

# Foster Advocates Summary Report

## *Findings from Focus Groups with Fosters Involved in Foster Advocates Programming*

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SUPPORTIVE TRUSTWORTHY  
CREATIVE GENEROUS RELIABLE  
HELPFUL HEALING CONNECTED  
RUTHLESS RESILIENT CARING  
PASSIONATE SAFE UPLIFTING

*I'll speak on ruthless, because that like sounds bad, but I think they are a huge advocate when it comes to people saying they are openly defiant of people saying the system doesn't have flaws... They are ruthless and serious about their advocacy and will do whatever they need to get these bills and laws passed to impact children for the better.*

In 2022, Foster Advocates asked Wilder Research to map out the work of their organization, including activities and outcomes, as well as gather feedback from Fosters about their experiences with Foster Advocates. The goal of these activities was to help Foster Advocates communicate what they do and the impact of their work to both staff and external partners and stakeholders. To do this, Wilder Research and Foster Advocates decided on two activities to meet these needs:

1. Develop an organizational logic model and informational graphic
2. Conduct focus groups with Fosters they serve

Wilder Research hosted two virtual logic model sessions with staff from Foster Advocates to map out what the organization does and what impacts/outcomes they hope their work will have both short-term (6 months – 2 years) and long-term (2-5 years). In addition to the more detailed logic model, Wilder also created a complementary, summary graphic to illustrate who Foster Advocates is and how they work with Fosters. These two documents are intended for both internal staff and external partners, such as legislators and policymakers. Additionally, the logic model will help guide Foster Advocates as they think about evaluation and what measures they need to collect to highlight the impact of their work.

After developing the logic model and graphic, Wilder facilitated two focus groups with some of the Fosters that Foster Advocates serves. Foster Advocates' work is grounded in close collaboration with Fosters, so it was crucial that they be involved in the project. The goal of the focus groups was for Foster Advocates to understand their impact through the lens of Fosters. This information can also help support Foster Advocates' logic model and build upon the outcomes for future iterations of the model. Additionally, these focus group questions can be used over time to help build upon Foster Advocates' evaluation capacity.

The following report focuses on findings from the focus groups.

## Focus group methodology

Wilder Research created the focus group questions with input from Foster Advocates staff. Two focus groups were held virtually via the Webex video conferencing platform in April 2022. Eight Fosters (ages 18+) who are currently involved in programming and services with Foster Advocates participated in the groups. In order to ensure the safety and protection of participants, Wilder submitted the focus group questions and protocol to its Institutional Review Board for review and approval. Initially, the groups were divided into “high dosage” and “low dosage.” Fosters who had engaged in 1-2 activities (with a lower level of time commitment) with Foster Advocates were placed in the “low dosage” group. Fosters who were more actively involved with multiple activities or services (that required a higher time commitment, like testifying or being on a board) were placed in the “high dosage” group. Due to the small sample size, Wilder Research cannot make comparisons between the “high” and “low” dosage groups, so results are aggregated across groups. Fosters were recruited by Foster Advocates and were given a \$40 gift card as a thank you for their participation.

## Findings

In each focus group, Wilder asked Fosters about their thoughts on Foster Advocates’ services and programming, including how well organizational staff work with Fosters. Results are not representative given the small number of Fosters who participated.

### ***Fosters felt engaged right away with Foster Advocates, largely because of their staff.***

Fosters noted that they felt engaged right away with Foster Advocates (less than two months after an initial meeting), because of the involvement of staff. Fosters felt that staff were able to connect them to programs or activities that aligned directly with Fosters’ interests and needs. Additionally, Fosters thought that the staff was able to build relationships at the start that helped Fosters feel connected to the organization.

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*I felt more engaged, really after like the interview process. [Foster Advocate staff member] is very connected, has a lot of resources, and is very supportive. Just her reaching out via phone, text, call, and the invites she sends. I feel like building a relationship with her as a go-to is really helpful and made me feel like I have somebody I can go to.*

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## ***Foster Advocates lives up to its name by advocating for Fosters on an individual and system level.***

When asked how they would describe what Foster Advocates does, all Fosters spoke about ways in which the organization advocates for Fosters like themselves. Focus group participants noted that the organization advocates on two primary levels.

The first is on an individual level in which the organization works with Fosters to help advocate for themselves. This work allows Fosters to better understand the foster care system and the changes that need to be made. Foster Advocates also provide tools, resources, and support for Fosters as they think about and start to advocate for themselves and other Fosters, including the different programs Foster Advocates offers.

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*I would tell them [Foster Advocates is] an opportunity for youth or adults in foster care to make a change for youth who are in the system or going through the system.*

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The second level of advocacy is what the organization does for Fosters as a whole. Much of this work involves community engagement or work at the legislative level. Fosters saw Foster Advocates as one of the only organizations focused on Fosters and those who have aged out of the foster care system. Additionally, Fosters saw much of the organization's work directly focused on improving those systems. This work is often related to legislative and policy work that the organization does on behalf of and in collaboration with Fosters.

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*The most recent one [that Foster Advocates worked on] was the child tax credit you can get as a former Foster, and also them helping pass the higher education act, was huge, I think for a lot of Fosters.*

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## ***Fosters value the individual attention they receive from Foster Advocates.***

Focus group participants were asked if they were involved in any other programs or services geared towards Fosters, outside of Foster Advocates. Of the eight, only three had been or were currently involved with other programs or services. All three noted the individual attention and support they received from Foster Advocates, compared to other programs. Participants noted a need for individualized attention and that other organizations' services, supports, and resources are not tailored to each Foster's individual needs. One participant noted that Foster Advocates helped them advocate for themselves and provide much-needed guidance and support in dealing with state systems, something they did not get through any other program.

