

The background image shows a city street scene. In the foreground, a large, ornate classical building with many windows and columns is visible. In front of the building, there is a public fountain with several water jets. A group of children are playing in the fountain, splashing water. Some children are running, and others are standing near the water jets. There are colorful balloons (yellow, green, blue, orange) floating in the air near the fountain. The overall scene is bright and lively, suggesting a summer day in an urban park or plaza.

🌀 BLOOM WORKS

# Creating Better Placements for Teens

Findings and Recommendations Summary  
September 7, 2023

# Our team



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UX Researcher



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UX Researcher



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Product & Delivery  
Manager



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Engagement Lead

# Non-kin foster track

## **"Sticky Family" Recruitment**

April 2023 - June 2023

How can we recruit the best resource families?

## **Placements for Teens**

June 2023 - September 2023

How can we recruit the best resource families for teens?

## **Therapeutic Foster Families**

September 2023

How can we recruit the best therapeutic resource families?

## Sticky family personae



Carer by Calling



Queer Ally



Unconditional Giver



Mobility Coach



Nonprofit Advocate



High Needs Specialist

## **Sticky families are made, not found**

We recommend leaving behind thinking that essentializes some as better foster parents than others, focusing instead on training and support.

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# Placements for teens

**Child welfare agencies struggle to offer teens long-term placements with families that are willing and able to facilitate teen thriving and preparation for adulthood.**

## Our goals

1. Understand and center youth definitions of success, ways to thrive and feel prepared for adulthood
2. Identify strategies to help to close the gap between need and availability of placements for teens so resource families are willing, ready, and able



## What we did

- Literature review on teens in care
- Case study on Michigan
- Triangulated across agency staff, resource families, and former foster youth who were teens in care
- Attended GROW training, reviewed NTDC materials
- Co-designed with youth
- Heard from 45 people in total



## Who we spoke to

**5** SMEs

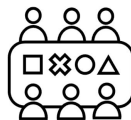
**11** Child welfare staff

**11** Resource families

**18** Youth formerly in care as teens



1:1 interactive sessions



Co-design workshop



Self-guided survey responses

# Representation

## Youth

- 10** People of color
- 3** Hispanic or Latino
- 3** Unaccompanied minors
- 2** Sibling sets

## Families

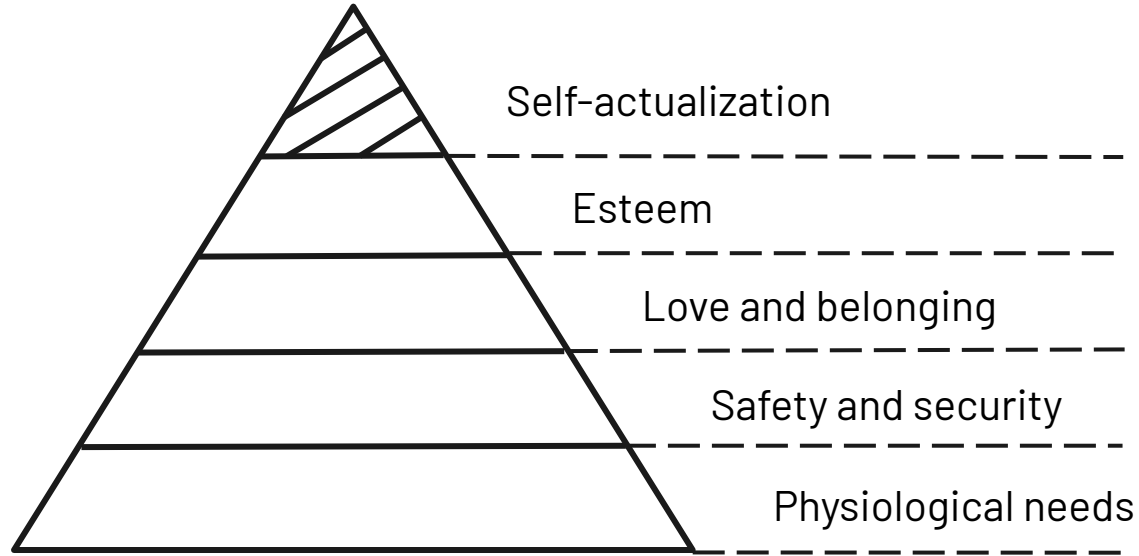
- 1** Single man
- 3** LGBTQ
- 3** Tribal

## Placements

- 10** in non-kin foster homes
- 9** in kinship homes
- 6** in residential facilities



## Basic needs build on each other



Maslow (1943) Hierarchy of Needs

## Research shows trauma complicates development

- Adolescent development builds on preadolescent achievements
- The teen stage is typically hard even for those not removed
- Removal is a trauma, and there may be others among those removed
- Traumas complicate needs in care



