

# Ensuring Young People Flourish: Applying the Science of Adolescent Development through the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

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**Jeffrey M. Poirier**

*The Annie E. Casey Foundation*

**Leslie Gross**

*The Annie E. Casey Foundation*

**Alex Lohrbach**

*The Annie E. Casey Foundation*

**Leonardo Johnson**

*Jim Casey Young Fellow*

**Sandra Wilkie**

*The Annie E. Casey Foundation*

Young people are the experts on their own lives. Drawing from their experiences, perspectives, ideas, and skills, they can and have made important contributions to shaping policy and practice that meet their own needs and improves their outcomes and those of their peers. Authentic youth engagement builds youth confidence and leadership skills while simultaneously improving

policies, programs, and practices in youth-focused settings. Authentic youth engagement is a core practice of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative®, a national systems reform effort that works to ensure that young people ages 14 to 26 in the United States who have spent at least one day in foster care after their 14th birthday have the resources, relationships, and opportunities to achieve well-being and success. As we mark the 20th anniversary of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 championed by former Senator John H. Chafee, we challenge the field to reexamine its assumptions about developmental needs and opportunities for young people and the type of expertise required to create policies and practices that prepare young people to thrive in adulthood. In this article, we describe the four components that

make youth engagement authentic and encourage policymakers and practitioners to more effectively implement authentic youth engagement principles and practices, which are grounded in evidence from the science of adolescent development and should be part of broader efforts to foster equity and inclusion in child welfare systems and communities across the country. We begin this article by describing the Foundation's efforts to transform child welfare policy and practice through the Jim Casey Initiative's priorities and activities and to illustrate how systems and communities across the country can build the will and capacity to authentically engage young people and improve youth outcomes through a supportive on-ramp to adulthood. We then highlight recent advances in adolescent brain science, connecting these to the work of the Jim Casey Initiative. We also share data documenting the benefits of authentic youth engagement. Moreover, we make the case for authentic youth engagement as an essential practice for providing young people with foster care experience opportunities that are critical during a period of rapid development.

About 874,000 young people ages 14 to 26 in the United States have spent at least one day in foster care after turning 14, and nearly 317,000 of them live in states with Jim Casey Initiative sites (Child Trends, 2019a). Since 2001, the Jim Casey Initiative has transformed discussions and policies to address what young people in and transitioning from foster care need to thrive. As a result of the work of a broad array of national, state, and local partners, this population of young people is now prominent in national and state legislative agendas and their voices are heard by political and government leaders. The Jim Casey Initiative's overall approach, rooted in adolescent brain research, employs five best practice principles:

1. Authentically engaging young people in the decisions that shape their lives;
2. Advancing racial and ethnic equity to reduce system-level disparities;
3. Forming partnerships with community stakeholders and institutions to create strategies and align resources to improve shared outcomes;
4. Using data and self-evaluation to make decisions; and
5. Building public will to create better policies and sustain momentum.

The Jim Casey Initiative advances strategies that help young people build permanent connections to adults and pathways out of poverty. Specifically, the Jim Casey Initiative aims to ensure that young people: (1) leave foster care with a permanent family; (2) have safe, stable, and affordable housing; (3) have resources and opportunities to excel academically and become financially secure; and (4) have the information and skills to make informed decisions about whether and when to become parents, and have support, resources, and opportunities to raise healthy children if they are expecting or parenting.

The Jim Casey Initiative was founded on the principle that young people are the experts on their own lives and it is only by intentionally engaging with, listening to, and acting on the expertise of young people that we advance strategies and solutions that improve outcomes.

Through partnerships between young people and adults, the Jim Casey Initiative developed the core components of authentic youth engagement. Importantly, authentic youth engagement values young people and adults as equal contributors to decision making; fosters a balance of sharing ideas and information between youth and adults; builds young people's leadership and supports their professional development; and maintains a focus on policy or practice change. Authentic youth engagement is integral to not only the Jim Casey Initiative's national work, but also to local efforts in sites. In the Jim Casey Initiative's network sites around the country and at the national level, young people partner with adults to shape strategies that recognize their unique development, experiences, strengths, and needs and that support their success.

