

Foster Care.

What young people
in the system say is working.

Office of the
Family & Children's
Ombudsman

Appreciative Interview Report
January 2001

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
The Ombudsman appreciative interviews.....	3
First theme: feeling normal.....	4
Second theme: feeling cared about	5
Third theme: feeling my opinions matter	10
Findings and recommendation.....	12
Young peoples' ideas to improve foster care	14
The young people interviewed by the Ombudsman	16

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Introduction—The State’s foster care problems are well known, and they are receiving considerable attention and study by state policy makers, agency officials and children’s advocates.

Less known is what aspects of the foster care system are working well. Unlike its shortcomings, the system’s strengths have received little attention or study. Efforts to improve the foster care system therefore have been and continue to be devoted almost exclusively to fixing problems. Few attempts are underway to support, reinforce, and amplify those things that are working well.

With these thoughts in mind, the Ombudsman undertook a project earlier this year aimed at learning what is working best in the foster care system. The Ombudsman approached this task by seeking out the perspectives of young people in foster care—it is their lives that are the most directly affected by the system, yet their voices are often missing.

Nearly everyone has heard what is wrong with the foster care system:

Acute shortage of family foster homes, as well as other placement options, for children.

Foster parents often do not receive the training, support and respect they need to adequately care for children.

Needs of many children coming into foster care are not timely assessed or addressed with appropriate services.

Children too often experience numerous and abrupt placement changes during their stay in foster care.

Many young people in foster care feel stigmatized, sensing that they are outsiders who are treated differently because they’re in foster care.

Many children in foster care continue to experience prolonged uncertainty about their future.

Many youth “age out” of foster care lacking adequate preparation for adulthood.

The Ombudsman approach was based on the belief that young people in foster care have the most to teach adults about what in the system is working well and matters most to them.

The primary objective in this project was to explore the potential effectiveness of a strength-focused approach as a means for creating foster care system improvements. Historically the Ombudsman has pursued the mission of promoting improvements by identifying and analyzing system problems and gaps through complaint investigations and system reviews. In this project, the Ombudsman intentionally sought to move away from this analytic, deficit-oriented approach to see what could be learned about system change and foster care through direct communication with young people about their best experiences.

**The Ombudsman initiated
this project, because
change can be achieved by
identifying what works
and focusing energy on
doing more of it.**

The Power of Stories—The Ombudsman project was heavily influenced by a system change approach called *Appreciative Inquiry*. This approach starts with the assumption that any human system is filled with powerful and largely untapped stories of effectiveness, high performance, strengths and emerging possibilities. It asserts that by engaging the system in a comprehensive discovery of these “success” stories and the conditions that make them possible, the system is able to create and focus energy on replicating and enhancing strengths and successes in unprecedented ways.

The Ombudsman appreciative interviews.

The first step in an Appreciative Inquiry process is to determine what topics are to be studied. Positive, open-ended questions about these topics are then developed and used by the system's participants to interview each other. Sometimes hundreds and even thousands of participants are involved in the interview process. The interviews elicit stories that provide a glimpse of what kinds of experiences are possible when the topics of study are most evident and alive. When the interviews are completed, the stories are synthesized (usually by the interviewers themselves) to identify prominent or compelling themes, as well as to uncover the conditions in the system that made the stories possible. This step is followed by a period in which the system's leaders and participants design and then implement an ideal vision of the future that is grounded in the best of what is already working in the system.¹

The Ombudsman identified several topics of study.

These included learning about young people's best experiences in the following areas:

1. **Generally.**
2. **Feeling cared for and accepted.**
3. **Taking initiative and responsibility.**

The Ombudsman was also interested in soliciting young people's ideas for ways to make their experiences in foster care the best they could be.

With these topics in mind, the Ombudsman developed the interview questions on this page, through which to elicit young people's stories. Ombudsman staff, and one contract interviewer, conducted individual interviews of 32 young people, aged 11 to 17 years old, residing in licensed family foster homes. All had been living in foster care for at least one year. Average length of stay was four years; average number of placements was four. The interviews were conducted privately, and most occurred in the young person's foster home. For a complete description of the interview process, see page 16.

The Interview Questions

1 During your time in foster care, you have probably had some tougher times and some better times. For now, I'd like you to remember one of the really good times you've had. It might be a particularly good day or week, or any time when things were going really well for you. Or it might be a great talk you had with someone; or any time you remember as being really special—a time when you felt really good and happy.

2 Think about a time while you've been in foster care when you felt really taken care of by an adult. This could have been a time when someone was really kind or caring, or a time when someone listened to you or helped you get what you wanted.

3 Think about a time while you've been in foster care when you felt really taken care of by an adult, who seemed to just understand what you wanted or needed without you even asking.

4 This next question is an important question for most people and you may need a moment to think about it. It can be a great feeling to be accepted, included in things. Think of a time during your foster care experience when you felt a part of things. This could be a person who made you feel accepted or a part of a group where you felt included.

5 Now I'd like you to think for a moment about your own strengths and gifts. Specifically, I'd like you to remember a time that you went after something that you wanted. It might have been something big or something quite small. Anyway, there was something that you realized that was important to you, and you said to yourself, "Go for it," and, as a result, you made something good happen for yourself.

6 Imagine that you had magic wand and could make anything happen. What three wishes would you have that, starting right now, would make the rest of your time in foster care the best experience you can imagine?

7 The last thing we want to ask you is how adults—who would really like to help—could make a difference for kids that are in foster care. I'd really like to hear your ideas.

Prominent Themes—In each story there is truth from a young person's perspective about something in the system that works for them.