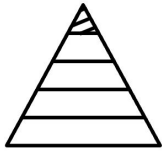
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# What we found

**Being a teen in foster care is a  
deeply disempowering  
experience.**

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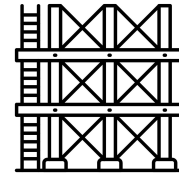
## We see disempowerment in 3 aspects:



**Teen needs are not always being met** and they are not receiving the necessary care to heal and thrive.



**Teens lack autonomy,** information, and involvement in critical decisions related to their lives.

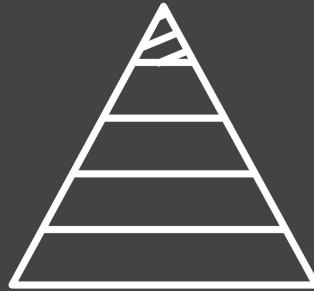


**Teens need more scaffolding** to experiment, practice, and master skills necessary for adulthood.



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# 1. Teen needs are not always being met



**Meeting basic needs like shelter, safety,  
and food is the top priority.**

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When I went to a foster care home, they had baskets of toothbrushes. I never got basic necessities as a kid – they had toothbrushes, toothpaste, mouth wash, deodorant. I didn't even know what deodorant was. They made me feel comfortable, they had a nice bed made up for me. When I was in my home [of origin], I had maybe a mattress and no sheets on it."

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Former foster youth



He's a normal 16-year-old, he's slightly defiant, doesn't clean up after himself. He also doesn't shower, doesn't initiate things he needs to do like shower, wear deodorant. He's a good kid, I just gotta remind him of things. The hygiene issue has been the biggest concern."

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Resource family

**Teens lack safe spaces to disclose physical, emotional, and sexual abuse cases.**

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I was self harming, I was not doing well. Our foster parents were abusing us. But I was scared of retribution later. I thought if I speak up, I might get in trouble."

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Former foster youth

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"They made me go to Bible study at Sunday school, shoved it down my throat because I'm bisexual. I should have never been placed with people who are homophobic. They knew, my caseworker knew, my foster family knew, and they did nothing. They placed me with homophobic Christians. I don't think that's right."

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Former foster youth

**More care and consistency are needed to meet teens' emotional needs.**



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Starting fresh in a new school and a new bed and new bedroom, that's hard. The whole process needs to be more comforting. Teens should be able to bring things from home - comforting things. It's already hard you have to go to a home where you don't know anyone."

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Former foster youth



The [GROW] training does a great job in terms of here are things you might encounter and they have a big piece on trauma. But I still feel like teens are kind of left out. They talk a lot about developmental disorders, fetal alcohol, things that occur in infancy. We talk a lot about attachment, which I know attachment is super important in those early years, but... they just don't really piece the two together about that insecure attachment and how then that is going to carry into foster care. So as much as I do love the training, I feel like the older population is not focused on as much."

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Child welfare staff

**Emotional support and diverse therapies to process trauma are fundamental needs as well.**

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I wasn't in counseling when I was in foster care, but a good counselor who could have walked me through step by step and guided me on how to heal from this, how to overcome this - that would have helped a lot."

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Former foster youth



In the residential facility - that's considered hospitalization, so you go back to straight medicaid but then nobody switched our teen back to a managed care plan when our kid came home, when they transitioned from a residential back to our home. So although we had psychiatrist appointments set up for our teen right when discharged, the psychiatrist refused to see them because they didn't have right type of health insurance. Our teen was discharged and didn't see a psychiatrist for 2 months because of that mistake."

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Resource family

**Teens need stable, supportive adults to accept, validate, and challenge them.**

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My MYOI coordinator was my champion. I love her so much. She was more consistent than any of my other workers. She really poured her heart into the work."

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Former foster youth

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I am still close with my CPS worker. She loved us so much. She would come and visit us all the time, even when she didn't need to. One time she took us to eat at a diner and we wore fancy dresses and she took a picture. I still have that picture. She also helped me understand my grandparents' perspective. She told me they loved me because they didn't ever say that."

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Former foster youth



## Teens are not receiving necessary care to heal and thrive

- All youth in care experience loss or trauma that requires additional emotional support
- Yet the existing system of mental health care does not support youth in foster care
- There is a lack of safe spaces to identify, disclose, and discuss cases of abuse happening to youth in care
- Foster families lack training and/or resources to meet the needs of teens
- Services are not always following youth through transitions and private agencies are less familiar with resources for teens
- Even if youth don't want to be adopted, they need parental figures who support, love and challenge them to do better and feel prepared for their next phase of life

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## 2. Teens lack autonomy



**Teens feel like they have little or no freedom or agency.**

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In the group home we had uniforms. They were scratchy. We were not allowed to do anything without permission including going to the bathroom, taking a shower, eating. We had to ask and if they said no. That was no. In one home, we were timed in the shower."

