



# “Be supportive and understanding of the stress that youth are going through:” Foster care alumni recommendations for youth, caregivers and caseworkers on placement transitions

Ruth M. Chambers<sup>a,\*</sup>, Rashida M. Crutchfield<sup>b</sup>, Tasha Y. Willis<sup>c</sup>, Haydée A. Cuza<sup>d</sup>, Angelica Otero<sup>e</sup>, Stephanie G. Goddu Harper<sup>f</sup>, Heather Carmichael<sup>g</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Social Work, California State University, Long Beach, 1250 Bellflower Boulevard, Social Sciences/Public Administration Building (SSPA) 161, Long Beach, CA 90840-4602, United States

<sup>b</sup> School of Social Work, California State University, Long Beach, 1250 Bellflower Boulevard, Social Sciences/Public Administration Building (SSPA) 161, Long Beach, CA 90840-4602, United States

<sup>c</sup> School of Social Work, California State University, Los Angeles, 5151 State University Drive, Simpson Tower 814, Los Angeles, CA 90032, United States

<sup>d</sup> California Youth Connection, 1611 Telegraph Ave, Suite 1100, Oakland, CA 94612, United States

<sup>e</sup> Psychiatric Social Worker II, Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health, 5321 Via Marisol drive, Los Angeles, CA 90042, United States

<sup>f</sup> Performance Auditor, City of Long Beach, 333 Ocean Blvd, Long Beach, CA 90802, United States

<sup>g</sup> My Friend's Place, 5850 Hollywood Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90078, United States

## ABSTRACT

A growing body of research has begun to explore youth's experiences of moving multiple placements in foster care and the impact of these transitions that lasts into adulthood. However, knowledge remains extremely limited regarding foster youth/alumni's recommendations for improving the process of placement moves. This qualitative research study examined foster care alumni's advice for youth in care, caregivers, and child welfare caseworkers on how to best handle placements moves. Results indicated that participants had a number of recommendations to help mitigate the emotional stress youth often experience as a result of placement instability. For youth in care, participants encouraged advocating for their voices to be heard in placement decisions and offered strategies to cope with the challenges of repeated placement moves. For caregivers, participants stressed the importance of demonstrating genuine care and support toward youth placed in their home and openly communicating with youth about upcoming placement changes. For caseworkers, participants strongly recommended better involving youth in placement decisions and developing close relationships with youth. Participants also recommended that caseworkers conduct more intensive evaluations of caregivers to ensure that youth are not placed in unsafe foster homes or with caregivers who are primarily motivated by financial compensation. Results from this study indicate alternative approaches to facilitating out-of-home placement transitions and addressing placement instability. Implications for child welfare policy, practice, and research are provided.

## 1. Introduction

In the past decade, researchers have begun to explore the experiences of youth who moved multiple placements in foster care. Common experiences such as loss of relationships, low self-esteem, and difficulty trusting others have been documented (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009; Reibschleger, Day, & Damashek, 2015; Sinclair, Wilson & Gibbs, 2001; Skoog, Khoo, & Nygen, 2014; Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008). This small, but growing, body of research on youth's experiences moving placements points to the significant impact of these transitions that lasts into adulthood (Chambers et al., 2018). However, few research studies have explored former foster youth perceptions of how to improve youth's experiences in foster care, especially related to transitioning in and out of placements. Attempts to mitigate the negative effects of placement

changes and promote placement stability should be informed by the experiences and perspectives of individuals who actually lived through placement transitions.

To help address this gap, this qualitative research study examined foster care alumni's advice for youth in care, foster caregivers, and caseworkers on how to best handle placements moves. Data was drawn from a larger study that also examined foster alumni's definition of a placement move, their experiences moving placements and their perceptions of the impact of those moves on their lives as adults (Chambers et al., 2017, 2018).

## 2. Literature review

While research on current or former foster youth's overall

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [ruth.chambers@csulb.edu](mailto:ruth.chambers@csulb.edu) (R.M. Chambers).

experiences in foster care has grown in recent decades, the majority of studies on placement moves have examined quantitative data, such as case records, and focused on factors such as risks of placement instability and frequencies of moves (Rock, Michelson, Thomson, & Day, 2015; Unrau, 2007). In contrast, a small number of qualitative studies have explored youth's experiences of placement transitions. These studies found that youth endured significant emotional stress as a result of moving multiple times in care. Common experiences included loss of important relationships, feeling rejected and unwanted, abuse by caregivers and other youth in the home, and a sense of powerlessness in that they were routinely excluded from placement decision-making processes (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009; Rostill-Brookes, Larkin, Toms, & Churchman, 2011; Skoog et al., 2014; Unrau et al., 2008).

The findings from these studies underscore the importance of re-examining the process of moving youth in care. There is a significant gap in the research of former foster youth's perceptions of how placement transitions could be improved. After conducting an extensive literature search, the authors found only one study that focused on former foster youth's perspectives about placement moves and a small number of research studies that sought to understand current foster youth's experiences. Randle (2013) focused on two research questions: what is a successful placement and what characteristics of foster caregivers ensure that the placement can be successful? Findings from the perspectives of 11 former foster youth indicated that a successful placement would be one in which the foster caregivers showed genuine care and the children felt like they belonged, loved, and safe. In terms of the foster caregivers, the former foster youth felt that these individuals should be motivated by their desire to help children, be good listeners, honest and to spend time with them.