After synthesizing all of the high point stories and ideas elicited through the interviews, the Ombudsman identified three prominent themes. The identified themes reflect the Ombudsman interpretation of the participants' collective perspective on what in the foster care system is working well and matters most to them. The themes are followed by the stories or ideas that best reflect them.

1. For more information about Appreciative Inquiry see OD Practitioner: Journal of the Organization Development Network, Vol. 32, No.1 (2000).

First theme: feeling normal.

What matters most? Feeling like part of a family.

From the perspective of the young people interviewed, success in foster care happens when they feel and are seen by others as not being different. They describe success primarily in terms of feeling and being treated like a regular part of their foster family.

“When I moved in, [my foster parents] made me feel real comfortable. They showed me my room and asked how I wanted to decorate it.”

“I feel like I’m part of the family. When we go to family events, my [foster] brother will say, ‘Come on, be a part of this. You are part of the family.’”

“When I got here it felt...like a normal family. There were four kids and two adults... The home I was in before—the foster mother was too old. There were no other kids in that home. I feel very accepted and included now in my foster home. I am treated like a member of the family. They don’t treat me different—for example, if I do something special, like I was in a play last summer, they didn’t all show up to come and see me in the play. Whoever could make it came to see me, and I liked that because that’s the way it would be for any other family member.”

“My foster mom would make me pull weeds or she would ground me when I was bad. But she didn’t treat me differently from the way she treated her grandkids.”

“Being with my guardian makes me feel like a normal kid. It was hard getting moved around, and now I know I’m going to stay here.”

“The first foster home I was in, we were a family. They were mom and pop. My brother was in the foster home with me, which is probably what made it the best. We always did stuff together. It didn’t matter what we did, we did it together. It was just that you had their [foster parents’] attention and it couldn’t be taken away, not by the phone or any interruptions. What we were doing could not be interrupted. It didn’t matter what we were doing, just that we were doing it together as a family.”

“My foster parents now are great. They don’t treat me like a foster kid. I call them mom and dad. They let me do things like this is my home. They let me paint my room any color I wanted. They give me money to buy things.”

“My [relative foster parent] made me feel accepted in numerous ways: by teaching us the rules of the house; taking us places with her, like to family gatherings; going on family trips to visit relatives; being told ‘I love you’ and getting hugs; having two dogs and two cats.”

“I don’t feel like an outcast. When you first enter a home, you feel like you’re interfering. That’s hard. Here, I feel like part of the family. Here, it’s not so much what they do, it’s their attitude. They don’t treat me like a foster kid. I feel like I can just be myself and they don’t have expectations that I have to live up to. They include me when they go places, like to family get-togethers, and when they introduce me they say, ‘This is my daughter.’ They believe that blood doesn’t have anything to do with being part of a family, and that is what I believe too.”

“At Thanksgiving, our [foster family’s extended family] came over and treated us like we were their own cousins, or nieces and nephews. They gave us hugs, they did stuff with us, and bought stuff for us.”

“My first Christmas in foster care. There were lots of people and everyone made me feel welcome. They treated the foster children the same as their own children. They didn’t introduce us as ‘Oh this is a foster child.’ They seemed to know what we were going through and made us feel welcome. My foster parents introduce me to people as their ‘granddaughter.’”

“The thing is, this [foster] family knows me. Holidays, Christmas, birthdays—they always include me. Even if I’m in a bad mood, I get included. I am included and part of everything. When we have the family picnic, I don’t know everyone, but everyone acknowledges that I’m part of the whole scheme. All the relatives just accept me as family.”

“Last year at Christmas [my foster family’s] whole family was here and their grandchildren. I actually felt like part of the family. I really liked that. They were nice and treated me like a brother.”

“The first two weeks after I moved in [to this foster home], one of the coolest times I’ve ever had is when I got to stay up late playing video games and watch TV and stuff. It felt normal. My foster parents were easy, lots of cats and two dogs. They accepted me and said I am the best kid they ever had and would like another kid like me.”

Second theme: feeling cared about.

"We have been working on [my foster parents'] second house in Ocean Shores. Everybody helped fix up the house. One of my foster brothers and I built a pathway. It was fun. It felt good to be included, and part of the family."

"I feel like family when we all get to go out to dinner. One time we went to Sizzler because it was my foster mom's cousin's birthday. The cousin was going to pay for all of us, but [my foster mom] said 'I'll pay for [me] and [my sister].' This felt really great, like she was saying, 'No, I'll pay for my kids.'"

"At this foster home, they would take me out to eat with their family. They had two little kids, and they would take me with them on their family activities. What probably made it easy for them to include me was that they took a lot of kids for a few days. I was the only one who was there long-term. I was there six months."

What matters most? Feeling cared about.

Young people said that success in the foster care system also occurs when they feel truly cared about. They describe success in the following ways: experiencing simple expressions of interest and caring about their feelings and needs—including their need for a connection with their birth family; being able to count on adults for security, structure and guidance; and having opportunities to discover and develop their potential. These experiences were touched upon in many high point stories.

"Show kids lots of love! I wish that other kids could be lucky like me and find good homes."

"Put kids in a family that really cares."

"I wish that all [foster] parents would be nice to foster kids. Be good to them—just like it was her child."

Experiencing simple expressions of interest and caring.

"My [foster] mom knows what I need without me asking. When my mom died, my [foster] mom held me tight. She got me through it and held me tight."

"I grew up taking care of myself. The most I've ever felt taken care of by an adult is here. Just little things make a difference, like [my foster mom] noticed my new pants and asked if I wanted to get my pants hemmed."

"Last year for my birthday [my foster mom] bought me some CDs that she knew I wanted. I didn't have to ask her, she just bought them for me."