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Former foster youth

//

In the residential home. It felt like a prison. And the food was bad. Not much thought was put into it. So I wrote a letter to the CEO essentially get better food. And we did get better food after that. She was nice, she listened."

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Former foster youth

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My sister born when 8 years old. I was parenting her. I was going to parent-teacher meetings. I was getting her up in the morning, getting her fed, getting her to school. I didn't want to be treated like a child."

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Former foster youth

**Teens are not involved in key decisions about their own lives.**

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I would sit through meetings about me. I mean decisions about me, how I should be dealt with or therapy, and I would sit through these meetings and listen, and not one time would anybody ask me how I felt about it, or what I would like to do. And I would sit through these meetings twice a month and it would be the same thing over and over."

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Former foster youth



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They switched my school, and then got mad at me. Because the school that I was at, I was on honor roll. I was an office assistant. I was on yearbook. I was on the debate team. And then they switched my schools and I failed all my classes. I didn't have friends. I was isolated. I got depressed. And they got mad because I wasn't presenting myself the same way that I was. I don't believe that they truly listened to foster kids and they just do what *they* think is best."

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Former foster youth

//

I got pregnant but my foster mom didn't want me to keep the baby. She told me I had to have an abortion. At what point do I get to say something and make decisions for myself? I wanted to have an abortion if it meant I could stay. My caseworker told me we could find another home, that made me feel like I had a say. I wanted someone to ask me what I wanted to do and to support me."

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Former foster youth

**Teens struggle to get access to information to understand what is happening or has happened to them.**

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I'm not sure why I was removed. There were so many people making decisions for me but no one was talking to me. The decision for me to be separated from my sisters and go with dad, that was made without my knowledge."

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Former foster youth

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I wanted to see my paperwork, my case file. They would never help me with that. My grandparents would say one thing. My mom would say something else. I never saw my file. I was too young to get my file."

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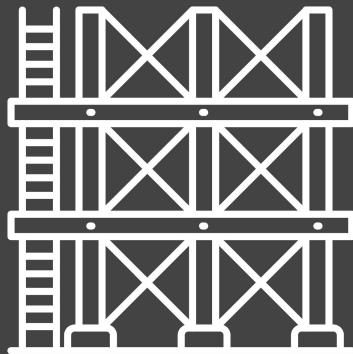
Former foster youth

## **Teens are not involved in decisions related to their lives**

- Teens in care are not given a voice in decisions about their lives
- Residential facilities were described as prison-like
- Even those in family homes felt infantilized and lack self-determination
- Teens' communication and movement while in care are closely monitored and restricted
- Reasons for removal and placement decisions are not clearly communicated to teens in care

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### 3. Teens need more scaffolding



**Teens feel abandoned to plan for their futures without information or guidance.**



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The system is setting kids up to fail in so many situations, by not teaching, not helping with things they'd learn in a normal family."

—

Former foster youth

//

It's hard to make decisions about your own life when you're constantly told what to do, what to eat, when to sleep. It's hard to make your own decisions when you've never been allowed to before. Teens are not taught independent living skills: how to rent, how to have a job, car insurance. That's a huge confidence loss. Teens know they won't be able to function when they become an adult. The system is setting teens up to fail."

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Former foster youth

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I got in trouble for saving money. Why can't I save? Every kid in foster home should be able to leave home with some money. When my baby was sick and I applied for social security, they saw I had money saved for daughter so I had to rush and spend money on a car. Later I was told I'd have to pay back money for foster care. I have no trust for government now."

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Former foster youth

**Consequences for 'normal' teen behaviors  
become serious quickly, without safety  
nets and acceptance.**

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As a teen in foster care, I've been bounced around my whole life. But the thing she showed me was just unconditional love. And just being unconditional no matter how bad the mistake I made was, she was always supportive, and just never gave up."

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Former foster youth



I've had to deal with some issues of vaping and drug use and alcohol use and inappropriate relationships with adults. But I swear if I have to have one more conversation about dick pics! I've had way more conversations than I ever have in my life about sexting. So we talk about safer choices that will benefit them so they know they can have an open and frank conversation."

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Resource family

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I've heard most people [foster parents] say, I want to fix you, I want to make you better, not have the trauma of what happened. But sometimes when they do that, they are triggering things those kids don't want. I know I'm broken and what I've been through. You can't change somebody who doesn't want to change. Most foster families should learn that. It's ok to let them go through what they will go through."

