we see the same issues come up, but they never move forward or past a certain point because we bring young people to the table, but we bring them to table to have a conversation and afterwards they go about business the way they want to do it, or they hinder the way they want to do it, anyway. So, I think it's really important that moving forward for true reform before we even talk about the different policies we would recommend that we look at the structure of a lot of agencies. We look at, nationally, who are the decision-makers, who are the stakeholders that we are constantly putting in those positions. And why hasn't there been more of those with lived experience or expertise at those, at those positions at a high level so that they can truly bring in a diverse representation of what the system looks like.

APRIL CURTIS-RIVERA [00:34:47]: My colleagues - Tom, sounds like you have another topic for, for a podcast with my colleagues.

TOM OATES [00:34:56]: We have, we have been known to take conversations and, and maybe break them up to give, to give our listeners a little bit of time to digest the first part, the second part, but no, I'm curious, April, to hear your thoughts about reform.

APRIL CURTIS-RIVERA [00:35:08]: So, I have the seat at the table, right? So nationally I work with several equally excited, passionate alumni and allies that have been coming up with reforms and making recommendations. So, I'm just going to highlight a few and then talk about some that are, that are more close and personal for me even in the work that I've been doing that are not so much on the master list, but. So, for the Family First, prevention related, right, support legislation to continue the 100% match for prevention services beyond October 1, 2021 most states are not in the position to benefit from the match because even if they've submitted approvable plans and claim to date back to the plan's submission, they have not implemented the necessary infrastructure to capture the requirement. For example, child-specific prevention plans, et cetera. Or they have built capacity, they haven't built capacity for prevention services yet. There are some states now that are rushing to implement, to be able to be, to back claim but, the rush to implementation as being driven by money versus what the system needs.

[00:36:16]: If the 100% reimbursement is extended, states will be able to implement more effectively and benefit from the financial reimbursement. Another reform opportunity is to create an expedited state plan for the approval process. In regards to the, the Omnibus Act, we're recent, right now, only 10 jurisdictions have been approved for the Title IV-E prevention programs. So, we don't have, we only have 10 jurisdictions, 10 states plans that have been approved for Family First Prevention. We need to release communications to states, reminding them as soon as they submit a state plan, they can automatically draw down Title IV-E funds at the 100% enhanced reimbursement rate for administrative trainings and costs. We used to, we need to use the Family First funds for financial assistance for housing and using Stafford Act authority. I know Ruthie and her crew - hey, they're a great crew for housing advocates that come out of Ohio, Jamal and Lisa - that have been pushing the reform around housing and ensuring that the FYI vouchers get implemented and expedited. Right now, we're still waiting for the federal government to provide provisions around the money that was released in

December that was specifically targeted towards COVID and those that are alumni on how states can access and draw on those funds. Those monies, they, they finish in September. And so, we're still, it's a clock that's ticking.

[00:37:53]: For me, for mental health, I would like to see reform around what it means to not only provide support for those that are currently in the child welfare system, but those that have exited and experienced the child welfare system and that have shown an increase need - what the pandemic has taught us is that trauma and triggers have happened all across United States and the world, right? So, we're going to see this years to come. So, in part of our plans for young people and families, we need to be pouring into our mental health services to be able to open the doors for someone like myself - I'll, I'll put myself out there - who may need support of how the COVID impacted me above and beyond what my employer can provide or even if I'm not employed. What does that look like and what type of monies should be out there where I can automatically draw down to receive those support services? We shouldn't put an age on a cap of receiving mental health services or support, especially for those that are continuing to relive trauma and dealing with it in times like the unprecedented times of the pandemic.

TOM OATES [00:38:56]: That's a lot. But, it's all relative, right? All things that you guys aren't the only people that have mentioned, you know, reforms like this. April, finally, where can folks learn a little bit more about Foster Care Alumni of America?

APRIL CURTIS-RIVERA [00:39:12]: So, you can go to our website, www.fostercarealumniofamerica.org, or you could send me an e-mail - april@fostercarealumni.org, april@fostercarealumni.org. And, you can connect, you can find out if there is a chapter in your state and if there isn't, you can work towards developing a chapter. We're going through some changes due to the pandemic and being able to re-establish chapters in the last year. And some of our leaders on here have taken up arms in being able to do so. You don't have to be a Child Welfare Advocate or child welfare expert to be, to join a chapter. It really is like the AARP. You just have to have aged out of foster care or retired like AARP, you just have to be a certain age for Foster Care Alumni of America. You just had to have touched the system, the child welfare system at any point in your life, and prior to your 18th birthday, and at 18 and older, we will work with you. Some of our old - I have, we have members that are older than myself and they're welcomed and supported, it comes with wisdom. Thank you for this time, Tom, and thank you to my colleagues, Latasha, Victor, and Kodi.

TOM OATES [00:40:22]: Yeah. April Curtis Rivera, Victor Sims, Kodi Baughman, Latasha Pearson, I cannot thank you guys enough for, for sharing the time together and letting us kind of be an ear on the wall to listen to you guys and for your, for your dedication and I thank you so much for being part of us here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast.

VICTOR SIMS [00:40:45]: It's an honor.

LATASHA PEARSON [00:40:46]: Thank you so much for the opportunity.

APRIL CURTIS-RIVERA [00:40:48]: You know, Tom, one would think that these may, these conversations may not occur, you know, on the regular without us having this podcast or this webinar, you know, I want to tell you the truth, they happen all the time amongst ourselves. We are constantly having these

Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast
Foster Care Alumni: Making Lived Experiences Matter Part 2 TRANSCRIPT

conversations behind closed doors, at our own tables. And so, we invite people to pull up a seat, sit at our table, come have a conversation, come break, break bread with us.

TOM OATES [00:41:11]: Well, thanks so much for, for pulling up at least a chair for us here in the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast.

APRIL CURTIS-RIVERA [00:41:17]: Thank you.

VICTOR SIMS [00:41:18]: Thank you, Tom.

TOM OATES [00:41:20]: You can tell that the four of them have, in a sense, grown-up around each other over the past few years. In fact, when we finished recording, the conversation continued for at least another 30 minutes. It was important for each of them to express the need for alumni to be able to establish some comfort, to be able to successfully advocate. And that's a charge for the agencies working with youth and alumni. See them for everything that they are. And if you recall from Part 1, the concept of never aging out of advocacy is important here. And also, for agencies to recognize what asking someone to share their story entails emotionally. If you head on over to childwelfare.gov and visit this episode's webpage, just search podcasts, we'll have links to FCAA and other youth advocacy organizations, along with Information Gateway's National Foster Care Month page and other resources for youth and those working with youth. Of course, if you have informational needs surrounding all aspects of child welfare - contact information, information about laws and policies, reports, tools for families - go ahead and visit Child Welfare Information Gateway at www.childwelfare.gov or reach out to our talented information support services team at info@childwelfare.gov. For now, thanks again for listening to the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. I'm Tom Oates. Have a great day.

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:42:49]: Thanks for joining us for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Child Welfare Information Gateway is available at www.childwelfare.gov and is a service of the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. The views and opinions expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect on those of Information Gateway, or the Children's Bureau.