"Once when I was really sick, my [foster mom] came down and slept with me. She washed my forehead with a wash towel, gave me aspirin, took my temperature and was really caring. It felt like she was my mom. I sit in [my foster mom's] lap and she will rock me and I can talk to her. I can share my problems and fears and tell her anything. I'm not used to so much attention. I think she understands what it is like because she was a foster kid too. Like after I visit my mom, sometimes my mom says stuff to me, and my [foster mom] will tell me, 'she doesn't mean it, it's just the drugs talking.'"

"When my older sister moved away to Arizona about a month ago, I was really upset. My foster father gave me a card. In the card, he wrote that he was sorry my sister was moving, and that he cared about me. I don't know how he knew what I needed. I was really upset, and I was crying. I was really happy when I read the card. It meant a lot. I just said thanks."

"When I first entered foster care, I was having a really difficult time with my mom. She has a personality disorder with, like, five different personalities, and it's hard to deal with. I didn't talk to anyone about things that were bothering me, and instead I just had a bad attitude. [My foster mom] knew something was wrong. Even though I had only been in placement with [her] for a month or two, I felt comfortable talking to her about my feelings. Before, I never opened up because no one listened. I just acted different and kept things inside. But [my foster mom] listened to me. I felt comfortable talking to her, and she showed me that other people cared about me too. Now it's easier talking about things that are bothering me."

Second theme: feeling cared about.

Experiencing simple expressions of interest and caring. *(continued)*

"It's a little thing, but I'm in sports and I get leg cramps. My foster mom always makes sure there are bananas because they help get rid of the leg cramps."

"My foster mother calls me into the kitchen and gets me to help her, and she talks to me."

"Last year at Christmas, I got everything I really wanted, and felt that I was loved. Not that I didn't before, but I didn't think they would really spend that much on me."

"When I'm mad, my [foster] mom knows and tries to get me talking. She keeps asking even if I have a hard time talking. It shows me she cares about me."

"Foster parents should not be afraid to show affection and bond with foster kids, even if they might move."

"In my first foster home, the first few days I was there I was feeling bad because I was missing my family. My foster mom called my caseworker and asked if I could have a visit with my family. My caseworker arranged it right away. We had a visit at the [DCFS] office, me and my five brothers and sisters, and my grandma. I don't know how my foster mother knew what I wanted, but I suppose she saw I was feeling sad."

"My dad died, and I was really sad and down. My [foster] mom was really nice telling me it was OK, and I would be all right. We talked about my feelings and that she would always be there to help me. She listened to me a lot and took me to lunch."

"I felt really happy on my last birthday. My foster family made it really special for me. They brought cake and ice cream, and sang to me, and we just sat around and talked. What made it so special was just having people around me that really loved me. It was different from my other birthdays because when I was living with my dad, he would make me plan my own birthday and he didn't really plan anything special. This was different because they just surprised me, and I didn't have to do anything."

"My foster mother recently—for a surprise because I am on the Honor Roll at school—bought me a new king size comforter and some special deep pocket sheets for my bed. She took me shopping, and I picked out what I wanted and the sheets go perfect!"

"At Christmas, my foster parents bought me a CD Walkman, a Tweetie sweater, and some overalls. They knew I wouldn't be getting anything for Christmas. It made me feel good inside because I wasn't expecting anything, and no one had done that for me before. I said, 'thank you very much.' I felt like crying. It was very nice. I just let them know I appreciated it."

"The first day I came here, I was nine. It was almost Christmas. At Christmas I got a Super Nintendo. It was special. I got a lot of stuff. I didn't expect any of that."

"One day, my [foster] mom and I spent the day together. It was just a regular weekend day. We cleaned the house together, then we went to the store together. Then we made dinner for everyone at home, and we went to a restaurant for dinner and to see a movie, just the two of us. What made it so special was spending time together by ourselves."

"My foster mom gets me things without me having to ask, and she seems to know when I need something. Like, she just seems to know when I need more socks—and I don't know how because I do my own laundry. I will just come home from school and there will be a bag of socks. Sometimes she'll buy me new clothes or stuff for my hair. She always gets the right size of clothes."

"My foster mother had six foster kids in her home. She would buy us all our own toiletries, shampoo and deodorant and things, and she would put our name on the things so it was just for us. It's the only foster home I've been in where we didn't have to share things like that. When I went to my last foster home, I didn't have any thick, warm socks to walk around the house in, and my foster mother just bought me some and set them on my bed like a gift. I guess she knew I needed them as I was walking around barefoot in the winter!"

"My social worker sent me a clothing voucher in the mail without me asking for it. It was August, with plenty of time before school started, and I wasn't expecting it at all. I was really happy I could get new clothes for school. Next time I saw my caseworker was when he did a health and safety visit, and I thanked him."

"I have a good caseworker. She always gets back to me when I call and remembers things, like if I need a bus pass or a clothing voucher, she doesn't forget. She also went out of her way for me to arrange my counseling so I could stay with this counselor. It has been a lot of hassles with insurance, but she did it."

"Last year, I was starting at a new school and moving into a foster home at the same time. My Spanish teacher just sensed something was wrong and asked if I was okay. She was new at the school, and I didn't know her, but we talked and I could relate to her. At Christmas, she gave me a little angel anonymously. I knew she gave it to me, and I asked her. But she said she didn't and that it must mean I have a guardian angel."

"My teacher last year recognized that I shouldn't be in special-ed classes. He got me out of special ed into the regular school program. Now being in special ed won't work against me when I'm in college or whatever. Now I am taking all the right classes, and I'm fine with my pre-college requirements. He moved me to sophomore English too. If it wasn't for that teacher, I probably wouldn't have gotten out of special ed. To make it simple, it felt good."

Supporting connections with my birth family.

