

foster advocates

3 Years In: **Looking Up And Forward**

June 2018-June 2021



foster advocates

Our Mission

Foster Advocates is not just our name; it's what we do. We foster advocacy, policy change, and organizing by partnering with Fosters and impacted communities.

Our Vision

We envision a Minnesota where every person involved in Minnesota's foster care system has the same access to opportunities and outcomes as their non-foster peers. We envision a Minnesota where Foster voices are respected and our community expertise is sought in every aspect of the child welfare system.

Our Foster Community

Early leaders in our network stated foster care creates a significant cultural identity, akin to other immutable characteristics, that is unrecognized once they are reunited with family, adopted, or age out. In response, we use the term Foster to name and claim this unique identity.

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To our Foster community:

I was told when I started Foster Advocates that I wasn't going to be able to "look up." I didn't know what it meant then, but I now understand. Since founding, I haven't been able to take time to reflect on our growth. I also haven't had time to celebrate our wins. It has been one push after the other—but it isn't everyday that the organization you founded turns three-years-old. This is a milestone and a chance for us to reflect on the past three years as an organization.



I founded Foster Advocates in 2018 based on an audacious idea: that child-welfare systems change could be, and should be, led by the people most impacted. Since then I have seen the organization grow from just one person to a team of five. What started as an idea, in outrage that the same systemic challenges I faced in foster care are still present, has now moved beyond my personal vision. I am humbled to help build something truly community-driven.

In just three years we are shifting the Minnesota child welfare landscape in significant ways and I couldn't be more proud of the Fosters who not only have overcome tremendous personal challenges, but who are working to overcome systemic barriers too. This is what I think about as I reflect on the most gratifying moments from the past three years. It is not a legislative achievement nor program launch, but instead, it was the first time I spoke with a Foster about how they wanted to advocate for themselves and their community. Our conversation became a mirrored experience of validation, connection, and belonging, an experience that I wish I had at 18. I saw a bit of the future at that moment, that if our organization can keep doing this, it will make a shift for the next generation of Fosters. No matter how cynical I am about current systems, I know things are going to change—all I have to remember is that young person, and so many like them, and their vision and drive to change the foster care system.

I created Foster Advocates because no one else was doing the work, though that was a responsibility I tried to shirk. I didn't want to be pigeonholed because of life circumstances outside of my control, but I saw too many struggling to navigate the foster care system and I could no longer ignore the need around me. I came to this work reluctantly. I felt alone while I was in foster care and daunted in trying to change our broken child welfare system alone. I hoped systems change would be someone else's fight. It's not. It is mine—and I am so glad I am not alone in this effort.

Now that I've been able to look ahead, I know our most powerful work is connecting and organizing with other Fosters. I am not asking you to have faith in the system, county workers, or even in our organization. I am asking you to believe in your own power, and let us invest in you.

With Gratitude,

A simple, elegant handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a series of connected loops and a long horizontal stroke.

Hoang Murphy, *Founder & Executive Director*

Summary

Across this report you'll read more about our vision, values, and approach that has developed over the past three years. You'll hear from some of our Foster leaders and our Board chair. We hope you will take the time to dive in and learn more about our work, previewed across this timeline, and our bold plans for the next few years.



June 2018—Launched!

Identifying our Space: Our first year was a test of survival and laying out the value of this work. Hoang's focus was on meeting with partners and legislators, mapping the landscape, and clarifying that no one else was addressing system-level change or holding our community central to the work.

2019

- Introduced our first bill proposal
- Added Americorps VISTA position
- Stewarded state data agreement for compliance of foster-care student outcome reporting

Breaking Ground: Our second year showed that Foster Advocates was prepared to do this work, with a focus on investing in relationships and resources needed for Fosters to be able to engage deeply with leadership opportunities.