Working at the local, state, and national levels, the Jim Casey Initiative contributes to improved and more equitable policies and practices in its four priority areas by partnering with young people, communities, organizations that work with young people, and child welfare agencies across the country. Paramount is a commitment to making sure all young people—regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, or where they live—have equitable opportunities to achieve well-being and success, and a belief that young people can succeed if they have a rock-solid foundation of support. Young people who have experienced foster care often do not have access to that support. They are less likely to finish high school or become employed and are more likely to experience homelessness or early parenting than their peers who haven't been in foster care (Courtney, Dworksy, Lee, & Raap, 2010). However, these young people have aspirations similar to those of other young people, such as going to school and having supportive relationships with peers and adults.

## **Adolescent Brain Science: A Critical Foundation for Child Welfare Policy and Practice**

Adolescent brain science informs how the Jim Casey Initiative partners with young people. Through no fault of their own, young people in

foster care may be removed from opportunities to take developmentally appropriate risks, make decisions about their lives, and experience normal activities such as participating in afterschool clubs and sports, attending sleepovers and obtaining a driver's license. These limitations can lead to feelings of isolation, a lack of autonomy, and powerlessness. Many policies and practices that affect young people in foster care attempt to fix problems for young people, result in decisions being made without their input, limit healthy relationships with birth families and relationship building with peers, and are based on assumptions that adults know what is best for young people. Effective partnerships with adults, on the other hand, help young people develop their leadership and advocacy skills. These partnerships also increase young people's connections, influence, and personal stake in the community and can support development of a positive identity.

Significantly, a recently released National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine consensus report (NASEM, 2019) synthesizes research on adolescent development and reinforces the importance of opportunities for young people with foster care experience. It documents, for example, that adolescence is a critical bridge between childhood and adulthood, beginning with the onset of puberty around age 10 and ending around age 25. During this phase of development, our brains undergo extensive remodeling and rewiring in response to the environment and the experiences we have. These changes affect our brain's structure (such as strengthened connections between brain regions), and function (the limbic region's increased sensitivity to rewards and peers)—and individual neural differences in how young people respond to incentives can influence their decisions, behaviors, and outcomes (Casey, Getz, & Galvan, 2008; Casey, Jones, & Hare, 2008). The report emphasizes that given these changes, when we are adolescents our brains are specially tailored to meet the needs of the developmental period so we are prepared to take on new challenges and opportunities.

While adolescence is often viewed as a period of turmoil and risk, the NASEM report and researchers have noted that this a period rich

with opportunities for exploration, learning, and growth, making it an ideal time to flourish and thrive. Neuroscience shows that young people require opportunities to take on responsibilities, develop new skills, make decisions that shape their lives, and engage in reflective conversations. These experiences help to fully develop their capacity to think critically, plan ahead, focus attention, engage in introspection, regulate emotions, and control impulses. In fact, the NASEM report notes that these opportunities, along with developing one's personal identity and building relationships with adults and peers, are all key developmental milestones during adolescence.

Furthermore, neuroscience shows that when we are adolescents, we are still developing and strengthening cognitive abilities and emotional regulation into our mid-to-late twenties. Building this part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex, requires us to take part in new experiences. During this period, a heightened attraction to new sensations and experiences can influence the decisions young people make—but the environmental context and emotional significance of the decisions matter too (Steinberg, 2005; Steinberg, 2008; Steinberg et al., 2018). Young people learn by doing—known as experiential learning—by being engaged in opportunities to make decisions, have reflective conversations, take healthy risks, and try new things. That is critical for healthy development. Additionally, opportunities for young people to act on their bravery and step into leadership roles provides stretch opportunities and healthy risks that help them learn about their strengths, goals, and hopes for the future.

The NASEM consensus report also describes the significant capacity for resilience and healing from past adversity that our brains have during adolescence. Because the brain is highly malleable during this period, adolescence is both a time of promise and urgency. Neuroscience shows that every interaction and experience a young person has plays a critical role in how the brain matures by strengthening synapses that are being used or pruning away those synapses that are not being reinforced. This malleability provides immense opportunity for young people to create meaningful relationships, leverage their confidence and

creativity, and heal from past trauma. By intervening during adolescence, we can optimize brain development and improve the well-being of young people transitioning from foster care.

