

# fostering perspectives

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## Lived Experience Creating Change

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services is committed to making positive and impactful changes to the state's child welfare system. Individuals with lived experience are the backbone of these efforts. North Carolina has created opportunities for individuals with lived experience to participate in meaningful discussions, events, and organizations to advocate for critical changes to improve outcomes for children and families. Representation from those who can speak from personal experience is of the utmost importance when making decisions that will change people's lives.

In this issue of Fostering Perspectives, we wanted to share many of the different ways people in North Carolina are utilizing their lived experience to create meaningful change. Through a variety of viewpoints and perspectives people share their stories and what they do to make an impact. Hopefully this issue inspires, educates, and enlightens you to think of all the different ways lived experience can make a difference. We hope you find it helpful.

## Practicing Child Welfare with Lived Experience: From Foster Youth to Social Worker

In this Issue	
Advocating Together: Strengthening Professional Relationships in the Courtroom	2
Kinship Therapeutic Foster Care	3
A Social Worker and a Foster Parent	4
Advocating for Yourself as a Kinship Caregiver	4
"Viridy First"	5
The Connectivity of Lived Experience	6
Messages from Foster Family Alliance of NC	7
North Carolina's Child Welfare Family Advisory Council	10
LINKS and Utilizing Lived Experience	11
Resource Parent Needs Assessments	11
Lived Experience Focuses Our Child and Family Services Plan on Families	12
Lived Experience Creating Change	13
Resources for Families Affected by Hurricane Helene	13



Candie Johnson

Experiences shape who we are. They shape our perceptions of the world, how we navigate life, the frame we see the world through, and they have the power to define us. It has been my lived experiences that brought me to where I am today: a child welfare social worker serving kinship families.

When I was a child, I never thought I'd be a social worker. I was raised in a family with priorities more centered around self-indulgence than education. I was taught to fear social workers because they would take me away from my family. I was told horror stories of what foster care was like. When I was eleven, that fiction became a reality. Fortunately, the experience was far from how it was presented to me.

After living a life of poverty filled with abuse and neglect, foster care was a paradise. There were still difficult times, but I no longer had to worry about being abused or parenting my three younger sisters. My only responsibility was to be a kid. As anyone in child welfare can attest to, that transition is not an easy one, especially with siblings. I fed, bathed, changed, supervised, and disciplined my siblings since I was a toddler and suddenly that responsibility was lifted. It took a long time, but I slowly adjusted. After around two weeks in my first placement, my two youngest siblings were placed in a different foster home. Sometime later, my other sibling was moved. We still saw one another at family visits, but I no longer had the pressure to parent them. While there was no safety reason for us to be separated, it was truly the best thing for me.

During my foster care journey I lived in three different foster homes and moved four times over three and a half years. Three months after my fourteenth birthday, I was adopted.

My adoptive mother obtained her Master of Social Work degree when I was a teenager. I'd never considered becoming a social worker, but seeing her journey and reflecting on my own experiences changed that. I decided I wanted to be the kind of social worker that my siblings and I needed. I wanted to work to impact the child welfare system from within, even in some small way.

I obtained my Bachelor of Social Work degree in 2017 and have practiced child welfare since. I'm now a MSW. I'm careful to keep my biases in check and to not let my experiences overshadow those of the families I serve. I'm honest with my supervisor when I feel my own bias may hinder my ability to give my best to a family and seek guidance to ensure my experiences aren't clouding my professional judgement. Despite these efforts, my lived experience will forever shape my perceptions of this work and I'm thankful for that. I have an understanding of the child welfare system and what my families are going through that many do not and it is a blessing.

I haven't made any profound impact to the system, but I have impacted the lives of countless families. My experience is not the same as every youth or family I work with, nor is it unique. I use my personal experiences along with my education and training to guide how I engage with families. I strive to be approachable, honest, ethical, and upfront. I'm a stringent advocate of relative and non-relative kinship placements whenever it's safe, even knowing that wasn't the best option for me when I was a child. As NC continues to work towards prioritizing kin, I'm proud to be a part of that change.

# From Foster Youth to Social Worker continued from previous page

I'd like to leave you with some things I have come to recognize in hindsight:

- **I've always struggled with severe anxiety and ADHD, but I was not diagnosed until adulthood.** I believe my fear of punishment, my general disposition, my parentification, and the sanctuary school offered me all prevented both from being identified earlier. I realize my trauma and coping skills masked the symptoms. It wasn't until I was in my BSW program that I even connected the feelings to names. When I work with children now, I try to view the big picture as well as the small nuances to attempt to discern if there is an unmet need being overlooked.
- **It's important for siblings to be together if there are no safety concerns in most situations.** Both the state of NC and the Social Work profession recognize this. I maintain this as a professional, but I see the other side based on my own experiences. There were no safety concerns that would have prevented my siblings and me from remaining together, but I know that is what was best for me.
- **Birth family connections are vital.** I see now that my birth parents struggled with mental illness, substance use, intergenerational trauma,

and developmental/intellectual disabilities that prevented them from being safe parents. While I don't have a great relationship with them now, it has been helpful for me to understand the abuse and neglect I experienced. I recognize they did not have the capacity to be safe and appropriate parents.

- **I still remember the day I was told my parents' rights were terminated.** I hadn't been given any inclination the case was headed that way, nor did I really understand what it meant. While I didn't wish to return to them, I still felt unmoored, blindsided, and powerless. I don't want any youth to feel that way.
- **There is bias towards kinship placements with misconceptions such as "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."** I am a living example of how incorrect that assumption can be. I advocate daily for kinship families to fight against such injustices, and I hope you will too.

*Candie Johnson is a Kinship SW III with the Catawba County Department of Social Services*

## Advocating Together: Strengthening Professional Relationships in the Courtroom



Venus Bradley

"So how did court go?" I asked our social worker after learning a hearing had been held for a new foster placement that morning.

"Fine," was the one-word response I received.

It hadn't gone fine. Major decisions were made without our knowledge, and an untrue accusation was made. It was the one time I missed court.

As resource parents (e.g. foster parents), we often focus on providing a loving home for foster children. But an equally important part of our role is working alongside the professionals who

advocate for the child's best interests in court. Building strong connections with the guardian ad litem (GAL) and caseworkers is crucial, as they often have greater insight into the legal process. The best outcomes for the child come when we operate as a unified team.

### Why Relationships Matter

Courtrooms can feel intimidating, especially for resource parents who may not fully understand the legal intricacies. But your presence and input can be vital in shaping the child's future. It's not just about showing up; it's about engaging with those responsible for advocating for the child. These professionals, particularly the GAL, are not adversaries. They share the same goal: securing the best outcome for the child in your care.

The GAL plays a distinct role in the case. While resource parents handle daily care, the GAL gathers information from various sources—social workers, therapists, teachers, and sometimes biological parents—and presents the child's best interests in court. They often have a wider perspective because they see the case from all angles.

Some resource parents may feel uneasy if the GAL's recommendations differ from what they believe is best. However, it's important to recognize that the GAL's assessments are based on a broader set of information. Building a good rapport with the GAL can bridge gaps in understanding and lead to better teamwork for the child's benefit.

### Practical Tips for Building Strong Relationships

**Communicate Proactively:** Don't wait for court hearings to reach out to the GAL. Keep them updated on the child's progress, behaviors, and any concerns. This builds trust and ensures they have a complete picture of the child's needs when making recommendations. Stay informed about upcoming court dates.

**Be Open to Their Perspective:** While you know the child's daily routine best, the GAL may have insights from other sources that shape their recommendations. Be open to discussing these perspectives and ask questions if something is unclear. This fosters collaboration instead of conflict.

**Share Key Insights:** As the person who spends the most time with the child, your observations are invaluable. Whether it's how family visits affect them or milestones they've achieved, sharing your insights ensures the GAL has a well-rounded view of the child's development and challenges.

**Attend Court with a Collaborative Mindset:** When you attend court, think of it as a team effort. By being present, you show the court—and everyone involved—that you're invested in the child's future. It also provides opportunities to strengthen connections with the GAL and attorneys.

### Advocating for the Child in Court

In addition to forming connections outside the courtroom, it's vital to recognize the significance of your role when attending court. Even when you're not called to testify, your presence speaks volumes. Judges and attorneys notice resource parents who consistently show up and engage.

Court can be inconvenient, especially for working parents. Hearings often occur at difficult times and may be rescheduled at the last minute. I've faced many frustrating moments sitting in court or traveling to the courthouse only to find out the case wouldn't be heard. Despite these challenges, attending court is essential. It's one of the few times you can hear discussions about the child's case firsthand, and your presence shows commitment.