2020

- Grew to a team of three
- Passed our first bill to ensure more educational stability for students in foster care
- Implemented first leadership and design programs with Fosters
- Conducted first state-wide survey with Fosters
- Distributed over \$200,000 in COVID mutual aid and built out the Coalition of Foster and Family Advocates

Building the Foundation: This past year, we identified and grew across our core areas: relationships with Fosters and organizations, research partnerships, and advocacy platforms. COVID-19 accelerated our work, both in crisis with a redirect and focus on immediate harm-reduction, and in opportunity, to use stories, research, and partnerships to push for systems change. The experiences felt at large throughout the pandemic— isolation, lack of choices, uncertainty about the future— gave a small glimpse into the everyday experiences of those in foster care.

2021

- Launched our Fellowship program
- Worked with Fosters on testimony and op-eds
- Led Coalition to engage with the state to implement federal pandemic relief for older Fosters
- Collected data on college experiences and impacts of direct cash transfers
- Grew to a team of five
- Passed a bill for free higher education for Minnesota Fosters

JUNE 2021

And Beyond

- Piloting educational leadership programs to support Fosters getting to and through college
- Launching our Foster Advisory Board
- Continuing annual Fellowship and topic-specific design work
- Advocating for an ombudsman for foster youth
- Building out research partnerships, our coalition, and funding collaboratives focused on direct cash transfers for older Fosters

Did you know: In just three years, we: passed **2** bills, launched **3** leadership programs, conducted **4** surveys, and grew to a team of **5**!

Looking Forward

It's hard to believe sometimes the amount of difference we've made in just three short years. The impact of one small organization showing up and asking critical questions related to Fosters and COVID-19, education, and homelessness (to name a few key issues), shows how essential this work is, and illuminates the great potential for change in the child welfare system. We are committed to the long-term work of advocacy and movement building, and we've also shown that immediate changes—with big impacts on the experiences of and opportunities for Minnesota Fosters—are very possible.

It has also become clear that the needs of Minnesota Fosters outweighs our current capacity. Over the next three years, we have bold plans to scale to meet the demands of our Foster community.

We have done a lot despite being a young organization. Now, we are asking you to join us in deep **imagination, partnership, and investment** in our vision and growth for the next stage of our journey.



Grounding Our Vision

Three years marks a milestone, as our organization shifts from building our foundation to expanding our capacity to serve Minnesota Fosters. If you have been with us from the beginning, let us reintroduce ourselves and the grounding issues, values, and theory of change we've identified. If you are new to our village, welcome!

Key Issues

At the core of our work, we recognize that the child welfare system, as the primary intervention tool to support families and youth in crisis, is currently damaging to communities and individuals on multiple levels. Even in the best instances, the act of family removal always causes trauma. For too many in crisis, the cure is almost indistinguishable from the poison.

So why do we separate families so often? If children matter, then their families must matter. If we believe that it takes a village to raise a child, then it also takes a village to fail one.

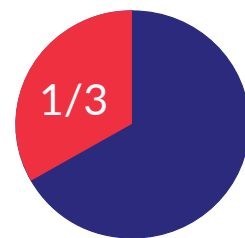
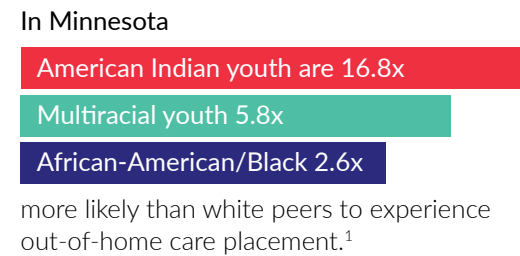
The idea that Fosters are “someone else’s kids” and therefore are not “my” responsibility is central to the challenge we face in reforming the system. As a state, we have failed to show that we care about our most vulnerable children, and the consequences of that indifference are staggering.

Fosters are our children. They became ours when the state separated them from their families. Communally, we owe Fosters a duty of care just as much as we do for the children in our own homes. However, Fosters have repeatedly seen at the personal level, and Foster Advocates has seen at the systems level, that this isn't happening. We are working to change this.

