

Center for *Children's* Advocacy

Testimony of the Center for Children's Advocacy in Support of Raised S.B. 180: An Act Concerning Permanency Hearings, Youth Advisory Councils, and Foster Families

Committee on Children
February 23, 2016

Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban, Senator Martin, Representative Kokoruda, and Distinguished Members of the Children's Committee:

My name is Zoe Stout and I am a Senior Staff Attorney at the Center for Children's Advocacy, a public-interest law firm representing Connecticut's most at-risk youth. We submit this testimony in support of Raised Bill 180, which provides for:

1. **Youth age 12 and over to be provided the opportunity to attend their permanency hearings;**
2. **Creation of youth advisory councils in congregate care programs;**
3. **Distribution of foster family profiles to youth; and**
4. **Foster care exit surveys.**

Youth in the custody of the Department of Children and Families are among the most vulnerable and potentially disenfranchised members of our community. Ensuring that they have a voice in all stages of their commitment to DCF is of vital importance to their success and well-being.

Youth over the age of 12 should have the opportunity to attend their own permanency hearings. Permanency hearings only occur once per year and are an opportunity for the judge to make important decisions regarding the youth's placement, services, and long-term goals. Connecticut should follow the lead of **34 other states** that have passed legislation or spearheaded initiatives to increase the attendance of youth at their permanency hearings and provide for meaningful participation of youth in court.ⁱ Studies of these initiatives and legislation overwhelmingly support the idea that youth participation in permanency proceedings improves outcomes for children and families. Enabling and encouraging youth to participate in court proceedings is widely recognized as a best practice that has gained support not only from states but by national organizations including the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges,ⁱⁱ the American Bar Association,ⁱⁱⁱ the National Association of Counsel for Children,^{iv} and the Pew Commission.^v Connecticut, which heralds itself as a leader in juvenile rights, should come in line with the majority of states that support this effort.

Youth living in congregate care should have a forum in which to voice their concerns and advocate for themselves. Despite a shift in public policy over the past several years which discourages placement of children in congregate care settings in favor of placement in foster family homes, Connecticut still has many youth who live in group settings. These youth often report feeling "abandoned and forgotten" by the outside world. This disempowerment is further felt from within the congregate care setting, where youth feel they have no voice in their day-to-day life experiences. For example, youth in one setting we worked in were barred from singing and dancing, for fear that youth would use it to antagonize other youth. Like any teenagers, these young people loved music and wanted the ability to express themselves without negative consequences. Because of their very valid concerns, we were able to have this policy changed. Our goal is for youth to experience the opportunity to take leadership roles within these settings, and work together to advocate for their needs.



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Youth should be given information about foster homes before they are placed. Youth in care are often bounced from home to home. They are moving in with families whom they have never met and know nothing about. This is a very unsettling proposition, even when youth are being removed from a home where they are being neglected or abused. Receiving information ahead of time about who lives in the foster home, where the child will sleep, what school they will attend, and what the household expectations are would go a long way to help alleviate some of the anxiety of entering an uncertain situation.

Youth should have an opportunity to give feedback on their experiences in foster homes.

Recruiting and retaining high quality foster homes, particularly families who open their homes to teens, is challenging. The youth who have resided in these homes are the best source of information about how they were treated, whether they felt supported, and whether their needs were met. Creating a formalized way to capture this information from youth when they are exiting a home ensures that these important perspectives are considered. Collecting and analyzing the results of these foster care family surveys will assist DCF in assessing which homes are the right fit for which kids and developing assistance for foster parents who need enhanced training.

We urge you to support Raised Bill 180 so that the foster youth of Connecticut can have their voices heard.

Respectfully submitted,



Zoe Stout, J.D.
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ⁱ Child has a right to be present for court proceedings in 34 states. See <http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/youth-voice-in-court.aspx>

ⁱⁱ The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges recommends that “children of all ages be brought to court, unless the judge decides it is not safe or appropriate based on information provided by case participants.” Whitney Barnes, E., Khoury, A., Kelly, K., “Seen, Heard, and Engaged: Children in Dependency Court Hearings,” National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, at p. 4 (2012). Available at www.ncjfcj.org/sites/default/files/CIC_FINAL.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Section 9 of the ABA “Model Act Governing the Representation of Children in Abuse, Neglect, and Dependency Proceedings” outlines a child’s right to notice and the right to attend and participate in all hearings related to the child’s case. https://apps.americanbar.org/litigation/committees/childrights/docs/aba_model_act_2011.pdf. See also http://www.americanbar.org/groups/child_law/what_we_do/projects/youth-engagement-project/expertise/engaging-youth-in-court.html

^{iv} The National Association of Counsel for Children recommends that “[c]hildren and parents should have the right to reasonable notice of every court hearing, as well as to be present and to be heard at all proceedings in which their rights are at stake or decisions about their lives are being made.” NACC Policy Agenda (2015). Available at <http://www.naccchildlaw.org/?page=PolicyAgenda>.

^v The Pew Commission recommends direct participation by youth in court proceedings, noting that “[c]hildren, parents, and caregivers all benefit when they have the opportunity to actively participate in court proceedings, as does the quality of decisions when judges can see and hear from key parties.” The Pew Commission, “Fostering the Future: Safety, Permanency and Well-Being for Children in Foster Care,” at p. 42 (2004). Available at http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/legacy/uploadedfiles/phg/content_level_pages/reports/0012pdf.pdf