Perhaps more importantly, developing the ability to manage our reactions and regulate emotions happens in the context of relationships—ideally supportive and trusting relationships with both peers and adults. As adolescents and young adults, we are highly attuned to emotional cues, social acceptance, and rejection and learn best with peers. With this knowledge, adults can support young people in nurturing existing relationships and creating new connections to expand their social networks. Authentic youth engagement serves both as an opportunity to cultivate relationships between young people and adults and as an avenue to have conversations with young people about the meaningful relationships in their lives. When young people are leading the dialogue about what and who is important to them, new connections and solutions often surface. Engaging and supporting young people in planning and decision-making about their lives—and the larger community—benefits them as they transition into adulthood.

## **The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative's Application of Adolescent Brain Science to Transform Child Welfare Policy and Practice**

### ***Integrating Brain Science with Authentic Youth Engagement***

Authentic youth engagement supports young people so that they can use their individual and collective power and expertise to shape a better future for those in and transitioning from foster care. By providing a combination of support and opportunity during this critical developmental period, authentic youth engagement can powerfully influence not only young people themselves but also systems change. The Jim Casey Initiative conceptualizes, promotes, and practices authentic youth engagement by ensuring young people are actively involved and lead decision making in their case planning, transition planning, and decision-making

that directly affects their lives. As part of authentic youth engagement, young people are also passionately engaged as advocates and partners to create sustainable practice and policy improvements on the systems level. Authentic youth engagement can lead to more equitable policies and practices when communities, systems, and organizations engage young people of color, for example, in efforts to improve child welfare policies and practices that disproportionately affect them.

In addition to the five best practice principles that frame the Jim Casey Initiative overall, four critical components define authentic youth engagement:

1. **Youth-adult partnership.** Adults treat young people as equal partners in the work and support their development of problem-solving and leadership skills they will need in adulthood. Through true partnership, young people and adults build mutual trust, learn from each other's expertise and experience, and solve problems together. Youth-adult partnership requires sharing information, having honest conversations, respecting varied experiences and opinions, and setting clear expectations about roles and decision making for all involved. Authentic partnerships should be honored at all times, whether young people are physically present or not. This means that adult supporters hold the responsibility to convey the voices, experiences, and desires of the young people with whom they partner to advocate for their engagement and their needs at all times, even in primarily adult spaces.
2. **Preparation.** Preparation requires that adults support young people to make informed decisions using a young person's strengths, building on their expertise and asserting their leadership. Effective preparation equips young people to be ready for and benefit from known and potential opportunities. Preparation should happen well in advance of an event, meeting, or activity. It requires time, effort, patience, relationship building, and awareness of a young person's unique developmental strengths and growth opportunities. Adults and young people must be open to practicing new



skills, being flexible in adjusting schedules to accommodate when young people are available, and addressing attitudes and beliefs that can get in the way of effective partnerships.

3. **Opportunity.** The Initiative's third authentic youth engagement component centers on creating and identifying opportunities in partnership with young people to support their development. Young people thrive on opportunities to engage in self-advocacy, exercise healthy risk taking, experience an array of positive relationships, and further develop their autonomy and leadership skills. Normalizing healthy risk taking and growing through failures and mistakes requires an environment where adults take young people seriously. Moreover, young people need to engage in stretch opportunities to take on skill-building challenges typically encountered by their peers who are not in foster care, such as joining a new team, working an after-school job, or trying out public speaking.
4. **Support.** The final component of authentic youth engagement, support, enables young people to benefit most from opportunities to lead and contribute. Support can be physical, emotional or financial and is tailored to meet the unique needs of each young person. Support must be grounded in authentic, trusting relationships. When adults support young people in a coaching capacity, young people are better able to engage in introspection, process their emotions, and arrive at their own solutions that best match their needs. Particularly when young people are advocating and engaging in work to change systems, they should be financially compensated for their knowledge, time, and contributions as equal partners. They should also receive support that enables them to participate. For example, young parents should have child care available so they can speak at a policy briefing. Contributing to systems-change work by translating their experiences to solutions for their peers can be emotionally taxing and difficult work that requires thoughtful emotional support.