Over the past year, our team invested time internally and with Fosters to identify key root causes and areas of need in the Minnesota foster care landscape:

- **Disparities in family separation:** Not only does Minnesota have some of the worst disparities in the country, but our systems are still embedded in a history and culture that defaults to family separation versus truly investing in family preservation.
- **Public misunderstanding of foster care:** There is a great need to challenge misinformation and to break open the single story myth of foster care. Fosters need regular spaces to share their truth, and the larger Minnesota community needs to regularly listen to Foster voices.
- **Challenge with accountability:** Minnesota is one of nine states with a state-funded, county-administered child welfare system. This agency setup makes it possible for both the Department of Human Services (DHS) and counties to deny responsibility for the failures of the system. There is an urgent need for outside oversight as well as cultivating state champions for foster-related issues.

Minnesota is consistently above the national average rate for children in foster care and experiences almost double the reentry rate into care.¹



Minnesota Fosters identify as LGBTQ+ and Two Spirit.²

In 2019, 13% of foster care placements were due to alleged physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. The majority of cases involved parental substance use, alleged neglect, or caretaker or child mental health.³

- **Threshold cliffs and carceral state:** Current practices don't provide onramps for Fosters to transition out of foster care to sustainable self-sufficiency, and often perpetuate a foster-care-to-prison pipeline. A true investment in Fosters would cost less than current de facto pathways into carceral or shelter systems.
- **Systemic isolation and lack of agency:** Fosters deserve opportunities to be experts and not just subjects when it comes to sharing personal narratives, reclaiming the Foster identity, building peer networks, and developing their leadership and advocacy skills.

So, how do we address these deep and problematic roots? **To achieve a shift in imagination and narrative, we must listen to Fosters.** At Foster Advocates, we know there are leaders with lived experience ready to step up—and we work every day to honor their voices, power, and purpose.

As the only organization in Minnesota centered on organizing and advocacy with current and former Fosters, we are in a unique position to address these landscape needs. We create a unique and outsized impact through relationships, research, and reform.



Relationships

We believe that those closest to a problem are the closest to solving them, and our values ground our work in collective organizing with Fosters as they direct the growth of our networks, programs, communication, and advocacy.



Research

It is clear a problem not measured is a problem not seen by the child welfare system. Not only is there a lack of data on outcomes and needs for Minnesota Fosters, but also a lack of opportunities for Fosters to contextualize system problems.



Reform

Cultivating community and advocacy are inherently intertwined. We collectively initiate reform and work to put Fosters, as the experts, at the front of identifying policy and implementation tipping points and opportunities.

Growing up I had wished that more people had listened to youth in foster care. Plenty of people heard us—but they did not listen. I can't change what happened to me, but I most certainly can make room for other people like me.

-Donovan, 2020 HCD leader (Twin Cities)



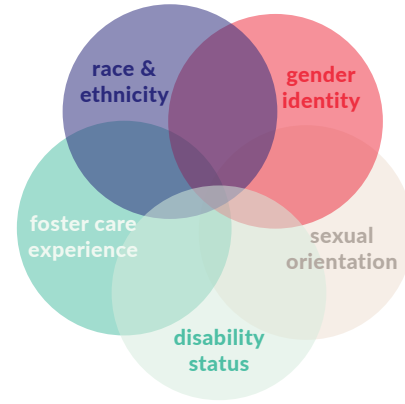
The Foster Movement

The past three years have shown there is great potential to build a movement in Minnesota led by Fosters. With every opportunity to step in as a leader, or share their story, or provide ideas for our programs and advocacy, Fosters from across the state have shown up. When asked “why now” for engaging in this work, over and over Fosters said:

If I had an opportunity before this, I would have taken it.