The authors identified three studies that interviewed current foster youth about their recommendations to improve the foster care system. Mitchell, Kuczynski, Tubbs and Ross (2010) interviewed 20 children, ages eight to 15, who were in foster care in Canada. The children were asked about their advice to children in care, foster parents and child welfare workers about ways to assist service delivery during moves to new foster homes. Participants advised children in care about ways to cope with stress and manage their emotions during the difficult transition to new placements. Recommendations for caregivers centered on building relationships with the children and helping them feel comfortable in their home. Lastly, the participants wanted child welfare workers to actively include children in placement decisions, openly communicate about upcoming moves, allow time for children to adjust to placement changes, and build relationships with children for emotional support (Mitchell et al., 2010). Sinclair et al. (2001) obtained 150 questionnaires from current foster youth aged five or older. Recommendations for areas of improvement were provided. Results indicated that they wanted respect for their wishes about their permanent placement plan, less placement moves, to move when the placement was not working out, to be informed about plans for their future and to have consistent contact with the caseworker.

Data examined in this current study was drawn from a larger study that also explored foster alumni's definition of a placement move, their experiences moving placements and their perceptions of the impact of those moves on their lives as adults (Chambers et al., 2017, 2018). Results from this larger dataset indicated that placement moves can be defined by: (1) Time and relationships, (2) Packing and leaving, (3) Loss of property, (4) Returning home, (5) Type of placement, and (6) Decision-making process (Chambers et al., 2017). In addition, results indicated that participants experienced constant moving that involved loss of relationships, exclusion from placement decisions, difficulty graduating high school, unsafe placements, and feeling unwanted by caregivers. Long-term negative consequences of moving included ongoing instability and emotionally distant relationships in adulthood. Remarkably, participants drew on their experiences to develop adaptability and inner strength in the face of these challenges (Chambers et al., 2018).

Understanding the perspectives of individuals who lived in foster care is central to effective child welfare practice, policies, and research related to placement moves and stability. This current study seeks to contribute to this knowledge base by exploring the advice foster care alumni offer to youth in care, caregivers, and caseworkers on how best to handle placement moves. It also should be noted that research in this area primarily relies on perspectives provided by youth who were still in care at the time of the interview; this study is different because the sample consisted of adults who aged out of the foster care system. This viewpoint allows for greater reflection, analysis and maturity in answering the questions about possible recommendations.

### 3. Methods

In order to explore transitions between placement moves, all participants met the following eligibility criteria: (1) minimum of 18 years old; (2) no longer in foster care; and (3) experienced at least two out-of-home placements during their time in care. The research team recruited participants in several ways. The team contacted both a local drop-in center and a local homeless shelter that provided services to foster care alumni to inquire about recruiting participants. The agencies allowed the team to distribute information, display flyers and conduct interviews on-site. In addition, the team mailed packets of information about the study to professionals and agencies who worked either directly or indirectly with foster care alumni. Several research team members also contacted individuals who they thought might want to participate or knew someone who met the study's criteria. Each interviewee received a \$20 gift card for participating in the study.

#### 3.1. Data collection and analysis

The majority (n = 40) of the interviews were conducted in-person at a private office either at the drop-in center or the local homeless shelter. The remaining three interviews were completed via phone and were recruited by the researchers' professional network. As mentioned above, this study was limited to adult participants (minimum of 18 years old, with no maximum age limit) who were no longer in foster care at the time of the interview.

This paper is part of a larger study (Chambers et al., 2017, 2018) that focused on how the experiences of multiple foster care placements affect individuals after they have exited the foster care system. In addition, and the focus of this paper, the participants were asked what ideas or suggestions they had to improve the placement move experience for current foster youth, foster parents and caseworkers. Though scheduled for 30 min, in practice the interviews lasted approximately 45 min. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Four out of the seven authors conducted the interviews. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at California State University, Long Beach approved all research protocols.

To analyze the interview data, the research team primarily used the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method generated a nuanced understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives. The research team conducted open coding on each interview transcript (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), using two levels of coding. The first level reduced data into preliminary codes and themes based on the research questions (Creswell, 2007). The team maintained openness by approaching all ideas presented by the participants without pre-conceived notions about what type of codes and themes might appear (Saldaña, 2009). Codes and themes were then changed and reorganized throughout the initial analysis process to determine the most accurate and descriptive analysis possible (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The second level of coding served to deepen the clarity of the analysis by classifying, prioritizing, synthesizing, and conceptualizing the data (Saldaña, 2009). This process allowed for revisions of the code list, such as refining previously vague or inaccurate codes, adding newly discovered codes, and consolidating redundant codes. The

research team used meta and focused coding during this level, including diagramming and reviewing codes to develop cohesive themes that appeared in all of the interviews.

To increase the trustworthiness of the findings, the following procedures were used:

(1) one researcher selected five transcripts and coded the data; (2) a different research team member (an expert who experienced a number of placement moves and had worked in the foster care field) analyzed the same five transcripts and also coded the data; and (3) both researchers reviewed the coding results and achieved 94% agreement (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

When disagreements arose about how to interpret a particular concept or code, the researchers discussed their concerns and arrived at a group consensus.

#### 4. Findings

This study sought to answer the research question, what are foster care alumni's ideas or suggestions on how to improve the experience of moving placements in foster care? Study participants were asked about recommendations they would offer to three groups of people on how to best handle placement moves: youth currently in foster care, foster caregivers (including foster parents, group home staff, and relative caregivers), and caseworkers (in this study, youth used the terms 'caseworkers' and 'social workers' interchangeably). The findings from this study are presented for each group of people, respectively. In line with the focus of this article on highlighting foster alumni's perspectives, participants' own words were used to describe themes in the presentation of findings, below.