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Former foster youth

**Teens are not always informed about or guided to much needed transition programs and services.**



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I did extended, voluntary care. I didn't even realize that was an option. I thought I turned 18 and I was out. But that wasn't true. That's something that more teens need to understand. I can't tell you where I would be if I hadn't been doing adult foster care."

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Former foster youth



Foster parents might not have time to teach teens life skills. Like, let's go practice driving, or fill in college applications together. Some of them don't know how to do simple things like cook meals. I had one youth who didn't know how to make microwave easy mac. She didn't realize you had to add water. So I was like, this is what we will learn today."

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Child welfare staff



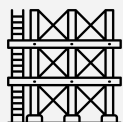
## Teens need support to master adult skills

- Teens need real life preparation for adulthood and the options for those in the foster system are not always clear
- Teens described needing greater academic support while in care and to plan for the future
- Resource family training doesn't set caregivers up to understand teen behavior from a trauma-informed perspective and to model or coach emotion regulation
- Accessing financial and housing assistance is complex and difficult for youth to navigate on their own



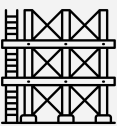
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# What we recommend



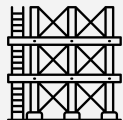
# 1. Listen to and prioritize teen voices

	How to do this
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learn from MI successes by instituting Youth Advisory Boards (YABs) widely and partnering with universities or CBOs as needed</li> <li>• Set parameters for contact with families of origin based on safety and risk, but also listen to and validate perspectives of youth</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consult and co-design with teens on policy and practice changes</li> <li>• Help teens feel heard on placement transitions and permanency goals</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be open with teens, in age-appropriate ways, about the reasons for removal and details about their case</li> <li>• Give teens guidance and decision-making opportunities to prepare them for their lives after care</li> </ul>



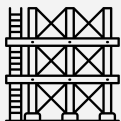
## 2. Improve resource parent training and preparation

	How to do this
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluate the emphasis in training on parenting children vs. teens and provide practical parenting strategies and examples</li> <li>• Differentiate the signs of abuse in older youth, not just in young children</li> <li>• Emphasize results of development, attachment, and trauma on teens</li> <li>• Clarify how behaviors might be typical teen vs. a result of trauma and how to carefully navigate this nuance</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide timely, complete, and informative youth history</li> <li>• Plan visits or respite care with resource families before placement moves</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Train resource families in self-regulation and mediation to improve communication and conflict resolution</li> </ul>

### 3. Prepare for emotional impacts of transitions



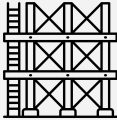
	How to do this
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow youth to have basic necessities and take things from their home that are comforting to them</li> <li>• Plan for how services will follow teens before placement moves or discharges</li> <li>• Conduct unannounced home visits and ensure there are opportunities for teens to speak up separate from adult caretakers</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inform teens early, and provide them time with supportive, well-trained adults to process changes</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make sure every teen has access to peer support</li> </ul>

## 4. Overhaul mental health provider system



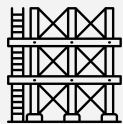
	How to do this
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dream big on creating a pipeline for well-trained, experienced, well-compensated clinicians for foster youth</li> <li>• Ensure all youth in care are offered counseling and provide mental health supports before youth are in crisis</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give youth choice and a say in the therapy they are offered</li> <li>• Ensure youth have solo therapy separate from family therapy sessions</li> <li>• Eradicate residential facilities in favor of specialized, highly trained homes in the community</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prepare resource families to deal with behaviors to reduce escalations and disruptions</li> </ul>



## 5. Create sustained relationships with supportive adults

	How to do this
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce staff turnover and caseloads to support continuity of care</li> <li>• Identify, maintain and build relationships with supportive adults</li> <li>• Institute mentor programs and regular respite caregivers</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institute and expand programs like MYOI (Jim Casey Youth Opportunity Initiatives) and other, similar programs (including CCAI Foster Youth Internship Program)</li> <li>• Fund programming and create informal activities to help teens bond with other trained counselors, resource families, and staff</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluate independent living programs to ensure youth have supportive adults and needed supports</li> </ul>

## 6. Expand opportunities for teens to master adult skills

	How to do this
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Provide specialized education assistance to youth while in care and encourage them to set and meet their academic goals</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Demystify the application process for the different social benefits that youth are eligible for</li> <li>● Continue to elevate and expand awareness of the MYOI program and its benefits</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Explore education and career goals and opportunities with youth while they are in care, and the assistance available to meet these goals</li> <li>● Inform teens about how permanency outcomes impact benefit eligibility</li> </ul>

 **BLOOM WORKS**

The background image shows a public water fountain in a city square. Several children are running and playing in the water jets. In the background, there are tall city buildings, including a prominent classical-style building with many columns. The scene is bright and festive, with colorful balloons visible.

# Thank you!