For children over 12, your support becomes even more important. Older children have the right to attend court and can feel overwhelmed by the process. By being there, you provide emotional stability, showing the child—and the court—that you're part of their team. When my now sixteen-year-old attended court for the first time, the GAL and their attorney ensured she was comfortable, explaining the process clearly. This support was key in helping her advocate for herself.

### Working Toward the Same Goal

Ultimately, everyone involved in a foster child's case, from the GAL to the judge, should be working toward the same goal: achieving the best possible outcome for the child. Whether that means reunification, kinship placement, guardianship, or adoption, the process requires collaboration. By cultivating strong professional connections with those advocating for the child, you ensure your voice and the child's needs are heard. The stronger your partnerships, the

more effective your advocacy will be.

In my experience, collaborating with the GAL has been invaluable. Whether facilitating our oldest son's transfer from another state, ensuring our foster daughter's college tuition was covered, or helping us secure guardianship of our youngest daughter, these critical outcomes were achieved through teamwork. The GAL played a pivotal role in these cases, demonstrating the value of effective partnerships.

As resource parents, we are not just caregivers—we are advocates. By fostering strong ties with professionals in the courtroom, we can ensure that every child in our care has the best chance for a bright future.

*Venus Bradley is a resource parent in North Carolina. She and her husband have been fostering for 8 years and have adopted three now adults and have guardianship of one*

## Kinship Therapeutic Foster Care



Erica Burgess

Kinship care is when children or youth reside with relatives like grandparents, aunts and uncles, siblings, cousins, or someone they have a "family like" relationship with. In North Carolina, approximately **24%** of youth involved with the child welfare system are placed in kinship care. Many of these families are providing care as non-licensed homes and are not receiving the same support as licensed foster homes. Many of the children and youth in these homes have experienced some form of neglect and abuse, which

has resulted in their removal from their biological parents and caused trauma. Some of these children and youth may now be experiencing behavioral or mental health concerns and need further support to remain in their kinship home.

The Family Focused Treatment Association (FFTA), a national membership organization that works to advance best practices and advocate for policies that supports families in care, believes all children belong with their families or with someone they have a family-like relationship. FFTA believes that children and youth with treatment needs can remain in the home of their relatives or those with a family-like relationship when given proper support such as therapeutic foster care.

**"As a foster child and now adopted teenager, it wasn't always easy. But my kinship family found amazing support through the KTFC program. They offered so much help and guidance to my aunt and uncle, making sure they had everything they need to take care of me."**

In 2020, the Family Focused Treatment Association (FFTA) launched a demonstration project to develop and pilot a therapeutic kinship care model in NC. This pilot engaged three public and private agencies in partnership to build a model with the goal of licensing more kin as therapeutic foster parents. This was designed with the hope that children and youth may have their treatment needs met by kin and would not need to transition from a home environment to a higher level of care.

The following agency partner pairs are participating in this project:

1. Wake County Health and Human Services and Methodist Home for Children
2. New Hanover County Department of Social Services and Boys and Girls Home of NC
3. Forsyth County Department of Social Services and Children's Hope Alliance

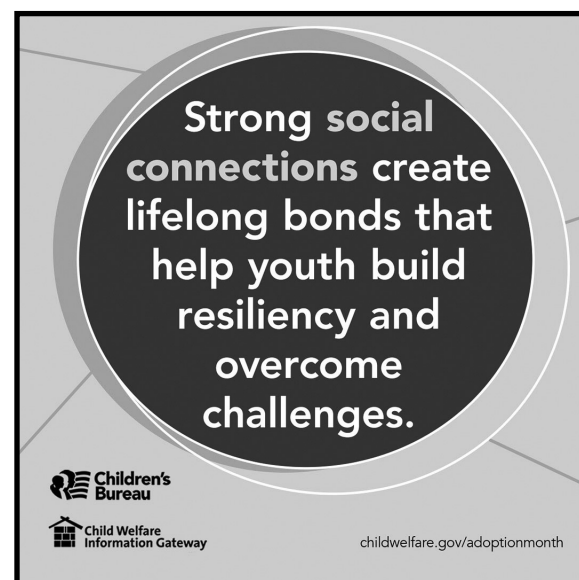
With the support of FFTA, UNC School of Social Work's Family and Children's Resource Program, and Child Trends, all three partner pairs have been able to effectively locate, place, train, and license kinship caregivers to provide therapeutic foster care. As a result, many youth and young people have been able to reach stability in their kinship home and many have even reach permanency through adoption, guardianship, or KINGAP.

**"As kinship caregivers who have benefited from the FFTA's KTFC Pilot, we can attest to the difference it has made. The support has been invaluable in providing the best care for our adopted daughter (biological niece) and helping us feel empowered as licensed therapeutic kinship parents. We have found incredible support through working with the KTFC pilot and the private agency that provided our therapeutic training and supervision."**

If your local agency is interested in learning more about the KTFC project and how to engage in your community, please contact Erica Burgess at [eburgess@ffta.org](mailto:eburgess@ffta.org) or use the QR code to visit the FFTA Website.



*Erica Burgess is a Kinship TFC Project Manager for FFTA. She has over 20 years of experience in direct care and management in the private sector of the child welfare system*



# A Social Worker and a Foster Parent



Megan Burns, MSW

Everyone is familiar with the age-old question of which came first, the chicken or the egg. I often ask myself which came first: my calling to be a social worker or my calling to be a foster parent.

I became a child welfare social worker after finishing my Master of Social Work degree. I became a foster parent about five years later. Over the past decade I've held many roles in DSS including foster care permanency worker, foster/adoptive parent recruiter and trainer, and now I'm a foster home licensing and placement worker.

As for my foster parent journey, my husband and I were licensed for almost five years with DSS, had six children come through our home, and adopted two of those children. I believe that having worn the hat of social worker, foster parent, and now adoptive parent gives me a unique perspective. I aim to use this perspective to humanize the other side, bring understanding, and increase cooperation.

Being a child welfare social worker and a foster parent seem to be two separate realities. The social worker lives in a world of safety vs. risk, reunification efforts, policies and procedures, paperwork and court, and time speeds by as they work to help children and families day-to-day. The foster parent lives in a world of changing diapers, kissing boo-boos, hugs, and reading books. Time creeps by between court dates. For a worker, there is a caseload of kids that is

part of a broader system, but for a foster parent, there is only this child, or this case, and a lived life with emotions at play.

For the foster parents that I work with, I strive to help them understand the underlying laws, policies, procedures, and time frames that the social worker must follow. To help them see these workers as people who likely got into this field to make a difference. A social worker's day rarely ends at 5pm and even if it does, thoughts of the day likely linger long after they leave the office. They manage their own emotions and feelings about a case professionally and keep an eye on their goal of spurring change and reunifying families.

For the social workers I work with, I hope to help them understand foster parents are people who have feelings, opinions, and busy schedules. I help them see that a foster parent's role never ends at 5pm and if they're doing it right, there is attachment and strong emotions at play. A foster parent's input should be considered and respected, even if it differs from the agency, and they should be treated as partners in a case. I encourage foster parents to be celebrated and cherished, not taken for granted or dismissed.

My goal is to be a champion for my families within the agency to ensure they feel supported and encouraged by all staff, not just the licensing team. Foster parents and social workers are both essential to our work with vulnerable children, so let's build each other up to do the work together.

*Megan Burns, MSW is a Foster Home Licensing and Placement Worker with the Catawba County Department of Social Services*

Scan to learn more about becoming a Guardian ad Litem



# Advocating for Yourself as a Kinship Caregiver



Genia Newkirk

Before writing this article, I had to take a huge pause, a deep breath, and totally relax my body to ensure that I capture the essence of this topic while using an economy of words to give it the justice it deserves.

My journey as a kinship caregiver began a little over five years ago, when my niece was five years old. Let's just say I was older and with an adult son who as I say, "was grown, and gone."

Knowing my niece was in foster care caused me to go into immediate rescue mode, without pausing to process the realities involved with

becoming a kinship caregiver. I didn't think much about childhood trauma, the legal system, parental/sibling bonds, and so much more.

Because of the unknown components of kinship care it's vital that kinship caregivers advocate for themselves in a manner that brings balance to you as the caregiver, the child(ren), and the biological parents.

**How do we do this?** We do this first by acknowledging the journey isn't an easy road to travel alone. We need to connect with support groups in our communities. We need to give voice and action to what our needs are as it relates to making sure we're attending to the best interest of the child.