When quoting participants, we include the pseudonym assigned to each individual along with their age, gender, race, total number of placements, and number of returns to their family of origin (counted in the total number of placements), as reported by the individual. This information helps demonstrate the similarities in responses among participants with different demographic characteristics and placement histories.

##### 4.1. Demographics

As shown in Table 1, and similar to other research (Rock et al., 2015; Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011), participants predominately included people of color, did not work and/or attend college at the time of the interview, and reported limited access to community resources. The majority (87%) of participants were between the ages of 18 and 23. All participants reported emancipating from foster care. Although the researchers did not ask participants to identify if they were experiencing homelessness, the majority of participants (93%) were interviewed at drop-in centers for youth/young adults and homeless shelters. Many of the participants also spoke about "couch surfing" (living with friends or relatives for brief periods of time), living in shelters, living in cars, or on the streets. Notably, moving in foster care was a common event for the majority of these participants.

##### 4.2. Recommendations for youth in foster care from those who experienced it

When foster care alumni described their recommendations to youth in foster care on how to best handle placement moves, they offered mixed messages. Many participants suggested that there were things that individual youth could do to protect themselves, internalize their feelings, cope with their trauma, and isolate to guard against disappointment. Contrarily, other participants offered ways to externalize their feelings, assert their rights and opinions, and build connections. Four major themes emerged: (1) "Hang in there strong...", (2) "The best thing is to behave proper...", (3) "Don't be afraid to say how you feel...", and (4) "Connect with staff and friends".

**Table 1**  
Demographic Results of Participants (N = 43).

<b>Gender</b>	
Female	51%
Male	44%
Transgender	5%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	
African American	44%
Latino(a)	23%
Caucasian	14%
Bi/Multiracial	19%
<b>Age</b>	
18–20	47%
21–23	40%
24–26	5%
27+	9%
<b>Foster Care Experiences</b>	
Average time in foster care	10 years
Shortest placement in foster care (average)	45 days
Longest placement in foster care (average)	2 years
Emancipated from foster care	100%
<b>Number of Moves in Foster Care</b>	
2–9 moves	30%
10–16 moves	25%
17–26 moves	27%
27–56 moves	18%
<b>Status at Time of Interview</b>	
Percent without high school diploma	40%
Percent without employment	67%
Percent not attending college	81%
Percent without health insurance	57%

Note: All data reported by study participants.

##### 4.2.1. Hang in there strong

A large number of interviewees recommended that youth "hang in there" during the placement process, referencing a need to cope with prolonged emotional stress experienced during placement moves. They expressed this perspective in several ways. First, participants urged youth to draw on internal emotional strength to endure chronic placement moves. Sofia advised youth to "hang in there strong and just know that one day that it will be over..." (age 21, female, Latina, 4 placements, 1 return to family of origin). Elizabeth offered this advice:

Don't think that every time you get moved you're going to a bad place, or you're going to somewhere worse than you came from, that's not always the case. Sometimes it ends up working out, not all the time, but it will end up working out eventually. So just kind of hang in there (age 21, female, White, 17 placements, two returns to family of origin).

Similarly, a large number of interviewees recommended that youth "just get used to" moving placements. Their comments reflected two key perspectives of placements moves: first, that moving placements was a common occurrence that youth should expect to happen regularly, and second, that youth lacked choice and control in placement move decisions. Christopher explained, "They just going to have to get used to it because it ain't really nothing that you could do...They going to move you if they choose to move you" (age 20, male, African American/Latino, 18 placements, one return home to family of origin). Sophie felt similarly. "It's really no way to handle it. You just got to do it... I'm saying there's nothing you can do about it" (age 19, female, African American, 17 placements, zero return to family of origin). Charlie's succinctly summarized the recommendations of many participants in stating, "Just get used to it" (age 19, male, Caucasian, 36 placements, zero returns to family of origin).

These participants viewed placement changes as frequent occurrences that should be expected and accepted by youth in care. Based on their experiences in foster care, they felt that youth would be limited in their ability to impact placement decisions and, therefore, their best recourse was to simply "get used to" the changes that inevitably would occur.

Participants further recommended that youth cope with repeated placement moves by focusing on positive elements of placements, even if the situation was less than ideal. Chloe encouraged youth to keep “Trying to make the best of where you are at” (age 19, female, African American, 17 placements, zero return to family of origin). Robert explained, “[A] move could be bad, it could be good, it could help you out...and you have to make the best of it” (age 23, male, Latino, six placements, zero returns to family of origin). Similarly, Jeff stated, “I would like to tell everybody to stay positive...if you’re pissed off, look at the positive side. If you look at the negative side it’s just going to bring someone down” (age 20, male, Caucasian, 29 placements, two returns to family of origin).

Reflecting on their own past experiences moving placements, these interviewees encouraged youth to persevere through placement transitions. Their counsel reflected their perspectives of moving placements as difficult, requiring youth to “make the best of” placement situations and “hang in there” in order to cope with less than ideal environments and circumstances.

