

FOSTERING CHANGE

An advocacy group of foster youths sets its sights on the 2019 legislative session on improving transitions and preventing houselessness

BY LIBBY DOWSETT
STAFF WRITER

Foster care youths past and present are drawing on their own traumatic experiences to help create policies to improve the system – and they have a fresh list of ideas for 2019 lawmakers.

“My experience taught me a lot about how screwed up our systems are,” said Elsana, a 23-year-old who is still struggling to find stability after growing up in foster care.

In the past 10 years, Elsana has bounced in and out of several foster care homes and facilities. After running away from one group home, Elsana was sucked into the world of sex trafficking. When authorities found Elsana, it was off to more foster homes and Portland’s Rosemont Treatment Center.

That’s when the youth decided to end it all.

“I remember people running into the room and people screaming,” Elsana said. “I could feel myself dying. I could hear the voices turning to whispers, saying, ‘Why did you do this?’”

Elsana (who uses the pronoun they/them) said surviving that suicide attempt was a turning point. A case worker insisted they be allowed to attend a Young Life youth retreat at Washington Family Ranch in Central Oregon, where Elsana made a conscious decision to prove everyone wrong – by becoming a success.

Preventing houselessness

Flash forward to 2018, and we find Elsana playing a key role in creating new foster care legislation in Salem. Elsana and about 30 other former and current foster children with Oregon Foster Youth Connection have come up with a list of recommendations to bring about change.

OFYC is a statewide, youth-led advocacy group that focuses on changing policy through peer support and adult mentorship. Members build connections with other foster youths and grow as future leaders.

This legislative session, the youths are focusing on ways to decrease “houselessness” for young people aging out of foster care and prevent foster home disruptions for those still in the system.

“Even if they’re not on the street, foster youth are houseless,” Elsana said. “Worrying if you’re going to come home to a bag packed and walk out the door again, and that’s the only thing you have, is your belongings in a garbage bag.”

Emily, a 24-year-old former foster youth, is also part of the OFYC group. She and Elsana participated in this summer’s OFYC Policy Conference at Willamette University, where youths developed proposals to take to Department of Human Services leaders and,

possibly, lawmakers.

Emily said sharing her past experiences with other OFYC members was emotional.

“When you start talking about the issues that have affected your life, there are a lot of wounds,” she said. “It takes a while for those wounds to heal.”

Emily was born into foster care. She’s struggled with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder and autism spectrum disorder. She was adopted as a toddler but was returned to the system at 9 years old. Emily said the system let her down again when she was abused in foster care.

“Even as an 11- or 12-year-old, I couldn’t recognize I was being abused,” she said, “but I think a CASA could have picked up on the signs.”

CASA stands for Court-Appointed Special advocates, a national organization. CASA volunteers help make sure children in foster care are having their needs met in court and their foster homes. As part of their new policy recommendations, Emily and OFYC members are calling for an increase in funding for CASA, with an emphasis on recruiting volunteers from diverse backgrounds.

The number of foster children in Oregon far surpasses the number of available volunteers, OFYC program coordinator Kate Rosenstein Houston said, so many foster children never receive a designated CASA.

“Youth are bringing up the same issues as youth in my day,” said Rosenstein Houston, a former foster child herself. “The problems are still being discussed by leaders in the field 10 years later, so it’s proof people are listening, but not that they are implementing change.”

More funding for CASA falls under the OFYC goal of securing better services for people ages 18-21. The young policymakers want to prevent future houselessness by helping youths who are aging out of the system. One of the biggest asks is for an additional \$4 million for Independent Living Program services. The current budget is \$2 million to help youths who may be struggling with the transition.

“The problem is ... they say, ‘You’re on your own,’ but there was never any opportunity to put the training wheels on, so to speak,” Emily said. “You don’t get a pilot program to learn how to live on your own.”

Elsana agreed, saying more Independent Living Program funding, to smooth the transition from foster care to adulthood, is essential.

“So, you’re leaving care ... with no job, haven’t finished high school, have nowhere to live,” Elsana

said. “What do you want me to do, guys?”