We have also heard, from Foster after Foster, the deep need to organize from an intersectional Foster identity. Many have been leaders in BIPOC and queer communities, on issues from education equity to juvenile justice, but say they often feel forced to background their Foster identity in those spaces. They name the difficulty of identifying publicly as a Foster because of stigma, assumptions, and the narrowness of public narrative around foster care. Fosters are calling for a space where they can connect with their identity peers, reclaim this part of themselves, and lead system change informed by their full self and collective lived experiences.

Every Minnesota Foster deserves a space for their lived experience and expertise to be honored, and for their deep reflection, creativity, and hope to be put into practice. Standing firmly on the side of young people impacted by the system in inequitable ways, our movement work aims to engage primarily older Fosters (~14-26 years old) when they are ready on their journey to turn pain into power. Each person has their own nexus point, when there is proximity to the experiences of care and enough distance to be able to look both backwards and forwards, turning the personal experiences into purpose and vision.



Foster care is a key area to test institutional change. System impacts—from broken social networks and trauma, to restrictions on agency—make Fosters deeply susceptible to problems in the social ecosystem. We see this across all issue areas: once young people have entered the foster care system, it is highly predictable that they will experience poor education outcomes, homelessness, food and job insecurity, and a myriad of other social harms. **The system has created this predictable vulnerability across generations of Fosters. However, something so predictable is also highly preventable—but only if we have the will to act.**

Focusing on Fosters, serving those at the most challenging center of system impacts, can have cascading benefits that lift up others in the community. If solutions do right by Fosters—they can do right by other vulnerable populations.

Minnesota can serve as a key testing ground for foster care innovation, because of our unique political and demographic makeup. There is a need for research, proof of concept, and leadership from the Midwest. If we can create change points in Minnesota, they can be replicated everywhere.



Foster Advocates’ vision and foundation has been tested over the past three years, especially in response to the COVID crisis. We are now at a crucial moment to grow into the organization our community deserves, as we continue to build a network of Foster leaders ready for transformational change. We envision the capacity to work with Fosters to place fulcrums at every place they identify a tipping point idea, and let their expertise and passion be the pull on the lever. **By truly investing in this network, we ensure this movement and change-work is not limited to Fosters’ time engaging with us, nor just to our organization.**

Theory of Change



Foster Advocates staff team, June 2021

Building the Foundation



Everything Starts with Relationship

Leadership Launch

In 2020, we conducted our first human-centered design (HCD) process with Fosters around the question, “How do we build power with and for Fosters?” These leaders challenged us to envision a ‘ladder of engagement’ for Minnesota Fosters that allows Fosters to ‘reclaim’ that part of their identity and have opportunities to connect with their peers.

From this visioning, we launched two core leadership programs:

- **A topic-specific HCD process each fall**

In 2020, we started with a focus on higher education to align with our 2021 legislative priorities. Our Fostering Education leaders developed and addressed the question, “Why do MN Fosters have lower rates of getting to and through college & career pathways, and how do we break those barriers and promote success?” Our leaders didn’t just stop at sharing lessons and ideas from their own lived experiences and expertise. The group led four prototypes to test their ideas: hosting a peer webinar, launching a survey, creating a resource guide, and sending recommendations to the state child welfare training academy. Their broader ideas grounded our larger Fostering Education launch (see page 12).

- **Our annual Fellowship each spring**

This extended cohort space allows Fosters to connect with their peers across the state while investing in their transformation as activists and activators. The Fellowship focuses on grounding in individual strengths, values, and boundaries, strategically sharing their stories for change, and building skills in advocacy and community mobilization. Upon completion of the Fellowship, Fosters can continue their advocacy work with us through our Community Board (see page 14), individual leadership, and other opportunities!

We deeply value the expertise Fosters bring to their engagement with us. All of our opportunities, from attending a data webinar to being in Fellowship, are paid to honor Foster’s time and talent.

