



OCF seeks and supports strategies to strengthen  
the voices of youth and families for its work.

OFFICE OF FAMILIES & CHILDREN

### **A Message from OFC Deputy Director Jennifer Justice – July 5, 2013**

Thanks to all of you who attended June's Partners for Ohio's Families (PFOF) regional forums or who have registered to attend one this month. Your participation in these sessions, hosted by the Midwest Child Welfare Implementation Center (MCWIC), will help us assess the impact of our efforts and gather information about where you would like us to focus in the future. I can't promise that we will be able to implement every suggestion, but I can guarantee that we will listen.

Let me also extend my appreciation for your support of the upcoming Connecting the Dots conference on July 25. This year, we have reached our youth attendance capacity even after increasing it by nearly 100 spaces. Although we have reached our attendee limit, last-minute cancellations do occur, so let us know if you have youth who would like to attend but have not registered. We're already thinking about how to make this opportunity available to more youth in the future.

Connecting the Dots is much more than just a conference. We have initiated a broad array of complementary activities to help youth in care make a successful transition to adulthood and independence. I am pleased to see the local Youth Advisory Boards grow, including the addition of a 13<sup>th</sup> board in Greene County and the expansion of the Lucas County board to include Wood County as the Northwest Youth Advisory Board. I am intrigued with the concept of regional boards and think it might be a feasible way for smaller agencies to offer youth in care the benefit of this peer support network. If your county is interested in joining a regional Youth Advisory Board, or if you have other ideas regarding the boards, please email me at [Jennifer.justice@ifs.ohio.gov](mailto:Jennifer.justice@ifs.ohio.gov).

This month's First Friday will provide an update on the Connecting the Dots initiative, including an introduction to two of our newest staff members. It seems that most conversations regarding older youth in care include some debate about whether it is realistic to expect youth engagement in court proceedings. Read on to see how Summit and Lucas counties have addressed the issue. Each approach began with strong judicial leadership but succeeded with the help of solid partnerships and collaborative planning. This same collaborative approach to problem-solving characterizes the five counties piloting the youth discharge form, which also is discussed in this issue.

In the midst of all this activity, I hope you find the opportunity to visit us in our new location at 4200 E. Fifth Ave. in Columbus. We are settling in and adapting to our new facility. I'd like to extend my thanks to staff yet again, as they have managed the various activities and disruptions associated with a move of this magnitude without interruption to our critical daily work.

### **Connecting the Dots Update**

The Substitute Care and Permanency Services Section, part of OFC's Bureau of Child and Adult Protection, is responsible for a range of programs for older youth in care and youth who are transitioning out of care. Some of the many programs that the section oversees include Ohio's independent living programming, the National Youth Transition Database, transitional youth coordinators (see the November 2012 edition of First Friday),

Ohio's Youth Advisory Boards and the Transitional Youth Housing Taskforce. This section of OFC also plays an important role in our exciting statewide initiative, "Connecting the Dots from Foster Care to Employment and Independent Living," created in partnership with the ODJFS Office of Workforce Development and Big Brothers Big Sisters.

Connecting the Dots is just one of Ohio's efforts to reverse the bleak outlook faced by too many youth who turn 18 while in care. Connecting the Dots helps this population by providing foster youth ages 15 to 18 and emancipated youth ages 18 to 21 with employment and educational supports and mentorship opportunities.

The initiative officially kicked off in June 2012. Since then, the five pilot locations – Summit, Lake, Cuyahoga and Hamilton counties, plus a consortium of Montgomery, Preble, Clinton and Greene counties – have developed strong working relationships between child welfare staff, and employment services staff and service providers.

The following youth recruitment and training events were held in June 2013 in the pilot areas:

**Dayton Consortium** – Approximately 50 youth attended a one-day conference held by Connecting the Dots community partners. In addition to hearing dynamic keynote presentations by former foster youth Rhonda Sciortino and Michael Sanders, attendees attended a series of small-group sessions with practical instruction on a variety of topics. Adult supporters - including foster parents, child welfare staff, and employment services staff and service providers - benefited from workshops, as well.