"When I first moved into foster care they let me go see my mom. I really needed to see my mom...I wish I could visit [my adult sister] more often."

"I wish I could be out of foster care and be living with my sister and she would be my legal guardian."

"Last year, during the summer, my foster mom and my [foster] family—my sisters and my uncle—went to Louisiana for a week to visit my 101 year-old grandmother. She was healthy and just great! She didn't seem 101. She was so happy to see us. There was also an 80 year-old uncle. We just wanted to go see relatives."

"When I first moved to my aunt's [foster home], I thought it was another foster home. I had not met her before and didn't know she was my aunt. Immediately everything was different. She wanted to get to know me and my brother, and she told us all about our family. Because of my aunt, I have gotten to know my grandmother, great-grandmother, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Every other year we visit relatives in California. I am happy to be with family."

"I would see [my grandmother] every two weeks or so, and she would always plan ahead for things for us to do. She knew us and the things we were interested in and what we liked to do. It makes me feel good that someone knows what I like and cares enough to want me to be happy."

"A really special time was about two weeks ago when I met my brother for the first time. Actually, he last saw me when I was three years old but I don't remember him. My foster parents really care about my family. I told them I wanted to meet my brother, and they talked to my caseworker about it. My sister knew where he was living. My brother is 32 years old now. He has his own family. His whole family came over here to my foster home and we had a two-hour visit. Meeting him and his family was great. I had talked to him on the phone a couple of times. He was really funny. He made me laugh. I really like that [my foster parents] care about my family and they made this happen for me."

"My grandma lives nearby and my foster mother let me go see her. She said, 'I don't want to hold you back from your family.'"

"I'm happy when I visit my sisters. It's fun, and we like to see each other."

"I am happy whenever I go down and see my sister and her family. They accept me for who I am. My brother-in-law asked me why I hide my feelings. He thinks about me. They are very much a part of my life, and I can talk to them about anything. They both treat me like a person. They love me, and they show it."

"My older sister (age 17) would come and find me when I had a fight with my foster mother. I would usually go up to the school, which was only about four blocks away. My sister would come and talk to me. She would give me advice and make me feel more comfortable. She would talk me into going back. My sister knew I needed someone to talk to, someone who cared about me. I would feel much better after talking to her."

"My only wish is for them to hurry up and get the visits with my mom figured out. We are going to have visits at my grandpa's house and he will supervise them. My grandfather, my mom and my [foster] Dad are going to sit down and talk about rules and guidelines for the visits. I want to have visits with my mom, but this won't be that often, just once every three months or so."

"I wish my brother could live me. He's in foster care with a relative in Idaho. We were very close when we were younger, but we grew apart. I think they should put brothers and sisters together in the same home."

"Sometimes the State will say you can't have contact with your brothers or sisters—at one time I wasn't allowed to talk to my brother, except for once a year. That's way too little, and I got out of touch with my brother."

Second theme: feeling cared about.

Supporting connections with my birth family.

(continued)

"I wish I could stay with my sister and brother who is in the system some other place. He's 16, and I wish that him and me and my sister could be together."

"I think that caseworkers should help kids find their parents. My caseworker says, 'I'll do it' but then he doesn't do anything. I tell him how to find my dad and he says, 'That's a good idea,' but when I ask him again, he hasn't done the good idea or anything else. I think he has some information that he does not tell me, but I don't know for sure."

Being able to count on adults for security, structure and guidance.

"I've been [in this foster home] for seven years. I feel safe here."

"I used to be afraid of losing this placement, but now I'm more secure because I'm in a guardianship."

"Last year I was having trouble in math and my foster dad showed me so many steps until I just learned it."

"One day while I was working this past summer, I missed the last transit bus and I was really scared I would be left there all alone. I called home and my foster mother answered. I was worried no one would be home. She said right away that she would come and pick me up and told me not to worry. When she picked me up she gave me a big hug. What I needed was for someone to tell me it was going to be OK. I was so relieved. It made me know she cared because she came right away."

"My very first foster mom accepted me. I was really scared when I first went into foster care, and I locked the keys in the car one time. She didn't get mad. One time I was sick, and she let me stay home, and didn't get mad."

"They were going to put me in a foster home in Ellensburg, but I said I would wait at the [crisis residential center] because I didn't want to move away and change schools. It was near the end of school when I finally moved to my new foster home in Yakima. It was very scary because I didn't know where I was going or who would be there. I found out I knew [my new foster mother's son] from school, so then I felt better. I wish that I could stay here in this foster home for the rest of my time in foster care."

"If had a foster child, I'd make sure they had discipline. Make sure they do their homework. Someone has to be in charge, someone has to make sure things get pulled back in line, and to provide some consistency. Consistency, structure and organization. That's what kids need to have the home be complete."

"In this foster home, we know what the schedule is going to be, we know what happens each day and what we need to do. Some kids are lost, they don't know whether they are coming or going, and they are put in so many different foster homes."

"My foster mother walked me to my class the first day of school and introduced me to my teacher. She talked to him for a while and made it easier than I thought it would be. She hand-picked my teachers. New schools are always hard. I was worried, but things turned out OK."

"My foster parents paid attention to my grades. They wanted progress reports from school about how I was doing, and they were willing to help me with my homework. They put me on a homework schedule where I could play after school but at some point I had to get down to my homework. They gave me a lot of attention and a lot of love. They helped me with my social life too. They taught me good skills for making friends and asking girls to dance and stuff."

"My foster mom got me help with my phonics. My foster mom's friend got me into a reading program, and it helps me a lot. She knew I needed help reading. I can read chapter books now. I just read the first page of a Harry Potter book. The only things I want for my birthday are chapter books. My foster mom's friend comes to the house to help me with my reading."