It goes without saying that kinship caregivers sacrifice on so many levels to ensure we can care for the whole child. One aspect of that is ensuring that familial bonds are maintained and sustained. This can be a difficult task, and

lead to emotional, mental, and physical breakdowns. As a result, we must be self-aware, and purposefully care for ourselves in ways that bring a restoration and energy to continue providing the care that our children deserve. Do not neglect attending to your needs. Seek out areas to provide respite for yourself (there is a reason why we're told on flights to put our oxygen masks on first).

**Lessons Learned:** As mentioned earlier, it is necessary to have balance as we continue to journey the path of kinship caregiving. I am learning the importance of cultivating the bond that exists between the child and the parent, and in some cases bridging the gaps that exist in that bond. No matter the passion, and/or bond that we have as a kinship caregiver, we are not the biological parents, and all efforts should be explored to maintain the bond shared with the biological parents. Allowing the child to explore their relationship with their biological parent is essential in working towards positive outcomes for everyone involved.

In closing, I have learned that being a kinship caregiver is an **A.R.T.** We are positioned to bring forth bountiful **Achievements** in the lives of children despite Adversity. We are not simply to provide a roof, but to provide a **Root** that will absorb all the nurture and love we must give and sprout forth as an amazing human being. Lastly, make no mistake, this is a tough road to journey. One filled with potholes, speed bumps, and road hazards. Just know **Together** on the same team, we can overcome every challenge, or obstacle that we face.

*Genia Newkirk is a Kinship Caregiver in North Carolina*

# “Viridy First”

Throughout this issue of Fostering Perspectives, you have read several pieces from resource parents, professionals, and those with lived experience working hard to create change in the child welfare system. Sometimes, three people can create impactful change in one another. I recently had the pleasure of speaking with Stephen, Kara, and Viridy. We hopped on a Zoom call together and I was amazed at how three warm, welcoming, and humble people created change by simply being themselves.

This story starts when Stephen and Kara went through pre-service training to become foster parents. They were open to fostering various age ranges. Stephen’s only request: the child or youth had to be potty-trained. They did not have children of their own, and the idea of parenting for the first time was intimidating, so they wanted to start out providing respite.

Enter Viridy. Viridy was sixteen years old and already wise beyond her years. She had been in foster care for a couple of years, and requested coming into care at the age of fourteen knowing it provided her with a better chance to thrive. When her previous placement disrupted on a Friday afternoon, Stephen and Kara were contacted and asked to take Viridy for the weekend. The ink was still drying on their new foster home license, and they were told if they couldn’t take her for the weekend, there were really no other viable options. As Stephen and Kara waited for Viridy to arrive on that fateful Friday night, they told me “We have never been that scared in our lives.” On Viridy’s way to their house she remembers being mad at her social worker for bringing her to a new placement. She wanted to go to a group home with her former foster sister, but her social worker asked her to “try Stephen and Kara’s home for a few days.” When Viridy stepped out of the car, Stephen and Kara remember thinking “she doesn’t look that scary.” Viridy remembers seeing their pristine white couch and thinking “this placement won’t last long.”

Then something happened that isn’t always the norm when new foster parents get their first placement. They all got along.

Really well.

I asked them why they think the placement worked so well and all three of them had trouble putting it into words. However, one theme remained consistent across their answers: they communicated early, often, and honestly. One of Viridy’s first questions was “What are your house rules?” Kara’s response, “What do you think the house rules should be?”

As often happens with short-term placements, there was a need for Stephen and Kara to keep Viridy longer than the initial three days. It was an easy decision for everyone. Viridy would stay. Stephen and Kara wanted to put Viridy first.

Viridy was placed with Stephen and Kara shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic shut the world down. They were all stuck inside together and something remarkable happened. They still got along really well. They played games together every night and their bond with one another continued to grow.

They went on family trips together, went fishing, went four-wheeling, and openly communicated the whole time. One day, seemingly out of nowhere, Viridy called Stephen “dad.” Talking to them, you could tell this was a very powerful moment in their relationship as Stephen became emotional describing it. Soon after, Viridy called Kara “mom.”

When Viridy was getting ready to turn 18, Stephen and Kara kept it “Viridy first.” They could have adopted her but wanted her to be able to benefit



(L-R) Stephen, Viridy, and Kara pictured along with Viridy’s son

**“Then something happened that isn’t always the norm when new foster parents get their first placement.”**

financially from the Foster Care 18-21 Program. “She spent a lot of time in the system, she should be able to benefit from it,” Stephen said.

When she turned 22 this year, Stephen and Kara adopted Viridy to make it official. As soon as the adoption was official, Viridy admitted she did in fact spill something on their white couch but was able to clean it before they noticed.

Viridy has had a busy year. She has gotten married and gave birth to a happy and healthy son, giving Stephen and Kara their first grandchild.

I asked Stephen and Kara what Viridy taught them, and they replied “she taught us about tenacity. She taught us about the importance of family. Parenting her has even made us closer as a couple.” Viridy said Stephen and Kara taught her to “be a leader, not a follower.” In other words, Viridy needs to put Viridy first.

Stephen, Kara, and Viridy want those reading this who are thinking about fostering a teen to give it a chance if they feel equipped to do so. Keep communicating and show one another respect, even if you’re having a disagreement.

I closed by asking Stephen and Kara their hopes for Viridy. They proudly replied “we want her to be whatever she wants to be. She’s already a great mother and a great wife.” Kara then asked Viridy “what do we always remind you when you’re planning your future?”

Viridy laughed and replied, “Viridy first.”

# The Connectivity of Lived Experience



Lanitta Berry

If you were given the opportunity to change the world, what would you do? How would you go about it? Who would you get help from? For some people, the power to change the world does not reside in any physical tool, but in their own collection of life experiences within a complex child welfare system. Their ability to combine the knowledge they have gained from past experiences and an understanding of how systems should be intended to work develops their expertise.

North Carolina has a very diverse landscape ranging from the mountaintops of Boone, the military bases in Jacksonville, and the “urban goldilocks” setting of Charlotte. Similarly, our state has no shortage of great advocates and experts with lived experience who are forging a new way of how care for families is provided, supported, taught, and managed. They are the catalysts in spaces that influence our state system. Like interconnected parts of woven threads, providing stability while sparking collaborative communal engagement is a byproduct of their work.

Here are some specific ways North Carolina system experts are impacting and serving families:

## Community Level

Foster Family Alliance of North Carolina (FFA-NC) understands the importance of having support for resource parents. As a parent, it is very easy to overlook your own needs while doing the best for your children. In August 2024, the organization began a mentorship model program for therapeutic foster parents. This is a perfect example of how shifting the idea of experts not just existing outside of communities but within them can develop safety nets and build connections. For more information or to learn more about ways to get involved with this mentorship program, contact the Foster Family Alliance of North Carolina at [info@ffa-nc.org](mailto:info@ffa-nc.org).

**State Level (also see “North Carolina’s Child Welfare Family Advisory Council” by Melissa Russell on page 10” for more information about the North Carolina Child Welfare Family Advisory Council)**

The North Carolina Child Welfare Family Advisory Council began in 2016 and is supported by a partnership with the NC Department of Social Services and N.C. State University. The council is a 12-member body with positions available to those who received and are directly impacted by child protective services. Foster, adoptive, birth parents, kinship caregivers, and former foster youth serve as experts providing expertise on state design and planning teams, webinars, and conferences. The connectivity of intersectionality is frequently addressed because systems are never linear and neither are the services and programs created to support them. It also shows how council members are

able to build capacity and share their knowledge because system navigation is not a straightforward experience.

## Nationwide Impact

SAYSO has been a crucial partner for child welfare systemic change in North Carolina for almost 30 years. SAYSO of Children’s Home Society of NC partnered with the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative to create the United Stakeholders for Change workgroup to increase placement stability for youth in care. So far, in the spirit of collaboration, the group has managed to create and present implicit bias trainings, partner at community events serving as facilitators and panel experts, and develop and publish tools with recommendations for best practices for resource parents and social workers within independent living programs. The approach of gathering members within the child welfare sector is intentional and vital to connect resources and services to tackle placement instability.

## Global Impact

In October of this year, the Kempe Center’s Call to Action Conference will be held virtually, and it will be an international affair. The purpose of the convening is to “bring radical and lasting change to the way child welfare systems work.” Opportunities for participants include learning about innovation for best practices, networking, and idea-sharing. For this conference, lived experience experts can not only join for free, but they can also present at no cost. I, along with many experts across the US and the globe, will be presenting workshops and webinars to inspire action. My session is titled “Collaborative Efforts for Change within Pregnant and Parenting Populations.” For this session I will be discussing how to utilize the five social determinants of health to better the child welfare system. If you would like to learn more about the session or are interested in seeing others, look for more information on the Kempe Center’s Call to Action Conference.