#### 4.2.2. *The best thing is to behave proper*

A number of interviewees advised youth to strive for positive behavior, as their behavior would be perceived as a reflection of their identity and impact placement decisions. Participants often expressed this after describing personal experiences of placements ending because their caregivers disliked or did not know how to address their behavior. Oscar advised youth to “Don’t do bad stuff and get like, moving from place to place.” From his perspective, placement moves were a consequence of youth’s negative behavior. As he put it, “The best thing is to behave proper...” (age 22, male, Latino, five placements, zero return to family of origin). Christopher similarly cautioned youth about their behavior, emphasizing that youth needed to manage how they were perceived by foster parents and the juvenile dependency court system. “You do whatever the people tell you to do. Make sure you get good references, like from foster parents...you don’t want to go back to the courts talking about how, ‘he been acting up’ and all this” (age 20, male, African American/Latino, 18 placements, one return home to family of origin). Nia warned youth to avoid all moments of “bad behavior” or “getting trouble” as then “you look bad to the system, like you’re a bad kid, and when it’s totally the opposite” (age 19, female, African American and Indian, 26 placements, two returns to family of origin).

The vast majority of interviewees cautioned that youth manage their behavior and guard against becoming attached to people because it would only be a matter of time before they moved again. They warned youth to protect themselves from the emotional pain of losing relationships as a result of placement changes by avoiding these connections altogether. Two individuals, in particular, summarized the sentiments of many participants. Henry advised, “Don’t become attached too much to anybody. Sounds bad, but it’s true. Otherwise it’s gonna [sic] hurt when you move” (age 23, male, Caucasian, 33 placements, one return to family of origin). José similarly warned youth to avoid connecting with people to lessen the hurt when changes inevitably occurred.

Don’t put your trust in the system or your social worker. The social workers get changed all the time. You just open yourself up to get hurt. So, don’t expect to be in one spot. Expect the change. Expect the move (age 22, male, Latino, 56 placements, two returns to family of origin).

The recommendations voiced by these participants highlighted the social and emotional toll of continual placement changes. Since youth should expect moves to occur, avoiding attachments with others was viewed as a necessary guard against the emotional pain caused by these transitions.

Despite this pain, these participants further recommended that youth be hypervigilant of their behavior in placements as their

reputation in the foster care system depended on reports of positive behaviors. Above all, youth needed to ensure that they were not perceived by caregivers or the court system as a “bad kid,” as these labels would impact placement decisions.

#### 4.2.3. *Don’t be afraid to say how you feel*

Beyond addressing their internal needs, the majority of participants recommended that youth in foster care externalize those feelings and advocate for their best interests in placement decisions. Though many participants suggested that it was better to be compliant, others encouraged youth to selectively vocalize their thoughts and questions to help ensure that placements met their needs. For example, Jessica encouraged youth to speak up early in the placement decision-making process.

Ask their social worker to communicate with them fully...ask if they can have an opportunity to meet the people who are going to be taking care of them and have a say so on if that home feels comfortable to them (age 36, female, Latina, two placements, zero returns to family of origin).

Nia similarly stressed that youth should voice questions and concerns regarding their placement to their social worker. “If you don’t like the placement you are at, you should talk to your social worker as soon as possible...and ask them to find you another placement” (age 19, female, African American and Indian, 26 placements, two returns to family of origin). Elizabeth captured many of the participants’ experiences in her statement,

I was in a foster home longer than I needed or should have been. So, don’t be afraid to ask questions and don’t be afraid to say how you feel and say when something is bothering you...Find somebody that you can talk to and let them know however you’re feeling so that they can help you either deal with it or find somebody that can (age 21, female, White, 17 placements, two returns to family of origin).

These participants advised youth to take an active role in the placement process by directly expressing their thoughts and feelings and asking for the information that they needed. These comments reflected the importance of youth’s involvement in placement decisions to ensure that their needs were met.

#### 4.2.4. *Connect with the staff or friends*

Though some former foster youth suggested that it was best to stay isolated, other participants suggested that youth should seek ways to actively maintain relationships after leaving a placement to best handle the transition into a new home. Several interviewees advised youth to continue communication with friends and former caregivers that they met at prior placements to sustain relationships. As John encouraged, “When they leaving [sic] a placement, you still could connect with the staff or friends. Get their number and see how many times you could go out there to visit them” (age 18, male, did not disclose his race, 23 placements, zero return to family of origin). Amanda eloquently expanded on the importance of continuing relationships throughout placement changes. “Keeping in contact, having that steady anchor, that’s going to make the difference. It just takes one person, just one person who unconditionally loves them and is not judgmental” (age 51, female, White, five placements, one return to family of origin).

These participants emphasized that youth should seek to continue communication and visits with people who are important to them after moving. From their perspectives, maintaining relationships was key to successfully handling the transition from one placement to the next.

#### 4.3. *Recommendations for caregivers*

Interviewees were also asked for recommendations on how caregivers, including foster parents, group home staff and relatives, could help a youth in foster care best handle placement moves. Their advice

for caregivers included six main themes: (1) “Think about the kids, not the check,” (2) “Welcome them in,” (3) “Talk to them about it [moving placements]” and (4) “Try and keep in touch.”

#### 4.3.1. Think about the kids, not the check

A significant number of participants stated that caregivers should think critically about the purpose of having a foster youth placed in their home prior to making the commitment. They said that youth should never be placed in their home if their primary focus was personal financial gain. Many interviewees shared personal experiences of former caregivers who, in one way or another, demonstrated that their main interest in having a youth placed in their home was for financial compensation through foster care payments. As Roberta stated, “if [caregivers are] in it for the money, you can tell” (age 18, female, African American, 26 placements, one return to family of origin). These participants’ recommendations for caregivers were direct and specific. Amber stated, “If you’re just doing it for the paycheck, just get out” (age 21, female, African American, 23 placements, three returns to family of origin). Similarly, Amanda urged, “Please don’t be in it for the money. It’s not about the money and it’s not about you as a person...” (age 51, female, White, five placements, one return to family of origin). Paulo summarized these directives for caregivers, “Think about the kids, not the check” (age 19, male, Latino, five placements, zero return to family of origin).