"In sixth grade, I was getting really bad grades. I wasn't doing my homework. My [foster] Mom helped me get better grades. She helped me everyday after school and, in the seventh and eighth grade, I got better grades. Now I do my homework every day after school, and my grades are good. It's not hard."

"When I first moved into foster care, I had a negative attitude. I did okay at home, but at school I was getting Fs. I was rude, had a smart mouth and would tell teachers, 'F-you.' But every night, my [foster mom] would sit here at the table and make sure I worked at my homework. I got straight As and won a citizenship award at the end of the year, and then won it again the next year. I never thought I was smart, but now I've turned into this good student, 'Ms. Preppy.'"

"My [foster] mom showed me how to budget money so I won't overspend."

"Science is my hardest subject. My aunt encouraged me. She told me that she knew I could try harder and as long as I tried hard, she could accept that. I worked hard at my science class and got a B."

"I trust [my foster parents]. They keep their promises; they are solid and consistent people. Kids should be able to trust their foster parents."

"I've been going to my counselor for seven years. Whenever I have problems I talk to her. She gives me advice on how to keep out of trouble, and she has been helping me prepare for [the] Casey [program], telling me about the questions they might ask me."

"I waited four years to get my Lego set. I was fascinated with the motors and the fiber-optics system. It had lights that go on and off, and a crane that goes up and down. I had a subscription for a Lego magazine, and I used to dream of what I would get. When I went into foster care, my foster dad gave me a job as a general contractor's helper—working for him! I earned \$4 an hour, and he taught me how to hammer nails, do demolitions and set-ups, clean up, and all sorts of things. My Lego set cost \$158 so [gets out his calculator], let's see, I worked about 39.5 hours to get enough money."

Having opportunities to discover and develop my potential.

"Change the perception of foster care. It's not a bad thing. Foster care can be a good opportunity for people. I wouldn't be running or playing soccer if I were with my mom."

"I wish I could get into [the] Casey [program]. They help you with college, and they have groups and activities."

"Last month, in my sixth period, the teacher handed me an envelope, and it was a letter from the US Track and Field Association inviting me on a trip of student athletes to China. There will be a 5K race and a 10K race in Beijing on New Year's Day with over 10,000 runners. The trip costs \$2000. When I got home and showed [my foster mom] the invitation, she was really excited and is trying to help me put the trip together and work on ways to get the money for the trip. I started running cross-country just to stay in shape for soccer, but found that I really like it."

"I got a summer job, my first job. I've always wanted a job, and I've always wanted to work with kids. My foster dad helped me fill out all the forms and took me to the orientation and other classes I had to do. My [Independent Living Program] case manager also helped set it up. I was the first person they called to offer me a job! I was a counselor in training over the summer, and next year I will be a counselor! I did really good. Usually people only become counselors after two years. This might lead to other jobs, and I'm really glad I did it."

"I wanted to be in football, and my [foster] dad helped me so I could do it. He said anything I needed, he would help me with it. I knew I would have to practice a lot. I told myself to just do my best and try to get it. It was hard. There were so many other fast kids. But I had a lot of help. My PE teacher helped, my coach, and my friends. My PE teacher let me run laps during PE so I could catch up on my speed and stay there. My coach let me stay after practice, and he helped me with my passing, blocking and my speed. My [foster] dad picks me up because I miss the bus since I stay so late after school. He picks me up, and he helps coach me, and just helps me."

"Last year I was on the sixth grade track team. I really wanted to break the 200 meter Spring record. In the last meet of the season, I broke the record for the whole district by one-tenth of a second. My final time was 27.2. I wouldn't have played sports if I didn't come [to this foster home.] I love playing sports. The [foster] family cheered me a lot, and my foster brother helped me lift weights and run to get ready to break the record."

"In seventh grade, I ran for [student body] president. I wasn't popular and didn't have a lot of friends, but decided I wanted to run. The first thing I had to do was to get 200 signatures to get on the ballot. I got the signatures, and then I made up banners, cards and gave out stickers to get the votes. I wrote a speech, which was approved, and gave it to the student body. Everyone respected my speech, and I met a lot of people. I lost by four votes out of 750. So I felt good about how I did. I had the strength to overcome the fear of not being popular and took a risk to be what I wanted to be."

"I've been dancing ever since I was little—I was always dancing. The summer I moved [to this foster home], my mentor asked me what activity I would like to get involved with. I told him I wanted to do dancing, so we went and signed up. I joined this dance group—a performing drill team at the community center."

"I made the varsity basketball team in seventh and eighth grade. In seventh grade, I didn't think I would make the team; about 20 kids tried out and a lot of them were eighth graders. I hustled and played as hard as I could and made the team. Our coach was good. My aunt went to a lot of our games and encouraged me."

Second theme: feeling cared about.

Having opportunities to discover and develop my potential. *(continued)*

"I'm doing cross-country for the first time. I didn't even really know what it was. I run cross-country—and when the pressure is on—I step myself up. I meet the competition. I keep beating the guys that are ahead of me. I keep getting better. I strive to do better. I keep up my motivation and enthusiasm. My [foster] parents help too. They come to some of the games, and they help with transportation."

"The first day of football practice, the coach was teaching everyone how to run plays. We were all running around doing exercises. We did this for three days after. This is the first time I ever played tackle football. It's been great. It opened a door. You could find out how fast you are. I work at learning the plays, and can diagram plays like the coach does. The coach would tell you that you did a good job. He helps us to get it right. I made the first tackle in the game Thursday. My foster parents came to the first game."

"I told my caseworker and [foster parent] that I wanted to go to cheer-leading classes. They weren't sure about it, but they went and checked out the people who were teaching the class, and then decided that I could take the classes. I had a lot of fun and learned to do cartwheels, and we made pyramids."