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*[T]he dedication that Foster Advocates has to kids is just so different than every other program I've ever been involved in... Foster Advocates is dedicated to each child and each kid. Former Foster youth or current Foster youth.*

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## **Fosters trust Foster Advocates due to the staff's dedication to helping and supporting each Foster.**

When asked if they have a trusted adult or organization in their lives, focus group participants responded with “Foster Advocates” and “Foster Advocates staff.” Focus group respondents said that Foster Advocates earns their trust by staff:

- Checking in on Fosters on a regular basis
- Building a relationship with Fosters by getting to know them on an individual level and asking if everything is ok, if there is anything they need, if there is anything Fosters would like to talk about, etc.
- Providing resources and supports that are specifically geared towards each Foster
- Being available for and accessible to Fosters
- Immediately dropping what they are doing to help Fosters if ever needed – Fosters always come first
- Being able to relate on a personal and lived experience level – something Fosters noted is hard to find in adults

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*My person is also [Foster Advocate staff member]. Like I said before, there's nothing bad that I can say about her. She's supportive, she gives resources, again she reaches out “do you need anything? I'm here to help.” If I ask for resources, she gets them to me the same day.*

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## **Fosters feel supported to become advocates and leaders in their own ways.**

Focus group participants felt supported by Foster Advocates staff, and noted feeling more comfortable in advocating for themselves and others and becoming leaders in their own ways than they felt before they got involved with the organization. Respondents noted that Foster Advocates supports them by:

- Sticking up for Fosters and ensuring they feel comfortable when advocating, testifying, or being on panels
- Providing skills that focus on advocacy
- Providing skills and spaces for Fosters to learn how to be leaders
- Providing a platform for Fosters to share their experiences
- Providing support and assistance to be assertive

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*I think a skill that they've tried to develop, especially for the fellowship, is being a leader or a collaborator. I think a lot of time, as Fosters, we're silenced in a way, especially by the system, or by like our birth parents or by your experiences that you've had. You feel like helpless, and like, I feel like a lot of us get the mindset that it is what it is. It just sucks. And I feel like they kind of give you a voice, and help you develop your voice, and say like no, this isn't right, or no, I deserve happiness, or I deserve these things.*

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## *Fosters feel empowered when they share their stories with others.*

Fosters were asked to think of a time when they felt empowered as a Foster. Participants noted that they feel empowered when they can share their stories with others, especially other Fosters. They also indicated that much of this sense of empowerment has come from the support given by Foster Advocates. Fosters also felt empowered when:

- Advocating for appropriate housing for themselves
- Accessing services and supports for continuing their education after high school
- Advocating for policy change
- Being the expert from their lived experiences when speaking to others about policy change
- Sharing resources with other Fosters and community members
- Connecting other Fosters with organizations and resources
- Feeling comfortable asking for help

Focus group participants noted that public speaking is a significant skill that they need help with, and want to continue improving, since they feel empowered when communicating with others. They noted that empowerment also comes when they are surrounded by supportive adults and other Fosters. They noted that the feeling of not being alone, or that there are other people going through similar situations, helped boost their confidence.

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*[B]eing able to advocate on a platform with a community of my peers is something incredibly empowering to me. I think the skills or resources from my community I have learned has been super helpful in my academic life and stuff. I can't really describe it other than like the feeling of being supported throughout everything. And a sense of pride of being a Foster, a term that Foster Advocates really came up with. I think that's empowerment coming from a community of peers.*

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## Moving forward

Overall, the eight Fosters who participated in the focus groups had strong, positive experiences with Foster Advocates, primarily because of their interactions with staff, the fierce advocacy work that the organization provides (both at the individual and community level), and the knowledge and skills they themselves gained towards self-advocacy). Fosters talked at length about the importance of the Foster Advocates staff as a key resource, particularly that they instill trust, confidence, and a sense of empowerment among Fosters. Fosters didn't identify any specific changes they wanted to see from Foster Advocates but based on the findings, these are some possible opportunities for Foster Advocates to consider to further enhance the work they are doing.

- **Continue to provide resources and training for Fosters to build their communication skills.** Fosters indicated that public speaking was a huge skill for them to feel empowered. Foster Advocates should consider thinking of ways to help Fosters with other communication skills that can help with advocacy, but also other facets in life like school.
- **Provide more connections to trusted adults outside of the organization.** Fosters indicated that Foster Advocates staff were the most trusted adults in their life. Foster Advocates has many connections outside of the organization. These connections would be a good resource for Fosters to build out their networks of trusted adults and organizations.
- **Consider creating a peer-mentoring program for Fosters.** Fosters indicated that they felt empowered to share their own stories due to the influence of other Fosters. Foster Advocates could consider creating a peer-mentoring program that allows Fosters to more closely engage with other Fosters to share stories or seek advice.
- **Work with Fosters to develop data collection tools, analysis plans, and reports that highlight the outcomes they feel are most important.** Foster Advocates believes in “nothing about Fosters without Fosters,” and already does an excellent job of including Fosters at every level of the organization. This inclusion can also be applied to evaluation through a Youth Participatory Evaluation (YPE) framework. Focus group participants spoke about increased knowledge, trust, confidence, and skills (such as public speaking); work with Fosters to develop evaluation from the “ground up,” starting with research questions and the measures most important to them.