These interviewees stressed that foster parents and group home staff needed to evaluate their personal motivations for being caregivers for youth in foster care. If financial compensation was a factor in their decision to be foster parents or group home staff, this underlying interest would be obvious to youth in their home and the caregiver should not have youth placed with them.

#### 4.3.2. Welcome them in

Many of the participants provided recommendations for how caregivers could provide a welcoming environment for youth during the initial transition period when they first move into a new placement. After providing an open and accessible transition into a home, participants also suggested that caregivers ensure that youth felt loved and appreciated during their stay. One way to make youth feel supported, participants suggested, was to ensure that they had room and felt comfortable to express their thoughts and feelings.

In particular, these participants advised that caregivers should allow youth time to adjust to a new caregiver and placement environment. Roberta wanted caregivers to understand that youth may need time before they are comfortable talking with caregivers.

I think a caregiver with anyone has to give any child time to become accustomed, they [sic] comfortable to them being in their home... and just let them know that, “Okay, well I understand. I understand, whether if you talk to me or not, I understand”...[I]f they feel that the caregiver understands, then they become more comfortable (age 18, female, African American, 26 placements, one return to family of origin).

Floyd recommended that caregivers’ welcome youth into the home by allowing time for youth to be oriented to the structure and rules of the placement.

I would say just welcome them in. Don’t immediately start barking out rules the moment that they get there. Kind of sit down as a family and speak and set some guidelines. Then slowly let them know the rules and regulations as the days go past. Don’t just bombard them with rules...like we’re in the military (age 20, male, African American, 17 placements, one return to family of origin).

These participants wanted caregivers to recognize that each move involves a transition period for youth. Allowing youth time to acclimate and finding ways to connect around the youth’s interests could help youth adjust and feel welcome in a new placement.

Participants recommended that caregivers engage with youth about their personal interests to help welcome them into a new placement. Andres offered this advice to caregivers:

“Talk to kids and see what he likes...Interact with the kid” (age 20, male, African American, seven placements, zero return to family of origin). Similarly, Shanisha directed:

Find out what they like to do, even though a foster parent think they may know about a child, each child is different. You never know where this child came from. So, maybe if they sat down and said, “Okay, well let’s find out what you like to do,” because you know what? Every kid got an interest too (age 22, female, African American, 32 placements, zero returns to family of origin).

Similarly, a large number of interviewees stressed the need for caregivers to support youth’s emotional wellbeing by fostering an environment where youth felt safe expressing their emotions. Jessica recommended, “Give them a space to kind of be able to express emotions when they come from the move, like give them the space to be safe with their emotions, I think. Kind of the most important thing” (age 36, female, Latina, two placements, zero returns to family of origin). Elizabeth also voiced the importance of emotional safety for youth who moved into a new placement. “Ask them if they feel safe, and what can you do to make them feel safer...If you don’t feel safe, you’re not ever going to be comfortable” (age 21, female, White, 17 placements, two returns to family of origin). Amanda summarized these recommendations for caregivers: “It’s about establishing a bond, a relational bond of trust with that child...so that they feel safe on every level” (age 51, female, White, five placements, one return to family of origin).

Many of these participants recommended that caregivers should intentionally talk with youth about their thoughts and feelings, especially in reaction to placement moves.

Elizabeth stated, “I don’t think people do enough talking. They already assume, ‘Oh this has this effect on them, or that she’s feeling like this.’ No, you don’t know that. Just sit down and ask them how they feel about it” (age 21, female, White, 17 placements, two returns to family of origin). Similarly, Isabella expressed,

If you see a child, you know, going through some things, feeling emotional, sit down and talk to him and ask him what’s wrong. Or, ask them just the littlest things will bring them a little way. Just ask them how their day’s going or how is school (age 18, female, Latina, 37 placements, one return to family of origin).

Roberta summarized the importance of engaging with youth to understand what they are feeling in order to best support youth. “When a child opens up and expresses how they really feel, then the caregiver could actually reach in and help them more because they know...what the child is needing” (age 18, female, African American, 26 placements, one return to family of origin).

These participants highlighted the role that caregivers can play in helping youth express their feelings and thoughts, especially related to placement transitions. Through building trusting relationships, avoiding assumptions, and having intentional conversations, caregivers can support youth’s emotional wellbeing during placement moves.

In caring about the feelings of youth, for many participants, caregivers could support youth through placement transitions was by demonstrating unconditional love, care and acceptance. As Emily advised, “Be loving and supportive towards the child. Don’t place demands or expectations on them to act or be a certain way, or hold their past against them” (age 22, female, African American, 26 placements, zero return to family of origin). Amanda also stressed the importance of experiencing love from caregivers that was not conditional or based on the youth’s behavior:

As long as...we know that someone loves us and cares for us enough, that we know that we can push [the boundaries], but you’re going to love me anyway. You’re going to accept anyway. Then that’s the

way it should be (age 51, female, White, five placements, one return to family of origin).