"At church we have a choir, and I am with that choir. I sang in front of a whole bunch of people. In Yakima, I sang at the Foster Care conference. I gave a speech and sang there."

"During track last year, we had overnight trips to Spokane and Cashmere, and I really wanted to get to go, but needed permission from the State. So [my foster mom] talked to my caseworker for me and handled stuff so I could go. I went to the state meet last year in track. I work out and jog every day. I want to play football for UNC; it's my goal."

"I signed up for Explorer Cadet to be a cop. I took the test to go to the academy and made it. I go twice a year to training at Fort Lewis and Yakima. I get to go on shift with the local police and can go out on non-dangerous calls with them. I got my social worker to pay for my cadet training, my books, clothes and equipment. I just had to give her a list of what I needed and prices."

Third theme: feeling

What matters most? Feeling like my opinions matter.

Young people said that success in foster care occurs when they feel like adults listen to and respect their opinions. They describe success primarily in terms of feeling that they are able to influence what is happening to them. This seems to be particularly important to young people in foster care because decisions about their lives are often made by a cadre of adults with varying degrees of interest in or familiarity with their individual needs and interests.

"It's easier to get along when I'm given more respect and trust."

"My foster parents trusted me from day one. They showed me the bedroom upstairs, but when I said I wanted to sleep downstairs they didn't say, 'Why, so you can run?'"

"Listen to what kids have to say and look at things from their point of view."

"If kids want to do something that is healthy, let them do it. Let them have a say and support their interests."

"They shouldn't force kids to visit their parents if they don't want to."

"My foster parents have a second house in Ocean Shores, and they thought about moving there. [My foster mom] asked me if it was okay with me if we moved and, if it was, she told me to give her five reasons why it would be good to move to Ocean Shores. Before, my mom moved all the time, and I never had any input. I had to change schools every year. [My foster mom] wanted everyone on board if we decide to move."

like my opinions matter.

“There was a case planning with my caseworker, counselor and parents, and [my foster mom] was there. They were saying things that I didn’t want to happen and made me feel like my opinion didn’t matter. They were saying things like I was irresponsible and manipulative. I was trying to say something, but no one was listening, and I thought I had thought of something really good to say. [My foster mom] got up and leaned over the table and told everyone to stop and listen—that [I] had something to say. I told them that staying at [my foster mom’s] was the best placement, that it was structured and that it was better than staying with a single, male bachelor, and that if they moved me it would set me back, and I would get angry. Everyone was surprised that I said anything because I rarely spoke. I thought no one would listen.”

“I really wanted to leave my [previous] foster home. I wanted to move because I knew it would never work out. My foster mother would not get help. My counselor would come to our house and ask her to participate in counseling or go to a support group, but my foster mother didn’t think she needed it. I would talk to my counselor about it, and she talked to my caseworker. My caseworker said they would only move me if my counselor recommended it. Then my counselor talked to my foster mom about it but she didn’t want to give up the guardianship. So I talked to my counselor some more and she put in her reports that it would be better for me to move. She let me write a letter to [my DCFS caseworker and his supervisor.] They used the letter in court and I got what I wanted. My sisters are happy that I am happy in a new home.”

“Something I really wanted was to get out of my old foster home and guardianship. I didn’t get on well with my foster mother. It just wasn’t working out. I had wanted to get out of there for a year or two. My foster mom was 63. I called her grandma because she said I had to—all the kids had to call her mom or grandma—but I didn’t like it. I complained to my counselor at school, and I kept bugging [my caseworker]. My foster mom didn’t want to give up the guardianship, but then she said she didn’t know how much longer she could take me. [My caseworker] arranged for me to meet [my current foster parents.] I was scared at first, but we all got along as soon as we met. I visited with [my current foster parents] a few times, and then I came to live here. I’m very happy here.”

“[My guardian] really helped me to get off my meds. I was on a bunch of different meds since I was about four years old, for ADD, ADHD, and the meds had lots of side effects. Like I would get migraines and an upset stomach. I had been asking for years to go off the meds, and no one listened to me. They would just change my prescription. But the side effects never went away. At first, [my guardian] told me I had to take my meds, but then he supported me and told the caseworker and everyone else to take me off my meds, which they did. It was kind of cool that he stood up for me. I’ve been off my meds now for six or seven months.”

“I wanted to change schools, and everyone said it wouldn’t happen. I finally asked my case manager, and she went to school with me. I did most of it myself, but she cared and came with me. I got a waiver and went to the school I wanted to go to.”

“If I have a problem, my sister and brother-in-law are there for me. They try to see it from my point of view. They get both mine and my foster mother’s point of view—and don’t totally disregard my point of view. They take my questions seriously and respect my ideas. If I feel upset, I know I can talk to them and be listened to.”

“They stopped my mental health treatment because someone stopped payment, so I’m going to have to get a new therapist, and I don’t want a new therapist. I like the one I have now. My foster mother is going to try to get it fixed so I can still see her.”

2. This process also reinforced our pre-existing belief that foster care should be temporary, and that what young people need most is a family to call their own. The Ombudsman therefore strongly supports ongoing efforts to: prevent the need for young people's entry into foster care; expedite decisions about the future of those who must be placed in foster care, and; ensure that those young people who cannot be reunified with their birth family are provided with an alternative permanent family. To this end, the Families for Kids Partnership has developed and is working to implement the Washington Permanency Framework, a five-year plan for improving policy and practice to ensure that all children in foster care have permanent families. For more information about the Washington Permanency Framework, contact Families for Kids Partnership, (206) 695-3238, www.FFKPartnership.org.