**Summit County** – In collaboration with Goodwill Industries, Connecting the Dots community partners held a six-day recruitment and program orientation event for 27 youth. It opened at Summit County Children Services with three days of activities that helped participants get to know each other, learn more about the initiative and assess their own life skills. Activities included an interactive "game of life," a "healthy dating" presentation by Akron Children's Hospital and a storytelling experience by therapist Curtis Williams. Participants spent the final three days at Summit County Department of Job and Family Services' One-Stop Youth Center, where presentations from Goodwill Industries, Metro Regional Transit Authority and Greenleaf Job Training Services gave them practical information about finding a job. At the end of this event, each youth was matched with a 10-week summer job. When school resumes, they will be placed in another job experience.

**Cuyahoga County** – Approximately 200 youth attended the two-day "I Believe in Me" conference, hosted by the Purple Project, Cleveland State Community College and Connecting the Dots partners. In addition to a range of workshops related to money management, housing, job searches, healthy eating and healthy relationships, participants also learned about college campus living. Other workshops featured former foster youth and adoptees, including Emmy Award-winner Darryl "DMC" McDaniels, child welfare specialist and business owner Rhonda Sciortino, and life empowerment specialist Cedric Brown. Adult supporters attended workshops on helping youth use obstacles in their lives as stepping stones and preventing human sex trafficking of foster youth.

For more information about Connecting the Dots, see the attached press release.

### **Connecting the Dots Welcomes New Staff**

As Connecting the Dots pilots move from the planning to implementation stage, OFC and the Office of Workforce Development are pleased to introduce the initiative's newest staff. As program coordinators, Regina Dawson and Alex McFarland (pictured on next page) will spend a great deal of time on-site, working directly with community partners and participating youth.

Regina has experience with the foster care system and in research, advocacy and youth engagement. Her experience working with housing, employment, training and supportive service providers will be helpful to the initiative as well.

Alex has been a member of the Montgomery and Ohio Youth Advisory Boards, most recently serving as vice president of the latter. Alex's experience in website development and written media campaigns will be a bonus in his new position.



Left to right: Regina Dawson, Connecting the Dots program coordinator; Alice Woorell, Connecting the Dots project manager; Alex McFarland, Connecting the Dots program coordinator; Amy Eaton, OFC Substitute Care and Permanency Section chief; and transitional youth coordinators Laurie Valentine and Susan Halter.

### **Everybody Plays a Role: Preparing Youth for Life after Foster Care**

Too often, foster care alumni report that they aged out of care with no formal plan for what to do next. At a 2011 meeting of the Ohio Youth Advisory Board (OYAB), the vast majority of the group could not recall ever seeing a plan that addressed where they would live, how they would support themselves or how they would further their education goals. Many OYAB youth reported not knowing who they could call for assistance and guidance once they turned 18.

To remedy that situation, the Supreme Court Advisory Committee on Children, Families and the Courts began a five-county pilot project to increase the role of youth in developing transition plans with help from trusted adult supporters. The project also seeks to increase judicial awareness and oversight of this effort, including helping youth participate in court hearings.

Since that time, the five pilot counties—Hamilton, Lucas, Marion, Stark and Union—have developed and implemented a framework. They have agreed:

1. To use a foster care discharge form, titled the Youth Developed Transition Plan. This plan is introduced at the start of the independent living assessment by either a caseworker or a guardian ad litem/court-appointed special advocate). The plan is always accessible to the youth, and it is considered to be a living document that the youth and responsible adult complete together and regularly discuss and update.
2. To speak with youth about the Ohio Benefit Bank, which offers an online “Universal Youth Transition Plan” and other services for foster youth. Caseworkers and other adults can use the plan to help youth identify strategies and set personal goals. It is available at [www.ohiobenefits.org](http://www.ohiobenefits.org).
3. To acknowledge and encourage the use of the many resources that can support youth in transition.

Ideally, the Youth-Developed Transition Plan is discussed at all review hearings, with special attention given to any significant changes or missing elements. Participants at the hearings are encouraged to discuss any concerns or issues related to the plan. At the youth's discharge hearing, the plan should be fully completed, and the youth should be able to demonstrate an understanding of all its elements. The committee is considering providing youth with a laminated copy of their plans at their discharge hearings.