The Jim Casey Initiative network puts these four components of authentic youth engagement into practice to drive greater equity and inclusion in a variety of ways, including the following:

1. **Youth leadership boards:** Jim Casey Initiative sites have developed and sustained youth leadership boards to ensure the experiences, voices, and knowledge of young people who are currently or were once in foster care shape policy and practice in the child welfare system. Youth leadership boards are inclusive spaces that serve as a platform for advocacy, while also providing opportunities for young people to build relationships, engage in their community, learn about tools and resources, strengthen their professional skills, and become advocates both for themselves and others (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2014). Members of youth leadership boards drive the priorities, projects, and initiatives that they deem important. Youth leadership boards are most effective when they are based in organizations that value authentic youth engagement and have staff capacity to respond to immediate needs of the youth board members, connect youth to resources, and support them in their personal and professional growth.
2. **Direct policy and practice advocacy.** In addition to serving on a youth leadership board, young leaders are deeply involved in contributing to policy and practice improvements at the local level. Examples include drafting proposals for policy and practice changes, informing and engaging key stakeholders, developing policy agendas, providing written and oral testimony, and conducting data analysis and research (Child Trends, 2019b).
3. **Collaboration with community representatives.** Young people also collaborate with community partnership boards that engage a diverse cross-section of the community and play a significant role in creating strategies, aligning existing resources, and developing new resources (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2013). Community partnership boards include a representative

from the public child welfare agency and other community stakeholders in both the public and private sectors who are influential in aligning efforts to improve outcomes for young people. Those efforts may include supporting youth engagement work, contributing to an advocacy agenda, and helping create a range of more effective opportunities for young people to ensure their well-being and success.

4. **Youth Leadership Institute and Jim Casey Young Fellows.** The Jim Casey Initiative includes a national Youth Leadership Institute (YLI), an intensive weeklong experience that builds competencies and skills to support young people in their leadership development and advocacy work. YLI prepares young people to be effective in making their own decisions, taking on roles in their communities at decision-making tables, supporting other young leaders, and contributing to national Jim Casey Initiative work. Over time, approximately 95% of the young people who attend YLI become Jim Casey Initiative Young Fellows. Young Fellows further build their leadership skills by partnering on a range of national work, applying knowledge and skills to efforts in their own communities and strengthening their work as advocates. Jim Casey Young Fellows play an integral role in developing the Jim Casey Initiative's strategies and recommendations for improving child welfare and other systems that affect their lives.

A key tenet underlies all of this work: young people are capable and want to be engaged. Moreover, survey responses show authentic youth engagement is critical to the Jim Casey Initiative's efforts to improve systems. Based on data from the Jim Casey Initiative's Opportunity Passport® Participant Survey collected in April and October 2018, 41% of young people across the 17 Jim Casey Initiative sites active at the time reported engaging in the implementation of several Jim Casey Initiative best practice principles (community partnership, evaluation, and advocating for young people). This ranged from 26% to 55% across sites (Child Trends, 2019b). The level of engagement with community

partnerships, evaluation, and policy and practice advocacy for young people varied across states. Young people were most involved in partnering with adults through community partnership boards working to improve outcomes for young people, followed by policy and practice advocacy and then evaluation activities such as reflecting on data or assessing the information. Specifically, one in three young people reported being engaged in community partnerships (from 11% to 46% across sites). Furthermore, approximately one in five young people reported being engaged in advocacy (from 9% to 31% across sites) and evaluation (from 5% to 33% across sites).

Significantly, over the 2013–2018 period, on average 80% of young people engaged in evaluation, community partnership, and advocacy with adults reported that they had equal or more say than adults they were partnering with in these activities. This high level of engagement and shared influence is important as young people and adults work on improving policy and practice for older youth transitioning from foster care. This led to results too: over the past five years young people were engaged in improving 122 (or 81%) of the 175 policies and practices Jim Casey Initiative sites reported at the state and county levels, including extension of foster care to age 21, employment tax credits, expansion of tuition waivers, foster care bill of rights, increased support for guardianship, sibling and grandparent visitation, extension of eligibility to age 26 for education and training vouchers, and increased access to pregnancy prevention services for youth in foster care (Child Trends, 2019b).

### ***Resources and Tools for the Field***

As part of its efforts to build on adolescent science, the Jim Casey Initiative has produced resources for the field and provided technical support to apply the science. In 2011, the Jim Casey Initiative produced a seminal publication: *The Adolescent Brain: New Research and Its Implications for Young People Transitioning from Foster Care*. This paper summarized the new research on the remarkable period of brain

development that occurs during adolescence and young adulthood, and the opportunity of that developmental period to help young people who have been in foster care grow through new experiences and heal from past adversity. That publication recommended that the emerging knowledge base serve as a foundation for developmentally appropriate practice and sparked an effort by the Jim Casey Initiative to apply this science to the federal opportunity offered to states with the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act. The Jim Casey Initiative created a campaign, called Success Beyond 18: Doing It Right, to encourage states to extend foster care beyond 18 in a manner consistent with the adolescent brain science. The campaign encouraged states to apply the adolescent brain science as they redesigned their foster care programming that was historically designed for young children. To date, 29 states have passed legislation through Title IV-E to extend foster care.