Christopher similarly advised that caregivers need to demonstrate love and support to youth placed in their home, as they would to their biological children. “Just treat them like they one of your own. Make them feel loved up in your house and they’ll be good” (age 20, male, African American/Latino, 18 placements, one return home to family of origin). Roberta also recommended that caregivers show love and care for youth in their home, but only if it was genuine. As she described, “I think children can like tell and get the vibes of who is caring about them and who isn’t” (age 18, female, African American, 26 placements, one return to family of origin).

From the interviewees perspectives, caregivers could support youth through placement moves by loving them unconditionally. During these times of transition, youth need to experience genuine care and acceptance from their caregivers that does not fluctuate based on their actions or behavior.

#### 4.3.3. *Talk to them about it [moving placements]*

Youth felt clear that placement change was a part of their foster care experience. Another way caregivers could show care and support was to take an active role in preparing youth for impending change. Nearly all of the participants emphasized that caregivers should openly and clearly discuss details of upcoming placement moves with youth. Jessica expressed the importance of providing youth with clear and specific information about placement changes. “Talk to them about it. Explain to them exactly what’s happening...and to be able to ask questions like, why are they moving, you know, where are they going to, and stuff like that” (age 36, female, Latina, two placements, zero returns to family of origin).

Other participants advised that caregivers should be transparent when discussing placement moves with youth, especially regarding why a youth would be leaving their home. Carmen expressed, “[T]hey should at least let the person know what’s going on, because a couple times they didn’t tell me why I had to move. That pissed me off!” (age 22, female, Latina, 32 placements, zero returns to family of origin). Floyd described how open communication about an upcoming placement move was crucial to helping youth feel supported. He provided specific suggestions of how caregivers could talk to youth about leaving a placement:

The foster parents that are helping a kid leave a placement, I would say don’t make them feel like you’re kicking them out. Or like they’re worthless, or ‘you just get the hell out of my house,’ type thing. Let them know that, ‘Hey, it’s not working out here, not saying we don’t like you, it’s just that we can’t help you out, or we’re not the people that can help you, and there’s another place out there that can fit your needs better’ (age 20, male, African American, 17 placements, one return to family of origin).

These participants advised caregivers to openly and transparently speak with youth about upcoming placement moves. Providing clear and honest information, including why and where the youth were moving, would assist youth in preparing for and understanding the upcoming change.

#### 4.3.4. *Try and keep in touch*

Multiple participants provided advice for caregivers on how to support youth after they had left their home. Their recommendations centered on continuing a relationship with the youth through ongoing communication and visits. Sofia stated:

Just support them, I feel, to not lose contact with the person. At least keep contact. Because a new environment, it scares them but if they still knew that they had contact with their other foster home they will be a lot happier (age 21, female, Latina, four placements, one return to family of origin).

Samuel’s advice was similar: “Try and keep in touch with that child and after you just let them know that you care about them, and that... you can help them in almost any kind of way that you can, emotionally” (age 21, male, African American and Latino, 17 placements, two returns to family of origin). Joseph summarized these sentiments:

When that child is moved, if you really loved that child you should go and visit that child. Or spend some time with that child still even though he is no longer with you, ‘cause you are still letting him know you know he might not get it right he or she might not get it right then and there but later on in life they’ll realize that person really care about me, that person really did love me (age 23, male, African American, 13 placements, zero returns to family of origin).

These participants recommended that caregivers continue to contact youth after they left their home as an expression of love and care. Keeping in touch and spending time with youth would help the youth feel supported and ease their transition into a new home.

#### 4.4. *Recommendations for caseworkers*

In addition to recommendations for youth and caregivers, participants discussed their suggestions for caseworkers on how to help a youth best handle a placement move. Three themes emerged: (1) “Do a better investigation on the [foster] family...” (2) “Be supportive and understanding of the stress that youth are going through” and, (3) “Really talk to them about it [moving placements].”

##### 4.4.1. *Do a better investigation on the [foster] family*

A large number of the interviewees highlighted that caseworkers should evaluate prospective placements more intensively to avoid placing youth in harmful environments. They described former placements where they experienced abuse by either caregivers or other youth in the home. Joseph summarized these statements: “I would say when you when you move someone around...do a better investigation on the family that you are placing the person with” (age 23, male, African American, 13 placements, zero returns to family of origin).

Other participants stressed that caseworkers needed to more closely monitor placements after a youth has been placed. In particular, they strongly emphasized that caseworkers listen to youth and believe them when they raised concerns about placements. For example, Oscar advised that caseworkers should visit placements “in secret” to observe how caregivers treated youth. He shared an example of how his foster mother treated him poorly at home, but “would act really nice” when the caseworker visited. Oscar recommended, “they [caseworkers] should check up on the foster parents and trust what you say” (age 22, male, Latino, five placements, zero returns to family of origin). Amber’s experience and advice to workers was similar:

“Listen to the child. If they telling [sic] you something, actually sit there and listen to them, because they really telling you some stuff that just might not be cool. Man, I had a social worker, I used to tell, ‘this lady [foster parent] is crazy, she smokes crack...’ She [the social worker] would not listen until she came up to the place and she seen the lady smoking crack” (age 21, female, African American, 23 placements, three returns to family of origin).

Referencing their own experiences of abuse in foster placements, these participants highlighted the need for more intensive and frequent evaluation of caregivers. In particular, they raised the importance of caseworkers speaking to youth about their experiences in placements and addressing their concerns as valid and true.