The wealth of know-how and its application within North Carolina is as vast as it is deep-rooted. Lived experience experts are pioneering true change and its chain reaction has no bounds. We can choose to ignore or we can adapt and grow from these efforts.

The last thought I want to leave with you is a small but mighty call to action that can be used daily. Take five minutes to think about:


1. Your “Why” behind being involved in child welfare.
2. Who do you work with to accomplish your why?
3. Who is missing from that team? Why?
4. How can you support others and be supported in this process?

*Lanitta Berry is a Child Welfare and Business Administration Consultant with lived experience in the foster care system*

Every teenager in foster care has a story to tell.  
**Make Every Conversation Matter.**

**QUICK TIPS FOR ENGAGING YOUTH:**

- Be honest and real about what is happening.
- Focus on strengths, but share honest feedback.
- Be trauma informed and recognize when trauma is a barrier.
- Ask meaningful questions and listen with empathy.
- Share tasks and set goals together.

 **Children's Bureau**  
 **Child Welfare Information Gateway**

# Messages from Foster Family Alliance of NC



Sherry Thomas

Hello Fellow Resource Families and Supporting Agencies,

Whether you are on a traditional, year-round, modified, or private school calendar, the 2024-25 school year has officially begun! While this is an exciting time to meet new teachers, make new friends, and discover new adventures in learning, it can also be a difficult time for students. This can be especially true for children and youth in foster care who may be struggling learners.

Some students may struggle because of distractions due to instability at home, trauma, or other transitions in their environment that created gaps in their access to consistent schooling. Others may struggle due to an identified or unidentified disability that is impacting their ability to access instructions.

As the new school year begins, I want to introduce myself and offer some tips to help make this the best school year yet for students, resource families, and agencies supporting students. I am fortunate to serve in the role of Education Consultant for Foster Family Alliance of North Carolina (FFA-NC). In this role I provide guidance and support around the special education referral or reevaluation process, Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and navigating 504 plans for resource parents and agencies. This includes training on federal requirements for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Section 504 requirements from the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. With more than 37 years of experience in the field of special education, most recently as Director of Exceptional Children Programs with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, my focus has always been to support students, families, and teachers.

Many times, the academic year brings a new school, an unfamiliar teacher, different home situations, or a new placement for children in care. However, returning to the same school can also be unsettling due to a new teacher, administrator, and/or peers. These changes can bring additional anxiety and concerns to children and families. Having a plan and the focus to address a new school year is important in setting students up for success.

In my experience, I have observed proactive steps that resource families can take to positively engage with their children's school.

Here are some suggestions to consider for making this school year the best one yet!

**Make time to attend the open houses, teacher meet-and-greets, or curriculum nights that are offered at your child or youth's school.** If these events do not allow time for you to discuss specific needs for your child, set up a separate appointment. However, attending these events will provide you with knowledge, information, and connections to those in the school who can and will support students.

**Maintain a morning routine during school days.** Structure is critical for students who struggle with change or anticipation of their day. Involve students in creating the routine; they are responsible for selecting their outfit, having their lunchbox in hand, or packing their backpack. Responsibility is a good way to create buy-in from the student to maintain the routine needed to get everyone out the door on time.

**If this is a new school, make sure all paperwork/documentation needed has been provided to the school.** This includes vaccination records, proof of residence documentation, and personal identification records. Contact the school ahead of time and determine exactly what your school requires. Assembling and providing those documents can ensure the school is clear on any medical needs, custody, etc. and will contribute to a smoother school experience for everyone.

**Set up a way to regularly communicate with the teacher.** This may be a communication notebook, email, written notes, or scheduled meetings. Just remember the opening and ending of the school day is not the best time to have an in-depth conversation with a teacher or administrator. Planning ahead and scheduling an appointment will bring everyone to the table and should prove to be more productive. This will make the year go smoother!

I welcome the opportunity to support resource families and agencies around their educational needs. Feel free to contact me if you have questions, concerns, or need guidance. I am always here to help! You can reach me at [sherry.thomas@ffa-nc.org](mailto:sherry.thomas@ffa-nc.org).

Here's to a wonderful and successful 2024-25 school year!

*Sherry Thomas is an Education Consultant with the Foster Family Alliance of NC*



FFA-NC is looking for volunteers for committees, the Board of Directors, and other areas. Please fill out our application, which you can find here: <https://www.ffa-nc.org/membership> or by scanning the QR code.



## A learning site for North Carolina's foster and adoptive parents and kinship caregivers

Foster parents are encouraged to talk in advance to their supervising agency about obtaining training credit through [fosteringNC.org](http://fosteringNC.org).

Join the [fosteringNC.org](http://fosteringNC.org) email list, to sign up to receive news and updates scan the QR code.



## Writing Contest

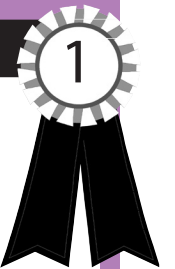


In the most recent Fostering Perspectives writing contest we gave young people in foster care the following prompt: **“Part of being resilient is overcoming a challenge. Tell us about a time you overcame a challenge and who or what helped you.”** Here’s what they had to say.

### Olivia Age 16

Lluvia, My sister, has helped me get over the challenging fear that I am unlovable even when I didn't feel like I deserved it but even then she still didn't leave my side and from the earliest of days, she enveloped me in a cocoon of affection, demonstrating through her actions that love was a force powerful enough to dispel any shadows of doubt. Her love wasn't just a mere emotion; it was a guiding light, a constant reminder that I was cherished and valued beyond measure. Through her nurturing presences and unwavering encouragement, Lluvia shattered the walls of insecurity that once surrounded me. Her words of reassurance were like a soothing balm to my wounded spirit, and her gestures of kindness spoke volumes of a love that transcended any limitations. In moments of self-doubt, she stood by my side, a beacon of unwavering support, reminding me that I was never alone in my struggles. Lluvia's love became my shield against the fear of being unloved, a steadfast anchor in the tumultuous sea of life. Her love was a testament to the boundless capacity of the human heart to heal, to uplift, and to empower. In her embrace I found solace, in her words, I found courage, and in her love, I learned that true love is not just a feeling but a transformative force that has the power to heal, to nurture, and to inspire.

OLIVIA RECEIVED \$100 FOR TAKING TOP PRIZE IN THE WRITING CONTEST.



### Tattianna Age 16

A challenge that I overcame would be when I had a hole in my heart when I was little. I was in the hospital from December 29th all the way to February 14th. My parents were scared that I wouldn't make it but here I am alive and healthy, playing with my friends and the animals, and hanging out with everyone I'm close with. The thing that helped me was my family's care and affection and faithfulness and their bravery and their hopefulness. Once I was okay again I got to go home and that was on February 14th aka Valentines day. Now it's my special day, the day I came home from the hospital after having a hole in my heart. My family cared for me the whole time and the nurses and doctors at the hospital never gave up on me. My parents call me their Miracle daughter. My siblings were also a big help in the whole process. My parents were also worried about my twin brother because he had something wrong with his brain, but he's okay now. He's alive and healthy and loves playing and doing stuff and going to school and hanging out with friends and family and helping people when needed.

TATTIANNA RECEIVED \$50 FOR TAKING SECOND PRIZE.



### Tyrell Age 17

I overcame a challenge when I went through my time of grief when my grandmother died. When I found out my grandmother died I was really angry and depressed. So I went to my foster parents, they gave me advice but that did little at that moment. But once I turned to God, everything changed for me, because I let go and let God take care of my problems. When God stepped in he made me look at what I do have (that was in my reach or still alive on this earth) and he taught me to be grateful. There are still times when I think of what grandma would've been like right now but I just think about the fact that I'm going to see her again one day. But now that I'm 17 years of age and I'm getting wiser each and everyday, I give God glory that he brought me out of depression and into his mercy and love. So I give God all the glory. Also some other helpers that were a big factor to me was my foster parents. They took great care of me even when I didn't act right, and they also took me to church and basically treated me like I was a part of their great families. I want to shout out my DSS workers because they taught me many lessons as well as lead me to the foster homes that treated me so well.

TYRELL RECEIVED \$25 FOR TAKING THIRD PRIZE.



### Layla Age 11

One of my biggest challenges I overcame was leaving my mom. 2 years ago I was really sad, my brothers and sisters were sad too! About 1 year in a half later that's when I found out I was leaving my aunt and uncle. My two brothers was leaving my grandad 1 month before me. Also I just learned to keep praying for my mom and family to get us back. I feel like every day was getting closer and closer. I just learned to talk to somebody you trust. My foster parents, are really, really nice. I would never be anywhere else than here. I truly learned to trust and believe in God. It helps!