Elsana and Emily said better communication among foster youths, case workers and foster parents can help prevent houselessness and disruptions in placements. OFYC conference participants want foster youths to be better informed about their housing and health care options so they can have more of a say in the decision-making process.

“Caseworkers don’t feel like the youth voice is important,” Elsana said. “They claim they know what’s best for us.”

Emily said she felt manipulated by caseworkers.

“They weren’t really talking to me; they were only talking to my whole web of people,” she said. “I considered them my over-lords.”

The youths are recommending the creation of a brochure or list of mental-health-care options for foster children. They also want lawmakers to support an expansion of the Oregon Health Plan to better meet the needs of foster youths, including more access to evidence-based trauma therapy and more-timely dental and orthodontic services.

Another health policy recommendation is medically based sexual education programs for foster youths and caseworkers, which focus on healthy relationships, sexual exploitation and sex

trafficking.

Quality foster homes, providers

To improve the quality of foster homes and providers, OFYC youths suggest that caseworkers create resource centers for foster parents to offer classes, activities and informational materials about raising children of different religions, beliefs and lifestyles.

They also recommend that caseworkers meet with foster youths at the age of 14 to review their housing options as they prepare

to transition out of foster care.

“The idea is, you can be in a home-share program or other option where you can be with like-minded individuals or people you feel safe with,” Emily said.

The youths want to prioritize housing for LGBTQ+ youths and minorities, who may find it more difficult to find housing after exiting care. The proposal recommends follow-up meetings every six to 12 months to continue the conversation on housing.

Another suggestion is a new one-month waiting period before youths are assessed in new foster placements. Rosenstein Houston said that often, youths are assessed using the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strength, or CANS, assessment within the first two weeks of entering a home.

Elsana said young people often are still in shock during those weeks, and they haven’t had the chance to get to know their foster family or the specialists evaluating them.

“These youth are being traumatized by being ripped from their family, or whatever they’ve known,” Elsana said. “You’re taking them to a whole new life, and that causes trauma, so these assessments are never accurate because a youth isn’t going to open up to a stranger.”

Rosenstein Houston said the one-month period will increase the chance of a healthy relationship-developing between foster youths and their foster families.

“So everyone’s on the same page,” she said. “Specific challenges can be identified and the stuff that’s easily fixed before such an important behavior-based assessment.” In addition to a waiting period, the youths are recommending the creation of crisis support plans to detail what should happen if a problem arises within a placement.

“I know a lot more youth would have the ability to thrive if they had a plan,” Rosenstein Houston said. “They could look at it and say, ‘OK, this is the expectation. If I don’t meet this for any reason, this is the response of my caseworker or foster



Elsana (left) and Emily are former foster youths who are working with Oregon Foster Youth Connection to effect change in the foster care system.

