

# CUT OFF

*Oregon foster youths have created a bill that would make sibling contact a legally binding right*

BY EMILY GREEN  
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It's been two years since DeAnna Baker has seen or heard from her two little brothers. Baker, 16, and her younger siblings have been in and out of Oregon's foster care system since they were infants, moving back and forth between foster homes and living with their parents on the outer west edges of the Portland metro area.

During the final year that they lived in their parents' home, their mother and two older siblings were no longer in the picture.

That's when Baker began to assume a parental role. A child herself, she was the most dependable person in her little brothers' lives. "I'd make them food. I'd get them dressed. I'd pick out their clothes - that kind of thing," she said.

After they were removed from their father's custody for the last time, the three were placed in a foster home in Newberg, but the placement wasn't right for Baker.

She eventually moved back north, to Forest Grove, to live with her grandparents. She was 25 miles away from her little brothers, but she made sure to stay in contact with them.

At first, visits were twice a month, then once a month, but her access to them slowly dwindled, she said.

It was after her former foster parents formally adopted her brothers, Baker said, that she was cut off from them completely.

"It's hard - really, really hard," she said.

"How would it feel to have your arm chopped off? Like they are always there, and then all of a sudden, they're not. I miss seeing their faces. They are going through puberty, and I don't know what they look like."

When Baker joined Oregon Foster Youth Connection in the summer, she wanted to find a way to ensure that other foster kids wouldn't be cut off from their siblings the way she was from hers.

Oregon Foster Youth Connection, founded by a former foster youth in 2008, is a program of Children First for Oregon. OFYC is a statewide, youth-led advocacy group with roughly 50 active members, all current and former foster youths ages 14 to 25.

When it comes to getting legislation passed, OFYC is a heavy hitter; every bill its youthful members have had introduced into the Oregon Legislature has eventually been signed into law.

Before Oregon's 2017 legislative session officially began, OFYC's bill to create a Foster Children's Sibling Bill of Rights had already been introduced as House Bill 2216.

Baker was one of four foster youths who created the policy recommendation for a Sibling Bill of Rights at OFYC's 2016 Policy Conference in July. At the end of the four-day gathering, the youths presented their work to

lawmakers and service providers at their annual luncheon. The words they shared that day are represented nearly word-for-word in the bill, said Lisa McMahon, OFYC's program director.

A recent survey of 525 current and former foster youths in six states, including Oregon, asked participants to pick the top five issues they felt were most important and in need of change in the foster care system.

The most-selected issue was "seeing siblings," with 52 percent of the foster youths naming it as one of their priorities.

In Oregon, 60 percent of youths selected "seeing siblings," and 60 percent also selected "preventing homelessness."

Oregon and Massachusetts were the only two states where more than 40 percent of survey takers also selected "foster parent training" as a top priority.

While OFYC members decided to move forward with siblings' rights, there were other policy recommendations they drafted at the 2016 Policy Conference that they hope will move forward outside of the legislative process.

McMahon said Oregon Department of Human Services has been receptive to working with the youths in her program on these other

policy recommendations.

Those recommendations include conflict resolution training for foster parents and caseworkers, better communication with each foster child at the start of his or her placement, better screening of potential foster homes and parents, and a mandate that a DHS employee conduct monthly visits of foster homes "using a physical checklist to inspect the living environment."

They also want DHS to be more supportive of LGBTQ foster youths, enabling them to open up to care providers without obstacles such as "religion and judgment," and better access to LGBTQ resources.

Finally, the youths indicated they wanted specialized training for caseworkers working with youths ages 18 to 21 that will better equip them to help the foster youths transition successfully out of foster care.

"We need to be doing a better job of listening directly to the people that services impact; in this case, foster youth," said Sen. Sara Gelser (D-Corvallis).

That's why she's signed on as one of several chief co-sponsors of the Foster Children's Sibling Bill of Rights.

"The connection between siblings is critical, and unfortunately, our current system is very

focused on what is convenient for the system," Gelser said.

McMahon said that for the foster kids, maintaining contact with their siblings helps ensure that they have family members who are there for them as they move into adulthood.

For the kids, it's a no-brainer.

"I want siblings to be able to have contact with each other. It's not right for them to be separated just because their parents mess up," Baker said.

If approved, the bill would write into state statute foster youths' right to maintain contact and visits with siblings and their right to be provided with transportation so visits can take place. Additionally, it would require that foster parents receive training on the importance of sibling relationships.

When asked if she was concerned about adding requirements foster parents must meet, given the state's crisis-level shortage of foster homes, Gelser said it shouldn't be a compromise.

"The foster care system needs to be solely focused on the needs of youth," she said. "I believe that quality foster parents that are stepping up and opening their homes to love and support young people in their time of need will want to ensure that they are connected



DeAnna Baker, 16, belongs to Oregon Foster Youth Connection, a youth-led advocacy group. She and three other foster youths helped create a policy recommendation for a Sibling Bill of Rights.

PHOTO BY JOSEPH GLODE

with their siblings. It's just the right thing to do."

A spokesperson for DHS declined Street Roots' request to speak with someone about how this bill might affect current practices, citing expected amendments, but said the agency works closely with OFYC and values its work.

The current version of the bill includes a provision that would have helped Baker stay in contact with her little brothers. It mandates that any adoptive placement must include terms ensuring that contact with siblings is encouraged and maintained.

However, McMahon said OFYC's youth members will add an amendment to that provision, changing the language so that it's a strong suggestion rather than a mandate.

"They don't want one of their siblings to possibly not get adopted if the family doesn't feel like they can handle having a relationship with all current and future siblings," McMahon said.

Also included in the bill is a requirement that foster youths be "immediately and timely notified of placement changes or catastrophic events affecting a sibling."

This element is crucial to 19-year-old OFYC member Raven Bowman, who also helped draft the policy recommendation.

When her younger brother was killed in a car crash in November 2014, no one thought to notify his siblings. Her older sister didn't learn of his death until the day before his memorial.

Bowman said her brother's death was especially difficult for her little sister because the two were "like twins."

Like Baker, Bowman also felt she was a protector of her younger siblings.

She described being separated from her siblings while in foster care as being like torture. Because she made the decision to leave a foster home where she was being bullied, she felt like she had failed her younger siblings.

"I didn't know if they were OK, and it was fear. It grew every single time I couldn't talk to them or didn't know what was going on," she said. "When I moved away, it got very difficult (to contact them). There were restrictions on phone access; I couldn't make connections with them. I often didn't know when visits were. I wasn't allowed on social media, so I couldn't contact them that way."

Now she's able to talk to them from where she's living in Creswell, but she rarely sees them because they live an hour south in Lebanon.

When Street Roots spoke with Bowman in mid-January, she said she still hadn't been able to give her siblings the Christmas presents she had purchased for them.

"When you are in the foster care system, siblings are all the connection that you have," she said. "They know what you are going through; they know everything. They want to help you. They want to stick by you."

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FOSTER YOUTH