### Alex Age 12

I have overcome many challenges. Here is one of them. While with my grandparents I had outbursts of depression and depressive episodes to the point I had unhealthy thoughts mostly the idea it was my fault for coming into custody but I then thought of healthier thoughts. I told myself that it was for the greater good that I am where I am and how well I've now been doing. My Grandmother helped me through these tough times by showing me that my thoughts were only a temporary solution to a fixable problem.



## Hailey Age 16

I'm Hailey. Earlier this year, I struggled with math in school. Adjusting to a new home environment and lacking effort led to me falling behind. Recognizing that need for change, Mrs. Connor, my math teacher, provided me with lots of tutoring every week after school. Her support and guidance led me to not only improving my grades but to also being awarded student of the month in March.

## Kayden Age 9

My challenge was being treated the wrong way. That is why I am in foster care. My parents were not treating me the right way, so they had to go to jail like the other writing contest. I didn't want to go to jail, but my parents had to because they were not doing the right things. They even made me and my three sisters sleep on the floor and left us all by ourselves. How do you think that would feel? Scary right? That is how it felt - scary. My parents were extremely bad. They need to get along with God. They still have a long long life to live, especially without God, so that was very hard for me. I had to move to seven houses. My sisters are now separated from me. One is in Washington, one in Charlotte, one in Fayetteville. Those places are far apart. The one in Washington didn't move long ago. That was super hard, especially if they are your siblings. It's like you don't have any if they are separated from you. My mom and dad didn't get along well - that was hard and scary.

## Ethan Age 14

When I was 14 I made the JV and Varsity team. I had to play center because of my height and athleticism. The only problem was that I wanted to play guard. My mentality was to do just that. A few games into the season I was determined to show what I had. Before one of our games I said "Coach, look at this." I went up and did dribble moves and shot some 3's and made them. He proceeded to say "That's good, but not enough." The next practice he comes up to me and says "We're going to shoot 25 mid-range shot's then we'll do the next drill." We do the drill and he says "5 for 25." After we finished he told me "Have I showed you or have you showed yourself?" That made me even more hungry to work and play guard. As the season was going coach saw my constant and consistent adjustments.

ALL OTHER SUBMISSION AUTHORS RECEIVED \$20 FOR CONTRIBUTING TO THIS ISSUE

A reader asks ...

# What is Unlicensed Kinship Care?



### What is Kinship Care?

Kinship care is the full-time care, nurturing, and protection of children by their relatives, members of their tribes or clans, godparents, step-parents, or any adult who has a kinship bond with a child or teenager.

Kinship foster care is when a child/youth comes into foster care and is temporarily placed with a relative or kin. "Kin" can be related to the child/youth by birth or have a "family-like" relationship with them, such as a close friend of the family or the child/youth's foster parent. Through kinship foster care, a child/youth can better maintain connections with family, making it the preferred resource when out-of-home placement is necessary.

### Why is Kinship Foster Care Needed?

When children and teenagers need a safe place to call home temporarily or permanently, those who are closest to them can step in as kinship caregivers and make a world of difference. At-risk youth who can depend on family or close family friends in their time of need can successfully adapt to new home environments that maintain the sense of familiarity and stability they are accustomed to.

Kinship care is a positive way forward and provides some of the best possible outcomes for children and youth who are temporarily displaced due to unsafe living conditions. Staying with a family member or a close family friend can help ease the trauma associated with being removed from their homes. In some cases, kids are able to stay in their current schools and childhood neighborhoods as well as maintain connections with family and friends. Additionally, youth who are placed with those familiar to them are more likely to successfully adapt to their new homes whether the placements remain temporary or become permanent.

### But Don't I have to be Licensed to be a Kinship Caregiver?

With kinship care, licensing is not a requirement. It's common practice for youth living in unsafe situations to temporarily stay with relatives or "kin."

Sometimes families can work out these arrangements on their own without involving the child welfare system. Other times, the system does get involved. It is important to note that kinship caregivers who choose to become licensed foster parents qualify for monthly financial assistance to help care for a child/youth. Additionally, licensed kinship caregivers may qualify for the Kinship Foster Care and Guardian Assistance Program (KinGAP). If there's a strong possibility you may become a permanent caregiver for a child in need, licensing is recommended.

### Unlicensed Kinship Care Payments

Effective July 8, 2024, eligibility criteria to the Unlicensed Kinship Care program was changed. Children and families must meet these criteria for the family to be eligible to receive payment as an unlicensed kinship care provider:

Child(ren) must be in the custody of a local child welfare agency while receiving payments;

County child welfare agency has completed and approved appropriate background checks and kinship care assessments at appropriate intervals.

The County must have the Court sanction or authorize the placement. This can be done at the earliest court hearing or by consulting with the County legal staff to ensure this is completed at the appropriate time (please refer to N.C.G.S. 7B-505 for non-secure cases and N.C.G.S. 7B- 903 for adjudicated cases);

Child(ren) must be related to the kinship care provider through blood, marriage, or adoption, providing foster care as defined under G.S. 131D-10.2(9); and, if applicable, any half siblings of the child(ren) regardless of their relationship to the kinship care provider;

Child(ren) must be between the ages of 0 and 17;

The placement must be an unlicensed kinship care provider;

The kinship provider must agree to receive payments by signing the DSS- 5802 (Unlicensed Kinship Payment Acknowledgement).

# North Carolina's Child Welfare Family Advisory Council



Melissa Russel

Maybe you've heard of the N.C. State Child Welfare Family Advisory Council. Maybe you haven't. Hopefully, by the time you've finished reading this article, you will understand who and what we are and be as excited as we are about our work.

Established in 2018, the N.C. State Child Welfare Family Advisory Council (CWFACT) is a partnership between families who have lived experience with the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS). Comprised of birth parents who have received

child protective services, young adult alumni of the child welfare system, foster parents, adoptive parents, and kinship caregivers, CWFACT uses lived experiences within the child welfare system to provide input on what services NCDHHS offers and how these services should be provided. This partnership highlights the importance of families having a voice within a system that directly impacts them.

A key facet of CWFACT and the work we do is that we are advisory in nature. We are here to use our experiences within the system to offer feedback on how procedures can be improved, rather than to share our personal opinions. At first, I didn't see much of a difference. As I attended meetings and started to absorb what was being said, I began to understand.

I came in with my view as a foster parent, assuming everyone else would think the same way I did. Quickly, I was proven wrong in the best possible way. I listened to my fellow council members and tried to hear what they were saying. They had their own experiences and unique perspectives that shaped the way they would approach a topic. And when it was my turn to speak, they were just as receptive to me and my experiences.

The best part about this council is the cohesiveness and support that the members give one another. We offer a safe space for ideas to be shared. Everyone is mindful of sensitive information and aims to share information in a thoughtful and considerate way. We also are responsible for managing our own emotional well-being and accepting that it's okay to step away if a topic becomes too much for us to handle.

At CWFACT, we hold meetings twice a month. Our Wednesday meetings are called "Lunch and Learns," and that is exactly what we do. The meeting lasts an hour and is educational in nature. We have guests from NCDHHS or other agencies who join and give us information on programs being offered. Sometimes our own council members can share their work within county, state, and federal levels. Our Thursday meetings are half-day meetings and packed with information and opportunities to impact procedures and services. We've had state and other agency representatives bring ideas to the group to get our advice on improvements. This could include flyers, improving verbiage

on documents and brochures, and advice on upcoming services and changes within the system.

We are also afforded other opportunities for being a part of CWFACT. For example, members are invited to join design teams for the state. Design teams are made up of NCDHHS staff, county social workers, and others who come together to help improve different aspects of our state's child welfare system. I've had the chance to create a training video used for resource parents and social workers on shared parenting and write for this publication.

We also present at national and international conferences. This October we have two presentations for the Kempe Conference, an international child welfare event. These presentations highlight our partnership with the state and how North Carolina is placing value on lived experiences and using them to shape the system. Leading up to our presentations, we collaborate to develop the content and layout. We aim to give each member an opportunity to excel and show how their lived experiences have led them to become a voice for change.

Leadership development is another bonus of being a member of CWFACT. Council leaders, employed by N.C. State, work with each of us to help us determine where our skill sets lie and use those to our highest potential. Every member has an impact in different ways, whether it be presenting, technical support, or even moral support.