The field has also expanded its focus on healthy development for young people with foster care experience. Building on this greater attention, in 2017 the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which now manages the Jim Casey Initiative, published a new paper to highlight the advancements. *The Road to Adulthood: Aligning Child Welfare Practice with Adolescent Brain Development* (2017d) offers recommendations for child welfare professionals, caregivers, and systems to use the research to work effectively with youth in or emerging from foster care in the four focus areas of the Initiative's work. These recommendations include training and equipping practitioners to understand the effects of trauma and racism; strengthening a young person's new and existing relationships; prioritizing legal permanence for all young people; promoting a range of educational and career pathways; cultivating partnerships with housing providers that meet the needs of adolescents; and supporting young parents in their individual needs and goals as well as those of their children.

To further translate the science and transform child welfare policy and practice for young people in and transitioning from foster care, in 2017 the Foundation also created a series of practice guides called

Brain Frames for child welfare practitioners, birth and foster parents, teachers, mentors, and legal professionals. The Brain Frames addresses healing and resilience, permanence, housing stability, connections to school and work, and supporting young parents (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017a, b, c, e, f). These tools articulate the connection between adolescent brain science and each topic area, lifting up patterns in systems that often contradict what the field is learning about the science. They offer concrete action steps and ways to engage and support young people as they navigate being in foster care and transitioning into adulthood.

In addition to its work supporting child welfare practice, the Foundation partnered with the American Bar Association (ABA) Center on Children and Law to create resources that support youth engagement in court hearings and case planning. The new tools provide information on federal and state laws that support the meaningful engagement of young people as well as steps attorneys and judges can take to authentically engage young people and create opportunities that promote healthy development. The Annie E. Casey Foundation is working with the National Association of Social Workers to develop and disseminate a curriculum for frontline social work staff to further align practice with adolescent science and encourage their meaningful engagement with young people.

## **What We Know About the Benefits of Authentic Youth Engagement and Leadership**

When young people are engaged from the very beginning of a decision-making process, rather than solely to provide feedback or a “stamp of approval,” young people strengthen problem-solving skills and experience an increase in self-esteem, hope, and belonging (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2014). Adults align their actions with the needs and assets of young people, strengthen relationships, and gain deeper insight and understanding into the young person’s expertise, strengths, and needs. Overall, organizations and systems are better able to match policy and practice shifts to the needs of older youth and

young adults, build a culture of trust and inclusion, and retain youth in their programs.

A recently completed study of authentic youth engagement documented how Jim Casey Initiative sites practice authentic youth engagement (Salazar et al., 2019). This study examined important factors related to site capacity, barriers, and assets; results achieved; and lessons learned as sites have worked to authentically engage young people. It focused on four Jim Casey Initiative sites—Georgia, Hawaii, Tennessee, and New Mexico—selected using a range of criteria to include a diverse set of sites with a track record for effectively engaging young people. Across the four, site definitions of authentic youth engagement were consistent, with a focus on youth empowerment and the four components of authentic youth engagement. Youth also talked about youth engagement in five core ways: youth-adult partnership and connection, youth being heard, youth contribution to change and results, support for young people, and effectively adapting support in ways that don't tokenize youth.

The study found that authentic youth engagement occurs through a wide variety of activities. For example, through secondary analysis of Opportunity Passport survey data, the study reported that across the four sites 38% of young people reported participating in activities to develop their leadership and advocacy skills, 35% worked on transition-related issues (e.g., education, housing) in their community, and 23% worked to advocate for young people such as through policy change. In a survey of youth the study conducted, young people most frequently identified youth leadership boards, self-advocacy, and development of policy agendas as activities they were engaged in. Both staff and youth survey respondents reported high levels of satisfaction with youth engagement in these activities as well.