Fosters are taught through the system that we’re so alone. This has made me focus on helping others, but sometimes I’m so focused on that I forget to help myself. Being in community through Foster Advocates—being able to meet others who have also been through it, and who have my same strong mind and leadership—that helps me back myself up. This gives me confirmation that I’m doing what I’m supposed to be, and that my passion and future vision to help Fosters will be backed by other people. - Ace, 2020 HCD Leader, 2021 Fellow (St. Cloud)



Agency and Voice

Foster leaders have made it clear they are ready for, and deserve, spaces for their voices to be heard, where they have a choice over how their stories are told and can share their power and purpose, not just their pain.

In addition to building out our social media, we have created numerous pathways for Fosters to raise their voices through writing and speaking with us—and on a national stage. Through a partnership with [Fostering Media Connections \(FMC\)](#), all of our Fellows will have op-eds published in [The Imprint](#), FMC’s news publication dedicated to covering child welfare and juvenile justice issues. Our Foster leaders are regularly interviewed for Minnesota news pieces and have their writing featured in the Imprint’s Youth Voice section.



Watching our social media grow is rewarding because it means our Foster community is growing. It means that a small nonprofit can provide a large platform for Fosters to have their voices heard. Having the opportunity to uplift Foster’s stories that have gone unheard for too long is the most meaningful part of this work. —Bre, Community Outreach Coordinator / Americorp VISTA 2020-2022

Being in relationship with Fosters is what grounds us. We know stories move people, but data moves systems.



Data Moves Systems

Elevating a different story

We weren’t planning on conducting state-wide research in 2020. However, when the shutdown hit, we were told by those in power that Fosters were not being impacted by COVID. Our common sense disagreed, as did partners and Fosters across Minnesota. We launched our first-ever survey, and statewide data clearly told a different story: Fosters were more deeply impacted than their non-Foster peers, across measures ranging from physical and mental health to job security, from education disruption to homelessness.

We don’t conduct research for it to live on a shelf. We used this survey to hold those in power to account: if they wouldn’t listen to stories from individual Fosters, they couldn’t ignore this data. This was a key factor leading to our receipt of Hennepin CARES Act funds to distribute to transition-age Fosters (see page 11). We continued to assess COVID impacts and general well-being and transition outcomes for Fosters through our Hennepin Relief Fund pre- and post-survey, which we are using to ensure Fosters aren’t left without support through the remainder of the pandemic, or beyond.

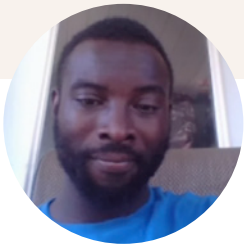
Did you know? Our COVID-19 Impact Report was the first state-specific measure of the pandemic’s impact on Fosters in the country.

Minnesota did not prepare foster kids for this pandemic at all. I read the report, so many are facing financial and housing instability and I know it to be true because it’s happening to me and every other foster kid I connect with. I’m so unbelievably disappointed in the foster care system. It feels like I’ve been abandoned all over again, no one to turn to or lean on and it’s absolutely petrifying for my future.

—22 year old recipient of Hennepin COVID relief fund

A highlight has been opportunities to open up about our experiences, and find similarities and connections. And to see my ideas in print to share with others what I have to say about foster care.

—Juwan, 2021 Fellow (Twin Cities)



Passing the Mic

Using participatory research values, we involve Fosters at all stages of research whenever possible. We share results with Fosters first, so they can provide a critical eye on interpretation and recommendations before data is released publicly. Our 2020 HCD Fostering Ed leaders created a college experiences survey, to broaden our understanding of the barriers and opportunities faced by their peers making it to and through college. This survey will inform our 2021 college needs assessment and launch of our Fostering Education Initiative programs.

It is not enough to just listen to Fosters, we must also invest in them.