3. The topics to be studied at an Appreciative Summit could include those developed for this project. Moreover, they could be expanded to address those experiences that the young people interviewed by the Ombudsman said they wished could be improved. See: *Young peoples' ideas for improving their experience in foster care on page 14*.

Findings—The Ombudsman found the appreciative interview process to be a powerful and rewarding experience. Our images of young people in foster care shifted subtly during these interviews. We came out of the process with a renewed sense of their individuality, vulnerability, resilience, and awareness. We also experienced a heightened appreciation of foster parents' contributions to the well being of the young people in their care. Further, we were moved and surprised by the young people's interview responses; specifically, by the utter simplicity of their best experiences and wishes, and by the unexpected commonalities and coherence in what they said matters most to them. Finally, the Ombudsman was left feeling energized and hopeful about the possibility of improving young people's experience in foster care. The Ombudsman has concluded that the successes discovered through this process could be replicated and expanded throughout the system if sufficient attention and energy were devoted to such an effort.²

The Ombudsman has developed a single recommendation aimed at enhancing young people's positive experiences while they are in foster care.

Recommendation—The Children's Administration should focus concerted attention, energy and resources on identifying, replicating and enhancing the positive experiences of young people in foster care. Consideration should be given to bringing together a large cross-section of key participants in the foster care system, including young people, public and private-agency leaders and case-workers, foster parents, and guardians ad litem, in an "Appreciative Summit." The purpose of the Summit would be to engage participants in a mutual discovery of what's working best in the foster care system and design specific ways to replicate and amplify these successes throughout the system. Bringing the "whole system into the room" for this purpose not only would generate new possibilities for action, but also would inspire an unprecedented level of trust and commitment to carrying out those actions on behalf of young people.³

Appreciative Inquiry is being used in a variety of systems and organizations throughout the world to accomplish large-scale positive system change. Those employing this approach include private corporations, non-profit organizations, grass roots initiatives and federal and state government agencies. For example, the Washington State Utilities and Transportation Commission (UTC) earlier this year initiated an Appreciative Inquiry process aimed at helping that agency improve the recruitment, satisfaction and retention of its employees. The child welfare system is in great need of a positive change intervention like Appreciative Inquiry. Washington State could serve as a national leader by bringing this innovative approach to the field of child welfare.

An Appreciative Summit would help generate the energy and momentum necessary for achieving powerful and long-lasting change. According to two of the founding practitioners of this method, David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, the Appreciative Inquiry Summit: *"brings out the best in people, it facilitates the 'whole story' coming together and it inspires highly committed actions on behalf of the whole. Since the inception of The Appreciative Inquiry Summit...we have watched, over and over again, tension turn to enthusiasm, cynicism to collaboration and apathy to inspired action."*⁴

4. Whitney, D., and Cooperrider, D., The Appreciative Inquiry Summit: An Emerging Methodology for Whole System Positive change, OD Practitioner: *Journal of the Organizational Development Network*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (2000), pp. 13-26.

Reactions from people who have participated in Appreciative Summits.

- "It evokes trust."
- "It lets people see and experience a purpose greater than their own or their department's."
- "You get a sense that you are connected to a goodness that comes from the power of the whole. You realize you really need each other."
- "It establishes credibility in the outcomes. When everyone is part of the decision you know it will stick."
- "New norms form quickly. You start to value relationships and getting the whole story."
- "People transcend the 'I' and become a 'we.' What's common becomes apparent."
- "It eliminates false assumptions about other people and other groups. When you get to know someone you realize they aren't exactly what you imagined them to be. You develop compassion for different people instead of judgments."

Young people's response to the Ombudsman Appreciative Interviews.

- "I think it's best to get ideas from kids by talking to them—like you are talking to me. I don't really like talking in a group because I'm afraid to talk in groups."
- "I like that you are talking to kids. Adults need to take the time to talk to kids and find out what's happening with them. To get ideas from kids—it would be good to talk to them like you are."
- "I think it would be best to get ideas from foster kids by having these interviews."
- "How to improve foster care? By asking us. Bring kids in to be interviewed. See if they like foster care. The caseworker could ask kids what could be better."
- "I'd interview kids. I know you can't interview everyone in the whole state, but maybe half."
- "Go and ask kids what they need, like this."
- "It would be best to get ideas from kids by coming and talking to them one on one."

Young peoples' ideas to improve foster care.

The Ombudsman interview protocol included two questions that were designed to elicit young people's wishes and ideas for improving their experience in foster care. Their answers focused on three main areas: transitions into new homes; communication with adults; and participation in ordinary activities.

1 Transitions into a new foster home.

"When a kid first comes into foster care, they should be given a stuffed animal or a toy or something, because they don't have anything with them except the clothes on their back. That's what happened to me—I got to pick out a stuffed animal. I still have it."

"Have stuff ready for the kids ahead of time so when they get [to their new foster home] there are things for them to do -like a play station, TV or boom box. Have a loving family to greet them."

"Caseworkers should give kids information about the foster home they are going to. They should have us meet the foster parents before we get placed there, and let us get to ask them questions with our social worker there, before we just get taken there. That is the scariest part of foster care, when you don't know where you are going or anything about the people you are going to."

"Caseworkers should help kids get adjusted to a new [foster] home—they shouldn't just put them in a new home and leave them there. They should come and visit to see how you are doing, or at least call. It's scary going to a new home."

"Make sure the child likes the [foster] home. Don't just put them there and say 'It's good just because the state and the foster family says it's OK.'"

"I would ask foster kids, do they like the foster mom? Are they doing OK?"

2 Communication with adults.

"I think caseworkers should explain more to kids about what's going to happen to them. When I got removed, the cops came, my mom was crying and then I was in a different home. Just talk to the kids more. I e-mail my caseworker a lot."