Congratulations to the five pilot counties for working together to ensure that youth have a planned transition from foster care. Those attending Cuyahoga County's Building Bridges Permanency Symposium in September can attend a panel about the pilot. Panelists will include Judge Denise Cubbon and Marjory Curry of Lucas County Juvenile Court, Julie Hayslip from the Stark County Department of Job and Family Services, Lisa Dickson from Foster Care Alumni of America and several young people. Be sure to stop by if you can. For more information, visit <http://www.ocwtp.net/PDFs/NCORTC/legalsymp2013savethedate2.pdf>.

## **Improving Youth Participation in Court Proceedings**

Involving youth in their court proceedings can have logistical and philosophical challenges. From a practical sense, transportation, court and youth schedules, and time resource issues can be difficult to manage. There may be concerns that conversation in the courtroom – especially as related to family or the youth's behavior – might be difficult or inappropriate for the youth to hear. However, these challenges can have solutions, and the inherent benefits of youth participation can justify the work needed to overcome those challenges. This month, we turn to two county juvenile courts that have effectively approached these challenges in a collaborative manner.

### **Summit County Juvenile Court**

Collaboration has been a hallmark of Judge Linda Tucci Teodosio's court since she started in 2003. She brought together court staff and representatives from Summit County Children Services and the Summit County Prosecutor's Office to discuss youth participation in court hearings. After nearly a year of research, discussion and debate, new policy was crafted that gives all age-appropriate youth the option to attend their hearings.

Under new policy, youth connect with a court-appointed special advocate/ guardian ad litem (CASA/GAL) volunteer. The volunteer explains the option and asks the youth to read a statement explaining what the hearing will entail and who is likely to attend. The youth and the volunteer sign a written acknowledgment that indicates whether the youth plans to attend. If another party wishes to restrict the youth's attendance, they must file a motion.

Achieving consensus on the policy was not easy or quick. The turning point was a meeting between Judge Teodosio and members of Leaders of Tomorrow, a northeast Ohio group of young adults who are or were in foster care. Before meeting with Leaders of Tomorrow, Judge Teodosio's workgroup had struggled with the idea of exposing youth to graphic details about their cases. Leaders of Tomorrow had a different perspective. Members were adamant about the importance of being present at their hearings since the outcomes affect their lives and futures. After that meeting, the workgroup began developing policy in earnest and implemented it this past spring.

"This will provide youth with the opportunity to be more involved in their hearings, and I think it's an idea whose time has come," Judge Teodosio said. "When a child has the opportunity to have a voice in shaping his or her own future, they are empowered to make that future a bright one."

### **Lucas County Juvenile Court**

Judge Denise Navarre Cubbon launched an initiative called VOICES, to give youth a voice in court, after reading the findings of the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care and the 2006 American Bar Association Youth at Risk Initiative, both of which recommended that abused, neglected and dependent children have a direct voice in court. First, she established a multi-disciplinary committee and sent a memorandum to community stakeholders – including magistrates, CASA/GAL volunteers and attorney GALs, and Lucas County



Children Services directors, caseworkers and legal staff – outlining their roles. She followed this with large-scale, multi-disciplinary training to reinforce stakeholders’ roles and answer their questions.

The model that emerged focused on youth who were recommended for planned permanent living arrangements (PPLAs), which keeps them in foster care until they emancipate at age 18. Under the new VOICES plan, youth are invited to their PPLA hearings to speak directly with the judge or magistrate. They also are required to appear in court each year afterward. The VOICES committee created judicial worksheets to ensure that each youth’s educational needs are being met, that teens are participating in independent living programs and that they have viable plans for their futures. The PPLA pilot was so successful that VOICES now encourages all youth ages 10 and older to speak directly to the court.



Judge Denise Navarre Cubbon

In Lucas County, CASA/GALs and caseworkers share the responsibility for preparing youth for court and making sure they are aware of opportunities to speak with judges or magistrates. The CASA/GAL is responsible for obtaining the child’s signature on a form that states whether the youth wants to attend the upcoming court hearing. Youth recommended for PPLAs attend a pre-meeting and receive a brochure explaining the importance of having their voices heard. CASA/GALs and caseworkers attend the meeting as well, to address any questions the youth might have.

Youth 10 and older are expected to attend hearings after their emergency shelter care hearing and adjudication. They may choose not to attend but are then informed that they can change their mind at any time and attend any future hearings. Children under 10 also may come to court if they wish. The court is in the process of adopting a local rule to institutionalize the process.