Investing in Fosters

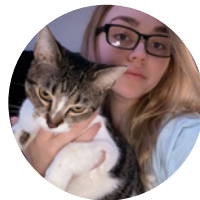
Eye on Education

For many Fosters who don't have a safe place at home, schools are a place of refuge. And for older Fosters transitioning out of the child welfare system, education is a key factor on the ramp to adulthood. That's why our legislative agenda began with a focus on school.

In June 2020, our "Keeping Fosters in School Act" became law (Minnesota Statute 120A.21), improving educational stability for K-12 Fosters by 1) ensuring they can choose to stay in their school of origin when entering care or moving placements, 2) only switching schools if it is deemed in their best interest, and 3) limiting educational disruptions by requiring enrollment in a new school within 7 days of a school transfer decision. Additionally, the act requires tracking school transfers and including that data in annual DHS reports.

Throughout my life, school has always been a refuge. Starting at 12 years old, I was in and out of hospitals due to the abuse I received from my biological parents. During this time, I was forced to miss several long periods of middle and high school, resulting in a disrupted and deeply challenging school experience that made it difficult to catch up and keep my grades high. Despite all of this, school was a place where I could just be me.

—Abbe, Fostering Higher Education Act Testifier (West Metro)



Did you know?

Despite many barriers in K-12 education, over 80% of high-school age Fosters want to attend college. However, only 3% complete a degree by age 24.⁴

4. National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2018). Fostering Success in Education: National Factsheet on the Educational Outcomes of Children in Foster Care.



After that success, we went BOLD for 2021. Research shows, and our Foster leaders confirmed, that finances are the biggest barrier for Fosters making it to and through any form of post-secondary education. Instead of Fosters losing support systems and all too often facing homelessness upon turn 18 or 21, they will now have access to the same opportunities most of their non-Foster peers get: a real chance at a quality education. Our "Fostering Higher Education Act" will allow Fosters to attend Minnesota colleges and universities for free, braiding existing federal and state-aid with Foster-specific scholarships to cover tuition and living expenses.

While proposing this bill for this legislative session, we were prepared to pursue this as part of a multiyear agenda (especially as less-comprehensive efforts in other states took multiple years to pass). Our powerful Foster testifiers and op-ed writers, who shared their college challenges and their dedication to future Fosters, carried this bill. Their stories connected with legislators who fought for this proposal. And on June 26th, our Act was officially signed into law!

It is not an understatement to say that this legislation is life changing. Instead of Fosters losing support systems and all too often facing homelessness upon turn 18 or 21, they will now have access to the same opportunities most of their non-Foster peers get: a real chance at a quality education.

Coalition-building & Mutual Aid

While building an advocacy coalition was on our radar for future efforts, the COVID-19 crisis bumped this up in priority. Over the spring and summer of 2020, in response to frustrations with the state's support of Fosters during the pandemic, Foster Advocates began reaching out to direct services partners focused on transition-age youth. And so, the Coalition of Foster and Family Advocates (CFFA) was born.

Leveraging stories from Fosters across our organizations and data from the COVID-19 Impact Report, our coalition made the case for supporting older Fosters. Hennepin County, which serves the largest number of Minnesota Fosters, responded to this call. CFFA received \$200,000 in CARES Act funds to redistribute to transition-age Fosters in Hennepin County, providing 128 Fosters with \$1,500 each in mutual aid.

We are incredibly proud of this work—and we know that one-time relief fund just provided a bandaid on the impact of the pandemic. With the power of our coalition, we were able to claim space at the table to advise and provide accountability to DHS this spring, as they distributed federal funds and adjusted to new guidelines for supporting older Fosters from the Supporting Foster Youth and Families Act (HR 7947).



The Relief Fund was used to pay for my rent, food, and living expenses, such as transportation costs. It relieved me of current financial stress and I am beyond grateful for this fund. Being aged-out of foster-care, it has been hard finding financial resources for basic living expenses. Not having a family to support me financially, mentally, or physically, any external support is so helpful. This fund provided a much needed break and allowed me to feel more secure in my current situation.