"When the police came to our house with two ladies to take us away, they said, 'Just grab enough stuff for three days, and you'll come home in three days.' I think they should not have told us that because we didn't come back."

"I think caseworkers should tell kids what the foster parents can and can't do. Some foster parents say it's OK for them to hit kids as long as they don't leave a bruise. My [previous] foster mom would say that when she hit me. I did tell my counselor she was hitting me and my counselor told me it's not OK but I wish I would have known sooner."

"I think foster kids need a direct way to communicate to be heard. Kids should be able to talk to one adult, who should have a meeting with the kids. Or they could have younger kids talk to older kids and the older kids could talk to caseworkers."

"Caseworkers should talk to kids more. My caseworker hardly ever talks to me. They rely too much on counselors and foster parents to talk to us. They should find out how we are doing directly from us."

"Foster kids should be able to e-mail their caseworkers and they should have to e-mail us back."

"I think caseworkers make judgments about what's best for us without asking us what we want. Caseworkers sometimes say they know how you feel, when how can they know? They should be like you [the interviewer], just asking questions and accepting our answers."

"I think caseworkers and GALs (guardians ad litem) forget about kids after a while. My caseworker hasn't called me once since I have been here, except to ask me to do this interview. My GAL has never called me."

"Keep promises! I was told that I would get to stay with my brother. Lie. I was told that I would get to stay in my first foster home. Lie."

"There are some really weird foster parents out there. I think kids need to have somebody on the outside like [the Ombudsman] to talk to, not the caseworker. I might not want to tell my caseworker something because she might get mad or hold a grudge."

3 Participating in ordinary activities.

Staying overnight at a friend's house.

"I wish I didn't always have to get permission from the state to be able to stay overnight at a friend's house."

"The guardianship took me out of the agency system. With the guardianship, I have more freedom. I can go over to a friend's house, or have a friend come over to my house without having to wait for a background check. Those decisions are left up to [my guardian] and me."

"Foster children should be able to spend the night over at a friend's house without everybody having to get background checks."

"The system is too afraid of what might happen that it can't trust itself. Like getting background clearances and criminal background checks just to stay over at a friend's house or have a friend over at my house."

"The system should make exceptions to all the rules for kids that don't need the rules. Like with the background checks before you can stay over at a friend's house. I never stay overnight at my friend's. I just tell them that I can come to their party but I can't stay over night."

Getting a driver's license.

"They should change the law that says foster kids can't get a driver's license until they are 18, unless the foster parents can put them on their insurance. This is not fair on the foster parents or the kids. This does not give foster kids a chance to be like other kids."

"They should help foster kids get their driver's license. I would like to be able to drive to my appointments, as now I have to take the bus and since it only runs out here every hour, I have to leave for my appointments an hour and a half ahead of time. Foster kids should be able to drive at 16 with an adult in the car, at least for a probation period until they think we can drive alone."

"I wish I could drive when I'm 16. Pass a bill so foster kids can drive, if you have good grades and are doing OK. We should be able to take risks like every kid."

"Foster children shouldn't be punished for one child's mistake. One [foster] kid got in a car wreck... now no foster child can take driver's ed until they are 18."

Buying new clothes.

"I wish kids could get checks for clothes, like \$50 a month or something. I like to have new clothes, but my foster mom can't afford it, and I don't like to ask her for a lot of money."

"Kids should get more clothes than once a year. My foster parents give me money and help me. I bought my last pair of shoes myself. Clothes vouchers don't pay for hardly anything. They don't even pay for underwear—just a pair of pants and a couple of shirts."

"I think foster kids should get a small amount of money per month for themselves. Sometimes the foster parents don't give the kids an allowance. I know it can't be a big amount, and it should be based on the kid's age and their behavior. Older kids like me could get about \$75 just to get some of the things they need."

"If I were an adult trying to help the foster care system, I would do fund raising to help foster care programs. Then I would work with the foster parents and foster child directly with clothing, books and sports equipment that the foster child needed. I would tell the foster child that there was a money limit that could be spent, but if he needed new football cleats, books, clothes, etc., he could buy them."

"I wish I could get an allowance. I always need money—for things like going to the movies, going bowling, buying shoes or earrings. I have been sitting around here with not a lot to do because I don't have any money to do stuff like that."

The young people interviewed by the Ombudsman.

The 32 young people whom the Ombudsman interviewed as part of its Foster Youth Appreciative Inquiry Project were selected with the assistance of DCFS and private agency caseworkers. The Ombudsman contacted DCFS and agency staff to help identify young people on their caseloads with the demographic characteristics sought by the Ombudsman. Each young person agreed to be interviewed after reviewing information about the purpose and nature of the project. Ombudsman staff (and one contracted interviewer) conducted individual interviews at or nearby the young person’s foster home.

Interview Participants

Sex:

Female: 17
 Male: 15

Age:

11-12 5
 13-14 12
 15-16 13
 17 2

Race:

Caucasian 22
 African American 6
 Asian 2
 Biracial (including Native American) 2

Ethnicity:

Non-Hispanic 25
 Hispanic 7

Cumulative Years in Out of Home Placement:

1-2 yrs 1
 3-4 yrs 7
 5-6 yrs 6
 7-8 yrs 6
 9+ yrs 2

Number of (Non-Respite) Placements:

1-2 15
 3-4 6
 5-6 5
 7-8 3
 9+ 3

Current Placement Information:

Placement Licensed By:
 DSHS 23
 Private Agency 9

Placement Type:

Non-Relative or Kinship 30
 Relative/Kinship 2

Geographic Location:

Region 1 5
 Region 2 5
 Region 3 5
 Region 4 9
 Region 5 5
 Region 6 3

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