

**AT-A-GLANCE**

**Initiative Start Date:**  
2007

**Initiative Location:**  
Mechanicsburg, PA

**Area Served:** Statewide



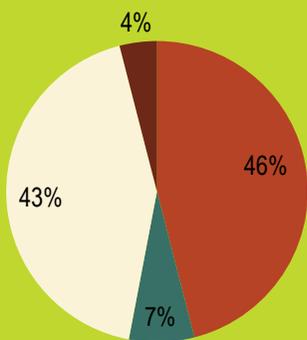
**Initiative Budget:** For all youth and family engagement activities  
\$450,000

**Age Range of Youth:**  
16 – 21 years old

**Number of Youth Served:**  
200 annually

**Diversity of Youth Served:**

- Black/African American
- Latino/Hispanic
- White/Caucasian
- Other/Unknown



**ABOUT**

At the heart of the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center’s work is a commitment to youth engagement -- ensuring that the voices of youth are heard and heeded -- not just in individual cases but to improve the overall child welfare system. To accomplish this, Pennsylvania has established a Youth Advisory Board (YAB) which provides input on agency policies and procedures and advocates for better results. Youth leaders also conduct trainings, review curriculum and work with county agencies to improve family services. “We begin with the expectation that youth are stakeholders from the start,” says Chris Nobles, Resource Center employee who experienced foster care, “not an add-on.”

**KEY ACTIVITIES**

- **Youth Advisory Boards** – involve 200 current and former foster youth in local, regional and statewide forums.
- **Youth Ambassadors, Youth Quality Improvement Specialists and Parent Ambassadors** – hire constituents of the child welfare system to enhance statewide permanency efforts for children and youth in foster care; partner with public and private child welfare organizations and the judicial system.
- **Youth Retreat** – organize an annual, week-long event at the University of Pittsburgh-Johnstown campus for 140 current and former foster youth; develop their leadership skills and prepare for transition from foster care.
- **Training, Consultation, Outreach** – hold youth-led “Know Your Rights” workshops for other foster youth; give input on casework practice; promote participation in the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD), a survey assessing how the state serves older foster youth.

**HIGHLIGHT**

In November, at the statewide YAB meeting, youth representatives were asked to provide input on two policy issues: 1) guidelines for mentoring youth and 2) youth curfew and dating. These are important issues for most adolescents. They are made more complicated by the rules and requirements that govern life in foster care. Youth leaders run the advisory board meetings themselves, giving them the opportunity to hone their facilitation and group management skills and to have honest, open dialogue with each other. Those skills were evident when a confident youth leader reminded a staff member that youth advisors themselves should be responsible for reporting out recommendations – not staff or other participants.

**Youth Thrive** is a research-informed framework developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) that identifies five protective and promotive factors for youth (age 11-26):

- Youth Resilience
- Social Connections
- Knowledge of Adolescent Development
- Concrete Support in Times of Need
- Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence

The goal of Youth Thrive is to increase the likelihood that all youth are supported in ways that advance healthy development and well-being and reduce the impact of negative life experiences. Youth Thrive focuses particularly on vulnerable youth, beginning with those involved in the child welfare system.

CSSP conducted a national search to identify initiatives that provide compelling examples of programs and policy efforts that build the five protective and promotive factors for youth in the child welfare system. This is a profile of one of the 15 selected exemplary initiatives.

## **BUILDING THE PROTECTIVE & PROMOTIVE FACTORS**

The exemplary initiatives address all or most of the protective and promotive factors. Here are several examples:

**Concrete Support in Times of Need:** Through the YAB, youth learn advocacy skills and are mobilized as active participants in the change process. This self-advocacy is a critical component to addressing the underlying inequities and conditions that make it difficult for youth in foster care to secure needed concrete supports (e.g., housing, health care, employment).

**Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence:** By serving as advisors, ambassadors or trainers, youth gain real world experiences that are part of adult life such as organizing work tasks, functioning in a group, speaking up for yourself and meeting deadlines. These experiences build traits that are central to social-emotional competence including high level thinking and character strengths such as self-awareness, self-regulation, future orientation, planning and responsibility.

## **USING DATA**

The resource center is committed to continuous quality improvement and uses the DAPIM™ approach -- Define, Assess, Plan, Implement and Monitor – developed by the American Public Human Services Association. It used this approach to create a five-year strategic plan for the YAB's local, regional and state advocacy efforts and tracks outputs such as publications, conferences, trainings, technical assistance and projects completed. The Center and its youth leaders also help counties use data and participate in Pennsylvania's continuous improvement efforts to reshape the system and achieve positive outcomes for children, youth and families. Quality Service Reviews, an in-depth look at individual cases, are an important part of the process to find out how children, youth and families are benefiting from services and how local services are coordinated.

In terms of results of its advocacy, the Youth Advisory Board ultimately points to changes in state policy. For example, the Board played a part in advocating for the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act*. Pennsylvania is one of 15 states to adopt the full provisions of the Act.