—22 year old recipient of Hennepin COVID relief fund

Did you know? In 2020, Hennepin County and the state of New Jersey were the only entities in the country to provide direct cash transfers (DCT) to Fosters as pandemic support.

Looking Forward

We are incredibly proud of the outsized impact we have been able to make the past three years. We plan to rise to the occasion, building upon our strong foundation to bring about our vision of a just and equitable future for and with Fosters.



Growing our Network

Fostering Education Initiative

Funding is not the only barrier Fosters face in higher education. Based on broad visions from our Fostering Ed HCD leaders, we are thrilled to launch two new programs in Fall 2021.

- 1. Education Leadership Program for High-school Age Fosters.** In a pilot with Ramsey County, we will support Fosters in their educational and career goals. This will include assistance with resource mapping and applications, and opportunities to connect with other Fosters in high-school and college.
- 2. College Peer Connections.** We plan on building out a network of Fosters in colleges across Minnesota, to act as Foster 'Ambassadors' in their regions. Fosters are resilient problem-solvers, and this group will support each other as issues arise, plan social or networking events for Fosters in their region, as well as identify leadership opportunities like developing informational resources about the college process to share back with younger Fosters. For this pilot, Ambassadors will meet virtually and be deeply involved with designing and evolving the program based on their needs.

Affirmational Design

To the best of our knowledge, our COVID-19 Impact Report was the first research on gender identity and sexual orientation rates of Minnesota Fosters. That data made clear that, compared to their peers, LGBTQ+ and Two-Spirit youth are overrepresented in foster care. Why this overrepresentation? Right now, the Minnesota system doesn't track these factors, but in other states, abuse from families of origin over sexual orientation and gender identity is a primary reason for family separation. If it's true that we measure what matters, then Minnesota can't claim to care about providing LGBTQ2S+ affirming foster-care placements or services. In fall 2021, we will explore this disparity through our HCD process, working with LGBTQ2S+ Fosters from across the state to clarify the issue and ideate possible solutions.

I am excited to work with Fosters to figure out how we can make college pathways easier to navigate. I know that my college experience was difficult, as a Foster and homeless young person, and we want to learn how to open up more options to Fosters, including 2-year, 4-year, and technical and training programs. Fosters are already accomplishing so much on their own, and I am looking forward to learning how we can ease some of their responsibilities and create meaningful connections with peers who share their experiences.

- Hannah, Fostering Education Program Manager



Measuring what Matters

College Landscape

To support our Fostering Education Initiative, we have to get a sense of where Minnesota colleges and universities already stand when it comes to supporting Fosters. In 2021, we will be conducting a college needs assessment to start mapping Foster-affirming and trauma-informed college programs and supports.

Data-Driven Partnerships

Fosters have raised critical issues, from challenges obtaining driver's licenses to lack of period hygiene products in foster homes, from adoption disruption to overmedication of Fosters. We explore these topics with the help of graduate interns and service-learning students from four local colleges. We are extremely thankful for the research capacity community and student volunteers provide, allowing us to identify advocacy pathways and leverage points for the next few years. In 2021-22, we estimate we will receive over 1000 hours of skilled volunteer support!

And Beyond

We look forward to broadening research partnerships with local and national organizations as well as hire a Research Director and Fellows.



Shifting the Landscape

Who Watches the Watchers

In 2022, one legislative priority will be creating an ombudsman for foster youth. Currently, Fosters who face inappropriate conditions or have their agency and rights violated have nowhere to turn. We have heard story after story from Fosters where they should have had an opportunity to bring in an ombudsman, from those behind denied equal access to services as their peers, to those facing abuse within their foster home.

All too often, Fosters are left with limiting and damaging choices and have told us they feel like no one is in their corner. While Minnesota has multiple ombudsman positions serving parents, unlike other states there is no independent position serving Minnesota youth who aren't being heard by the child welfare system. Thanks to a capstone crew at the Humphrey School of Public Policy, we have critical research to ground our policy proposal to turn this position into a reality for future Minnesota Fosters.