Although young people, staff participating in the Jim Casey Initiative, and community partners saw opportunities to strengthen authentic youth engagement, such as through greater involvement of underrepresented young people (for example, youth of color; youth with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities), the study

documented a range of strengths across the four sites. For example, staff in Jim Casey Initiative sites reported having sufficient capacity to authentically engage youth, with staff buy-in, preparation, and skills often cited as contributing to this capacity. Youth and staff also reported that authentically engaging youth is important and contributes to results. In particular, the study found that key informants thought that youth-adult partnerships were a key success in each of the four sites, anchored by nurturing, trusting relationships between youth and adults. Young people, staff in Jim Casey Initiative sites, and community partners shared that youth leadership, agency, and voice benefitted not only young people as they transition from care, but also efforts to improve child welfare policy and practice. A vast majority indicated that authentic youth engagement has improved policy and practice in their sites while also supporting young people as they transition to adulthood. The study also found that youth reported gaining skills and knowledge, feeling supported, and being celebrated for contributions and achievements through these opportunities.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation also has aimed to better understand the influence of the Youth Leadership Institute (YLI), described earlier in this article. Since 2017, an evaluator has administered surveys and conducted interviews with young people participating in the leadership institute and adult partners to understand how YLI has supported young people and developed their knowledge and skills, and how participants are applying what they've learned (Kaye & Clone, 2019). For example, a survey administered at the beginning of YLI and at the end of YLI the past three years has found that participants report improvements in their knowledge of content areas covered during the weeklong YLI. Based on the 2019 survey, the 17 young people participating in YLI reported gains in all content areas (such as adolescent brain science and leadership competencies), with large gains in understanding how to develop a policy agenda and facilitate effective, results-based meetings. The evaluator found that YLI's training structure resonated with young people's learning styles and the information was relevant and used well after the training ended. Furthermore, YLI participants and leaders in Jim Casey



Initiative sites described participant growth in a number of areas. For example, young people improved their ability to use data and strategically share their stories to advance advocacy efforts. Participants also returned home with a deeper agency in using their voice for advocacy as a result of the YLI experience. “I’m appreciative of the opportunities that I’ve gotten through attending YLI and the skills that I would develop,” said one young participant. “I didn’t know before then ... that I had power in my voice and ... that you can wear your experience in a confident way instead of being ashamed. I attribute that to YLI.” Leaders in sites likewise noticed participants’ increased sense of confidence and self-efficacy. Additionally, YLI participants created a supportive network of adults and peers that extended beyond the weeklong training.

Together, these studies have informed the Foundation and the field about efforts to strengthen youth leadership and engagement through the Jim Casey Initiative. They provide important information that contextualize this work and illustrate the contributions youth engagement can make to better results for young people and systems.

## **Conclusion**

This article challenges the field to reexamine its assumptions about young people ages 14 to 26, to see this as a period of significant developmental opportunity and to understand and embrace the power of authentic youth engagement. Neuroscience tells us that young people are uniquely primed for learning and are motivated by curiosity, passion, and excitement. They need opportunities for new experiences, to learn through relationships, and to grow through mistakes. Moreover, authentically engaging young people can strengthen equity and inclusion efforts. In this article we address the intersection of the science of adolescent brain development with authentic youth engagement, offering the perspectives, practices, results, and lessons learned from the Jim Casey Initiative. As we look to what the next 20 years will hold for Chafee’s legacy, we strongly encourage all public child welfare agencies, dependency courts, and Court Improvement Programs to collaborate

to ensure that youth voice is central in child welfare program planning and improvement efforts as outlined in a recent U.S. Children's Bureau Information Memorandum (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, 2019). Authentically engaging young people is critical to their healthy development and vital to well-functioning child welfare systems. It is imperative that the field develop innovations and interventions that support the healthy development of young people so they are able to choose and establish trusting relationships to support them as they thrive into adulthood. Authentic youth engagement can equip communities and systems to pursue these innovations and achieve more equitable outcomes for all young people in and transitioning from foster care.

We implore systems to act, because our young people can't wait. In 2016, half of teens aged 16 and older who exited foster care were emancipated; that is, they left care without being successfully reunified with their family or connected to another family through adoption or legal guardianship (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018). Significantly, the rate of young people emancipating from care was 10% higher for youth who are Black and 11% higher for youth who are Hispanic than the rate of their peers who are White (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018). To change these statistics, systems must first change mindsets. They must recognize the power of partnering with young people to achieve and sustain change, and to foster greater equity and inclusion. We must do better, and with these tools and insights, we can start now.

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