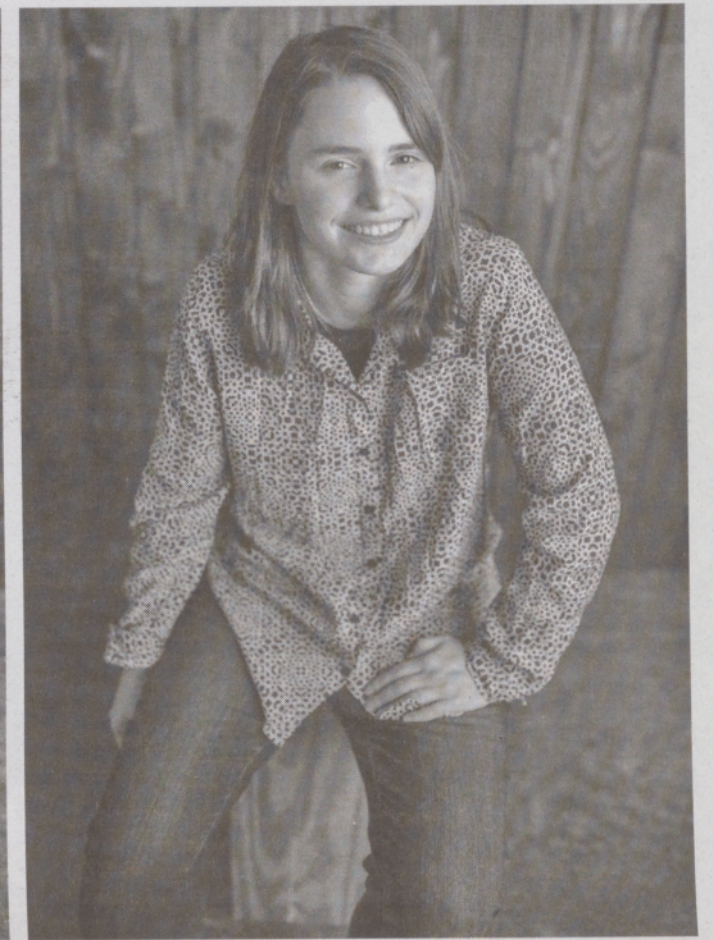


PHOTO CREDIT: PFAUS PHOTOGRAPHY

parent.”

As it is now, foster youths often are removed from the home for what the foster child might consider a minor infraction.

“A youth gets in trouble in school or something,” Elsana said. “So the foster parent says you’re not doing well here, so we’re going to send you to another home.”

Rosenstein Houston said that again, better communication is key.

“A lot of times, what starts as a small issue builds to a bigger issue,” she said. “And there isn’t support for the family when they ask, ‘OK, how do we mediate this?’”

“Unfortunately, the response is usually just to remove the child from the home,” she said.

The proposal for a crisis support plan is already gaining traction with Child Welfare. Oregon Child Welfare Director Marilyn Jones recently implemented the plan with a specific foster youth, and she was able to keep the girl in her home. OFYC members say this is an example of how the OFYC recommendations don’t always require a DHS policy change or a new law. OFYC participants have another tool to de-escalate problems in the foster care system. They recommend that the state hire former foster youths to help bridge communication barriers between DHS and foster children.

Emily said former foster children, like herself, recognize how post-traumatic stress disorder plays a role in many of these situations.

“Your heart rate goes up, you sweat and maybe go into that fight or flight mode,” she said.

Emily said she felt those same feelings as

ONLINE

■ Learn more about the OFYC proposals: www.ofyc.org/2018/08/10/2018-policy-recommendations/

■ Street Roots’ previous coverage of OFYC’s Foster Children’s Sibling Bill of Rights: news.streetroots.org/fostersiblings

■ By fully funding the CASA program, Oregon could easily remedy many issues plaguing its foster care system: news.streetroots.org/CASAFunding

she and other foster youths shared their past experiences in July at the OFYC Policy Conference. Emily, Elsana and the other participants “got personal” as they discussed how to help improve the foster care system.

“Your reaction to your trauma comes up,” Emily said. “The atmosphere gets a little tense.”

Growing success story

This isn’t the first time foster youths have come together to recommend legislation. In 2017, lawmakers passed OFYC’s Foster Children’s Sibling Bill of Rights, which established rights for siblings who are separated in foster care.

Previously, OFYC youths advocated for Oregon’s tuition waiver for foster children at state universities and community colleges. They also successfully pushed for a foster

child’s right to open a savings account in their own name, participate in ongoing extracurricular activities, and receive assistance in learning to drive or obtaining a driver’s license.

“We create this safe space, where you’ll be respected and your voice will be heard,” Rosenstein Houston said of the OFYC atmosphere.

Emily said that even with record participation at this summer’s conference, there is plenty of room for growth.

“More foster youth need to know this exists, and this is an opportunity,” she said. “The more people, the better.”

Elsana was proud to be an OFYC facilitator at the 2018 conference, especially after arriving at the 2017 conference nervous and terrified to speak.

“I had no confidence,” Elsana said. “But within three days of working with this group, I was able to go into the Capitol and talk to representatives and senators with the utmost confidence, and talk about my personal story without crying.”

OFYC youths are narrowing down their legislative recommendations and are expected to present their final proposals to lawmakers in January. The group said that since its inception in 2008, Oregon lawmakers have passed every piece of legislation developed and proposed by OFYC.

“It’s great that it will help future kids, but it’s frustrating that it doesn’t change what happened before,” Elsana said. “It doesn’t take back the struggles everyone had to go through to get here.”

“Why can’t I change it all at once?”