With the leadership skills we have been given, members can pass that knowledge to others in the community. For example, do you remember the first time you entered the child welfare world? The language, acronyms, and rules can be overwhelming. Members can use the knowledge they've gained and help navigate others that are new to this system. Having someone who's been there before by your side as you try to wrap your head around the thousands of thoughts entering your head might just help create a success story. Through peer support and community cafes, members can also take the knowledge they've gained back to the meetings and further use it for change.

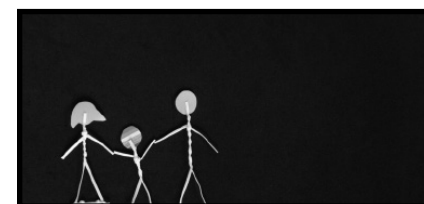
I just began my third year with CWFACT, and I can't praise the work or the people enough. Each member and agency personnel truly care for one another and is always there with a kind and supportive word. There is a safe space for disagreement without fear in the most civil way. The commitment from the state to use our voices and experiences to progress child welfare within North Carolina helps build stronger families, which in turn builds a stronger community. We all come from different backgrounds with different life experiences, but share the common passion for children, families, and our community.

*Melissa Russell was a foster parent for seven years and now serves on the NC State Child Welfare Family Advisory Council. She is the parent of two children adopted from foster care*

## New Courses on Fostering NC

### Empowering LGBTQ+ Children and Youth Experiencing Foster Care

In this course, narrated by a young adult with lived experience, participants will learn how to support and advocate for children and youth who identify as LGBTQ+. Participants will also learn common terms, research regarding outcomes, skills needed to provide a supportive home environment, and resources to learn more.



### Helping Children and Youth Succeed in School: A Course for Resource Parents

In this course, participants will learn how to support and advocate for the educational needs of children and youth in care. Participants will also learn about educational outcomes, legislation that provides resources and supports including Individualized Education Plans and 504 Plans, as well as their role in supporting and advocating for the educational needs of children and youth in care.



# LINKS and Utilizing Lived Experience



Tori Marshall

The John H. Chafee Foster Care Federal Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood is known as the “LINKS Program” in North Carolina. The LINKS Program supports youth and young adults between 14 to 21 years old who are or were in foster care.

LINKS is not an acronym, and therefore does not “stand” for anything. Instead, it is a word that captures the purpose of the Chafee Act and the intent of North Carolina to build a network of relevant services and resources with youth. These services and resources allow young people

to have ongoing connections with family, friends, mentors, the community, employers, education, financial assistance, skills training, and other resources to facilitate their transition to adulthood.

LINKS also utilizes federal funding to support and assist youth and young adults in their transition to adulthood. LINKS Special Funds support contracts with agencies in NC that provide direct services and support to youth and young adults.

The NC LINKS program helps to bring about change by leveraging those who have lived experienced in numerous ways. One of the extraordinary ways is by having a Youth Advocacy Leader Council of young people voted in by their peers from all over NC. These young people with the support of the SaySo (Strong Able Youth Speaking Out) advocate for positive changes for their peers. These young people participate in different Government Page Weeks

and participate in meetings with their local social services to provide feedback on current services and support in their county.

These young people also participate as members of committees with The NC Department of Health and Human Services to provide their lived experience input in meetings that impact permanency, safety, and the well-being of children. Young people with lived experience also participate in planning committees to help develop resources and guides for social workers and caregivers.

These young people’s voices, input, and stories are so important to help move the needle towards positive change for foster care youth and young adults in NC. Their insight and feedback are valued in this partnership to create change. Young people receive monetary stipends to compensate them for their efforts.

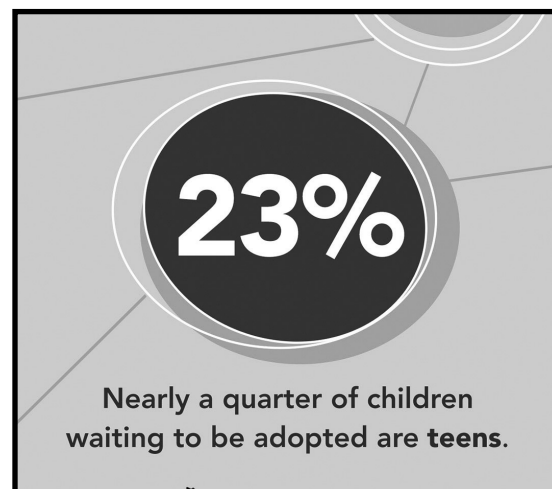
The NC Department of Health and Human Services also hires young adults with lived experience after they have fully exited out of foster care. These young adults are employed within the Permanency Section to work closely with LINKS, Foster Care 18 to 21, NC Kids for Adoption Recruitment, and the Adoptions Program. These young adults lead meetings, participate in many projects, and propose ideas for initiatives that impact permanency.

NC LINKS is dedicated to helping youth and young adults in NC with their transition into adulthood and society but cannot do the work without the partnership of young people with lived experience.

*Tori Marshall, BSW is the State LINKS Independent Coordinator with the NC Department of Health and Human Services*

## Tips to Create a Welcoming Space in Permanency Planning

- Listen to youth.**  
Ensure all voices have an equal chance to speak.
- Prioritize inclusive language.**  
Use youth's preferred pronouns and practice cultural humility and responsiveness.
- Address your implicit biases.**  
Incorporate connections to other cultures, such as through artwork or food, into your space.
- Mistakes are okay.**  
Acknowledge that everyone comes from a different background.
- Put the person before the job.**  
Make sure youth know the door is always open.



# Resource Parent Needs Assessments



Jonathan Rockoff

For the past two years, the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) has partnered with Foster Family Alliance of North Carolina (FFA-NC), and the UNC School of Social Work’s Family and Children’s Resource Program to create, administer, and analyze a resource parent needs assessment in North Carolina.

Over 800 respondents have replied each year providing valuable insight into what resource parents (foster, adoptive, and kinship) need, value, and hope to see improved in North Carolina’s child

welfare system. Crucial information has been collected from resource parents **like you** about training needs, gaps in support, court involvement, and much more. This feedback helps shape and form what is being done in North Carolina to improve placement stability, outcomes for children and youth, and retain and recruit more caring and effective resource parents.

The third annual Resource Parent Needs Assessment is currently being developed. We are working with skilled evaluators to fine-tune the questions and ensure the assessment provides key information that can lead to change.

We anticipate the next Resource Parent Needs Assessment to be sent out in early spring 2025. The purpose is to hear from individuals who have served as resource parents within the previous twelve months. If you have participated in the past

two years, we truly thank you for your time and valued feedback. We hope you are willing to participate again this year!

If you have not participated in the past and at the time of the assessment being sent out you will have been a resource parent within the last twelve months, we truly hope you consider taking the assessment. Your voice and input can directly lead to important changes being made in North Carolina’s child welfare system. We hope to hear from as many resource parents as possible. Be on the lookout from your licensing agency within the next few months for more information!

*Jonathan Rockoff is an Educational Consultant with the UNC School of Social Work’s Family and Children’s Resource Program*

# Lived Experience Focuses Our Child and Family Services Plan on Families



Rick Zechman, CMSW

All states are required by the US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (ACF) to develop a Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP), which is a five-year strategic plan that sets forth the vision

and goals to be accomplished to strengthen the state's child welfare system. The CFSP aligns and consolidates plans for multiple programs that serve children and families, as well as older youth and young adults formerly in foster care, to ensure a comprehensive approach to meeting the needs of children and families.

**The North Carolina Division of Social Services (NC DSS) relies on those with lived experience to help create these goals and monitor progress toward achieving them.** Examples of having lived experience include parents who have successfully navigated child welfare services and reunified with their child, resource or kinship parents providing foster care for children, and former foster youth.

At the statewide level, there are collaborating partners in NC, including but not limited to SaySo (Strong Able Youth Speaking Out), the Child Welfare Family Advisory Council, and Foster Family Alliance of North Carolina that support the development of individuals with lived experience. They engage in the annual progress and service reporting meeting with our federal partners, monitoring and providing feedback on the CFSP goals. Their voice at the table reminds policymakers and others why we all do this work, and the importance of working together to make a positive difference in

the lives of others.

Individuals with lived experience contribute within various state-level workgroups and are integrated within all ongoing policy, practice, and programming design teams. NC DSS has five design teams that meet monthly to review performance data and policy guidance. They include the Safety, Permanency, Well-Being, Continuous Quality Improvement, and Workforce Development Design Teams. Collaborating partners advise NC DSS on implementation strategies and practice standards that will improve outcomes for children and families. The Safety Design Team provides recommendations for Goal 1, the Permanency Design and Well-Being Design Teams for Goal 2, the Workforce Design Team for Goal 3, and the CQI Design Team provides recommendations for Goal 4.