“The benefits when youth participate in the court hearings are enormous,” Judge Cubbon said. “It gives youth a sense of control over their lives, it helps them learn how to advocate for themselves, it improves their understanding of the court process governing their lives, and it provides valuable information that the court needs to make meaningful decisions.”

### **The National Youth in Transition Database**

The federal John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program gives states funding for programs that help youth transition from foster care to independence. Chafee also requires the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families to develop a data collection system to track these independent living services and programs. This is called the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD).

States must collect information on each youth who receives independent living services, as well as demographic and outcome information on select youth in foster care whom the state follows over time. Outcome information is collected by surveying the youth on or around their 17<sup>th</sup> birthday and then again on or around their 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> birthdays.

Because Ohio has a large number of youth in care, the state surveys a random sample of the 17-year-old population (known as the baseline population) and then follows up with the group at ages 19 and 21 (the follow-up population). States must collect and report outcome information on a new group every three years.

### **How Are We Doing?**

We appreciate county efforts to reach out to youth and encourage them to complete critical surveys through the NYTD portal, <https://nytd.ohio.gov/nytd/login.do>. This information helps us better understand how to improve our foster care system and meet the long-term needs of youth we serve.

Ohio’s 19-year-old follow-up population is reported twice in 2013. The first report, 2013a, covers October 2012 through March 2013. The second report, 2013b, covers April through September 2013. While we have not yet received official federal confirmation, we believe Ohio met the 60 percent return rate for the 19-year-old group in the 2013a submission. We’d like to thank the many workers throughout Ohio whose hard work and creative outreach helped us achieve this completion rate.

Unfortunately, Ohio is at risk of financial penalty for the 2013b period. At this point, 40 percent of the sample group has completed the survey. At least 20 more youth must complete the survey before September 30 if Ohio is to avoid financial penalties.

If you would like to know the return rate for your county or have other questions, please contact Elaine Early Hall at (614) 752-0080 or Cathy Ghering at (614) 752-5211.

### **It's Not Too Late to Share Your Thoughts at the Regional Forums**

Don't miss your chance to participate in one of the four remaining Regional Forums, held by MCWIC:

July 8	Southwest Ohio Regional Training Center (Hamilton)	9 a.m. to noon
July 9	Central Ohio Regional Training Center (Columbus)	1 to 4 p.m.
July 10	Lutheran Homes Society (Toledo)	9 a.m. to noon
July 11	Montgomery County Job and Family Services (Dayton)	9 a.m. to noon

The findings from these facilitated focus groups will be used to identify items and activities of Partners for Ohio's Families that you found beneficial or unnecessary. Most importantly, this is an opportunity for public and private child welfare agencies to offer their suggestions on the types of activities they would like to see OFC implement, as well as what items OFC should focus on in the future.

"I thoroughly enjoyed participating in a Midwest Child Welfare Implementation Center Regional Forum this week," said Mark R. Groner, vice president of clinical services and clinical director at Beech Brook in northeast Ohio. "I and others were engaged in lively and meaningful dialogue about how Partners for Ohio's Families and the Office of Families and Children at ODJFS are collaborating to co-create a better child welfare system for our state. The opportunity to share and hear feedback about progress being made, and to surface ideas about added ways to attain ever better outcomes in the future, left me with optimism for a continuously improving child welfare system in Ohio."

To register for a forum in your area, visit <http://www.mcwic.org/events/partnersForOhiosFamilies2.php>.

#### **June 2013 Global Emails**

The following emails were sent in June from Jennifer Justice to PCSA directors and/or private agency directors. They are organized below by mailing date and key word.

- 6/19/13 - Annual Credit Report for Youth
- 6/20/13 - PASSS Program Changes Effective July 1, 2013
- 6/26/13 - Finding Words Ohio: A ChildFirst State

#### **PRINCIPLE OF THE MONTH:**

OFC seeks and supports strategies to strengthen the voices of youth and families for its work.

If you want to subscribe to First Friday, have comments or ideas about content, or would like to be removed from the mailing list, please send an email [First\\_Friday@jfs.ohio.gov](mailto:First_Friday@jfs.ohio.gov). For additions to or removals from the list, be sure to include your name, organization and email address.



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