##### 4.4.2. *Really talk to them about it [moving placements]*

Nearly all participants stressed that caseworkers should include youth in the decision-making process regarding moving them from one placement to another. Many shared personal experiences of placements

ending abruptly without explanation. Others recalled experiencing fear and uncertainty because they were not informed about new placements and did not know what to expect with each move. These participants emphasized three main ways that caseworkers could involve youth in placement decisions and help ease the challenges of moving: incorporate the youth's input into decisions about new placements, tell youth in advance about an upcoming move, and share detailed information about new placements to help youth emotionally prepare for the change.

First, the interviewees wanted caseworkers to ask youth for their opinions on prospective placement changes and to incorporate their input into placement decisions. Many participants described inclusion in the process as an indicator of a caseworker's respect and care for youth. Isabella summarized these sentiments in her advice to caseworkers:

Sit down and talk with him [a youth] and ask him what he wants or what she wants. Don't just make a move for him because they're just gonna think that you don't really care. You just want to get them out of your face (age 18, female, Latina, 37 placements, one return to family of origin).

Other participants suggested practical ways for caseworkers to involve youth's perspectives in placement decisions. In particular, they recommended that caseworkers facilitate pre-placement phone calls or visits with youth and prospective caregivers so that youth could assess a placement and voice their opinion. As Olivia stated, "I'm going to say that they [caseworkers] should at least help us call the placement to see if we like it or not. Then if we don't like it, then don't take us there" (age 19, female, White, African American and Indian, six placements, zero returns to family of origin).

Second, participants were adamant that caseworkers should tell youth about placement moves before they happened. When offering this advice, they often contrasted it to their own personal experiences of emotional distress when moved abruptly with limited or no notice. If caseworkers told youth in advance about an upcoming placement change, youth would have more time to emotionally prepare for the transition. As Floyd suggested to caseworkers, "Let the kid know ahead of time [about a move]. Let the kid know sometimes, maybe even before you let the foster parent know...Just to give the kid a head's up" (age 20, male, African American, 17 placements, one return to family of origin). Similarly, Jessica recommended that caseworkers "Tell them [youth] in as far as advanced as they possibly can [about a move], to help them prepare" (age 36, female, Latina, two placements, zero returns to family of origin).

Third, a large majority of interviewees stated that caseworkers should share more detailed information with youth about a new placement before they were moved. Many shared personal examples, of both positive and negative experiences, to illustrate how knowing more about a placement in advance would make it easier for youth to adjust to a new caregiver, living environment, neighborhood, and school. Elizabeth summarized this advice to caseworkers:

I think it's really important to really talk to them about it, and to let them know where they're going. Let them know all the information you can tell them about it...so that they get an understanding. They're still not going to fully know what they're getting into until they get there, but to give them any information you can about how the place is run, and how the people are that are there, and the staff (age 21, female, White, 17 placements, two returns to family of origin).

As a specific way for youth to gain a glimpse of life at a new placement, a number of participants recommended that caseworkers setup pre-placement visits. They described times when adjusting to a new environment had been easier because their caseworker had taken them to meet new caregivers, eat dinner with other youth who were placed at a new home, or review the schedules and rules. As Zahra recommended,

"I think they [caseworkers] should just sit down and talk to them [youth] about it and take a little tour of where they're going to go. Let them get familiar in the place" (age 22, female, African American, six placements, zero returns to family of origin).

Participants were effusive in their recommendations to caseworkers to involve youth in placement decisions. They drew upon their personal experiences, highlighting how caseworkers could better facilitate placement transitions by involving youth's input in placement decisions, telling youth about a move in advance, and helping youth gain insight into a new placement environment. By including youth in the process earlier and taking into consideration their perspectives, caseworkers could help youth emotionally prepare for the stressors involved in moving.

#### 4.4.3. *Be supportive and understanding of the stress that youth are going through*

Many of the participants advised that caseworkers should provide emotional support to youth during the difficult process of moving placements. Overwhelmingly, they described placement transitions as emotionally stressful events that had enduring, negative impacts. They recommended that caseworkers support youth during placement changes by listening to them, spending more time with them, and demonstrating care and attention.

For example, Henry described how when he was in foster care he felt like "somebody's luggage" when caseworkers transported him to a new placement. He stressed the importance of caseworkers showing personal attention to youth to better facilitate moves. "Show attention to the kid. Don't act like it's a burden... you should at least show individual attention to each person...[Youth] need to get the idea that [they're] a person and not just something to be moved around" (age 23, male, White, 33 placements, one return to family of origin).

Other participants recommended that caseworkers communicate more and spend more time with youth to better support them through placement moves. Benjamin advised, "Maybe spend more time with them. My social worker, we never sat down and talked...Maybe show that you care about them" (age 19, male, African American, 11 placements, one return to family of origin). From Samuel's perspective, more communication would help youth feel supported by caseworkers. "Asking questions, just speaking to them, and calling them a lot more than just one or two weeks. Call them almost every other day and ask them, 'how are you doing?' Even if it's just a few minutes conversation" (age 21, male, African American and Latino, 17 placements, two returns to family of origin). Jessica summarized these recommendations to caseworkers:

Ask [youth] a lot of questions and give them the space to be emotional also. And visit with them before the move and make sure they are there with them through the move. And be supportive and understanding of the stress that the youth are going through (age 36, female, Latina, two placements, zero returns to family of origin).

These participants highlighted the important role caseworkers play in the process of transitioning youth from one placement to another. In light of the emotional distress youth experience when moving placements, the interviewees recommended that caseworkers build personal relationships with youth to better support them during these transitions.