Sharing lived experiences and feedback contributes to amending child welfare policy guidance. Sometimes, the changes may seem simple, but they are impactful to a family. For example, instead of calling appointments for a family to see their child "visitation," we now call that "family time."

At the community-based level, NC DSS facilitates listening sessions/focus groups and administers surveys to individuals with lived experience, identifying their perception of the successes and challenges of the child welfare system. Listening sessions and surveys target youth who are experiencing foster care, birth parents, kinship providers, and resource parents. Analyzing this information helps identify key issues that inform the development of a CFSP goal. For example, information reported by kinship providers contributed to the development of objectives for Goal 2, the need to develop kin-specific licensing standards. Developing those will support the overall recruitment and retention efforts of kinship providers, and safely support the children they care for.

*Rick Zechman, CMSW is an Educational Consultant with the Family and Children's Resource Program at the UNC School of Social Work*

## In June 2024, our state submitted a new CFSP to ACF, setting the following goals for the 2025-2029 period:

- Goal 1:** Strengthen all child welfare staff's ability to assess ongoing safety throughout the child/family's engagement with child welfare services.
- Goal 2:** Increase access to services for children and their families to keep children in the safest, least restrictive setting.
- Goal 3:** Develop and support a stable, competent, and professional workforce in child welfare.
- Goal 4:** Implement continuous quality improvement.
- Goal 5:** Improve engagement with stakeholders to ensure services are responsive to the needs of communities and outcomes for children and families are improved.

Coming November 14

# TAKE CARE

A new documentary looks at the child care crisis in North Carolina, how it affects everyone, and what's at stake if we don't fix it.

Learn more at [takecarenc.com](http://takecarenc.com)

Produced by SeeBoundless and Neimand Collaborative with funding from the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services.

Children's Bureau Child Welfare Information Gateway

This is the average time in care for children waiting to be adopted. Black or African American and American Indian/Alaska Native children spend more time in care compared to other children.

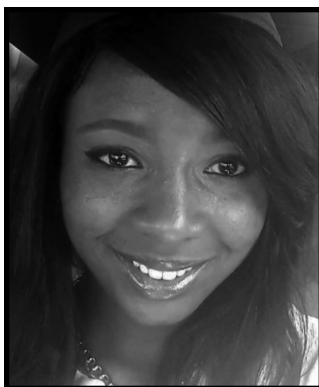
# 34.9 months

[childwelfare.gov/adoptionmonth](http://childwelfare.gov/adoptionmonth)

To review the CFSP in its entirety, scan the QR Code:



# Lived Experience Creating Change



Shanita Dildy-Goings

My name is Shanita Dildy-Goings and I am considered a lived experience expert on life within and transitioning from substitute care. Lived experience experts use their personal encounters in life to educate and inform others who may not have first-hand knowledge. That expertise is then used to aid in things like the strategic direction, governance, and design and delivery of research an organization can take to improve itself. Basically, lived experts have insight that could greatly increase the effective implementation of an organization's goals better

than anyone without personal insight could. In this way, since I was young, I have been lucky enough to be a witness to and be a part of real change in the system by just being willing to share my story.

It started with SaySo. They first taught me that despite what I had gone through, or how old I was, that I had a voice. My voice became my platform for change to fix what I didn't like about being in care including my lack of agency, normalcy, sibling visits, etc. I was an angry and confused child who felt passed around, alone, and unstable. The adults around me lacked the capacity, training, or will try and understand what I was going through, let alone how to make the experience better for me. For this reason alone, the system needed

to look to experienced experts if they hoped to improve.

The adults who sought out these experts valued what I had to contribute and learned from what I and other youth like me have lived through. With their help I have been in the room with mayors, governors, representatives, and senators who have direct influence over how the state views foster youth. The lived experience I was able to share through speeches, articles, workshops, and my art paved the road to better kinship care, sibling connections, and normalcy standards. I can only look forward to and support others with lived experience as they make their mark in creating change within substitute care.



To learn more about SaySo, scan the QR Code:



## Resources for Families Affected by Hurricane Helene

From the FosteringNC course "Preparing and Responding to Disasters"

The following are things caregivers can do during an emergency to increase their ability to stay connected with children and youth:

1. Reassure children and youth that they have a plan to stay safe.
2. Stay calm to show what calm looks and feels like.
3. Share simple information using a calm and steady voice.
4. Organize comforting and distracting activities.
5. Take care of yourself.

To learn more, visit this course on FosteringNC.org using the QR Code:



**3 Ways to Apply for Disaster Aid**

<p>ONLINE</p> <p><a href="https://DisasterAssistance.gov" style="color: black; text-decoration: none;">DisasterAssistance.gov</a></p>	
<p>FEMA APP</p> <p>Download the FEMA APP</p>	<p>CALL</p> <p>800-621-3362</p>

For information regarding FEMA Disaster Relief contact FEMA via computer or phone or the QR Code below.



To obtain resources such as this "Now I Am Safe" Social Story, visit the Family Support Network of NC website using the QR Code below.



NOW I AM SAFE

<p>We had a flood.</p>	<p>The rain was loud.</p>
<p>The water was high.</p>	<p>I was scared.</p>
<p>Now, the flood is over.</p>	<p>I am safe.</p>
<p>My house looks different.</p>	<p>I might stay somewhere new</p>
<p>We will work together to clean up our town.</p>	<p>Things will be different, but we will be safe.</p>



# Help us find families for these children and youth

For more information on these children or adoption in general, contact the NC Kids Adoption and Foster Care Network (tel: 877-625-4371; email: nc.kids@dhhs.nc.gov; web: <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/divisions/social-services/child-welfare-services/adoption-and-foster-care>)



## Anastasia (age 12)

Anastasia is excited to meet her forever family! This talented young lady enjoys playing the violin. Currently, she participates in lessons and values that she can express herself through music. Anastasia is an extrovert, with a bubbly personality, who loves socializing with those around her. She is a nurturer who takes pleasure in helping and supporting others. Faith is important to Anastasia. She would like to continue attending church and church activities once placed in her forever home. Anastasia desires to find a loving home. Her ideal adoptive placement would consist of an active single parent or two-parent household. Anastasia will flourish in a home that allows her the freedom to express herself, is patient, nurturing, and provides structure. This amazing young lady does best when her caregivers offer affirmations and compliments. Any family interested must be supportive of maintaining important relationships deemed safe and appropriate for Anastasia.

## Cassidy (age 17)

Cassidy, who prefers to go by "Cat", has an infectious personality. They are very bubbly and love participating in conversations with friends and family. Cat is musically talented. They enjoy writing music and play several instruments including guitar, ukulele, and piano. With an interest in all things music, Cat also participates in Choir. A few of Cat's other interests and hobbies include watching volleyball, arts & crafts, and playing video games. Cat has not yet decided on a course of study but plans to attend college. Those who know Cat best, describe them as calm, laid back, genuine, creative, talented, and kind. Cat is very open to finding their forever home! When asked about their ideal placement, Cat shared that they do not have a preference when it comes to family dynamics. They do not care if other children are already in the home, although Cat thinks it would be cool to have younger siblings! Cat also shared that they would like the freedom to be themselves and spend time with friends and family. Cat will do best with a family that loves and accepts them unconditionally, provides consistent routines, expectations, and structure. Any family interested must understand the effects of trauma and be supportive of maintaining important relationships deemed safe and appropriate for Cat.

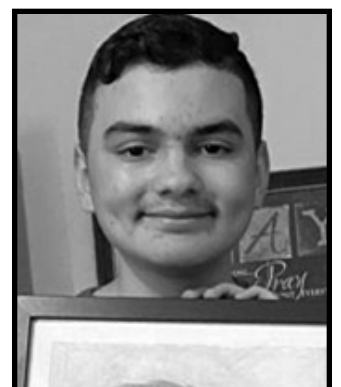


## Dominic (age 8) and Karamyah (age 9)

Dominic and Karamyah are adorable siblings in need of a forever home. Dominic is an energetic little guy who loves dancing and singing to the music of Michael Jackson. Dominic loves to watch the Pink Panther and Thomas the Train. He also enjoys playing Sonic the Hedgehog video games. Karamyah, who prefers to go by "Myah," enjoys reading, coloring and going to the park to play. Myah also likes to play with her dolls. She loves dancing and listening to Janet Jackson. Dominic and Myah share a very strong bond and will need to be placed together in an adoptive home. The agency is looking for a two-parent home that is loving, structured and patient with an understanding of trauma.