Aditya



Megan

From Aditya providing legislative analysis, to Megan building our a resource guide, to all the students conducting literature reviews, the network of partners we've built allows us to be accountable to the issues raised by Fosters. I am able to return to our leadership programs with answers to their questions and gather feedback on how we are turning their ideas into actions.

-Elena, Associate Director



And Beyond

Over the next few years, we are excited to continue our annual Fellowship cohort and continue with HCD topic processes, increase team capacity by hiring communications and development staff, and expand the Fostering Education Initiative to additional sites.



MPP capstone crew

Creating a Runway

The obstacles that Fosters face while aging out of foster care became even clearer during the pandemic. With the successful DCT program in Hennepin, Foster Advocates started talking with Minnesota foundations about an “EFC+” program: a way to support Fosters after they officially leave state care, through targeted, monthly financial support. It is abundantly clear that this would be a smaller investment with a bigger return than the de facto state plan for transition-age Fosters, which relies on shelters and other emergency assistance services.

Our efforts have caught the eye of national partners, and we are exploring pilot programs, similar to those happening in California and New York, here in Minnesota.

Foster youth need more than a home. We need to be able to age out with our own stable housing, mental health support, and overall circle of support. I know for a fact half of the people making decisions for the foster care system were not emotionally ready to be taking care of themselves financially or mentally by 21, so why are you expecting an already traumatized population to do it? Foster care should be until a young person is 26 years old.

—23 year old recipient of Hennepin Relief Fund

Structured Foster Feedback

Fosters have provided guidance and feedback on our actions and priorities since the beginning. In fall 2021, we are honored to create a formal space for Fosters to weigh in on advocacy and legislative efforts, programs, and research directions: our Foster Community Board.

Minnesota Fosters can apply, and those who complete our leadership programs will be invited, to serve in this paid role. Structured feedback from this Community Board will deepen the organization’s impact and guide staff on longer-term landscape shifts, while maintaining the agency and centering the expertise of the Fosters we serve.

Our ultimate goal is for this Community Board, alongside our larger network of Fellows, to act as the key sounding-board not only for our organization, but for partners and Foster issues across the state.



And Beyond

As this report went to print, we finalized our fifth hire! Ariana will join as our Policy and Advocacy Manager to support CFFA, EFC+ efforts, and our Foster Community Board. Over the next few years, we aim to be able to pursue multiple legislative bills in a single session.



As I reflect on the past three years, it is hard to know where to start.

Is it with the very beginning, where I was asked to join the founding board? The moment we got our official 501c3 status a year later? Or was it the first time we changed a state law?



In these three years, I am amazed by how substantially Foster Advocates has changed the child welfare landscape. It’s even more remarkable when you consider how difficult it is to start an organization, let alone nurture it and lead it into vanguard for systems change. However I realize that, like for so many of our young people, it doesn’t matter as much where we started—more important is where we are headed.

As an organization we have so much to be proud of (as this report makes evident!). I am even more proud of the vision for the next three years. What started with an unwavering belief in young people’s voices, their agency, and their power to change their fates, can now serve as the connective tissue for organizations across the state who are seeking to truly honor Minnesota’s promise to it’s Foster youth.

We’ve all heard Wellstone’s immortal words “We all do better, when we all do better.” This young organization is actually making these words true. We’ve done a lot with a little. I am excited to embark on the next step, where we can do a heck of a lot more, with a little more help from our friends.

Thank you for reading this far, thank you for your support, and thank you for believing that Minnesota’s promise can be as good as Fosters’ potential.

Onward!

Kristy Snyder

Kristy Snyder
Board Chair

We want to acknowledge the following supporters, as without their founding gifts, none of this work would have been possible. Thank you for believing that a Foster could change the system, because now, a network of Minnesota Fosters are.



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