## 5. Discussion

Before discussion of the findings and implications, limitations of the study are presented. Limitations include the small number of participants, the majority of interviews were conducted at drop-in resource center and/or a homeless shelter, and interviews occurred exclusively in Southern California. Data consisted exclusively of information self-reported by participants; no other data was collected. In addition, all of the study participants had emancipated from foster care and their

perceptions may not be generalizable to foster care alumni who experienced different permanency outcomes.

This study sought to understand foster care alumni's recommendations for youth in care, caregivers and caseworkers on how to best handle placement moves. Prominent findings included the emotional stress participants experienced as a result of moving placements while they were in foster care. This is evident in the tensions between the recommendations that the participants offered to youth in care. On the one hand, participants spoke about the importance of speaking up and making connections with other youth, caregivers and their caseworkers. On the other hand, participants recommended ways that youth guard against close relationships and focus on simply enduring the challenges of moving. These seemingly contradictory set of recommendations highlight the risk involved in repeated placement moves: if youth in care speak up, they may not be heard, and if they build emotional connections, they may lose these important relationships.

In light of these distressing experiences, participants recommended clear, actionable steps that caregivers and caseworkers can take to improve the process of placement transitions. First, the findings indicated that more intensive evaluations of caregivers and placement environments are needed to ensure that youth are not placed in unsafe foster homes. However, a home that is free from abuse is not the only qualification for an appropriate placement. The participants stressed the importance of caregivers who demonstrated genuine love and interest in their wellbeing that was not motivated by financial compensation. Participants recommended specific ways that caregivers could make youth feel welcome and loved while placed in their home and caseworkers could support youth during transitions to new homes. They also encouraged both groups to maintain relationships with youth after the placement ended. These findings indicated the importance of healthy, trusting, long-term relationships to buffer the stresses of repeated placement moves.

In addition, caregivers and caseworkers can improve placement changes by better involving youth in placement decision-making processes. Participants stressed that caregivers and caseworkers must involve youth early in the process, communicate clearly about upcoming moves, and solicit and listen to their input in placement decisions.

The majority of these findings align with studies conducted by Mitchell et al. (2010), Randle (2013) and Sinclair et al. (2001) in which current/former foster youth recommended that caregivers and caseworkers build relationships with youth and stressed that caseworkers need to involve youth in placement decisions. The commonalities in perceptions of how placement transitions could be improved, especially among participants with different ages, placement histories and nationalities, further highlights these findings. By contributing to a knowledge base area that is significantly limited, this study helps build understanding of foster youth/alumni's recommendations to improve placement transitions.

## 6. Implications

Findings from this study carry implications for child welfare practice, policy and research. In terms of practice, participants outlined a number of specific, clear directions for caseworkers and caregivers to improve placement transitions for youth in care. For caseworkers, a principal recommendation was to better involve youth in placement decisions. Caseworkers must communicate with youth as openly, clearly and early as possible regarding upcoming moves and incorporate youth's input in the decision-making process. Many participants specifically recommended that caseworkers facilitate pre-placement visits between youth and prospective caregivers. Learning about caregivers and home environments through these visits could serve as a way for youth to provide their input in placement decisions as well as assist youth in emotionally preparing for a move.

Study results also point to the need for caseworkers to conduct more intensive and comprehensive evaluation and monitoring of caregivers

to ensure a safe and supportive home environment for youth. Participants raised issues they experienced in placements, ranging from abuse by caregivers to lack of genuine, loving care. Their recommendations for caseworkers to more appropriately respond to youth's concerns about placements point to a need for additional training for caseworkers. Training areas could include evaluating and selecting caregivers, seeking input from children and youth regarding placement experiences, and identifying 'red flag' behaviors among caregivers. In particular, trainings need to incorporate foster youth/alumni's experiences and perceptions of living in care and moving placements.

Participants also advised a number of practice implications for caregivers, including specific ways to assist youth in adjusting to a new home environment, building lasting relationships with youth, and communicating with youth about upcoming moves. Trainings based on foster youth/alumni's experiences and recommendations could help build caregivers' skills in these areas.

Study results also hold a number of implications for child welfare policy. Participants emphasized that caseworkers should spend more time with youth to understand their experiences and perspectives, involve them in decisions, and build supportive relationships. Policy changes, such as lower caseloads for caseworkers, may be needed in many child welfare agencies in order for workers to be able to spend more time with youth.

In addition, participants highlighted distress caused by placement moves, both in terms of the emotional stress of repeated transitions and abuse or mistreatment experienced in some placements. These disturbing findings indicate several important policy implications. First, the findings point to a need for more funding to recruit qualified foster and relative caregivers who can provide consistent, loving care. This could help promote placement longevity and minimize the number of transitions that youth experience, as well as improve the quality of care youth experience in placements. Second, study results suggest re-evaluating out-of-home placements as an effective intervention to promote child safety and wellbeing. Coupled with research on youth's experiences moving and outcomes of placement instability outlined previously, these findings underscore the negative impact of placement moves and necessitate reconceptualizing our national approach to foster care.

To support policymakers and practitioners, additional research is needed to better understand foster youth/alumni's recommendations to improve child welfare service delivery, especially related to placement moves. Effective child welfare approaches must center the experiences and perspectives of individuals most impacted by this system, and further research could help illuminate this important area.

## 7. Conclusion

This study highlights foster care alumni's recommendations for youth in care, caregivers and caseworkers on how to best handle placement moves. As individuals who lived through placement transitions, foster youth/alumni are the 'experts' in foster care and their experiences and opinions must directly inform approaches to out-of-home placements and placement moves.

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