## Jonathan (age 17)

Johnathan is ready to meet his forever family! This creative teen is a talented artist with a vivid imagination. Currently, he enjoys sketching real and mythical creatures but is interested in any activity that allows him to be creative. Johnathan has a variety of other hobbies that include playing video games, watching Anime, Pokémon, Legos, spending time outdoors, and conducting science experiments. He has a great love for animals and enjoys spending time with them, especially dogs. Johnathan is an extrovert who makes friends easily with his easy-going, personable, and engaging personality. He has several friends that he spends time with, both at school and in his neighborhood. Those that know Johnathan best share that he is a mature and independent teen who is also very polite to every person he meets. When it comes to school, Johnathan's favorite subjects are math and graphic design. He has expressed an interest in attending college to pursue a career in either engineering or graphic art design. Johnathan desires a family of his own. When asked about his ideal forever home, he would love for his family to have a "mom and pets". He also hopes that his family is active and enjoys participating in fun activities. Johnathan would do best in a single parent or two-parent household. This awesome teen will thrive in a home that is structured, consistent, loving, stable, and patient. Johnathan will thrive with a family that loves and accepts him unconditionally, provides consistent routines and expectations, and meets him where he is. Any family interested must be supportive of maintaining important relationships deemed safe and appropriate for this young man.



North Carolina is committed to achieving permanence and well-being for youth! Fostering Perspectives contributes by featuring profiles of young people seeking permanence through adoption in every issue. This is just one of many recruitment efforts continuously undertaken by the NC Division of Social Services and the state's public and private child-placing agencies. Since 2015, 17 of the young people featured in Fostering Perspectives have been placed with a forever family. Another seven have placements pending.

Please continue to share this page with others and help us find families for children and youth who need them.

### Rapheal (age 17)

Rapheal has a big personality that shines through once he becomes comfortable with those around him. This loving, kind, and positive young man has an amazing sense of humor and enjoys telling jokes. Rapheal describes himself as extremely funny, well-liked, and easy to get along with. Rapheal is passionate about his interests, which include drawing, bowling, playing basketball, board games, and working out. He also enjoys watching pro-basketball and superhero movies. Rapheal shares that he would like to attend culinary school to pursue a career as a chef. Rapheal is interested in having a forever family who is active and enjoys participating in activities outside the home. He would also like to have siblings in the home. The ideal adoptive placement for Rapheal would consist of a two-parent or single male parent home that demonstrates love, support, patience, and an understanding of how trauma effects children and teens. He will flourish within a consistent, structured, and routine focused home who utilizes positive affirmations and praise.



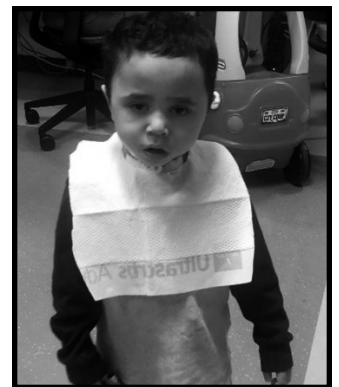
### Serenity (age 13)

Serenity enjoys getting to know others and thrives with one-on-one attention! She enjoys makeup, nails, clothes and hair, and enjoys a quick trip to the mall or going to the movies. She also likes knitting, singing, and has expressed an interest in track. It is not a surprise that Serenity has expressed a desire to become a singer or hairdresser. Serenity desires an adoptive family and will do well in a family capable of setting boundaries, cultivating their relationship with her through quality time and willing to provide support regarding her desire to learn more about her culture and interest.



### Zechariah (age 4)

Zechariah is looking for a forever family who will love, cherish and adore him. He is a loving, sweet and energetic young boy who is full of personality. Zechariah loves giving and receiving affection with hugs being his favorite. He is very outgoing and does not let anything hold him back. He loves to help others by cleaning up and bringing attention to tasks that need to be completed. He interacts well with adults and loves to play with peers. Zechariah is a determined child who brings joy and light wherever he goes. Zechariah needs a fully committed family who has the ability to meet his developmental and medical needs. His agency would like him to be placed in a two-parent home with a family who will undergo training as needed to provide him with the best care.



### Khei-Mele (age 10)

Meet Khei-Mele! He is a sweet and caring young boy who is funny and loves to make others around him happy. Khei-Mele has a playful personality to go along with a cute smile. He enjoys sports and likes to play basketball and football. Khei-Mele likes to be active and spend time at trampoline parks. Khei-Mele is excited about the possibility of finding his forever family. He would do best in a two-parent household and thrives on structure and routine. He would like to maintain contact with his older siblings and current foster parents.



## fostering perspectives

November 2024

Sponsors: NC Division of Social Services, SaySo, and the Family and Children's Resource Program, part of the UNC School of Social Work.

Contact Us: Fostering Perspectives, c/o Jonathan Rockoff, Family & Children's Resource Program, 325 Pittsboro Street, CB# 3550, Chapel Hill, NC 27599.

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Advisory Board: NC Permanency Design Team

Newsletter Staff: Jonathan Rockoff (Editor), Ashton Williams, Matt Tarpley, and Southey Blanton

Mission: Fostering Perspectives exists to promote the professional development of North Carolina's child welfare professionals and foster and adoptive parents and kinship caregivers and to provide a forum where the people involved in the child welfare system in our state can exchange ideas.

Disclaimer: The opinions and beliefs expressed herein are not necessarily those of the NC Division of Social Services or the UNC School of Social Work.

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Online: [www.fosteringperspectives.org](http://www.fosteringperspectives.org)

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References: See the online version of this issue for references cited in this issue.

# Writing Contest

First Prize: \$100 • Second Prize: \$50 • Third Prize: \$25

Please send us a response to the following question:

ADVOCATING FOR YOURSELF MEANS TELLING OTHERS WHAT YOU NEED TO BE SAFE AND HAPPY. TELL US ABOUT A TIME YOU ADVOCATED FOR YOURSELF AND WHO HELPED YOU. (RESPONSES SHOULD BE 200 WORDS OR LESS.)



DEADLINE: February 1, 2025

E-mail submissions to [jrockoff@email.unc.edu](mailto:jrockoff@email.unc.edu) or mail them to: Fostering Perspectives, Family & Children's Resource Program, 325 Pittsboro Street, CB# 3550, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. Include your name, age, address, and phone number. In addition to receiving the awards listed above, winners will have their work published in the next issue. Runners-up may also have their work published, for which they will also receive an award.

Seeking Other Writing Submissions

Submissions can be on any theme. There is no deadline for non-contest submissions: submit your work at any time.

Join the Fostering Perspectives List!



To be notified by email when new issues appear online, use this QR Code:



## Get in-service training credit for reading this newsletter!

Enjoy Fostering Perspectives and earn credit toward your relicensure. Just write down the answers to the questions below and present them to your licensing social worker. If your answers are satisfactory, you'll receive 30 minutes of training credit. If you have questions about this method of gaining in-service training credit, ask your worker.

### In-Service Quiz, FP v28 n2

1. How does Candie's experience in foster care help her be a better social worker?
2. What does Erica describe as the goal of Kinship Therapeutic Foster Care?
3. Genia describes being a kinship caregiver as being an "A.R.T." What does A.R.T. stand for?
4. What does Megan do to help social workers understand what it is like to be a foster parent?
5. Melissa talked about the CWFAC. What is the CWFAC and what do they do?
6. In Rick's article he discussed North Carolina's goals in the Child and Services Family Plan. What are two of the goals?
7. What agency does Shanita credit with teaching her how to use her experience to bring change?
8. What are two of Venus' tips for building strong relationships with court partners?
9. What are some of the ways that Tori shares LINKS can help young adults transitioning to adulthood?
10. What was the two word phrase Stephen and Kara always said to Viridy so she would put prioritize herself?

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NOVEMBER IS

## NATIONAL ADOPTION MONTH

[childwelfare.gov/adoptionmonth](http://childwelfare.gov/adoptionmonth)

National Adoption Month is an initiative of the Children's Bureau that began as National Adoption Week in 1984. In recent years, we have focused our efforts on adoption of teens because we know that teens in foster care wait longer for permanency and are at higher risk of aging out without permanent connections, which places them at risk for negative outcomes. This year's National Adoption Month theme is "Honoring Youth: Strengthening Pathways for Lasting Bonds." Young people should have a strong support network that meets their needs; embraces and affirms their racial, ethnic, and cultural identity; and promotes family, community, and cultural connections. By honoring every youth and their network, professionals can work toward an adoption that is meaningful and purposeful, paving the way for healing, well-being, and long-term stability.

As of September 30, 2022, there were nearly 109,000 children waiting to be adopted who were at risk of aging out of foster care without permanency. The average time in care for children waiting to be adopted after termination of parental rights was 19.1 months.